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## The Female Protagonists' Failure to Achieve the American Dream in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*

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### Abstract

This study examines the failure of the American Dream in the lives of protagonist depicted in Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman Is No Man* through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. The research focuses on how Palestinian immigrant women in the novel are unable to achieve the promises of freedom and equality associated with the American Dream due to deeply ingrained cultural traditions. Instead of experiencing liberation upon their arrival in the United States, the female characters, Isra, her daughter Deya, and Fareeda, her mother-in-law find their lives are still governed by the same strict, traditional values that would have limited them. The dominance of these traditional values acts as an internal system of control, shaping their roles and ideology and severely limiting their opportunities. By examining the intersection between this cultural hegemony and the American Dream, this study argues that the American Dream is not a reality that can be achieved by these women but is merely an illusion by the profound and persistent cultural traditions they face.

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase "American dream" is the word-for-word embodiment of the dream Americans have. American dream is the belief, an idea and national concept that every individual has the opportunity and freedom to achieve success regardless of their background. The core idea of American dream was first popular since the nation's founding, the phrase was invented by a writer named James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931. The concept of American dream was rooted in the principles of equality, liberty that can be pursuit by anyone who had been in America and anyone who move in America. Even the term of American dream is coined in the time of great depression, however the aspiration and its belief are still related until these days. Jillson (2016, p.1) sees the American Dream as "the broad promise of the American life" that is can be seen as the perception of the United States as a country where individuals have fair access to prosperity and greater opportunities in life (Saifullina, 2022) . The promise, according to Bruno (2019) in its meaning, is to provide a foundation for opening up opportunities for every individual, regardless of their background or origins, both for those living today and future generations. They are given the freedom to pursue their dreams, live the life they want, develop their abilities, and realize their full potential.

For decades, the ideal of the American Dream has inspired individuals from around the world to migrate to America in pursuit of prosperity, freedom, and a better life. The promises that have been echoed, strengthen the motivation of immigrants for generations seeking fortune in America (Hirschman, 2014). However, while the American Dream is often accompanied by a range of ideas, and promises, the realization does not always align with the expectations rather than has been echoed. Ashkar (2021) assumed the United States may not always fulfill its promises as a place where immigrants can attain the American Dream. The discussion about whether the American Dream should be universally available or limited to individuals who meet certain criteria continues to be a persistent issue.

Although the American Dream promise of freedom and opportunity for all, However, the experience of a Palestinian-American family in Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman Is No Man* showed the opponents reality. Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man* is a novel that tells the story of a Palestinian-American woman living in Brooklyn. The story is set in two periods, following Isra in the 1990s and her daughter, Deya, in 2008. Isra, a young Palestinian woman who was arranged to be married with Adam, had to move to America

with dreams of a new life, ends up trapped in a repressive household under the strict control of her mother-in-law, Fareeda. Although Fareeda often oppresses Isra through rigid cultural rules, but she herself is actually a victim of that same cultural system. Her actions reflect how women in cultural system are not only objects of oppression but can also act as agents who reproduce the oppressive values they have internalized. The other period is focused on her daughter, Deya, that faces the same expectations from her grandmother, who forces her into an arranged marriage and forbids her from attending college.

To provide a deeper analysis of the how culture system can be the factor of the American Dream's failure in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*, Researcher has conducted several relevant previous studies. The purpose of this study is to obtain information and knowledge that can be compared by researchers. Previous relevant studies help researchers to ensure that this study has minimal errors. Researcher have examined the novel from multiple perspectives. The first study is by Salvianny & Nurcahyani (2020) analyse about oppression and the resistance of the women character in the *A Woman Is No Man*. This study explores both the oppression faced by women and the strategies of resistance depicted in Etaf Rum's work, *A Woman Is No Man* using Patricia Hill Collins' concepts of the Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition, this study applies a descriptive-analytical approach to examine how female characters experience oppression and respond to it. The findings show that oppression operates in four domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. While men enjoy freedom and privilege, women are constrained by obligations to family honour and domestic responsibilities, which make them compliant and restricted.

