



## Gender, Isolation, and Diasporic Consciousness in Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper investigates how *An Unnecessary Woman* negotiates gender, isolation, and diasporic consciousness. It studies how Alameddine represents female intellectual solitude in a post-war Arab setting, and in the ways that solitude generates a diasporic mode of self-reflection. The literary problem is to reconceptualize Aaliya's seclusion not as mere marginality but as a deliberate strategy that produces a particular diasporic consciousness: one that is at once rooted in cultural memory and unmoored from national belonging.

It is argued in this paper that *An Unnecessary Woman* reframes female isolation as a site of diasporic self-translation. The paper adopts a qualitative literary approach that focuses on textual and conceptual analysis. The approach is used to thematically analyse the text and present the findings using close reading as the primary analytical method. Jahn Manfred's narratological model, which focuses the attention on a formal structure of narration, is the theoretical framework used to thematically analyse and interpret the text under discussion. Elements like focalization, temporal movement and interpretation of consciousness are key aspects in interpreting such a novel that is full of interior monologue and reflective memory. It is seen how the narrative mirrors psychological space and what the structural features look like as expressions of isolation. Through Aaliya's withdrawal, Alameddine stages an inward exile that functions as both critique and creation: gendered marginality becomes the ground for a reflective, resistant subjectivity. In other words, solitude in the novel is not simply social failure or pathology; it is a field in which diasporic identity is lived, tested, and inscribed.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Post-war Lebanon and its ambivalent modernity, which is the setting of the novel, produces what postcolonial theorists term as the "unhomely," a psychic condition in which home and world are confused and contested. Aaliya's apartment is both refuge and crucible: a space in which isolation becomes instrument—a place where language performs the work of survival. She translates other authors not only to pass the time, but to create a self out of borrowed voices; this fact links personal loneliness to larger diasporic formations of identity.

Alameddine's prose registers cultural dissonance: multiple tongues, sectarian memory, and overlapping historical violences. But the novel's interest lies less in a topographical account of displacement than in how solitude remakes gendered subjectivity—the way retreat becomes a vehicle for reflection, selfpossession, and, paradoxically, social critique.

The study is situated at the intersection of postcolonial and feminist theory. Homi K. Bhabha's ideas about cultural hybridity and liminal "third spaces" help frame Aaliya's in-between identity; Edward W. Said's reflections on exile illuminate the productive aspect of displacement; and feminist theory—from Simone de Beauvoir's notion of gendered otherness to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on the subaltern voice—helps clarify how Aaliya's silence and linguistic labour relate to structures of gendered

exclusion. Recent criticism on Arab diasporic and feminist writing further grounds this study's attention to how diasporic narratives rework silence and authorship.

This study contributes to discussions in Arab diaspora studies and feminist postcolonial criticism by showing how isolation can be reframed as a creative and political stance. While critics have examined Alameddine's themes of trauma and ageing, less attention has been paid to the particular way gendered solitude produces diasporic consciousness. Addressing this lacuna refines our understanding of how Arab-Anglophone fiction stages interior exile as a means of creative resistance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITICAL COMMENTS

Critical engagement with *An Unnecessary Woman* has largely coalesced around questions of isolation, gendered marginality, and intellectual withdrawal, frequently situating Aaliya Saleh's solitude within frameworks of social exclusion or postwar alienation. While these readings offer valuable insight into the conditions that shape Aaliya's life, they often approach her isolation as a deficit—an absence of social integration, relational fulfillment, or political engagement—rather than as an active and sustaining mode of subjectivity. This chapter reviews existing scholarship on the novel and related theoretical fields in order to identify a critical gap: the insufficient attention paid to Aaliya's isolation as a deliberate, meaning-producing practice grounded in translation, intertextuality, and diasporic consciousness.

### 2.1 Diaspora, the Unhomely, and Internal Exile

Much of the scholarship engaging Alameddine's novel situates it within postcolonial and diasporic discourse, drawing on theorists such as Homi Bhabha to articulate the sense of unbelonging that permeates Aaliya's narration. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" is particularly influential, describing a condition in which the private sphere becomes unsettled by historical violence and cultural fracture. Critics applying this framework emphasize Beirut as a space where war and memory collapse temporal boundaries, producing a form of psychic displacement even in the absence of physical migration.

However, while these readings productively complicate narrow definitions of diaspora, they often stop short of examining how such displacement is *narratively enacted*. Diasporic consciousness is invoked descriptively rather than analytically, treated as a contextual condition rather than a structured mode of perception. As a result, Aaliya's inwardness risks being interpreted as passive withdrawal, rather than as a reflective stance through which she actively reorganizes cultural inheritance, language, and identity.

