

Palestinian Motherhood: Dreams, Resilience, and Generational Trauma in Etaf Rum's Evil Eye

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Abstract

“She wrote about Mama. She wrote about Teta. She wrote about the olive trees in Palestine, how they had been chopped from the roots. How, even though they’d looked dead, they were the most resilient trees and had grown back to twice their original size.” - Etaf Rum, Evil Eye.

For almost eight decades now, Israel has been pushing out Palestinians from their land, leaving them homeless and nameless. However, despite everything, they stay resilient, just like the olive trees in Palestine that grow back even after being chopped off. For women in Palestine, motherhood is an act of defiance against this occupying and obliterating force of Israel. They give birth to future generations in the hope that someday, their children will be able to come home to Palestine again, even if they will never be able to. While women in Palestine has their own struggles; those who immigrate to other countries take a fair share of the generational trauma of internal displacements and genocide with them, wherever they go. Knowingly or unknowingly, this seeps into their psyche, resulting in a deep sense of shame, for abandoning their homeland, and a lack of belongingness to the country they now live in. For mothers who lose their dreams too in the process, this reflects in the form of anger, hatred, and abuse towards their children. The Palestinian-American author Etaf Rum’s novel Evil Eye talks about three generations of women: Yara, her mother Meriem, and her grandmother whom she calls Teta. It is a poignant portrayal of how the environments in which these women live affect their motherhood and the methods they adopt to preserve themselves and their children in a cruel world. This paper looks at the effect of broken dreams, generational trauma, and mental health issues on Palestinian motherhood by studying Rum’s novel in detail, focussing on the various aspects that make each of these women a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother in the eyes of society.

Keywords: Palestine, motherhood, abuse, depression, generational trauma, belongingness, identity, dream

Palestine is a country that is constantly under the threat of erasure due to the Israeli Occupation since 1967, places a great deal of importance on its mothers. Women in Palestine are often hailed as the pillars of society since they occupy half of it and give birth to the rest. According

to Rebecca Ann Otis, “From the Palestinian standpoint in the decades since 1948, the act of having many children represents a political act of defiance to their situation of continued statelessness. In effect, bearing children a raw affirmation of their existence” (Otis 97). The pressure to maintain the identity and survival of the country hence falls upon Palestinian mothers. It is expected of them to fill the gaps left by the Palestinians who get killed in the resistance against Israel. However, not all births are celebrated equally. In Palestine, a son is considered more valuable than a daughter since not only is he the inheritor of the family legacy, but also an asset to the Palestinian resistance against Israel.

A Palestinian girl child is culturally conditioned to act ‘feminine’ and ‘motherly’ and is only considered a woman once she is married and produces male children. This qualifies her for the respected title of *Umm*, which is a way of saying that she is the mother of a male child, unlike a woman who only has female children and is hence referred to merely as *Mara’h*, or a married woman (Abu Duhou 86–87). Women becoming mothers therefore gains supreme importance and giving birth to many children comes to be a method by which these mothers in Palestine fight against the force that is trying hard to obliterate their community. Thus, motherhood becomes a vessel to carry on their memories, no matter how long the occupation and genocide go on.

Etaf Rum, a Palestinian-American author, tries to portray a picture of what it means to be a mother who has her roots in Palestine through her works *A Woman is No Man* (2019) and *Evil Eye* (2023). Born and brought up in Brooklyn, New York, by Palestinian immigrant parents, many of Rum’s own experiences are reflected in her novels, including isolation, Islamophobia, and identity crisis. As someone who got married young and moved away to her husband’s place, Rum resembles the protagonist Yara in her novel *Evil Eye* in quite a few ways. She shares Yara’s feelings of being dissatisfied with life and feeling guilty about it. In fact, Rum says that writing novels was her way of finding answers to questions that troubled her for years. She remarks, “I’m a different person now than I was before I started writing *Evil Eye*. Yara taught me a lot, a lot of how I delude myself. She taught me the extent to which I self-abandon, and how much I’ve been taught to self-abandon from a young age” (Rapkin and Rum). This idea of abandoning oneself is empathetically portrayed in Yara’s mental health struggles. Thus, through her works, Rum intends to explore the areas of women’s identity, freedom, and generational trauma, and thereby help Palestinian women feel seen (León and Rum).