The second study by Sari (2020) that talked about women's oppression in a patriarchal society and what kind of patriarchal oppression that the women's character faced using Sylvia Walby's concept of feminist literary criticism. Through the women's character in the novel, the findings show that women's character in the novel faces 4 kind of patriarchal oppression through Sylvia Walby's concept. The kind of patriarchal oppression that the women's character faces are patriarchal mode of production, male violence, patriarchal state and patriarchal culture. Moreover, this study also examines women's struggle to resist the patriarchal oppression. This analysis shows that these different types of patriarchy are interconnected, forming a complex system that limits women's freedom and autonomy. By placing the characters' experiences within Walby's feminist framework, this study provides deeper insight into how patriarchy functions at

both the personal and structural levels. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the importance of resistance, showing that women's efforts to challenge oppression

The third study by Dedi (2023). This study exposes about Arab American women's life through the characters and how they can achieve the goal of their existence in Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man*. This research using existentialist feminism to examine the women's character in Etaf rum's *A Woman Is No Man* through Simone de Beauvoir's concept. The scholar's findings show the existence of the women's character and how they live in America. This analysis emphasizes that women's experiences are not only personal journeys, but also reflections of broader social and cultural structures that limit them. By applying Beauvoir's existentialist literary theory, this study shows how female characters deal with situations where they are treated as "the other" and their efforts to resist them. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of freedom, choice, and self-autonomy as crucial aspects in women's efforts to build meaning and purpose in their lives.

The fourth study is by Diana (2023). This research reveals the types of hegemony found in the novel *A Woman Is No Man* by Etaf Rum. The scholars use Gramsci's theory of hegemony to examine the types of hegemony found in this novel. Scholars also discuss how this hegemony can be formed and how it is experienced by the characters in the novel *A Woman Is No Man* by Etaf Rum. By applying Gramsci's concept, this study provides insight into how patriarchal authority and cultural expectations are embedded in family structures, which ultimately limit the characters of women in the novel *A Woman Is No Man* and reinforce the patriarchal system. This shows that domination is not only maintained through direct power, but also through the process of passing down cultural norms that make practices of domination seem natural and sustainable over time.

After mentioning several previous studies, the researcher seeks to develop and expand existing research with a specific focus on the relationship between cultural hegemony and the failure of the female's protagonist achieving the American Dream in the novel *A Woman Is No Man*. The main focus of this study is to analyze the failure of the female characters in achieving the American Dream the novel *A Woman Is No Man* using Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory as the main framework. This study argues that the culture of their home country which constraints them is the reason why the female characters in the novel fail to achieve the American Dream. This analysis will focus on three female characters which are, Fareeda, Isra, and Deya, and how they are portrayed as experiencing pressure and restrictions through the systems and ideologies that have been

established in their traditions and culture. This research contributes to the fields of literature and cultural studies by applying Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony to the novel *A Woman Is No Man*, offering an in-depth analysis of how hegemonic ideology limits the realization of the American Dream for female characters. Focusing on the experiences of the characters Fareeda, Isra, and Deya in the novel, this study reveals the persistence of oppression or marginalization in a culture, despite the promise of freedom and opportunity in the United States as promised by the American Dream.

Several researchers from previous studies have explored themes of patriarchy from various perspectives, women's struggles, and even studies that reveal the types of hegemony found in the novel *A Woman Is No Man*. However, researchers have found significant gaps in the literature that have not yet been examined. Although studies on hegemony have been conducted previously, this previous study focused on the types of hegemony according to Gramsci. Therefore, this research was conducted to fill this gap. Instead of focusing on types of hegemony, this study will examine and unravel the conflicts in Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman Is No Man* as a form of failure of the female protagonist to achieve American Dream aspirations that have been echoed due to internalized cultural hegemony. Thus, this study will make an original contribution by offering a theoretical framework to explain why a community, despite being physically located in a land of freedom, remains trapped within its own ideological boundaries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Hegemony

Hegemony is a concept that originated from the thoughts of Antonio Gramsci in the 20th century. The concept of hegemony is fundamentally different from domination. Hegemony is a form of power domination that is achieved not solely through coercion, but through the agreement or consensus of those who are influenced or ruled. Stoddart & Stoddart (2015) stated that Hegemony is opposed to and distinct from coercion; while power is typically rigid and fraught with brutality and punishment, hegemonic power works by convincing the individuals or social classes being ruled to follow the social norms and values of a system that is inherently exploitative. Boothman (2008) argues the hegemonic aspect appears in the exercise of power by the ruling class, which obtains the consent of the ruled people, against the opposing class. Gramsci (1991) confirms that hegemony by the government can occur not only based on economic and political power

alone, but also on their success in establishing a worldview and value system that is accepted by those being ruled. Workers and oppressed or ruled groups accept this domination because it is considered normal, even seen as something that should be. Hegemonic power is characterized by its attachment to beliefs, ideals, and normative views that are deeply rooted in society.

