

An Unnecessary Woman Study Guide

An Unnecessary Woman by Rabih Alameddine

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Plot Summary

Grief, hope and humor all combine in this story told by 72-year-old Aaliya Saleh in the novel "An Unnecessary Woman" by Rabih Alameddine. In this snapshot of the introverted but well read woman living in Beirut, the capitol city of Lebanon, Aaliya shares with her reader her love for her home city as well as her fear of growing older. Through the course of the novel Aaliya struggles with grief as she remembers the death of her best friend, joy as she finishes a translating a book and despair when her life's work is damaged by a water leak.

When the novel opens Aaliya is celebrating the completion of her translation of the novel "Austerlitz" by W.G. Sebald. She is surprised when she looks into her mirror and sees that her hair is blue. She blames the blue tint on her distraction paired with using too much of a shampoo advertised to help liven up her white hair. She believes the color will eventually wash out.

The following morning Aaliya is stressed when her brother comes to her door intending to drop off their mother to stay with Aaliya. She'd been estranged from her family for quite a while simply because she, the offspring of her mother's first husband, was unnecessary to them. She didn't want to meddle in their lives and wished for them not to meddle in hers. When Aaliya's mother walks into the apartment and looks at her daughter she begins screaming. Fadia, who owns the building, orders them out. She is aware that since Aaliya's husband divorced her Aaliya's family has been after her to let them have the large apartment. Aaliya refuses to give it to them and Fadia refuses to force her tenant out. Aaliya is furthered stressed when the three other women who live in the building with her follow her into her apartment to try to comfort her after her family members left.

Feeling off balance by the events of the day Aaliya goes for a walk. As she walks around the neighborhood in which she has lived for 50 years she shares stories including her decision to arm herself with a gun and how she went about procuring the firearm. She tells of the record store where she bought records and taught herself to enjoy music. Aaliya also shares stories of the bookstore where she worked for 50 years. She returns home to find that Fadia has cooked a meal and left some in front of Aaliya's door.

The next morning Aaliya faces the group of three women, whom she secretly refers to as the three witches, as they gather for coffee in order to thank Fadia for the meal. She turns down an offer to join them for coffee saying she has to go out. Aaliya goes to the National Museum believing she will be able to get herself back on center. The trip is disastrous as a group of Italian tourists along with two small boys keep Aaliya from being able to get lost in the art as she is usually able to do at the museum. She has to find a place to hide and cry before she can leave.

Almost unconsciously Aaliya walks to her mother's apartment and asks to see her. She meets her great-niece Nancy for the first time. The two work together to give Aaliya's



mother a pedicure after the old lady tells them that her feet hurt. On the way home Aaliya is haunted by memories of Hannah, her only friend. Hannah committed suicide years before but Aaliya still grieves her death, blames herself and wishes she knew why Hannah decided to die.

The next morning is Aaliya's worst. Her neighbors come to her door telling her a pipe has burst flooding the area of the maid's room in each of the apartments. It is in this small bedroom that Aaliya had stored almost all of the copies of the 37 books she had translated into Arabic. The handwritten copies of the translations are all soaked but the women set to work helping Aaliya dry out the pages. As they talk the women persuade Aaliya to set aside her rules and break from the structured format of her work. Aaliya decides this means she can translate any writer she wishes to. She chooses two books as possibilities for her next project. Knowing her neighbor Marie-Thérèse is coming to invite her to lunch Aaliya decides she will translate one book if Marie-Thérèse knocks and the other if she rings the doorbell.



Pages 1-20

Summary

As she brushes her teeth in preparation for bed, the narrator, Aaliya Saleh realizes she's used too much of a shampoo intended to liven up her white hair and has unintentionally dyed it blue. She excuses her strange hair color by explaining that she was distracted when she shampooed and didn't read the instructions. She also had just finished her Arabic translation of "Austerlitz," a novel by W.G. Sebald, and was celebrating with two glasses of red wine. When she'd reread her translation of the novel, she was reminded of her friend Hannah, resulting in her distracted state.

Since she was 22 Aaliya has cultivated the art of translating books into Arabic from the English and French versions. She begins each of her new translations on January the first. She believes she's translated a total of 37 books in the 50 years she'd been working on these translations. Preparing to begin a new book is as exciting for Aaliya as other people's celebrations of Christmas. This year, though Aaliya isn't sure which novel will be her next project. She's considering "2666" by Roberto Bolano but is worried she might not finish the long book because she's getting older and slowing down.

Aaliya tells her reader she has chosen to be alone. She feels she had no other option as the society of Beirut didn't care much for childless, divorced women. She discusses her educational background. She'd done her first translation to Arabic when she was fourteen. She'd begun classes on the Quran when she was seven. Although her teacher admonished her and her classmates to hear the rhythm and rhymes in the writing of the holy book, it wasn't until she read poetry that Aaliya truly grasped a love of the written language.

Aaliya was told she was loved by her father when she was a child. He gave her a name that meant "the high one, the above" (p. 11). He died before she was even two years old. It was arranged that Aaliya's mother would marry her husband's brother. She went on to have five more children. She remembers that he was kind but didn't pay her much attention. At his death, he forgot to call both Aaliya as well as his youngest daughter to share with them some of his wisdom. Aaliya was married at sixteen. Her husband divorced her before she was twenty. After he divorced her, Aaliya said the her husband married twice more but never produced any offspring. She insinuated he was impotent but ironically he had died with an erection.

When she was first married Aaliya explains how she believed life still had possibilities. They were welcomed warmly by the owner of the building in which their apartment was located. Although she had little, Aaliya felt rich. When Aaliya's husband divorced her, the building owner shunned her and told his children not to associate with her either. Even so when Aaliya's family came to demand she give up the large apartment, the building owner took Aaliya's side and refused to allow anyone in her family to have it. Her brothers even took to banging on her door and cursing her in hopes of scaring her into



leaving. She said these instances stopped when the Israeli siege of the city began and she got an AK-47 for protection.

Analysis

The first thing that may strike the reader about Aaliya is her sense of humor despite the troubles through which she'd lived. She has lost Hannah, the only person she considered a friend. Her father died when she was only two years old. Her mother remarried and had other children, but Aaliya always felt as if she were unneeded in the family. She was married when she was sixteen. Her husband divorced her less than four years later. She lived through her family's harassing demands for her to give up her apartment as well as the Israeli siege of Beirut. Despite these trials, Aaliya is still able to laugh at herself when she unintentionally dyes her hair blue. She jokes with herself that at least her hair didn't wind up the color of the Israeli flag.

Another thing that should strike the reader just as quickly is her knowledge of literature. Her life's work has been composed of translating the English and French versions of novels into Arabic. Aaliya easily incorporates references to literature into her thoughts. She speaks of how she spends glorious time secluded in literature. It is her chosen means of escape from the world. When she speaks of the way her landlord treated her after he husband divorced her she says she "might as well have worn a scarlet letter" (p. 18). This is a reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's book "The Scarlet Letter." It not only describes the way Aaliya perceived how her landlord treated her but the way that divorced women were treated in Beirut.

The main struggle in the novel, which the author only touches on in this section is Hannah's story. The story of Hannah's life deeply affects Aaliya because Hannah was her only close friend. In this section Aaliya refers to Hannah as part of the reason that she was distracted when she died her hair blue. She also mentions the way Hannah was attentive to her and listened when Aaliya spoke. From this section it can also be inferred that Hannah is dead.

Another theme introduced in this opening section is that of Aaliya's solitude. She is an introvert. She prefers to be alone and actually draws her strength from being alone. As she notes in a comparison to her life and a sandbox it is in literature that she finds her life and her joy. It is through life that the grains of sand move through the hourglass, signifying her approaching death.

Aaliya's relationship with her family is another important theme in the novel. She is the oldest child in the family but feels the most unnecessary. She was the only child of her mother's first husband. Although she'd been told her father loved her, he died when she was two. Her mother remarried and soon had five more children with her new husband who was both Aaliya's uncle, the brother of her father, and her stepfather. At the time of Aaliya's birth, female children were not thought of as highly as male children. She was sent to school but then taken out of school when she was married at the age of 16. Her husband divorced her shortly afterwards. She described him as an impotent insect who



blamed his impotence on her. After their divorce, her family members began harassing Aaliya believing that she should give up her large apartment to one of her half-brothers who had children. They banged on her door day and night cursing at her. She got a gun for protection during the wars in Beirut. It was only after they learned she had this gun that her family members stopped harassing her.

Another theme in the novel that is briefly touched upon in this section of the book is that of the changes that have taken place in Beirut since Aaliya was born. She mentions in this section that when she first came to live in the apartment building in which she still resides there was frangipani, a flowering tree, in front of the building as well as a locust tree across the street. She states that both trees have been uprooted since she moved there 50 years ago.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Aaliya's traits. How do you feel about her as a character? Do you like her? Feel sorry for her?

Discussion Question 2

Talk about the way that Aaliya's family has treated her. Do you think this treatment is to be expected? How might her family have treated her better?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Aaliya's love for literature. How can literature, or any art for that matter, act as a way for a person to find solace in his life?

Vocabulary

conscientious, immaculately, obtrusive, anomaly, imbibing, protagonist, inductor, unequivocal, penultimate, morose, flagellate, ubiquitous, lapidary, canonical, obsequiously, mollifying, impotent, priapism, ephemeral, trousseau, despotism



Pages 20-44

Summary

As she has aged Aalyia has become unable to sleep well. It is sleep she misses the most, she says. As she lies awake she relives her younger years and misses her work in the bookstore. It was Hannah who had helped Aalyia get a job at the bookstore after her husband left her. The man who owned the store had agreed to hire Aalyia temporarily until he could find someone to represent the store. She'd worked at the store for fifty years. After the man who owned the store died, she inherited the huge oak desk she'd admired when she first entered the store. She describes an antique comic book that sits on her desk and describes how she got it by trading her plastic handbag to the boy who owned it when she was ten. Also on the desk is a singed copy of *Invisible Cities*. She'd caught the book on fire when trying to read it by candlelight during the years of the war in Beirut. She also describes how during the years of the war she had hidden with her neighbors in the basement of a neighboring building until a group of Palestinians broke into her apartment while she was hiding in the basement. One of the men defecated on her floor. For this reason she got herself an AK-47 and slept with it in bed next to her.