This study departs from that tendency by approaching diasporic consciousness not as geographic dislocation but as an epistemic position—one sustained through linguistic mediation, temporal layering, and selective affiliation. In doing so, it aligns diaspora theory with close textual analysis, allowing the novel's formal strategies to carry conceptual weight rather than serving merely as illustrative examples of postcolonial trauma.

### 2.2 Gender, Solitude, and Intellectual Marginality

Feminist readings of *An Unnecessary Woman* frequently foreground Aaliya's status as an unmarried, aging woman whose intellectual pursuits render her socially illegible within a patriarchal milieu.

Scholars have noted how the label "unnecessary" operates as a cultural judgment that disciplines women who exist outside reproductive, familial, or communal utility. These interpretations effectively expose the gendered logic through which Aaliya is marginalized, emphasizing how social structures restrict female autonomy while rendering intellectual labor invisible.

Yet many of these accounts frame solitude primarily as the outcome of exclusion, reinforcing a causal narrative in which isolation is something imposed upon Aaliya rather than cultivated by her. Such readings risk reproducing the very logic they critique, positioning Aaliya as a subject defined by lack—of marriage, recognition, or public voice—rather than by her chosen practices of engagement with texts, languages, and memory.

Recent feminist scholarship complicates this view by rethinking solitude as a form of intellectual agency, particularly for women whose participation in public discourse is structurally constrained. Within this framework, withdrawal does not signify disengagement but rather the creation of alternative spaces of meaning-making. This study adopts that perspective, reading Aaliya's solitude as a condition that enables sustained reflection, translation, and ethical reading, thereby reframing isolation as an active strategy of self-preservation and resistance.

### 2.3 Translation, Translingualism, and Self-Construction

One of the most distinctive aspects of *An Unnecessary Woman*—and one that remains under-theorized in existing criticism—is Aaliya's lifelong commitment to translating Western literary texts into Arabic without an audience. While several scholars acknowledge translation as a central motif, it is often treated symbolically, as an extension of her isolation or a metaphor for cultural mediation.

Recent work in translingual literary studies, however, offers a more precise vocabulary for understanding translation as a formative practice rather than a secondary activity. Scholars in this field argue that translation constitutes a mode of reading that reshapes subjectivity, allowing individuals to inhabit multiple linguistic and cultural positions simultaneously. From this perspective, translation is not merely a bridge between languages but a site where identity is negotiated, fragmented, and reassembled.

Applying this framework to Alameddine's novel reveals Aaliya's translations as acts of self-authorship. Through sustained engagement with borrowed voices, she constructs a diasporic self that is neither rooted in national belonging nor dissolved into cultural loss. This study builds on such scholarship by positioning translation as the primary mechanism through which Aaliya's diasporic consciousness is sustained, arguing that her intellectual labor produces continuity in the absence of social recognition.

#### **2.4 Intertextuality, Narrative Voice, and Methodological Positioning**

Critics have frequently remarked on the novel's dense intertextuality, noting Aaliya's extensive citations of European and Middle Eastern writers. These references are often read as markers of erudition or as evidence of cultural hybridity. Less attention, however, has been given to how intertextuality functions structurally within the narrative, shaping its voice, rhythm, and temporal movement. From a narratological perspective, Aaliya's voice is constructed through a layering of textual affiliations that blur the boundary between original thought and inherited language. This feature complicates conventional notions of authorship and originality, aligning the novel with broader questions about intellectual lineage and cultural transmission in postcolonial contexts.

Methodologically, this study adopts a theoretically informed close-reading approach, combining feminist theory, diaspora studies, and translingual criticism to examine how narrative form produces meaning. Rather than applying theory externally, the analysis traces how concepts such as exile, gender, and translation emerge organically through language, metaphor, and structure. By doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that Aaliya's isolation is not merely thematized but formally enacted through the novel's stylistic choices.

#### **2.5 Identifying the Critical Gap**

Taken together, existing scholarship provides valuable insight into the social, political, and gendered forces that shape *An Unnecessary Woman*. However, it has yet to fully account for the ways in which Aaliya transforms isolation into an enabling condition through translation and intertextual engagement. By synthesizing diaspora theory, feminist critique, and translingual methodology, this study addresses that gap, arguing that Aaliya's solitude constitutes a deliberate mode of diasporic self-construction rather than a retreat from the world.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The theoretical frameworks and methodology to analyze *An Unnecessary Woman* are examined. The methodology applied is an interpretive methodology that is a mix between postcolonial and feminist theory, so it is considered a qualitative design. The methodology used in Jahn's *Narrative: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*, 2021 is adopted in the analysis. It also elaborates on the use of affective reading, spatial analysis, and close reading as part of the methodological approach. Lastly, an ethical perspective is demonstrated in this chapter that provides a systematic and flexible approach that digs into the themes of identity and belonging.