### **American Dream's Failure**

The American Dream is a concept and an aspiration that in the United States, every individual has the opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, regardless of their background. This concept according to Fayzullayeva (2023) is the belief in upward social mobility, opportunity, and success. However, the meaning and accessibility of this dream have been the subject of extensive academic research and public debate, especially as socially and economic conditions have changed over time. Huntington (1983) argued that the American Dream is a core component of the "American Creed," which includes liberty, equality, individualism, and democracy. Referring to the founding ideals of the United States, the American Dream has historically served as a unifying national narrative and a source of personal motivation. However, Huntington (1983) argues the increased presence of new ethnic and racial groups in the United States may diminish how strongly people feel connected to the American Dream, as they may not share the same cultural values that originally formed the basis of the American Dream.

The American Dream is increasingly criticized as an unattainable ideal for many people, resulting in widespread disappointment and a reassessment of its validity in contemporary society. Hight (2011) stated the American Dream is unable to address the complexities of life in America today means it is too idealistic and simplistic, while the reality of life in America is much more complicated. This phenomenon can happen because individuals from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds tend to maintain their original culture, which is a fundamental element of their identity, so they do not immediately assimilate into the dominant culture. The cultural diversity that exists in the United States provides a strong basis for questioning whether racial and ethnic groups share the same vision of the American Dream and whether this vision applies equally to them. This is along with Cohen-marks (2016) that stated the diversity of cultural backgrounds in this country encourages reflection on whether racial and ethnic groups have a similar perspective on the American Dream and whether it truly applies to them.

Many immigrants find that the American Dream is difficult to achieve because they remain strongly attached to their native cultures and traditions. This is not due to a lack of opportunity in America, but rather to internalized cultural hegemony, which makes it difficult for them to assimilate or embrace the freedoms offered. As stated by White & Hanson (2011) individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds often maintain their native culture, which is a fundamental element of their identity as immigrant who live in America. The pressure to adopt dominant American values can create significant conflict, causing them to feel trapped between two worlds and which causes discomfort within themselves. This is supported by the argument Cohen-marks (2016) that cultural diversity in America raises questions about whether different racial and ethnic groups share the same view of the American Dream and whether that dream truly applies to them equally. Thus, even though external opportunities exist, immigrants often feel constrained by internal limitations stemming from the traditions that they hold.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design, with literary analysis as the primary method. It applies Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony as the main analytical framework to explore how dominant cultural ideologies shape the life experiences of female characters and contribute to the failure of them to achieve the American Dream in Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*. The primary data source of this research is the novel *A Woman Is No Man* (2019) by Etaf Rum. Passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that portray women's struggles, cultural restrictions, and how the female failed to achieve the American Dream are selected for analysis. The secondary data sources consist of scholarly articles, books, and previous studies related to the concept of the American Dream, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Previous analyses of *A Woman Is No Man*.

In this study, the main research instrument is the researcher, as qualitative literary analysis requires interpretation, critical reading, and conceptual application. The researcher functions as the primary instrument by selecting data, analyzing textual evidence, and interpreting the findings in accordance with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony.

Data for this research were collected using documentary techniques, which rely on close reading and note-taking. The process began with reading the novel thoroughly and repeatedly to grasp its central themes. Passages that illustrate cultural domination,

resistance, and the American Dream were then identified and highlighted. These textual excerpts were categorized into thematic units to facilitate systematic analysis. To strengthen the interpretation, the data were further supported by theoretical frameworks and critical references from secondary sources.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of the study and provides an analysis based on relevant theoretical perspectives. Referring to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, this analysis explores how cultural values in the Palestinian-American community limit the achievement of the American Dream idealism for the female characters in Etaf Rum's novel *A Woman Is No Man*. These characters are physically in America, but psychologically and ideologically, they remain bound by the cultural norms of their homeland, which have been deeply internalized that they are considered not as coercion, but as a natural way of life. This section will focus on the lived experiences of the three central female characters in *A Woman Is No Man* which are Fareeda, Isra, and Deya—to explore how internalized cultural hegemony contributes to the failure of the American Dream within their community

### Fareeda

Fareeda is Adam's mother, Isra's mother-in-law, and Deya's grandmother in the novel *A Woman Is No Man*. She is described as a firm, straightforward, and stubborn figure. Fareeda strongly upholds traditional Palestinian cultural values, particularly regarding family honor, which she believes lies in women's obedience, maintaining a good reputation, and managing the household. Fareeda is portrayed as a woman deeply rooted in tradition and the patriarchal system. She often pressures Isra and Deya to follow the old rules, even though it causes them suffering. However, Fareeda is not purely an antagonist; she is a character shaped by her own experiences as an immigrant and a woman who was once also bound by strict rules.