Evil Eye tells the story of a second-generation immigrant, Yara, who moves to North Carolina from her hometown, Brooklyn, after getting married to Fadi. She is the mother of two girls,

Mira and Jude, and teaches art at a local college. The story begins with Yara getting an opportunity at work to go abroad and her husband restricting her from doing so, claiming to be busy and incapable of looking after the kids while she is away. Just as Yara seems to be adjusting to this rejection, her colleague Amanda makes a racist and Islamophobic comment about her and this triggers Yara, resulting in her snapping at Amanda. Yara is then put on probation by her superior and is asked to attend mandatory therapy sessions to improve her workplace behaviour. Although reluctant initially, Yara slowly starts processing her feelings with the help of the therapist William and later Esther, and befriends a gay man named Silas in the process. She gradually realises that her difficult childhood and generational trauma have a strong hold on her, and that unknowingly, she had been passing it on to her children. Her husband Fadi and her mother-in-law Nadia remain detached and unsupportive towards Yara throughout her struggles and healing process. On realising that her marriage has left her feeling trapped and helpless, Yara decides to get a divorce and focus on being a better person, for the sake of her children.

Where Does One Truly Belong?

Yara is often worried that she does not belong anywhere—neither in Palestine nor in America. While she faces racist comments and is often stereotyped for her Arab background in America, she feels out of tune when it comes to being a true Palestinian, despite trying her best to be one. Throughout the novel, we see her cooking several Middle Eastern recipes that she had learnt from her Teta, or grandmother, such as *tabbouleh*, *shakshuka*, *tzatziki*, and *mujaddara*, to keep her memory alive. She once admits to her kids that her happiest childhood days were all spent in Palestine, cooking with her Teta. It was Teta who etched the memories of Palestine into Yara. She often told Yara about the Nakba, how she had to flee her house suddenly one day and was never able to go back.

Teta's memories of being snatched away from her homeland Yara realises that she had it much better than other Palestinians. She had a home and did not live under the constant threat of being displaced. Hence, unlike her Teta, who had lived in Palestine her entire life and considered it her only home, Yara felt like she did not belong in Palestine or America. "Her privilege as an American citizen stood in stark contrast to the poverty and powerlessness of the millions of Palestinians who lived in the crumbling camps, who faced staggering rates of joblessness and violence, who barely had access to clean water. It filled her with a deep sense of shame" (Rum 45). In the world outside, immigrant women like Yara are constantly otherised, preventing them from having a singular identity. Thus, the only way these women survive is

by attempting to belong to their families and community. Yara knew that her mother-in-law Nadia felt the strong urge to preserve their family and be involved in the Palestinian community in North Carolina because back in Palestine, homes and families were constantly torn apart. So Yara did the same as well. She made delicious dinners every night and tried hard to reconnect with Fadi, just so she could belong somewhere, to someone. But Fadi did not understand her needs, causing her to feel completely alone in the world.

The Broken Oud and the Blame Game

Meriem too experienced extreme loneliness. She was well known in her hometown for playing the Oud, a Middle Eastern musical instrument. Teta once said, “Your voice has the ability to make us forget, ya binti” (35). For the people who have constantly been ripped away from their homes and always lived in the fear of being erased forever, occasional intervals of forgetfulness about the horrors and rubbles they lived in were like a tonic, and Meriem made that possible for her community with her songs. Her music was something that brought her, as well as her people, to life. It is the desire to dedicate herself more to her music that made her leave Palestine where she knew she had no scope of doing so. She had come to America with the dream of being a famous singer but had to succumb to the expectations of being a good mother. She did not want to be a mother but was pressured into giving birth to six children because of her homeland’s traumatic state. This made her feel stuck in her life, doing nothing but “mothering” her children all throughout the day (117).

She struggled with adjusting to the culture of America, did not know the language, and could not in any way pursue her interests. When Teta died, Meriem lost both her mother and her motherland. On top of everything, her abusive husband left her feeling more isolated than ever by refusing to divorce her and threatening to take their kids away from her. The only way she found belongingness amidst all of this was by having an affair with another man. This was probably the only time when she felt she was more than just a mother. So, when her husband found out about it from their daughter, Meriem grew more and more resentful of her children, whom she believed had destroyed all her dreams. This caused her to take out her anger on them by being violent and abusive towards them, and Yara bore the brunt of it being the eldest child and the one closest to her mother. Meriem’s behaviour is very clearly indicative of depression, but her superstitious husband wrote it off as her being possessed by a jinn and resorted to punishing her for it through domestic violence. As a matter of fact, in addition to the grief of losing her beloved mother, Meriem was also going through nonfinite grief, which is defined as grief that one feels when a dream they had never materialised, which in this case is her