#### **3.1 Postcolonial Framework**

The first interpretive theory chosen is postcolonial theory that was coined by Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the third space. In *An Unnecessary Woman*, Aaliya's apartment and her solitude are considered the third space, as it is a place where both displacement and belonging are integrated in. This can be linked to Bhabha's argument in *the Location of Culture* (1994) which describes identity as a process of negotiation that occurs in the interstices between fixed cultural categories.

Moreover, Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996) complements this view by defining diaspora as both a condition of dislocation and a geography of desire. Aaliya's Beirut is both familiar and strange in this work, so the idea of "home" is contradictory in both the apartment she lives in and the city that she resides in. The methodological use of these ideas lies in reading spatial and psychological distance as indicators of diasporic subjectivity. That is why Brah's perspective is crucial in analyzing this work.

#### **3.2. Feminist Framework**

The second framework comes from feminist theory. Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters* (2000) describes how the figure of the stranger structures encounters and belonging. Aaliya's solitude can thus be seen as an "encounter" that redefines her relation to space and selfhood. Using Ahmed's approach to analyze isolation from a different lens gives us an out of the box analysis. It is interpreted as a different way of occupying space rather than the typical view people see as emotional withdrawal.

Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) provides another methodological approach which is the idea that women write from the margins and reclaim the act of expression through silence, absence, and bodily awareness. Reading Aaliya's voice through Cixous's lens helps explain how unacknowledged intellectual labor can still become self-defining.

This feminist framing also draws implicitly on Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which questions how the silenced subject articulates agency. In the methodology adopted here, Spivak's influence appears as interpretive caution, focusing on the power of silence in Aaliya's behavior.

#### **3.3 Affective Reading Approach**

Rita Felski's *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020) introduce the concept of reading as an act of relation. Felski's relational perspective helps to form the tone of this study's interpretive practice, which is to read *with* rather than *against* the text. This means attending to the emotional logic of Aaliya's solitude and the affective texture of her reflections. This approach is more empathetic towards the characters in the novel.

### 3.4 Spatial Analysis

Spatial analysis supplements close reading. Drawing on Marta Puxan-Oliva's *Narrative Space and the Reader* (2021), the study considers how space functions as both setting and metaphor. Aaliya's apartment is treated as a narrative site where identity is enclosed, preserved, and reimagined.

Spatial reading, in this sense, involves tracing how interior spaces reflect psychological conditions and social boundaries. Combining Puxan-Oliva's narrative spatiality with Brah's and Ahmed's theories of home and estrangement enables the analysis to view space as a living component of the story, not merely its backdrop.

### 3.5 Interpretive Strategy

The interpretive strategy integrates theory and text rather than applying one onto the other. Theory provides conceptual vocabulary; the text offers experiential illustration. Each reading sequence, therefore, proceeds by identifying a spatial or narrative motif and interpreting it through the theoretical lens established above.

The methodology values interpretive transparency — it explains how meaning is derived from textual evidence, maintaining a balance between theoretical insight and narrative texture.

The design follows a case-study logic: one primary text examined through multiple theoretical perspectives. The analysis does not rely on author biography or sociological data; its evidential base is the text itself. The aim is not to generalize but to deepen the understanding of how isolation operates as a creative and critical position in Alameddine's fiction.

### 3.6 Ethical and Interpretive Position

It is acknowledged that reading Aaliya's voice involves some ethical negotiation between empathy, critique, identification and distance in a feminist postcolonial context. Felski's analysis of attachment as a legitimate critical position legitimizes the affective interpretation in this work. The methodology therefore follows a simple premise, which is that solitude, when represented in literature, demands both analysis and care. The interpretive method used here aims to understand Aaliyah's silence as a deliberate act of creating her own world, as it is done in her own volition.

The conceptual and methodological foundations used in the study is outlined. Combining postcolonial, feminist, and narratological perspectives. All these conceptual and methodological frameworks combined create an interpretive method that focuses on narrative form and existential condition in *An Unnecessary Woman*. Following Jahn's methodological approach, the framework proceeds from definition to application which grounded the main framework of the analysis study. The next chapter applies these methods to examine how Aaliya Saleh's solitude in *An Unnecessary Woman* functions as feminist self-possession and diasporic consciousness.

