

Timelines:

AALIYA'S STORY

- 1937: Aaliya is born
- 1939: Aaliya's father dies
- 1944: Hannah gets 'engaged'
- 1951: Aaliya translates some pages from her science textbook
- 1953: Aaliya gets married
- 1967: Ahmad starts coming to the bookstore
- 1971: Ahmad stops coming to the store
- 1972: Hannah commits suicide
- 1977: Palestinian militia breaks into Aaliya's apartment
- 1982: Ahmad is exiled from Lebanon
- 2009: Aaliya writes this book

LEBANESE HISTORY

- 1944: France grants Lebanon independence
- 1967: Arab-Israeli war in which Israel takes control of West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula & Golan Heights
- 1970: Black September (in Jordan)
 - Jordanian military attacks the PLO, which had been operating in Jordan since 1967. Peace deal last for 6 months; PLO expelled from Jordan in 1971.
- 1975: The Lebanese Civil War begins
 - The event typically used to mark the beginning of the Lebanese civil war is when the Phalange, a Christian militia, attacked a bus with mostly Palestinian passengers, killing more than 25.
- 1978: Israel invades southern Lebanon; Hundred Days War in Beirut
 - MAR: Israel invades southern Lebanon, withdrawing from most of the territory quickly, but turning it over to Christian militias.
 - FEB-APR: The Hundred Days War was fighting in Beirut between Christian militias and Syrian 'peacekeeping' troops.
- 1982: Israel invades; Sabra and Shatilla massacre
 - JUN: Israel invades again, lays siege to Beirut.
 - SEP: The Phalange attacked a Palestinian civilian neighborhood and refugee camp as the Israeli Defense Forces observed over a 36 hour period, killing at least 500 and likely more than 1,200.
- 1988: Negotiations take place in Taif, Saudi Arabia.
- 1990: October 13th Massacre starts 15 years of Syrian defacto rule
- 2000: Israel withdraws the last of its troops from Lebanon
- 2005: Syrian withdraws the last of its troops from Lebanon
- 2006: Israeli attacks Lebanon, Beirut is heavily bombed
- 2008: Sectarian clashes in Beirut between Shia and Sunni militia

Discussion Questions:

1. Does Aaliya change during the course of the book? Does Aaliya understand herself to have changed over time; in other words, does she remember herself as a young woman differently from how she perceives herself at the time of this book? In just the few days we actually follow Aaliya's life in the present, does she change?
2. Alameddine frequently writes about people who don't belong in the place they find themselves. Most of his other main characters are caught between the Middle East and the United States. Is Aaliya similarly dislocated?
3. Aaliya feels most at home in her apartment. She also loves the city of Beirut, even as she calls Lebanon a "pygmy state," a term she also uses to describe Israel. What role do the city and the apartment play in this novel?
4. Aaliya describes the women in her building as "witches," reporting on their lives with some disdain. Yet, most of their direct actions toward Aaliya seem to improve her life: Fadia occasionally brings food that Aaliya finds delicious, they all defend Aaliya when her family arrives and seek to help her save her translations after the flood. What are we to make of this contrast?
5. How are Hannah and Aaliya the same and how are they different?
6. What roles did Ahmad play in Aaliya's life? Why does he leave the bookstore and Beirut? Compare and contrast him to the other male characters in the story, such as Aaliya's "impotent insect" of a husband, Aaliya's half-brother, or Hannah's lieutenant.*
7. A lot of the summaries of the book, including the back cover of my copy, talk about a woman whose life is upended by the Lebanese Civil War. There are few stories directly about the conflict. How important was it in shaping her life?
8. All of Aaliya's thirty-seven translations have been works already translated from their original languages—she only does "translations of translations." But at the end of the novel, Aaliya decides she's ready to undertake her own translations of books initially written in French or English. What does this change say about Aaliya? At the end of the novel, she's trying to decide between one novel written in English, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and the French *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar. Which do you think she will choose? What will her choice between the two books mean?*
9. Aaliya notes at a few different instances in the novel that she avoids stories that culminate in an epiphany. "There should be a new literary resolution: no more epiphanies. Enough. Have pity on readers who reach the end of a real-life conflict in confusion and don't experience a false sense of temporary enlightenment." (p. 148). Does *An Unnecessary Woman* end with an epiphany?*
10. Is Aaliya believable? Is her story believable?

* These questions are taken directly from the publisher's "Reading Group Guide," available at: <https://groveatlantic.com/book/an-unnecessary-woman/>