Several days after the defecation incident, during one of the many ceasefires in the way Aaliya went to a camp known as Sabra to look for Ahmad. She'd met Ahmad when he'd come to the bookstore looking for a copy of the novel *The Conformist*. He couldn't afford to buy the book so he sat on the floor over the course of several afternoons to read it. He began to help out around the store even though Aalyia's boss refused to hire him. Ahmad stopped coming to the bookstore in 1971 after Black September. She watched during that time as he'd become sullen. She'd seen the disappointment and fury build in his face. When she went looking for him, she found him living in an expensive house. He wanted sex in exchange for the gun. She agreed when she learned he still had hot running water and would allow her to take a shower.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that the reader learns that while Aaliya was divorced quickly by her husband and she has chosen not to remarry, she is no prude. She had made friends with a young man who came to her bookstore to read the books he could not purchase. She later went to him when she needed a gun she could use to protect herself. He asks for sex with her in exchange for the gun and a hot shower, a luxury Aaliya had not been able to enjoy during the years of the war. She believed she surprised the young man by taking a sexual position other than the missionary position she thought he expected. Although the proposition was unexpected, Aaliya seemed to enjoy her sexual encounter with the young man.



In the theme of grief in this section Aaliya mourns the loss of her youth, as she has aged she has had more and more trouble sleeping. She believes it is sleep that she misses most of the things she cannot do since she has gotten older.

As Aaliya mourns her inability to sleep well she thinks about references to sleep in literature. She shares her opinions of both Virgil and Pessoa's statements about sleep. Notice also Aaliya's interest in literature even as a young child. She describes trading her purse for an illustrated comic book of "A Tale of Two Cities" written in Arabic when she was only about 10 years old. She still keeps the copy of that book on her desk in her reading room.

Another book that stays on Aaliya's desk bears the burn marks that remind her of the civil war in Beirut. She'd been trying to read by candlelight during the fighting when she'd accidentally caught the book on fire. In her imagery she indicates it was while her city burned that she herself had an "incendiary mishap" (p. 26). Also in the theme of the city of Beirut, Aaliya shares with her reader the reason why she decided she needed a gun. During bombings she had been going to the building next door to take shelter when the shooting began. One day when she returned to her apartment she found that Palestinians had broken into her apartment and had looked through her things. One of the men defecated in the floor of the apartment before they left. Aaliya decided at that point that she was not going to leave her apartment again but would instead stay and protect her possessions. Interestingly, Aaliya seemed more upset about the defecation than she did about the idea that the men had gone through her things.

One thing to notice about Aaliya's life is the tone in which it is presented. Aaliya is not self pitying about the difficulties she's had in her life. Instead, she looks back and colors her experiences with humor. The reader doesn't feel sorry for Aaliya because her troubles are presented in such a matter-of-fact way. Aaliya doesn't feel sorry for herself. She's accepted her life and the way it has been.

Discussion Question 1

Before this section would you have thought that Aaliya would be one who would have slept with a man in order to procure a gun? Are you surprised that she agreed so quickly to Ahmad's proposal?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the map the cartographer made of Beirut and the reference he made to Sabra. How does this reference agree with the way that Aaliya has described the Palestine camp?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Ahmad and the changes that Aaliya notices in him during the time she knew him in the bookstore.

Vocabulary

somnolent, digress, acrid, scions, pittance, resplendent, bestiality, espadrilles, fecund, metamorphosed, delineated, cartographer, didactically, cachet, recompense, taciturn, vivacious, ensconced, enunciate, capitulation, conjoiner, servile, cavorted, promiscuity, ephemeral, ineffable, salacious, immures, palimpsests



Pages 44-63

Summary

When Aaliya does finally sleep, she dreams of Hannah, the girl she described as being the one her mother disrespected the most. In her dream Hannah was younger than she. The man who was to be Hannah's husband was even younger than Hannah but they kissed and had sexual intercourse. Aaliya believes she dreamed of Hannah as her mind's unconscious way of telling her how alone she is.

Aaliya gets up slowly and stiffly. She boils water for tea in the kitchen. As she sits the lights go out because the government's electricity is out again. It is only through her books that Aaliya knows what it is like to live in a city where the services are reliable. She does wonder, though, if people who live in countries where things are as they expect them to be feel more in control of their lives. She describes her life in Beirut as feeling too random to give her much of a feeling that she has control over anything.

That morning, Aaliya hears Marie-Thérèse walking up the stairs. Aaliya sees that she isn't wearing a mourning dress. She realizes that day is the anniversary of Marie-Thérèse's husband's death. She refers to the other three women who live in her building as the witches and notes they have resumed their coffee group. She can hear the women talking as they gather on the landing above hers.

She had intended to begin reading a new book that day but Aaliya decides it doesn't feel like a new book day. She still hasn't decided which book she wants to translate and decides to look back at her translation of "The Emigrants." She can't find her flashlights so she gets a candle. Her manuscripts are packed in the maid's room with the overflow in the maid's bathroom. She is careful to step over the spot where the Palestinian defecated on the floor during the war years.

Analysis

Most interesting in this section of the novel is Aaliya's discussion of the electricity in Beirut. As she sits drinking her tea, the electricity goes out. It doesn't surprise Aaliya. Notice her response touches on the theme of literature. She tells her reader that she knows what it is like to live in a city where the electricity is reliable from the books that she has read. What she wishes she could understand is if people who have reliable electricity feel more in control of their lives. She believes that she feels a lack of control of her life because the electricity and infrastructure in Beirut is so unreliable. She indicates the city even has trouble upgrading systems, like the self flushing toilets in the hospital, because of the unreliability of the electricity.

Hannah's story and Aaliya's grief seem to go hand in hand. As she wonders why she dreamed of Hannah she decides it is because of the loneliness that her friend faced but



kept so well hidden. Aaliya believes that she dreamed of Hannah as a reminder of how lonely she really is.

In the theme of introversion notice that, as is common for most introverts, Aaliya prefers to get her life experiences through indirect means. In this section she shares with her reader how she is able to eavesdrop on her neighbors as they have their morning coffee gatherings. She picks up on neighborhood gossip and information about the other families in the building by listening in on these conversations.

As Aaliya sits and watches the sun rise in her kitchen she shares with her reader how much she loves her city despite the bad times she's seen in it. She uses personification in her writing as "the faint light creeps through the window" (p. 54) when the sun rises.

Touching on the theme of literature and art, Aaliya continues to debate on which book she should translate next. When considering one book she knows she will face trouble in translating pronouns so she decides to look at an earlier translation with a similar structure to see how she handled it. Notice that when she enters the room where she stores her translations Aaliya often suffers with an irregular heartbeat. The translations cause her a range of emotional and physical distresses and pleasures depending on her attitude when she enters the room.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of Aaliya's habit of stepping over the spot in the maid's bathroom where the Palestinian defecated. Why does she avoid this spot even though she cleaned it so thoroughly?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think that Aaliya's dream meant? Why did her friend appear younger than she?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the system Aaliya has for translating her books. Why do you think she's structured her system as she has?

Vocabulary

rambunctious, corporeal, askew, posthumous, verve, salacious, precocious, deplored, shrapnel, denizens, aubade, transmute, acoustics, undulate, concur, depilation, facade, liaison, bitumen, torpor, macaronic, sedentary, indelible



Pages 63-86

Summary

When she heard knocking on the door, Aaliya didn't even look through the peephole, she just opened her door. She didn't expect it to be her eldest half brother. She overheard Fadia say the word "trouble" from her landing above as she opened the door. Her half brother brought in two suitcases and said he was bringing her her mother. Aaliya was scared of her brother. He had come to her apartment many times yelling at her, demanding her to exchange apartments with him.

After Aaliya's stepfather died, her eldest half brother had taken over as head of the household. Her mother had continued to live with him. Aaliya felt her mother wanted it that way. She felt once she had stopped trying to be part of her mother's life, her mother had forgotten about her. Aaliya tells her brother she doesn't think it will work for her mother to live there. She's surprised by how fragile her mother looks. Aaliya feels her mind muddy just as it always does when her mother is near. It is when Aaliya tells her brother and sister-in-law that her mother is not her responsibility that her mother raises her head and looks at her. Then she screams. Fadia storms into the apartment demanding Aaliya's brother to go and take his family with him. Joumana and Marie-Thérèse have entered the apartment as well. Aaliya briefly considers how rude it is for she and the other women to be forcing her mother out of the apartment. She thinks how short a time her mother must have left to live.

As they stand in her apartment Aaliya considers her changing relationship with Fadia. Although they haven't become friends, Aaliya thinks at least that they have become civil. She remembered the trouble that Fadia had given her father because she had the power to get her father to agree to whatever she wanted. When he decided she should get married and brought home a suitor, named Abdallah, Fadia threw a fit refusing to marry Abdullah. Fadia already had her mind set on a man she'd met at the theater. They married. Although the man was faithful to Fadia, Fadia was not faithful to her husband. Surprisingly, it was Abdullah with whom Fadia decided to have her affair. Aaliya remembered that when Abdullah died, Fadia mourned his death more deeply that she did that of her own husband.

Back in the present, Fadia tells Aaliya's family to go and not come back. After they left, Aaliya told the other women she had to go sit down. Without thinking, she led the other women to her reading room. Joumana is surprised by the number of books in Aaliya's room. As she looks through Aaliya's room, Aaliya becomes more and more panicked wishing they would leave. When Fadia returns from making sure that Aaliya's family left she also comments about Aaliya's books. She thanks both the women and waits patiently hoping they will leave soon.



Analysis

Aaliya's relationship with her family is an important theme that is addressed in this section of the novel. They haven't treated her well in the past. After she was divorced, her half-brothers came to her apartment banging on the door, cursing her and demanding that she let them have her apartment. As she tells the story of her relationship with her family it seems that she tried to have a relationship with them, going to the hospital when babies were born and even taking her mother to lunch on occasion. It seemed that her half-brother's hate for Aaliya had been cemented when she'd seen him being patted down outside the hotel where he worked by his suspicious employer. Aaliya had sympathized with him but it appeared it angered and humiliated her brother to have her see him in that position. Notice also that Aaliya never calls her eldest half brother by a name. She gives her reader a hint as to why she might not have named this brother in an earlier section. On page 16 as she discusses why she hadn't yet given the reader the name of her husband she points out that there are several reasons why a writer wouldn't give a character a name. The first of these is to keep that character defined only by the relationship, and the second is to keep the attention of the reader on the main narrator. It appears the writer of the novel uses both these techniques in choosing not to name Aaliya's half brother. He is nothing more to her than what is defined by his relationship. The lack of a name also keeps the reader focused on Aaliya.