“Relax?” She placed her hands on her hips. “That’s easy for you to say. I’m the one who has to keep them out of trouble, who has to make sure they maintain a good reputation until we marry them off. Tell me, who will be blamed if something goes wrong? Huh? Who will you point to when these books start putting ideas in their head?”

The atmosphere shifted. Khaled shook his head. “That’s the price of coming to this country,” he said. “Abandoning our land and running away. Not a moment goes by when I don’t think of what we’ve done. Maybe we should’ve stayed and fought for our home. So what if the soldiers had killed

us? So what if we had starved? Better than coming here and losing ourselves, our culture . . .” His words faded out.  
(Rum, 2019, p.54)

This dialogue shows how Fareeda, despite being a victim of cultural hegemony, has become a powerful agent for maintaining it. She does not see the rules and traditions as oppression, but rather as a duty and responsibility to uphold the family's honor. In her conversation with Khaled, it is clear how Fareeda prioritizes her granddaughter's reputation above even their personal freedom. She believes that “books” are an influence that could instill ideas that oppose with their home country culture. This concern reflects her fear of losing control and the destruction of the cultural value system she believes in. While the American Dream promises freedom and opportunity, Fareeda believes this does not apply because cultural customs and traditions must be upheld even though she and her family live in America. This shows that cultural hegemony continues to exist with the consent of the governed to maintain the system, which is not in line with the idealism of the American Dream.

“Loves me?” Fareeda laughed. “Look at all I do for that man! I spread a full *sufra* for him every day, wash and iron his clothes, scrub every inch of this house so he can be at ease. I raised his children, these men and this girl, all while he was away. And you say he loves me?” Her eyes shifted to Isra. “Learn this now, dear. If you live your life waiting for a man's love, you'll be disappointed.”

Isra felt sorry for Fareeda. How tired she must have been raising her children alone in a foreign country, waiting for Khaled to come home and love her. She wondered if that would be her fate as well.  
(Rum, 2019, p. 62)

Although Fareeda appears to be a figure who reinforces cultural norms and acts as a governor in a cultural hegemony system that oppresses women in the novel, she is actually the part of the governed too. She not only reproduces values that oppress women like Isra, but is also confined, constrained and bound by the same values. Fareeda willingly accepts the cultural system and even maintain the values, because cultural ideology has become so ingrained in her that it has become part of her identity and how she constructs her world of view. She no longer sees the system as a form of oppression, but as a reality that must be accepted. This shows how hegemony works not through coercion, but through the consent and internalization of dominant values by individuals. In this context, the major factor behind the failure of the female protagonist to achieve the American dream is because they are unable to break through the constraints that internalized in their culture.

The idealism of freedom, equality, and social mobility offered by the American Dream becomes an illusion when their value system that they have remains alive and accepted by themselves.

### **Isra**

Isra is portrayed as soft-spoken and reserved, often keeping her thoughts and emotions to herself. Isra is originally from Birzeit, a small town in Palestine. Raised in a conservative and patriarchal culture and environment, Isra grows up with culture and environment that believe a woman's destiny and duty is just to marry a man and serve her family. Isra is arranged to marry Adam, a Palestinian man who has lived in America for a long time, Isra moves to America follow her husband with the hope that her life will change for the better. She dreams of finding love, freedom, and new opportunities in a land she believes offers more than what she had in Birzeit.

“I thought things would be different here,” Isra confessed. Fareeda looked up. “Different how?” “I thought maybe women only had it so tough in Palestine, you know, because of old customs and traditions.” “Ha!” Fareeda said. “You think women have it easier in America because of what you see on television?” Her almond eyes narrowed to slits. “Let me tell you something. A man is the only way up in this world, even though he'll climb a woman's back to get there. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.” (Rum, 2019, p.62)

In this conversation, Isra thought that America would give her a better life, a more humane life for her, where she would not have to constantly submit to her homecountry traditions, especially as an immigrant. She hoped that by living in America, she could be free from the cultural pressures that restricted her as a woman. However, Fareeda shattered that hope. She explained that Isra's view was too naive and idealistic. For Fareeda, Isra's view of living in America would change everything was just an illusion of the American dream that she had only seen through television and the books she had read. Fareeda emphasized that even though they lived in America, their traditions and cultural values still had to be followed.

### **Deya**

Deya is pictured as a pivotal person just like her mother, Isra. Since the tragic death of both of her parents, she has lived with her sisters and grandparents only. She is depicted as a young woman with a strong, independent will and an open-minded perspective. She respects the values of the cultures of her home country but she also resist and fight for her personal freedoms that the American Dream promises.