unfulfilled dream of being someone like Fairuz, an iconic Lebanese singer (Valentin). However, she was never recognised as a victim by her society. Instead, she was labelled a ‘bad mother’ and Yara’s father constantly reprimanded her whenever she did anything that resembled the way her mother had behaved. Even when Yara tried to make him acknowledge that he had been a bad parent as well by abusing her mother in front of her siblings and her, her father refused to do so and put the blame solely on Meriem.

It is a cultural norm in many communities to praise the father when a child excels at something and to blame the mother when the child does something wrong. In Yara’s case, her father was completely absent from her house for most of the time. When Fadi turned out to be a workaholic too, this was what disturbed Yara the most—that he wasn’t being a parent any better than her father. It was only after she decided to divorce him that Fadi agreed to share the responsibilities of their daughters equally. It is interesting to note here that Yara’s father, who had been disinterested in anything other than his traditional role of being a breadwinner, had threatened to take the children away when Meriem asked for a divorce, knowing very well that despite how much she disliked being a mother or how badly she failed at her duties as a parent, the children belonged to her too, and that he had the power to strip them away from her. In both cases, the women felt powerless as they were forced to feel that they did not belong even in their families. This also shows the hypocrisy of men in putting the onus of raising children on their partners, despite being completely capable of equally contributing to the process of parenting.

Irreparable Losses and Coping with Grief

For both Meriem and Yara, it was the death of their mother that pushed them deeper into the abyss of sadness. As the descendants of Palestinians who underwent many traumatic events during their lives, Meriem and Yara both inherited intergenerational trauma—the sense of loss and grief—that came with their ancestor’s past. Talking about the Palestinian loss Randa Jarrar says, “To be from an erased place is to constantly fear erasure of those you love the most” (Jarrar). For Meriem, the only way she could remember her mother was through the memories of Palestine. It was the one place where Yara had seen Meriem happy. Once she lost her mother in addition to her dream and her motherland, all that was left in Meriem was a void, a feeling of emptiness. She no longer possessed anything that had given her any joy and this caused her to act out in the worst ways possible. Yara too followed soon and started exhibiting many similar patterns as her mother. But unlike Meriem, Yara had access to mental health resources.

By following William's advice to note down her feelings in a journal, Yara was able to process that most of her problems had come from her unhappy childhood and her dysfunctional relationship with her mother. Meriem had constantly blamed Yara for ruining her life, and this had led Yara to internalise the idea that she was indeed to blame for how her childhood turned out to be. Despite being understanding and empathetic towards her mother's struggles as an adult, Yara was unable to feel at peace. Rum writes, "For days afterward, Yara dreamed of her mother, imagining things they'd never done. Sometimes they were huddled together in her childhood bedroom while Mama braided her hair. Other times they were holding hands as they strolled around Bay Ridge, Mama stopping at a corner ice cream truck to get her a cone. In one dream, Mama was tucking her into bed while singing one of her favourite Fairuz songs, her voice enveloping her like a soft blanket. Yara hummed along sleepily, reaching up to trace her fingers across her mother's cheek. But it seemed like the farther she stretched out her hand, the farther Mama drifted away until she eventually disappeared." (183)

For Yara, the only way to feel peaceful would have been by mending her relationship with her mother. She had been yearning for her mother's love from her childhood and this desire carried on even when she became a mother herself, as we see in the paragraph above. But the fact that her Mama passed away without the reconciliation she had dreamt of made Yara sink into the depression that had followed her since childhood.