Aaliya is deeply troubled by her mother's reaction to her. When she finally looked up at her daughter, she screamed. Notice that Aaliya believes she didn't even register in her mother's mind as her daughter and worthy of love, even before she became elderly. Aaliya compares herself to her younger half sister. She indicates that her mother treats this other daughter as a second class citizen. In her comparison she indicates that in her mother's mind the other daughter is treated as Fanny Price a Jane Austen heroine, while Aaliya was treated like Quasimodo, a hunch back locked in a tower because of his appearance. Aaliya does not appear to feel badly about the distance that has developed between herself and the rest of her family because of the way they had treated her in the past.

In the theme of introversion, notice how distracted and off kilter Aaliya gets when there are many people in her apartment. She is disturbed by the appearance of her half brother and mother but even more so by the appearance of the three witches. In her confusion Aaliya walks to her reading room to sit down unwittingly leading the concerned witches to the place that Aaliya considers her sanctuary. As the women look at her things and even rifle through them, Aaliya is more and more uncomfortable.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Aaliya never referred to her half brother the eldest by his given name?



Discussion Question 2

Why did Aaliya's family feel that she should take responsibility for her mother? Why did Aaliya feel the arrangement would not work?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way that Aaliya reacts when she has several people in her apartment. How are these physical and emotional responses typical of a person who is introverted?

Vocabulary

parody, amalgam, perdition, infallible, hubris, obstreperous, innocuous, nemesis, adamantly, feasible, incongruously, succubus, skirl, advent, baccalaureate, conjoined, inveigle, rescind, metaphorical, obsequies, egregious, impervious, interloping, gendarmes, fauteuil, aberration, loquacity, annihilated



Pages 86-105

Summary

Aaliya decided she needs to get out of the house. As she walks through the city, she wonders why her mother screamed as she did. She walks past a Pizza Hut that had formerly been a record shop. It was by buying record albums that Aaliya taught herself how to listen to music. She started out with Chopin. Because she didn't know anything about music she decided to choose albums bearing the Deutsche Grammophon label. She could buy one a week with her meager salary. Although the owner of the record store never said much to her, she felt he approved her purchases when he grunted his approval. When she bought her first Gould album, the store owner's eyebrows shot up. Aaliya was pleased. The music had been her only luxury. She'd collected most of the books she had by bringing home the books she was asked to special order if they weren't picked up.

She continues to wonder why her mother screamed when she saw her. Aaliya didn't think her mother recognized her. The only time she'd really seen her mother scared was when her half brother, the eldest, was kicked in the head by a mule. Aaliya goes on to discuss with herself that if her predicament took place in a modern novel, the reader would know why her mother screamed because these novels depend on causality.

Aaliya then admits that while she wishes she had a cause telling her why her mother screamed, she will probably not get one, but she needs one. She uses an example from the war when the woman who lived in the apartment above her was killed by gunfire. Many people made up stories to try to explain the reason why the woman had been killed. Aaliya felt the woman had simply been unlucky. She feels that what happened to that woman won't happen to her because she is different from that woman. She indicates it is the reasons that make other people think that the same things won't happen to them.

She continues to walk an area around her house. She sees a teenaged boy showing off his cigarette smoking skills. She strays again in her story, telling her reader about "Crime and Punishment," the first novel that she translated. It was the first adult novel she'd read, she says. She read Constance Garnett's English translation of the novel. Although she'd since then heard controversy about Garnett's translations, she admired Garnett because she taught herself to translate. She criticizes Garnett's habit of skipping words for which she didn't know in the translations or leaving out portions of long passages. Aaliya considers, though, that she doesn't know how good her translations are, as she believes she is too close to them to judge them fairly.



Analysis

Aaliya is deeply disturbed by her mother's reaction to her. As she walks around her city she tries to come up with a reason why her mother screamed. In the theme of literature, Aaliya suggests that if her life were the topic of a novel, she as a reader would understand exactly why her mother had screamed. She criticizes these novels based on psychology that strive to give the reader causality for every instance in the story.

Aaliya continues with a discussion of the increased inclusion of causality in novel as well as the increased need for the population as a whole to feel a need to know why things have happened. Aaliya concludes that having a reason why something happened helps the common man to believe the same thing won't happen to them because of differences in their stories and ways of life.

Notice when she leaves her apartment that Aaliya wears a head scarf to cover her blue hair. She arranges the scarf carefully so that it covers her hair but leaves enough skin exposed that no one can assume that she's wearing the scarf for religious reasons. Notice in fact that Aaliya describes the religious reasons for wearing a head scarf "asinine." The reader can assume from Aaliya's use of this strong word that she has no desire to be associated with any type of religion.

Aaliya shares a good deal about the way her city has changed since the wars. She indicates the stairway in her apartment was at one time "exposed and friendly" (p. 86). Notice the personification of the stairway in this reference. After the war years, 1995, Aaliya describes the half walls built around the building in hopes of protecting it from bullets. The grocery store across the street from Aaliya's apartment has become an electrical shop. The record shop where Aaliya bought records is now a Pizza Hut. In a particularly interesting quote, Aaliya compares her city to Elizabeth Taylor.

In the theme of grief, as Aaliya tries to make her way around the city, dodging in and out of traffic and watching the younger generation, she wonders if she has gotten too old for Beirut.

Discussion Question 1

How does Aaliya describe the need for an explanation for the things that have happened to them? Why does she think that humans desire these explanations?

Discussion Question 2

Consider Aaliya's act of teaching herself to enjoy music. Why do you think she decided to focus on music as her one luxury?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the changes Aaliya notices as she walks around her city. How has the war changed Beirut? What changes can be attributed to time and modernization?

Vocabulary

lactescent, perambulated, languorous, condescendingly, idiosyncratic, nongarrulous, autodidact, panache, minuscule, pseudointellectuals, dilettantes, equanimity, annihilating, aleatory, erudite, porcine, vitriolic, ineffable



Pages 105-125

Summary

Aaliya continues to discuss translations in this section of the novel. She shares with her reader that she has never published any of her translations, only stored each translation she has finished in crates in her apartment. She believes her work is unpublishable because few in the Arab world are interested in literature, much less Arabic translations of literature. She says she continues to do the translations because she is committed to the work. Because she has made her work of translating a sort of master for herself, it is this master of her life that helps time pass more easily. She describes herself as being happy when she is at work on a translation. She even admits to her reader that near the end of the war a publisher had contacted her and asked if she would consider trying to complete a translation for him. Although she began to think the idea might have promise she was disappointed when she learned the title of the novel he wanted her to translate.

When Aaliya returns home from her walk she discovers that Fadia has left food for her in front of the door to her apartment. She thinks about Fadia's children and wonders briefly how her life might have been different if she'd had children. When she thinks about children and the noise that comes with them, however, she rejoices that she has none.

Aaliya admits to her reader that she was one who once believed that art had redemptive power. She decided it wasn't a conscious decision she'd made, but one that had helped her to escape the reality of life. Her family had never encouraged reading and Aaliya believed that might be one of the reasons why literature appealed to her so much. When they accused her of trying to be different, Aaliya wondered why she would want to be normal and stupid like the normal people she knew. She knew she didn't have beauty that would make people love her, but thought she could earn their respect through knowledge. In her mindset, Aaliya decides to put the idea of translating another book by Sebald away. She decides she needs to read something that is not so honest.

Aaliya is unable to sleep the night after her half brother brought her mother to her apartment. As she boils water for her tea she decides her best course of that action for the morning is to start one of the books from the pile she wants to read. The book on top of her pile is "Microcosms" by Claudio Magris. She buries herself in the book until she reaches a portion of the book where the life of a character mirrors that of Hannah. At this reminder of Hannah, Aaliya feels dizzy and sick. She doesn't believe that both her mother and Hannah coming back into her life in such a short period of time is a coincidence.

Aaliya remembers Hannah mentioning in her diaries that she remembered being hungry during her childhood. Aaliya has all of Hannah's journals in her possession. Since her tenth birthday, Hannah had written at least once a day in her journals. Her entries stopped a few months before her death. After a long labor, Hannah was born with red



hair. One of her feet was slightly clubbed. Her family said the long labor was because Hannah was too shy to come out. She was doted on by her family. Hannah had memories of a doctor breaking her foot twice in an attempt to alleviate the clubbing but she still limped when she walked. Aaliya believed her friend had never been hungry as her family had given her all the food she needed even though she had an insatiable appetite. Aaliya believed Hannah's hunger was representative of her need to be loved.

Hannah believed that if she weren't so shy she would have had plenty of suitors. Aaliya agreed. She added her friend was also a person who wanted to please other people. Her diaries included descriptions of what she imagined her romantic encounters might be like. Aaliya noticed in these stories that not only did the descriptions of Hannah's suitors change, Hannah's descriptions of herself also changed.

Analysis

Along with being an introvert, Aaliya appears to also be a bit of an obsessive compulsive at least when it comes to her translations. She's set up rules for her translating that she feels she must follow even though she translates for no one but herself. Following the theme of introversion, notice that it is when Aaliya is working that she is most happy and fulfilled. It is a characteristic of introverts that they enjoy thinking about deep, intellectual topics.

Notice that Aaliya refers to Arabians as having little interest in literature. She believes that no one would be interested in reading her translations. She reasoned that those who wanted to read the types of novels she translated had enough education that they could read the English or French versions. In this way Aaliya has almost a haughty view of Arabians as she believes they wouldn't be interested in reading good literature in their own language.