"Nonsense." Fareeda had squinted at the Turkish coffee grounds staining the bottom of her cup. "It doesn't matter where we live. Preserving our culture is what's most important. All you need to worry about is finding a good man to provide for you."

"But there are other ways here, Teta. Besides, I wouldn't need a man to provide for me if you let me go to college. I could take care of myself." At this, Fareeda had lifted her head sharply to glare at her. "*Majnoona?* Are you crazy? No, no, no." She shook her head with distaste. "But I know plenty of girls who get an education first. Why can't I?"

"College is out of the question. Besides, no one wants to marry a college girl." (Rum, 2019, p.25-26)

In this dialogue, Deya wants to continue her higher education, but her grandmother, Fareeda, against her will, believing that a woman's main duty is to marry and raise a family. For Deya, college is a path to independence without depending on men, while for Fareeda, education is considered irrelevant because husbands should be the breadwinners. Under the excuse of preserving cultural traditions, Fareeda restricts Deya's freedom and prevents her from achieving freedom as the aspirations promised by the American Dream. This struggle shows how cultural norms become barriers for Deya, and this also emphasizes that the freedom and opportunities promised by America are not always achievable for everyone, as experienced by Deya herself, who failed to realize the American Dream itself.

"I'm afraid, Teta," Deya whispered. "I don't want to marry a man I don't know." "Arranged marriages are what we do," Fareeda said. "Just because we live in America, that doesn't change how things are." She shook her head, reaching inside the cabinet for a teakettle. "If you keep turning down proposals, the next thing you know, you'll be old and no one will want to marry you, and then you'll spend the rest of your life in this house with me." She caught Deya's eyes. "You've seen other girls who've disobeyed their parents, refusing to get married, or worse, getting divorced, and look at them now! Living at home with their parents, their heads hanging in shame! Is that what you want?" Deya looked away. (Rum, 2019, p.34)

This dialogue illustrates how cultural hegemony works through intimidation and the establishment of social norms. Fareeda not only commands Deya, but she also uses arguments designed to instill fear and shame. Fareeda used threats and created fear of shame and social isolation as a means of control. Although Deya was physically in America, she remained bound to a belief system that emphasized cultural obedience and conformity. Her unwillingness to enter into an arranged marriage became a form of resistance against her own culture, but Fareeda's determination to uphold tradition by threatening Deya with consequences if she did not comply made that resistance difficult.

Thus, Deya, as the “governed,” feels trapped. Although she has the desire to resist, she finds it difficult to fight against traditions that are so deeply rooted and emphasized by her own family. This shows that the promises of the American Dream cannot be realized if her cultural ideology as a Palestinian limits her so strongly and is maintained within her family environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main conclusion from the analysis of this novel is that the failure of the female characters in achieving American Dream because of the internalized cultural hegemony they live under, a system that is actively upheld by their culture of origin. In this novel, Fareeda is the embodiment of both the “governor” and the governed in this hegemonic system, making cultural oppression appear to be a moral obligation. Fareeda's dialogue shows that she considers the preservation of her cultural norms, which are largely detrimental to women, to be of utmost importance, even viewing the freedom offered by America as a threat to her family's honor and reputation. She willingly accepts oppression against herself, and in doing so, she reproduces the same system of control against Isra and Deya. Her belief that a woman's life is defined by her role as wife and mother is so deeply rooted that she cannot see the promise of the American Dream of independence and self-determination as anything other than a dangerous illusion. This shows that the American Dream cannot be achieved when a community actively rejects and undermines its core principles from within.

Isra and Deya's experiences show how this hegemonic cycle is passed down from generation to generation, making the promise of freedom from the American Dream an unattainable illusion. Isra's initial hope that going to America would provide her with a way out of the culture that had been oppressing her was dashed because Fareeda continued to enforce the hegemonic culture that she considered to be her ancestral heritage. Isra's dream was, in fact, an illusion based on a superficial understanding of life in America. Her subsequent life of oppression, silence, and physical violence shows that being physically in America does not guarantee freedom if one remains ideologically trapped by cultural expectations. Similarly, Deya's struggle for independence, while representing hopeful resistance, is consistently confronted with the same hegemonic pressures. Ultimately, the novel concludes that without fundamental liberation from the chains of internalized cultural norms, the American Dream remains an empty promise for these women, because

their aspirations are limited not by a lack of opportunity in America, but by the ideological constraints of their own culture.

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