

NATIONAL BOOK CLUBS

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A WOMAN IS NO MAN by Etaf Rum Discussion Questions

1. Why might a community or culture have a “code of silence”? What are the potential risks of such secrecy? In what ways is such silence harmful to Isra and other women and girls?
2. Beyond the literal, what does it mean for a person to have a voice? Why is it important to health and safety? What are the various forces that silence Isra’s voice?
3. Why are books so important to Isra, Sarah, and Deya? What makes the reading of books so threatening to Isra’s mother, Fareeda and the men in the novel?
4. In the frustrated words of Isra’s mother, “What does love have to do with marriage?” What is the purpose of arranged, loveless marriages? Why would her mother accuse Isra of being a sharmouta because she wanted to fall in love?
5. Isra is taught from an early age that, “Obedience [is] the only path to love.” What does this mean? Why is obedience important in a society? When does obedience become oppressive or dangerous?
6. When Isra first meets Adam, he vehemently claims: “I am free.” To what extent is this true or not? What forces limit personal freedom? What is a healthy balance of personal freedom and obligation to family or community?
7. Why does Fareeda believe that, “Preserving our culture is what’s most important,” despite the suffering it brings to the women and girls in the family? What, more specifically, does she believe must be preserved?
8. In what different ways do Isra, Deya, Sarah, Adam, Fareeda, and Khaled assimilate to American culture? Which acts of assimilation from their children and grandchildren are acceptable to Khaled and Fareeda? Which are not? What does this reveal about their values?



9. Throughout the novel, men are forgiven for committing zina, for drinking, sexual infidelity, and violence toward women. How is this explained and justified? What is the source of this double standard that contradicts even the Quran?

10. Isra's suffers the profound shaming of her daughter and of herself for giving birth to only girls. Why are girls and women thought to be of such little value in her family and culture? What vast effects do these ideas have on girls as they grow up? What can be done to resist such psychological and physical harm?

11. Of what value is Isra's writing of letters to her mother that she never sends?