Also in this section Aaliya shares with her reader her belief that art and literature had redemptive powers. Because she knew she wasn't beautiful, she hoped that her intelligence and interest in literature would set her apart from others. Her sense of humor comes to the surface in this section as she quotes a writer who stated he hadn't hurt a living soul in his life. Aaliya doesn't believe she can truthfully say she never hurt a living soul since she spent her life selling books. Aaliya also believes she was attracted to literature because her mother and stepfather discouraged her from pouring herself into her reading.

Also in this section of the novel Aaliya tells more of Hannah's story. It seems she is working closer and closer to the kernel of Hannah's story that will help the reader to understand why thoughts of Hannah grieve her so badly. She is jerked out of the book she is enjoying because a character reminds her of Hannah. Aaliya is shocked and disturbed by the memory of her friend. It is not a memory that she wants to have. Just as she wishes she had a reason why her mother had screamed when she saw Aaliya, Aaliya also wants to know what happened to Hannah. Because her friend stopped



writing in her notebooks weeks before her death, the diaries she inherited don't give Aaliya any clues about Hannah's cause of death.

Notice also that Aaliya recognizes the allegory that Hannah includes in her journals. She refers to being hungry. Aaliya realized that Hannah was never physically hungry but instead hungry for love and affection. Even though Aaliya describes Hannah's family as doting on her, Hannah still didn't feel she was loved.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the methods used to try to correct Hannah's clubbed foot.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Aaliya believe she was responsible for hurting people because of her profession of selling books?

Discussion Question 3

In this section of the novel Aaliya explains some of the reasons she believes she was attracted to literature. Do you think she achieved her desire to be different because of her love for reading? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

lepidopterist, esoteric, anhedonia, crapulous, homiletics, permutations, resplendent, frenetically, voluptuous, arabesque, purulent, exigent, aptitude, corniche



Pages 125-147

Summary

Aaliya describes herself as being different from Hannah as she didn't fantasize about love but instead about having a career. She believed that being a secretary would be an ideal job for her. As she thinks back over her childhood, she wonders if she didn't dream of having a husband but decide to block that part of her childhood out because her one short marriage had been so unhappy.

Aaliya strays from Hannah's story by stating that she does not agree with some critics who say that a reader will remember only a series of images from the novels they read. She argues if this were so, people should take photographs instead of writing. One image that she does admit has been ingrained into her memory is that of a man wearing grey silk lenses in his glasses to make the world appear to disappear before his eyes. She wonders if she has not looked back on her life wearing this sort of glasses.

After another brief foray where Aaliya describes the meeting of a mother of a friend who worked as a secretary Aaliya realizes how far she's strayed and returns to Hannah's story. She begins her story by describing how she met Hannah. The person who connected the two was the Lieutenant, Aaliya's future brother-in-law. Hannah had met the Lieutenant when she was twenty-two and Aaliya was only still a child.

Aaliya strays again to a story about how she believes the discovery she loves most is the battery operated clock. She believed the ticking of old fashioned clocks served as a reminder that time was getting away. Aaliya returns again to her story of Hannah by describing an incident Hannah had with her sister-in-law that seemed to change Hannah's opinion of herself. Shortly after that Hannah decided she wanted to work. She worked first in her father's store. After her mother joined her and there was no longer enough work for them both, Hannah began volunteering at the hospital. Because she limped, Hannah used a service so she wouldn't have to walk to work. She always paid for two seats so she didn't have to worry about sitting next to a strange man.

On the way home one day the Lieutenant happened to be in the car with Hannah. Hannah believed he was the perfect man for her. Even though she'd paid for two seats, the driver of the car decided to stop for another soldier. He planned to return Hannah's money for the seat but Hannah begged him not to pick up the man. Believing he could not drive by a soldier with an empty seat the man argued with Hannah. The Lieutenant stood up for Hannah and the driver threw them both out of his car. The Lieutenant treated her so politely, even offering to walk her home that in Hannah's mind she believed that he had proposed to her. Hannah's family sent an invitation to the Lieutenant's family inviting them to lunch.

As Aaliya thinks about the invitation to lunch that Hannah's family extended, she considers that she never had anyone over for lunch. She worries she's becoming the



kind of person who always draws the conversation back to oneself. This is what she remembers her mother always doing to her whether it was a cut knee, her first period or her wedding night. Back to the story of Hannah, Aaliya remembers she and Hannah had gone to visit Aaliya's mother one day. That day Aaliya's mother had asked Aaliya not to bring Hannah back because Hannah had red hair. Aaliya tries to keep in mind when considering her mother that her mother is uneducated. It doesn't keep her from being critical of her mother, however.

Aaliya goes off on another tangent where she discusses the idea that many modern novels include a variety of problems followed by an epiphany. She wishes these writers would take pity on their readers because they live in a world where they don't always experience an epiphany in every situation.

Analysis

This section of the novel is long and winding. It is almost as if Aaliya dreads thinking about the circumstances that led to Hannah's death. She interrupts herself to talk about an instance where she met the mother of one of her friends at school. That woman was a secretary, Aaliya thought it would be a perfect job for her. She additionally interrupts herself by talking about how self centered her mother had always been. She'd even gone so far as to tell Aaliya one day that she should no longer bring Hannah to their house because of Hannah's red hair. Aaliya hopes to herself that she never becomes like her mother but then jokingly interrupts herself to tell her reader that she's about to tell them about her bowel movements.

Notice that in one of her tangents, Aaliya discusses the use of epiphanies in modern novels. An epiphany is a breakthrough in understanding about a certain situation. Aaliya is frustrated by the ease that characters in books seem to have epiphanies while she struggles with her own conflicts with no enlightenment in sight. She states "Dear contemporary writers, you make me feel inadequate because my life isn't as clear and concise as your stories" (p. 148). Since this discussion of epiphanies comes in the middle of Aaliya's discussion of Hannah and her life it can be assumed that Aaliya wishes that she could have an epiphany when it comes to Hannah's cause of death.

In the theme of grief, Aaliya discusses the nostalgia that she feels for certain scenes from her childhood. These include nostalgia for the smell of jasmine at night and the way the furniture was arranged. Another object that seems to be the source of grief for Aaliya is the traditional ticking clock. She includes the "ticktock" of the clock in Hannah's story as if Hannah were being pressured to hurry and help her sister-in-law. In the next section of the novel Aaliya discusses her belief that the electric or battery operated clock is the best invention as she no longer has to listen as a traditional clock ticks off the passing minutes of one's life.

Notice the way that Aaliya has obviously studied Hannah's notebooks closely looking for clues as to what might have caused her friend's suicide. She notices that Hannah's handwriting changed after an incident when Hannah's sister-in-law Maryam



unintentionally called attention to Hannah's lack of dexterity. The writing changed again, Aaliya notices, when Hannah's father gave her permission to work at his store.

Interesting in this section is Aaliya's description of school, that it is the place where childhood is killed.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the incident with Hannah's sister-in-law, Maryam. Why do you think Hannah was so affected by this incident?

Discussion Question 2

Why did women of Hannah's time not use a service? Why did Hannah prefer to use one?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Aaliya's thoughts about epiphanies. Why do you think she felt so inadequate because she hadn't had the epiphany she desired?

Vocabulary

idyllic, exogamous, paltry, nostalgia, patrician, dexterous, pundits, obstructionism, foray, salacious, felicitous, insatiable, promenade, betrothed, demurely, propitious, egregious, lassitude, amorphous, inured, epiphany



Pages 147-167

Summary

Aaliya tells her reader that after witnessing an incident during the early years of the civil war in Beirut she made a resolution not to complain. She had been walking home from the bookstore when she saw a man wearing many layers of clothes across the road from her. He leaned against an open doorway. The doorway behind the man struck Aaliya because she believed the darkness inside was impenetrable. She suspected she was hallucinating. A few moments later she encountered a dead man on the side of the road and decided her vision had been a foreshadowing. The corpse was right in her path. She tried to be calm but as she looked at the dead man she had a thought of Ahmad. At that point she panicked and ran home. Once she was home she realized what a miracle it was to be alive.

Aaliya returns to the story of Hannah and the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant and his family, including his younger brother who was Aaliya's future husband, attended the lunch. The younger brother hated Hannah but adored the Lieutenant. He told Aaliya later that his brother had no intention of ever marrying Hannah. He claimed the family had no idea that Hannah believed he had proposed to her. Aaliya didn't believe the Lieutenant's family was as dim witted as her former husband and believed they must have known something was amiss when Hannah's family served them such an extravagant lunch.

The next day Hannah's father met with the Lieutenant's father. The Lieutenant visited Hannah four times over the next two weeks, each time with the intention of telling her he hadn't intended to propose. Aaliya got mixed stories. Her husband said the Lieutenant told her each time but that Hannah wouldn't listen. Aaliya suspected the Lieutenant hadn't told Hannah because he didn't want to hurt her feelings. The Lieutenant finally told Hannah's father he would have to tell her as he didn't have the heart. That next day, however, there was a car accident and the Lieutenant was killed.

Hannah's family comforted her while she grieved. Aaliya believed it was because of this experience that Hannah became the person that Aaliya knew. After she finished grieving, she considered the feelings of her new family. She spent her time doing whatever the family needed in order to ease their pain. Even after the family recovered from the Lieutenant's death, Hannah remained a part of the family. She even came along with the family when they visited Aaliya's family at the time of Aaliya's betrothal.

The noise from the radiator in Aaliya's apartment wakes her from her memories. She gets up to bleed the radiator as it is the first time it has been on that season. As she works on the radiator she thinks of the American writers Hemingway and Faulkner. She has in common with Faulkner the fact she doesn't like to have her reading interrupted. Aaliya realizes she's gone on another digression. She tries to return to her reading but can't concentrate, so she listens to some music. Her choice is Bruckner's Symphony no. 3. She becomes frustrated with her train of thought as she listens to the music. She



believes she is nothing. While she says she never wanted to be a giant, she believed she could at least be a midget, at least more than a speck.

As she listens to Marie-Thérèse call her cat, Aaliya remembers her mother's fondness for cats. She would take care of all the feral cats in the neighborhood even though she never had one as a pet. She even risked her life during the war when she heard a cat crying across the street. Her mother was not able to convince the cat that she found in an abandoned apartment to come with her. The next time she was able to go and check on the cat she found the apartment had been ransacked and the cat was gone.