## 4. DATA DISCUSSION

The paper applies the theoretical and methodological framework outlined earlier to interpret Aaliya Saleh's solitude in *An Unnecessary Woman*. The aim is not to impose theory onto the text, but to let the novel and the ideas converse with each other. Solitude, here, is read as both a lived condition and an intellectual stance, as well as a way of being that reveals how gender, displacement, and consciousness intertwine.

As Sara Ahmed reminds us in *Strange Encounters*, theory can serve as “a meeting place,” a site where concepts and experiences come together to make sense of how subjects inhabit space (Ahmed 7). This study proceeds in that spirit: by treating Aaliya's isolation not as withdrawal, but as an encounter— between self and history, woman and world, silence and articulation.

### 4.1 Aaliya's Apartment as a Diasporic World

Aaliya's apartment is both the novel's stage and its consciousness. It holds her books, her memories, and her solitude. The space is at once private and porous, a metaphor for what Avtar Brah calls “the lived experience of diaspora,” where home becomes both a shelter and a reminder of displacement (Brah 192).

As if this apartment is the one place that she can have control over and can govern, despite the outer fragmentations that are embedded within the city that lies right outside of her apartment walls.

Homi Bhabha's idea of the *unhomely* helps capture this contradiction: the domestic space becomes haunted by the world outside, its familiarity shadowed by estrangement. Aaliya's apartment, described with recurring attention to doors, light, and dust, functions as what Bhabha coined as a *third space*, an in-between zone where identity and belonging are rewritten (Bhabha 13).

Recent readings by Harrat and Khoualed show how isolation in Arab diasporic fiction often serves as a mode of self-preservation rather than self-negation. Harrat describes such solitude as a “hybrid consciousness,” born from historical fracture yet capable of quiet reconstruction (“Grey Zone”). In this sense, Aaliya's apartment becomes a narrative chamber where hybrid subjectivity takes shape. Her estrangement turns into routine, and her displacement turns into thought.

Moreover, according to the spacial theories of Puxan- Oliva, we may depict the apartment's stillness as the geography of Aaliyah's becoming. It is the place that is seen as a “readerly space”, one that demands both immersion and distance. Therefore she becomes a paradox, as the reader and the text, and as the subject and critic of her own life all at once.

#### 4.2 Silence and Gendered Resistance

According to Helene Cixous, women's writing often comes from places where they are not allowed to speak, because writing can turn silence into meaning (Cixous 885). Aaliya's story shows this idea in a clear way. Her solitude is not empty; it expresses how she feels and who she is. She decides not to publish her translations and she keeps some distance from people, yet she continues to read and write quietly. These choices work as forms of feminist resistance. Her unseen writing shows a kind of authorship that does not look for praise but keeps going because it is important to her and because it has value on its own.

Additionally, following Gayatri Spivak, the question of whether the subaltern can truly speak remains central, and this concern is relevant here as well (Spivak 285). Aaliya's silence in the novel is not simple quietness. It works as a form of refusal. Her isolation becomes an action rather than a condition. It performs what Spivak describes as an active rejection of both colonial and patriarchal ways of looking at her. Aaliya never shares the work she has created over many years, and this choice becomes a gesture of intellectual independence.

Recent feminist scholars such as Badidja and Al-Khotaba offer readings of *An Unnecessary Woman* that support this interpretation. Badidja argues that Aaliya occupies a position where her knowledge is not recognized by dominant institutions. Even so, it continues to exist and function within the private space of her own life (Badidja 182). Al-Khotaba focuses on how the novel's style produces this effect. He shows that the patterns of language in the text shape a system in which women's voices are pushed aside and treated as secondary within patriarchal culture (Al-Khotaba 97).

These arguments point to a different understanding of solitude in the novel. It is not simply a state of quiet suffering. Ahmed's work helps clarify this by describing solitude as a possible "reorientation," a turning of the self that opens another way of existing in the world (Ahmed 9). Aaliya chooses to organize her life around her own values. Her silence ends up becoming a sign of persistence and self-authorship rather than a case of merely "suffering in silence."

#### 4.3 Hybrid Consciousness and Exilic Subjectivity

Aaliya's solitude also reflects what Bhabha calls "hybridity," a space where different identities are constantly negotiated. She moves between several positions. She is Arab but also cosmopolitan. She feels rooted yet exiled. At times she is visible, at other times almost unseen. Her habits of reading and thinking each day show this in-between state, as she shifts between love for literature and distance from it.