The Courage to Move Forward

When Yara was asked to attend therapy sessions at her workplace, she felt it would not work for her at all. Part of it stemmed from her cultural background as well, given her mother did not get any professional help. Teta was a huge believer in superstitions. She taught her daughter, Yara's mother, the art of reading tea leaves. When Meriem was married off, she predicted that her daughter would have to go through several hardships and therefore urged her to stay back in Palestine. It was Teta's belief in superstitions that slipped into Meriem, and to an extent Yara as well. Teta believed the *Hamsa* charm would protect her daughter, instead of believing that her daughter would be able to protect herself. Hence Meriem also put her trust in superstitions. She believed she was cursed once she lost her mother and after the fortune teller confirmed this fear; she internalised the thought that she couldn't help herself. She had no friends to talk to, and no education to depend upon to save herself from unfavourable situations. Hence, she couldn't escape her depression or her rage. Therefore, Yara thought it was unfair on her part to even feel like she was having any troubles with her marriage or her past. However, unlike her mother, Yara had a friend in Silas who encouraged her to give professional help a try, and a job

that made it possible. She had William and Esther listened to her and helped her find her way. All of this ended up making her even more guilty as she knew that this was a privilege her Mama did not have. However, on realising the hold her mother had on her, Yara knew she had to do better with her kids. She did not want to follow the model of motherhood set by Meriem. She wanted to be a 'good mother' to her kids and break the chain of abuse and trauma. In fact, by mothering her kids, Yara was being a mother to herself as well—a kind of mother she always wanted but never had. She knew that her girls were constantly watching and learning from her like she had been from Meriem. Hence, she did her best to not repeat her mother's mistakes. Once when she snapped at her girls, she immediately thought of the memory of her mother snapping at her in a similar situation and how that had made her feel as a young girl, so she apologised straight away and comforted her girls. She also made sure that Mira and Jude knew that she loved them. The very reason she agreed to work through all her painful memories and seek help for her mental health issues was to protect her kids from the trauma that she had carried for so long. This is an excellent example of Palestinian resilience.

Despite going through endless and unfathomable loss and pain, Palestinians kept hope alive in them. They continued to make families and temporary homes in refugee tents. They continued to celebrate religious festivals and birthdays. They continued to believe that one day Palestine would be free, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Teta believed the same. When Yara once asked Teta if she thought she would ever get to go back home, Teta shows her the key to her parent's house and says, "Even though I've lived in this camp for over fifty years now, I was raised with the hope of returning to my homeland, and I still have that hope. And if I don't, maybe my children will return, maybe my grandchildren, maybe you. That's why I've kept this key all these years" (207).

Yara wanted to have a home—a place where she belonged and felt safe. She did not have that in her husband's house or her parents' house. But she had that in the apartment she had gotten for herself and her kids. After going through two traumatic houses and the memories associated with them, Yara had finally come home, and she wanted the same for her kids. She wanted them to have a safe world, happy and free parents, and above everything, a home. Yara made sure that they had it all. She wanted to be able to act on her mother's words from the past that often echoed in her mind, "One day you'll do things better than we did. Inshallah you will" (340). Yara knew that a divorce would be looked down upon by the people around her. In fact, her father had refused to be a part of her life anymore when she informed him of her decision. But she did not care about being the picture-perfect mother anymore. All she wanted was for

her to have an identity of her own and for her kids to have a mother who cared for them and loved them, a mother who did not pass on her trauma and pain to her kids, a mother who tried. Yara knew that she was trying her best to become that, and that was all that mattered.

Conclusion

Etaf Rum, in her novel *Evil Eye*, captures the difficulties, resilience, and unbroken spirit of Palestinian motherhood, through the lives of three generations of women—Teta, Meriem, and Yara. The novel explores how a lack of belongingness, broken dreams, and intergenerational trauma affects the process of mothering and how different generations of mothers respond to the same. It calls for the readers to understand the battles mothers fight within their homes and hearts, and the impact societal pressure and cultural expectations have on them, pushing them to the brink of various mental health issues. Rum makes sure that through her characters, women who go through similar struggles feel seen and acknowledged.

The stories of Teta, Meriem, and Yara stand as a testament to the spirit of Palestinian women across the world who strive hard to preserve their culture and identity. Rum encourages her readers to empathise with the mothers of Palestine who continue to do their best for their future generations, despite going through constant erasure, loss, and displacement. Even though Meriem and Yara are Palestinian immigrants, a lot of their identity is formed by their broader Palestinian experience and their traumatic history. Rum calls attention to the need for proper familial support and mental health care for mothers and highlights the importance of sharing parental responsibilities. She acknowledges the hardships that come with breaking cycles of trauma and abuse and emphasises the need to empower women to be capable of doing that. *Evil Eye* is not just the story of Yara, but also the story of every mother who wishes the best for her child, who desires to protect them from the things that harmed her, and who tries her best, even if she fumbles or falls at times.

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