Aaliya hears the three women in her building talking over their coffee again. She knows she should thank Fadia but the thought of talking to someone, or even being around another person makes her feel awkward. Hannah was the only person she'd been able to spend time with comfortably. She still feels off balance from her encounter with so many people the day before.

Analysis

In a way, Aaliya had a sort of epiphany when she once made a decision to stop complaining. She had seen a dead body in the street when she was on her way home from the bookstore during the war years. Once she got past the corpse and was at home she realized how lucky she was to be alive. It was for this reason that she decided not to complain. Realize that this incident also adds to the theme of Beirut and the way the city had changed through the years that Aaliya lived there. Aaliya has lived through the years of the war when it was likely to find dead bodies in the street. Aaliya mentions the war again when she talks about her mother's love for cats. Aaliya remembered during the war in 1986 her mother seemed more concerned about the cats she took care of than the war that was raging around them. Notice Aaliya describes the war fittingly. She says her country was "shedding its humanity and its humans" (p. 163). The term "shedding" ties in with a cat's habit of shedding its fur in regular cycles just as Aaliya felt the people in her city were participating in wars in regular cycles.

In this section of the novel Aaliya also shares with her reader that her social isolation has gotten worse as she has gotten older. Where she had once been able to socialize with her customers and not feel awkward just because another person was around, she now feels as if she is not herself if she has to interact with even one person. In this section of the novel the situation that makes her uneasy is the idea that she must thank Fadia for her meal the previous day.

Notice the way that Aaliya describes the writing in Hannah's journals after she met the Lieutenant. She personifies the words as they leapfrog one another "words jumping off the page into my lap" (p. 151) as Hannah must have been excited when she wrote them. Aaliya indicates that in the years that she knew Hannah, she'd never known her to be so drastically different from her solid, reasonable self. Even though the Lieutenant's brother, Aaliya's ex-husband, said his brother never gave Hannah any



indication that he wanted to marry her, Aaliya believed there must have been some indication in that nature in order to make Hannah so excited.

Aaliya's story in this section enlightens the reader as to how Hannah came to be part of the Lieutenant's family since he did not intend to marry her. He died in a car accident before Hannah could ever be told that the Lieutenant was not interested in her. After his death Hannah's desire to please and help others led her to help and comfort the Lieutenant's family. Since that time, she'd just become accepted as part of that family. For this reason, she was with the family when they went to Aaliya's house when she and the Lieutenant's brother were betrothed.

Notice Aaliya's descriptions of clothing in this section of the novel. "Over the nightgown of my abandoned sleep, over the robe of yesterday's embarrassment, I put on my burgundy mohair coat," (p. 156). Aaliya speaks of the physical clothes that she wears but uses their descriptions in connection with her physical and emotional state. She adds that her slippers are so old that her "left foot, like a pervert, flashes its five toes with each step" (p. 157).

In the theme of literature, notice that Aaliya is very critical of American writers. She is especially disillusioned by Hemingway, whose writing she finds boring and shallow. One of the writers with whom she does say that she has something in common with is Faulkner. They both share a dislike of being interrupted while they are reading. While Faulkner could afford to lose his job because he preferred to read than to wait on people Aaliya did not have that freedom as she depended on her job to support herself.

Notice that when Aaliya is talking about her desire to be something in life, she didn't want to be a giant but something recognizable, she borrows a phrase from Shakespeare. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace" (p. 161) is an idea that comes from Shakespeare's play "Macbeth" but perfectly describes Aaliya's feelings as she thinks that her life is passing at a sluggish pace.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the man that Aaliya saw in the doorway before she saw the dead man. Do you think this man really existed or that he was a hallucination intended to be a foreshadowing for Aaliya?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think Hannah's family should have done in the situation in which they found themselves in respect to the Lieutenant? Do you think they should have told Hannah the truth about the Lieutenant after he died?



Discussion Question 3

So you think the Lieutenant ever mentioned marriage to Hannah? How do you think she got the idea that he'd proposed to her when he actually hadn't?

Vocabulary

loden, anomaly, imbecile, progeny, morose, nuance, flocculant, apocryphal, solidarity, cavorting, atrocities, discontinuous, pantheist, discomfited, atypical, ubiquitous, ignoble



Pages 167-186

Summary

Aaliya listens to the conversation on the landing above her so she can properly time a thank you to Fadia. Joumana is telling her friends that her daughter has finished her course requirements and has only to complete her dissertation in college. When Aaliya does poke her head out, Joumana invites her to come join them. She lies and tell Joumana she's working on something she needs to finish before she has to leave her apartment in an hour. Joumana shares with her the news of her daughter's progress on her Ph.D. She tells Aaliya that the topic of her daughter's dissertation is tombstones. Aaliya quotes a phrase in Latin which Joumana recognizes. She and Joumana speak briefly about their shared desire to read some of the classical writers in their native language before Aaliya withdraws from the conversation.

Aaliya prepares to leave her apartment, feeling she must go somewhere since she told the witches she couldn't have coffee with them because she was leaving. She decides to pay a visit to the National Museum. Although she tries to walk to the museum, Aaliya is forced to take a bus because of the rain. She shares with her reader the history of the museum and the steps its curators took to protect the artifacts during the civil war.

Once she arrives at the museum she is greeted by the guard who will not allow her to pay for her entry. She's argued with him in the past but he refuses to let her pay. He tells her in his secret code that Italians are visiting the museum on that day. She generally enjoys the museum because it is rarely crowded and because there is no background music.

On this particular day there are two loud, unrestrained five year olds who are visiting the museum. Aaliya tries to enjoy the ancient sarcophagi but her thoughts are interrupted by one of the mothers admonishing her child. She decides to go the opposite way of the boys and heads toward Astarte's thrones. She hears the sound of shoes behind her and doesn't have to look back to know that the Italians have arrived behind her. The boys come running into the room and run into the group of Italians. The Italians and the mothers have a brief confrontation about the behavior of the children. After the Italians have walked away, one of the mothers backhands her child. The one who wasn't hit begins crying then the punished one joins in.

Aaliya is suddenly struck by a wave of nostalgia and has to hide behind a staircase to compose herself. Once she believes she has herself under control, she walks out of the building. The guard asks if she is okay. She decides to tell him the truth, that she came there as an escape but was unable to find the solace for which she was looking. He seems to understand.



Analysis

Notice in this section how Aaliya tries to keep her distance from the other women who live in the same building as she. She even refers to the three as the three witches, indicating that she does not like them and believes they are evil in some way. However, Joumana, who is a university professor, tries to connect with Aaliya and talk to her about the language of Latin and books. Joumana seems impressed to learn how highly intelligent Aaliya is. Because Aaliya is so introverted, she can not allow herself the chance to get close to these women. Even though she had not intended to do so, Aaliya even puts herself to the trouble of making a trip out of her apartment in order to avoid having coffee with the three women.

It is at the museum that Aaliya has a sort of breakdown. She is already feeling physically tired from her lack of sleep and emotionally tired because of her memories of Hannah and the encounter with her half-brother. Additionally, have the three witches in her house the day before made her feel off balance, and she has yet to regain her full composure. She'd hoped her visit to the museum would be a quiet retreat but instead she was faced with noisy Italians and two ill behaved children. It can be assumed that Aaliya breaks into tears simply because she's too tired to hide her emotions any longer. Aaliya seems to believe that these tears, which have been coming more and more often, are a sign of weakness and old age.

Interesting in this section is the history that Aaliya gives of the National Museum and the neighborhood in which it is located. She tells her reader how the road that leads from her apartment to the National Museum marked the line that divided east and west Beirut during the civil war. She notes that memories brought to mind while walking the route could "unbalance a balanced Beiruti" (p. 175). She uses the war terms of "emotional land mines and unexploded ordnance" (p. 175) to describe what the area is like. Even though the area has been rebuilt, Aaliya can remember the number of people killed, the bombed out racetrack and the horses that burned alive in their stalls.

In order to protect the artifacts in the museum, the curators dug a crypt under the old museum in which to hide the valuables. Even though the museum was destroyed, the items in the crypt were never located. It is those things that were hidden beneath the ground during the war that Aaliya now goes to view.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how the crowds and noise at the museum kept Aaliya from finding the solace she hoped she'd find. Why do you think that Aaliya cried at the museum? Why is her crying spell significant?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way that Aaliya refers to the three women who live in the building with her. Do you think she relates to them at all? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Research the civil war in Beirut. Discuss how Aaliya's description of her city during the war agrees or disagrees with historical information.

Vocabulary

reposes, odalisque, indolence, aphasic, minuscule, extolling, aberration, jitney, antediluvian, insipid, rancorous, mezzanine, genuflects, perfunctorily, masochists, febrile, homilies



Pages 186-210

Summary

As Aaliya walks away from the museum, she wonders why she can't be normal like other people. She notes although she's tried to hold herself above other people, she's lately been having more and more crying spells. She cries at movies, even bad ones. She empathized with Fadia when Fadia learned that her lover had died. In her kitchen she had overheard the witches talking about it and cried for Fadia's loss.

As she walks through town she continues to think about the damage done to the city during the civil war and how the city has changed. She is approached by a teenaged girl begging with her mother. She removes her scarf, shocking the girl with a glimpse of her blue hair. After this act, Aaliya gives the girl the money she had pulled out of her purse for her museum fee. She continues to walk, moving past an alley way where she was embarrassed as a child when she had to go to the bathroom before she and her mother could reach their home. Her mother had pointed out a place for her to relieve herself. Aaliya remembered a woman seeing her and screaming at her.

She'd thought that morning about going to visit her mother. She realizes she is walking in that direction. She doesn't want the screaming to be the last memory that she has of her mother. As she walks, Aaliya thinks of how proud of herself she is for having finished "Austerlitz." She tells the reader the titles of her two favorite books about the Holocaust and how the type of treatment they gave to the themes of grief. As she thinks about grief, she wonders if Hannah killed herself because she was simply overwhelmed by the grief in her life.

Aaliya goes back to the day she met Hannah. Although she knew the family was there to discuss marriage, she hadn't realized the far reaching effects getting married would have on her. She didn't realize she'd had options at the time. She shares with her reader how mismatched she and her husband were. She said they rarely had anything to talk about and that she was much lonelier when she was married than she is as a single person.