Harrat describes the Arab diasporic subject as living in a "psychopathological zone of hybridity," a phrase that captures the quiet strain within Aaliya's inner life ("Grey Zone"). This tension does not simply confine her. It also opens a space for freedom. Aaliya does not pick one side between belonging and detachment. Instead, she remains between them, which reflects what Said calls "exilic thought," a way of thinking shaped by distance and estrangement from home (Said 173).

Khoualed's work on Arab diasporic writing suggests that isolation can give a person the chance to reshape the story of exile. It can move from being only about loss to becoming a way of defining oneself ("Counter-narratives"). Aaliya follows this path. Her solitude becomes creative rather than empty. Her reading life forms her identity, and books become the community she chooses. For her, reading is not separate from living. It is the way she lives.

Cixous's idea of feminine writing adds another layer to this understanding. She argues that identity can be formed through writing instead of through family lineage. Aaliya's narrative echoes this idea. The first-person voice and the constant presence of other texts show what Cixous calls "writing the body" (Cixous 889). Even as her body ages and becomes less noticed, it remains a source of knowledge. Her solitude is not only in the mind. It is also lived through the routines of her days, which themselves become a quiet form of resistance.

Through this lens, Aaliya's inner world becomes the novel's most political space. It challenges the belief that power must always be public or social. In Alameddine's novel, selfhood is sustained not by being absorbed into a community but by sustained reflection and inner life.

#### 4.4 Synthesis

Across these readings, solitude emerges as both feminist practice and diasporic condition. Aaliya's isolation reimagines the possibilities of agency for women who exist outside traditional forms of belonging. Her apartment, her silence, and her daily rituals together articulate what might be called an ethics of self-containment—an inward freedom that resists both social dismissal and cultural nostalgia.

As Brah reminds us, diaspora is not only about movement but also about "dwelling in displacement" (Brah 209). Aaliya's solitude transforms that dwelling into a form of thought. Through her, Alameddine offers a vision of exile that is not tragic but contemplative, not a wound but a mirror.

The next chapter concludes this study by reflecting on how Aaliya's solitude, viewed through feminist and postcolonial lenses, reframes marginality as creative resistance—a silent, self-sustaining mode of authorship within the dissonant world of post-war Beirut.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Aaliya Saleh's solitude, as discussed in this study, can be understood as a quiet form of strength. She continues to live on her own terms, which becomes its own kind of endurance. Inside her Beirut apartment, isolation is not simply emptiness. It becomes a way for her to keep going. She responds to the pressures of exile and gendered exclusion through reflection and thought. Her physical world is small. Even so, it leads her to large questions about how to live when one does not fully fit within society.

From a postcolonial and feminist perspective, solitude does not appear as failure. It functions as authorship and self-making. Bhabha's idea of the third space helps explain this position, since fragments of life are turned into something new and creative (Bhabha 56). Avtar Brah's description of "dwelling in displacement" also sheds light on this experience, because home can be both a shelter and a reminder of exile at the same time (Brah 209). She feels close to the world and distant from it at the same time. These tensions shape her identity.

Feminist thought helps reveal the emotional register of this solitude. Hélène Cixous writes that women often write "in white ink," from within quiet spaces that history leaves for them (Cixous 889). Aaliya's daily habits of reading and thinking become her version of that ink. She writes the self without needing an audience. Silence does not erase language. It sharpens it. In this sense, Spivak's idea of the subaltern resisting full translation becomes relevant, since a part of the self remains beyond appropriation (Spivak 285). Edward Said's reflections on exile further show the ethical dimension of distance. He explains that the exiled person often "sees the entire world as a foreign land," which encourages thinking from the margins rather than the center (Said 173). Seeing the world from the margins allows her to think more freely.

Rita Felski's idea of attachment allows a more personal emphasis where even a solitary life involves connection. That is where reading becomes one of its strongest forms. Felski's idea of attachment helps us understand Aaliya. Her connection to the world comes through reading and thinking, and through her commitment to her inner life rather than through social ties (Felski 27).

Overall, this study argues that *An Unnecessary Woman* presents isolation as creative resistance. Silence, unrecognized labor, and unassuming wisdom show that solitude can form its own kind of community. It becomes a community of thought. The city around Aaliya may be divided, yet a sense of wholeness grows through perceiving and understanding rather than through simple visibility. The novel ends without full reconciliation. It ends with composure and calm acceptance, where supposed unnecessariness is turned into meaning.

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