She'd noticed Hannah on that first day because the girl was happy and because she ate everything offered to her. Hannah was the first person to pay Aaliya a visit after her wedding. During the visit Hannah had told Aaliya that while her new husband was cranky, he was also harmless. Hannah taught her how to cook, knit and repair buttons. She would visit Aaliya to help her close the bookstore. After they'd been friends several years Aaliya began reading books about philosophy to Hannah.

Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Aaliya admits that she realizes she is different from others and that these differences bother her. After she leaves the museum, Aaliya



comments that she wishes she could be more like the guard at the museum who is able to interact with people easily and without panic. She thinks of the other authors and artists who have voiced similar wishes that they could be “normal.”

Also important in this section is Aaliya’s decision to go and visit her mother. She is still deeply troubled because her mother screamed when she looked at her at her apartment. Aaliya doesn’t want this to be her last memory of her mother. Knowing the guilt that Aaliya feels because of Hannah’s death, the reader must wonder if Aaliya regretted the way she last saw Hannah and doesn’t want to make the same mistake with her mother.

As Aaliya walks to her mother’s apartment, Aaliya shares with her reader that she sees buildings that still have bullet holes in them from clashes between the Shiites and Sunnies in 2008. Notice the way that Aaliya plays with words as she describes the way that the Israelis have damaged the city of Beirut. She corrects herself when she calls the damage done by the Israelis “monumental” because she believes that word carries a positive connotation. It “implies raising instead of razing” (p. 194) she explains using the homophones raising and razing that have completely opposite meanings.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think is Aaliya’s motivation for going to see her mother? Do you think she will actually go through with her visit?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Aaliya’s attitude toward the Israelis.

Discussion Question 3

Aaliya says that if she had realized she would be taken out of school when she got married she would have asked more questions. Do you think Aaliya’s questions would have done her any good even if she had known to ask them? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

imperturbably, incandescent, idiosyncratic, ineluctable, diaphanous, demesne, portentous, susurration, platitudes, ululations, intrinsics, consternation, tectonic, desecration, escutcheon, bourgeoisie, delusions, comport, rancid, perfunctory, rube



Pages 210-229

Summary

Aaliya admits she identifies most with the philosopher Spinoza. Lost in her thoughts, Aaliya almost steps in a large hole in the pavement. She feels off balance and hears bells ringing again. She forces herself to continue walking. When she reaches her mother's apartment she knocks on the door but doesn't ring the bell. She listens, hoping no one is home before she rings the bell. A teenaged girl opens the door. Aaliya tells her that she wants to see her mother. The girl calls for her grandmother. When the sister-in-law who had been at Aaliya's apartment the previous day appears at the door, Aaliya tells her that she only wants to pay a visit. Her sister-in-law treats her hatefully and Aaliya wonders what she'd done to deserve such hatred from the woman. When Aaliya suggests she thought her visit might help her sister-in-law steps back to let her inside the apartment.

Aaliya's mother is sitting in the living room. She looks dead but Aaliya's sister-in-law assures her that she is not. The girl, Aaliya's great-niece, tells her that she can wake the old lady but Aaliya tells her she doesn't want to wake her. She sits in a chair facing her mother. As she watches her mother sleep, Aaliya believes she has come face-to-face with her future. Beside her mother sits a mother of pearl encrusted music box. She remembers the box and realizes that it plays a Chopin tune, perhaps the reason that she began appreciating Chopin first. She would like to tuck the box into her purse but knows she can't with her great-niece watching.

The door slams and a teenaged boy walks into the room. He asks who Aaliya is. She doesn't answer. Finally, a vehicle on the street makes the windows and chandelier rattle, waking Aaliya's mother. Aaliya counts waiting for her mother to look at her. When she does look, the old lady calls Aaliya by name. Her mother groans and Aaliya asks if she is all right. Her great-niece explains that she doesn't always answer and tells Aaliya that she needs to ask specific questions.

The two finally realize that it is the woman's feet that hurt her. Aaliya tells her mother they need to take her shoes off even though she is afraid of what she might find. The old lady's feet stink. The skin is dry and irritated. Her nails are badly overgrown. Her great-niece tells her they have to do something about her toenails. Aaliya agrees but isn't sure what they should do or if she wants to do anything. Her great-niece, who has told Aaliya her name is Nancy suggests she could open a window. Aaliya is surprised that she finds the girl bearable. She wonders if she, too, is lonely.

Analysis

An important object is introduced in this section of the novel. Aaliya spots a music box on a table next to the chair in which her mother is sitting. When Aaliya sees this box,



she suddenly realizes why the love of Chopin and his music came to her so easily. She had grown up hearing and humming the Chopin tune that the music box played.

Notice that even though Aaliya wonders if Nancy, the girl that Aaliya believes is her great niece, will eventually wind up in her lap because the girl keeps crowding her closer and closer, Aaliya realizes that she finds the girl bearable. She wonders if Nancy feels the same loneliness that she does.

When Aaliya comes face-to-face with her sister-in-law, she wonders why the woman is so hateful to her. In Aaliya's mind she has stayed away from her family because she did not want them to meddle in her business and did not wish to meddle in theirs. Notice that Nancy, the girl that Aaliya speaks to the most, tells Aaliya that she was not even aware that Aaliya's mother had two daughters.

Aaliya feels a type of grief as she looks at her mother. She believes she is looking at her own future, that 16 years down the road she will look and act like her mother. This idea gives Aaliya both fear and grief.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how you would have felt if you had been Aaliya looking at her aged mother. What might you have wondered? Would you have been as terrified as Aaliya seems to be?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Aaliya's interactions with her great niece.

Discussion Question 3

Consider Aaliya's relationship with her family. Why do you think her sister-in-law treats her so hatefully?

Vocabulary

miasma, superfluous, antipathy, stigmata, reticulation, androgynous, akimbo, maliciously, fission, simulacrum, effluvium, succinctly, monosyllabic, loquacious



Pages 229-248

Summary

Although Aaliya doesn't want to give her mother a pedicure and feels demeaned when she thinks of doing so, she gives her great-niece a list of items to get for her. Aaliya and Nancy work together one on one foot and one on the other. They wash the old lady's feet and trim her nails. Aaliya notices that her mother looks happy. As she looks at the paintings in the room she sees one of her stepfather, remembering what he looked like. She remembers one day when she was walking with her stepfather and her older brother that her father had the two children switch places so that Aaliya was on the side next to oncoming traffic. As an adult, Aaliya recognizes her stepfather's intention but when she was a child she had thought he was terrible.

As Aaliya walks away from her mother's apartment, she wonders if her mother will remember the promise that Aaliya made to her that she would return. On her way home, Aaliya remembers what the neighborhood she walks through was once like. One of the two sandstone houses she remembered still stands even though it is abandoned. She remembers another sign of the past crashing with one of the future when she was walking to the bookstore one day. A BMW had not stopped for traffic and had crashed into a cart of vegetables pulled by a mule. She was mesmerized by the symbolism.

Aaliya remembers Hannah last read a book by Proust. She wishes Hannah had continued writing in her journals so she would know what it was that killed her. Aaliya knew that Hannah was trying to read that particular writer because she knew it would please Aaliya. She hopes it wasn't something she read in the novel that made her decide to kill herself. Hannah had aged prematurely, Aaliya explains. She turned grey in her thirties. When she reached her forties, she began having trouble sleeping. She tried home remedies then went to a doctor for help. Valium made her feel like a walking corpse the next day while Seconal made her confused and terrified.

Even though Aaliya admits she was still young when Hannah killed herself, she chides herself for not paying better attention to her friend. Hannah had spoken of missing her parents but Aaliya didn't think much of it. A year before Hannah's first suicide attempt, the Lieutenant's mother died. On her deathbed she promised Hannah that in Heaven she would not feel she had to choose between her son and the daughter that Hannah had become to her. Hannah had told Aaliya about what the woman had said but had glossed over it. When Aaliya later read Hannah's journals she realized Hannah had not included that promise in her recording of the event at all. Aaliya wondered if it was that promise that made Hannah wonder if the Lieutenant had really not been interested in her at all.

Aaliya remembers that the winter before Hannah died was dreary. Hannah's mood seemed to mirror the weather. Aaliya noticed she wasn't as talkative. She'd also stopped writing in her journals. She seemed preoccupied, often not drinking the tea



Aaliya had fixed for her or stopping her knitting in the middle of a project to just sit quietly. When Aaliya asked what she was doing, Hannah said she was thinking.

Although Hannah had been faithful to help Aaliya at the bookstore three days passed without her coming to help. When Aaliya finally called her, Hannah said she was sad but Aaliya believed she sounded rational. The following morning she came to the bookstore in high spirits saying that she'd finally had a good night's sleep. She admitted to Aaliya she had taken out the pills her doctor had prescribed her and had taken all 35 that were remaining. She felt she was ready for God to come and get her. Instead she woke at 8 a.m. the following morning. Aaliya was horrified and insisted Hannah should have come to her. She planned to take Hannah to a doctor that night. Instead Hannah suggested they indulge in a good meal. After they had enjoyed, Hannah went home, packed up her journals and included a slip of paper with Aaliya's name on top of them, climbed to the roof of her building and jumped off. She died in the ambulance.

Aaliya looks back on what Hannah did to herself believing that she should have suspected that Hannah would try again. Aaliya admits that it is only at times that she believes she has truly recovered from Hannah's death. She wishes she'd paid more attention to Hannah and had realized how lonely she was. She wishes she'd never let her friend out of her sight that night. As she remembers Hannah, the pain of her grief comes back full force.

Analysis

Aaliya finally tells the whole story of her friend Hannah's death. She is not only grieved because she misses her friend but also because she feels she is somehow responsible for her death. One of the ideas that Aaliya repeats about her friend Hannah is that she thought her friend was happy. Hannah was reading Proust and had gotten further than she ever had into his volumes of work. She also thought Hannah had surrounded herself with lots of friends and relatives. For these reasons Aaliya thought Hannah was happy and not lonely.

It appears the only trouble that Hannah talked to Aaliya freely about was her inability to sleep. Ironically it was after Hannah had a good night's sleep and seemed to be in a better mood that she was successful in her second suicide attempt. It is common for those who commit suicide to have a spell just before they kill themselves in which their spirits seem to lift. It is said this is because they have decided they are going to kill themselves and are relieved they've finally come to a decision. Notice that Aaliya is angry with herself for believing that Hannah's high spirits were a sign that she was on the road to recovery. She wishes now that she'd kept a better eye on her friend.

The grief Aaliya feels as she remembers her friend's death is doubled by the rain that has been constantly falling from the sky. As she takes care of her mother, Aaliya wonders what will happen to her if she lives long enough that she is no longer able to care for herself.



Notice in this section of the novel when Aaliya is faced with the idea of having to give her mother a pedicure when she feels demeaned by even the idea of the act. She references two acts in the Christian Bible that involve foot washing. One of those took place when Jesus believed to be God's son washed the feet of his disciples to demonstrate the idea of servanthood. She also references the actions of a woman named Mary who washed Jesus' feet as a symbol of her devotion. In that story the woman dried Jesus feet with her hair. Aaliya makes light of her situation wondering if she were to wipe her mother's feet with her hair if they would turn blue.

In the theme of the importance of literature, Nancy asks Aaliya how she learned all she did about foot washing. Aaliya tells her it was from reading lots of books. In this case she doesn't tell her young niece that she actually learned how to wash feet from watching her mother do it. It does give Aaliya a chance to share with Nancy the importance of literature and what one can learn from reading.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Hannah's suicide was connected with her mother-in-law's deathbed promise to her? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the BMW crashing into the mule pulled cart.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Aaliya's act of washing her mother's feet. Do you think this act is a way for Aaliya to alleviate her grief? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

cumulus, anodyne, menial, irascible, virulent, proliferation, indubitably, obfuscations



Pages 248-268

Summary

As Aaliya continues to walk home, she thinks of Ahmad when she hears the sound of the commercial airplanes bringing emigrants home for the holidays. The last news she'd had of him came in the form of a newspaper clipping where he and other exiles were lined up to board a ship to Tunis. He did not hide his face like the others. In the present, as rain continues to come down, Aaliya thinks of the writer Pavase who worked for Einaudi, a leftist publisher. When that publishing company was sold to a right wing prime minister a pipe burst in Pavase's house, destroying all of his work. Aaliya believed it was Pavase from his grave keeping the right winged politician from making any money off his work.

Aaliya admitted the year Hannah died was horrible and became impossible to understand. That same year the owner of her building died and Aaliya worried that Fadia would evict her. Her brothers and mother were hounding her for the apartment. It was at this time that Hannah threw herself fully into her books. She could understand even the most difficult books much more easily than she could understand grief. In her desire to get home Aaliya decides to take a taxi. Once she is back at home, Aaliya cuts off her blue hair. She cries as she cuts. She decides on a bath to wash the memory of her mother off. Then she wants to continue reading.

From her window in the living room, Aaliya can see only a bit of Beirut. When she was young, she wished she had a better view. Now she just wishes there was an easy way to clean the outsides of her windows. Although some have compared the city of Beirut to Noah's ark on which all animals were welcomed, Aaliya's thinks how it was only the best of every kind of animal that was allowed on the ark. In "Microcosms" she has read that even though God intended to wipe out evil with the flood, all manner of evil entered the ark in the form of the humans and animals that took refuge on it.

Aaliya wakes the following morning having slept very little. It is cold in her apartment. It rained heavily all night. She heard noises above in Joumana's apartment as if she were murdering her husband. As she heads toward her kitchen she notices the apartment smells damp. Aaliya considers again what project she will start. She wonders if she could break her own rules and not start her translation on Jan. 1. Even though she toys with the idea of breaking her schedule, she realizes it is her habit that keeps her settled. She knows she must make a decision.

She wakes when the doorbell rings. She hears Joumana's voice asking her to open the door. The three witches are wet as they cram into her foyer. She hears the word "flood" but doesn't want to know what they're saying next. They tell her they hope she doesn't have anything valuable stored in her maid's room. She runs to the room with the others following her. She smells the wet before she even opens the door. She is sick to her stomach and has trouble turning the doorknob. There is little water on the floor, but



every crate containing her translations is wet. She cries. She believes her life is collapsing around her.

Her neighbors lead her to the kitchen and help her sit. Marie-Thérèse wipes her face. Joumana asked what was in the boxes. She suggests they should try to move the boxes and see what they can save. Aaliya tells her the boxes contained her translations. Joumana seems shocked. The women begin working, moving the boxes out. Aaliya tries to help but can't find the strength. She wishes she had the heart that she once had, one that could cope with such a devastating loss.

Analysis

Aaliya loses both her hope and her humor in this section of the novel. After all of the bad luck and trouble her life has dealt her it appears that this blow may be the one that does her in. She has focused her life on her translations. Now she fears her translations are gone because they have been damaged by the water from the pipe bursting.

Notice as Aaliya walks home the night prior to the discovery of her soaked boxes, she had thought about Pavase and his work that was destroyed when a pipe burst in his home. These thoughts foreshadow what is in store for Aaliya in reference to a bursted pipe destroying work.

Notice that in this section as Aaliya is plunged into grief by the water damage to her work she shares with her reader all of the trials she faced after Hannah died. Not only did she have to deal with her grief and guilt she was also worried she would be kicked out of her apartment because the owner of the building had died and had left the building to Fadia. At the same time her family was harassing her about giving up her apartment. About the same time the country went to war. Notice that Aaliya wonders with all the distractions going on if she had grieved adequately for her friend.

In the theme of literature notice that Aaliya indicates it was at this point in her life that she immersed herself even more deeply in her reading and studying. Just as it had in the past, literature became a place that Aaliya went to hide from the unpleasantness around her. Notice that she says she could understand even the most difficult piece of literature more easily than she could understand the concept and workings of grief.

A final important action by Aaliya in this section of the novel is her act of cutting off her hair. She refers to her hair as an albatross as she cuts it. She uses a quote from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in which her burden is described as falling off into the sea. It appears that Aaliya has come to connect her blue hair with her mother, especially since it was Aaliya's hair and its strange hue that her mother first noticed about her.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Aaliya decided to cut off her hair?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Aaliya's outlook on life after her crates of translations were soaked. Does her writing in this section differ from other sections? How does it differ?

Discussion Question 3

In this section of the novel Aaliya makes a reference to Beirut as being like Noah's ark. Do you agree with her ideas of the ark? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

puerile, voracious, insatiable, jejune, recalcitrant, mellifluous, flummoxed, destitute, degradation



Pages 268-299

Summary

Aaliya is finally able to motivate herself to help with the moving. She thinks the crates look like lined up caskets. Joumana kneels in front of one of the crates. When she hears Aaliya gasp she motions for her to calm down. Aaliya begins to cry again when Joumana lifts off the top to reveal the water soaked pages. Behind her, Fadia begins to massage her shoulders. Aaliya thinks of the different ways that authors have killed themselves over the course of the years. She notes that of the artists, musicians are less likely to kill themselves.

Marie-Thérèse says they will have to separate all of the pages to allow them to dry. Fadia insists they must dry them or fungus will spread throughout the apartments. They put up laundry lines and begin to hang the sheets up to dry. When they realize they don't have enough lines they decide to use blow dryers. While the women are gone to get their dryers, Aaliya looks for her translation of "Anna Karenina." She finds it and realizes what an effort it will be to rewrite all of her translations. She wonders why she doesn't just throw all of her work away. At that point she views it as unnecessary. She begins to separate the pages of Anna. She gives a short scream when she sees Marie-Thérèse's feet approach beyond the pages. She tells Aaliya the plumbers have arrived.

Marie-Thérèse is pleased when she sees "Anna Karenina" and realizes she'd actually read one of the books that Aaliya had translated. Marie-Thérèse smiles as she recounts her memories of the book. When Joumana entered the apartment and heard they were talking about "Anna Karenina" she looked like she was about to cheer. As they work Joumana asks Aaliya if she had ever considered publishing any of her work. The women seem shocked when she insists that her translating had been a whim. Joumana tells her that she has some graduate students who could work on transcribing all of the ruined work. They also seem shocked that Aaliya had been working for all those years on her translations but had never changed her system. Just as Aaliya has decided she must ask the women to stop both Fadia and Marie-Thérèse decide it is time for lunch. Fadia goes downstairs to cook. They insist she join them for lunch but for now her apartment is empty. They have finished drying only two short manuscripts. She wonders if she should take Joumana up on her offer to get graduate students to help in the process or if she should just throw it all away.

She thinks that Fadia might be right, that the disaster is a chance for her to break from routine. She wonders if she might even branch out into authors she'd never considered before. As she considers deviating from her norm she wonders if she is experiencing an epiphany. She becomes excited as she decides she will translate either Yourcenar or Coetzee. She decides that if Marie-Thérèse rings her doorbell she will next translate *Memories of Hadrian* by Yourcenar. If she knocks, it will be *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Coetzee.



Analysis

Aaliya's resilience begins to rise to the surface in this section of the novel. Although life has dealt her another cruel blow, Aaliya starts her climb out of her grief quickly. As she mentioned earlier in the novel she is often excited by the thought of beginning a new project. Even as she sits among the ruin of her past projects, Aaliya is challenged by the women who live in the building with her to think about her upcoming project. It is when they tease her with the idea that she could break from her translating traditions that Aaliya becomes excited with the idea of translating one of her favorite books even though it didn't fit the criteria she'd once lined out for her work. "Beginnings are pregnant with possibilities" (p. 5) Aaliya had thought at the beginning of the novel. It appears it is this hope of a new beginning that helps Aaliya to come to grips with her latest tragedy.

In the theme of literature, notice two of the women who help Aaliya dry out her work both have positive reactions when they realize that Aaliya had translated "Anna Karenina." Marie-Thérèse is excited because she recognizes the book. It is one she had actually read before. Joumana is also excited when she hears the other women talking about the translation. One of the questions that Joumana has for Aaliya when she asks why Aaliya never considered publishing her work is if Aaliya didn't think that people whose native language was Arabic would enjoy reading that book in their native language instead of reading it in a translation. Although Aaliya still seems to doubt her translations have literary merit, she seems to seriously consider the point that Joumana made.

A final note of interest is the change in the way that Aaliya referred to the women who lived in her building. Though in previous references she had almost always called them the three witches she changes the reference to "the women" after they begin to help with her transcriptions. Although their act of helping Aaliya may not symbolize the beginning of a tight friendship between Aaliya and the other three the women have taken strides in gaining Aaliya's trust and respect.

Discussion Question 1

If you were Aaliya, do you think you'd take Jomauna up on her offer to have graduate students translate her work? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Aaliya's relationship with the three "witches" will improve after this section of the novel? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss Aaliya's excitement at the idea she didn't have to follow the rules she'd set for her translating. Why do you think she was so rigid about her rules in the first place?

Vocabulary

vivisector, turbid, imperious, genuflecting, discomfiting, transcribe, serfs, atypical, farrago



Characters

Aaliya Saleh

Aaliya Saleh is the main character and narrator of this novel. She is an introvert who has devoted her life to translating novels into Arabic. She was born when her mother was only sixteen. Her father, who loved her and gave her the name Aaliya, died when Aaliya was not even two years old. Aaliya's mother remarried and had five more children. Aaliya felt out of place in the family. She grew up to believe she was unnecessary in her family. She was married when she was sixteen to a man who was not a good match for her. Among his failings, he was impotent and blamed his impotency on Aaliya. He divorced her before they'd been married even four years. When he left Aaliya, he did her the favor of letting her stay in the apartment.

Because she was a female, however, Aaliya's family believed she should have given up the apartment to one of her half brothers. Even though they pounded on her door and cursed her, Aaliya refused to relent. When the war began and her apartment was broken into by Palestinians while Aaliya was taking shelter in the basement next door Aaliya got herself an AK-47 in order to protect herself and her apartment. She indicated her family stopped bothering her when they learned she'd gotten a gun.

In order to support herself Aaliya's friend Hannah helped her get a job at a bookstore. She worked at that bookstore for 50 years before the owner died and the store was closed. As a woman of 72 at the time the novel is written Aaliya spends her days reading and translating French and English versions of novels to Arabic. She is disturbed when her eldest half brother brings their mother to her apartment intending to drop her off. Most shocking to Aaliya is that when her mother looks at her she screams.

In addition to dealing with her strained relationship with her mother Aaliya also struggles with guilt and grief because of her friend Hannah's suicide. She wishes her life were like a novel where she could come to some great epiphany about Hannah's death or least understand why Hannah died as she did. Aaliya knows that real life is not like literature and that her situation has no easy explanation. Aaliya comes closest to despair in the novel when a leak soaks all of the transcribed manuscripts she had stored in one of the rooms in her apartment. The other three women who live in her building, who she calls the three witches in secret, help her to begin drying out her papers. One even suggests she should try publishing her work. They also encourage her to break some of her own rules when choosing books to translate. With this in mind, Aaliya decides upon two books that are her favorites that she considers possibilities to translate. Her spirits lift as she thinks about beginning a new work and how she will decide which of the two books she will work on next.



Hannah

Hannah was Aaliya's only friend. Aaliya met Hannah because Hannah had endeared herself to the family of Aaliya's husband many years prior. The brother of Aaliya's husband, who is referenced only as the Lieutenant, had once been kind to Hannah and Hannah believed that he had proposed to her. The Lieutenant tried on different occasions to tell Hannah he didn't love her but was unable to hurt her in that way. The Lieutenant finally asked Hannah's father to take care of the task for him. Before her father was able to tell Hannah, the Lieutenant was killed in a car crash. Hannah helped the family in its time of loss just as if she had been an actual daughter-in-law. For this reason she was with the family when they came to ask for Aaliya's hand in marriage to Sobhi.

Aaliya believed that Hannah had a close circle of family and friends. It wasn't until her friend committed suicide that she realized how lonely Hannah was all of her life. At the time of her death Hannah also suffered severe insomnia. In her attempts to kill herself she first overdosed on the sleeping medicine her doctor had given to her. When that didn't work, Hannah jumped from the roof of her building. Even though Aaliya inherited Hannah's journals after she died she never knew why her friend had decided to kill herself because she'd stopped writing in her journals just a few weeks before her death. Aaliya wondered if it were not because of a comment the Lieutenant's mother had made on her deathbed just a year prior to Hannah's suicide that made Hannah so sad. The woman promised to Hannah she wouldn't feel she would have to choose between the Lieutenant and Hannah in heaven. Aaliya wondered if Hannah had discovered what the comment meant and realized that the Lieutenant had never really wanted to marry her.

The Lieutenant

The title the Lieutenant is the only way that Aaliya's brother-in-law is referenced in the novel. Aaliya never met this man. He died before she became part of that family. Even so, Aaliya's best friend Hannah believed incorrectly the man had proposed to her. In reality the Lieutenant believed he was being polite when he stood up for Hannah when they were riding in the same service, she took his words and actions as a proposal. The Lieutenant fit Hannah's description of her ideal suitor. He was attractive and seemed as shy as Hannah. He visited her several times with the intention of telling Hannah he had not intended to propose to her and was sorry she had taken his friendliness in that way. The Lieutenant, however, was not able to hurt Hannah in that way. Just before Hannah's father was going to tell her that the Lieutenant did not want to marry her, the Lieutenant was killed in a car accident. Hannah was never told that the Lieutenant did not intend to marry her.

Fadia

Fadia was only a young girl when Aaliya was married and first moved into the apartment building that Fadia's father owned. Early in their relationship Fadia spent a good deal of



time in Aaliya's apartment and seemed to admire Aaliya. After Aaliya was divorced and Fadia's father forbade her from spending time with Aaliya she began to look down upon her old friend. When Fadia took over her father's building as an adult she continued to allow Aaliya to stay there just as her father did. She chased off Aaliya's family when they came to bother her. Fadia would sometimes leave food for Aaliya outside her door. When the apartments flooded, Fadia was one of the three women, those whom Aaliya referred to as the three witches, who helped Aaliya begin drying out her work. Fadia was a direct contrast to Aaliya because Fadia was overly concerned with her appearance, was loud and boisterous, and had absolutely no interest in literature.

Sobhi Saleh

Sobhi Saleh is the name of Aaliya's ex-husband. Aaliya described him as an impotent insect who could not get an erection. He divorced her after only four years of marriage. He married two other women after he divorced Aaliya. Even so, the man died childless. Aaliya indicates that it was ironic that even though the man could not hold an erection when he was alive, he died with a full erection. Aaliya said that Sobhi had blamed her for his impotence. She'd been much lonelier when she was married than when she was divorced from the man who was such a bad match for her. Sobhi was also the younger brother of the Lieutenant, the man with whom Hannah fell in love. Even though Sobhi adored his older brother, he despised Hannah, the woman who became Aaliya's only friend.

Aaliya's Mother

Aaliya's mother first appears as a character in the novel when Aaliya's half brother brings her to Aaliya's apartment with the intention of dropping her off for Aaliya to care for her. When her mother looks up and sees her daughter, Aaliya's mother screams. Aaliya wonders through the course of the novel why her mother screamed when she saw her.

Aaliya later visits her mother at her eldest half brother's house. As Aaliya sits and watches her mother sleep, she believes she has come face to face with her future. Aaliya believes her mother had never really loved her as much as she had her other children. She always felt out of place around her mother. Notice that like many characters, Aaliya's mother is not given a proper name. She is referred to only by her relationship to Aaliya.

Joumana

Joumana is the woman who lives in the apartment above Aaliya's. She is one of the three women that Aaliya refers to as the three witches. Joumana is a university professor who suggests to Aaliya that she should submit her translations for publishing after Joumana realizes what her neighbor has been doing for so many years. It is Joumana who coordinates the three witches in helping Aaliya to begin drying out her



translations. She is the one who seems most interested in getting Aaliya to open up to the others.

Aaliya's Half Brother, the Eldest

Aaliya's half brother, the eldest, is the brother who tried to drop their mother off at Aaliya's apartment. Aaliya admits she is afraid of her half brother. She gets the feeling he wants to fight and argue with her. She remembers that when her husband had first divorced her, her eldest half brother had been the one who'd most wanted Aaliya's apartment for himself. He'd been among those who had banged on her door and yelled at her because he wanted her to give him her larger apartment.

Marie-Thérèse Hayek

Marie-Thérèse Hayek is Aaliya's downstairs neighbor. She is one of the three women who lives in Aaliya's building that Aaliya calls the three witches. While the women are drying out the translations that Aaliya had written Marie-Thérèse is relieved when she sees "Anna Karenina" among the titles because it is a book she recognizes and has read as well.

Hajj Wardeh

Hajj Wardeb was not only the owner of the building where Aaliya lived once she was married, he was also Fadia's father. When Hajj Wardeb died, he willed the building to Fadia. Although Hajj Wardeb seemed to shun Aaliya once she was divorced, he did stand up for her and would not allow her family members to bully her out of her apartment.

Ahmad

Ahmad was the teen boy who came to the bookstore where Aaliya worked to read books. He eventually began helping out around the store even though the owner refused to pay him anything. Later when Aaliya decided to get a gun it was to Ahmad that she went. He agreed to give her a gun in exchange for sex.

Abdallah

Abdallah is the man who Fadia's father had arranged to marry her. When Fadia learned her father had arranged a marriage, she refused to marry the man. She said she instead want to marry for love. Fadia married the man she believed she loved but wound up having an affair with Abdallah.



Nancy

Nancy is Aaliya's great-niece. Aaliya meets this girl when she visits her mother. Even though Nancy talks quite a bit and crowds Aaliya, Aaliya feels unusually comfortable with the girl. The two work together to give Aaliya's mother a pedicure after they see what bad shape the woman's feet are in. Nancy seems to want to impress Aaliya.



Symbols and Symbolism

Tube of Bel Argent Shampoo

This tube of Bel Argent Shampoo is intended to make Aaliya's white hair look less flat; however, she uses too much and winds up dying her hair blue. The blue hair that results characterizes Aaliya as a typical little old lady even though she is far from being such.

An AK-47

This AK-47 that Aaliya procured from Ahmad is a symbol of both her determination and her spunk. She decided to get the gun after a group of Palestinians broke into her apartment and one of them defecated on the floor. When she went to Ahmad for the gun he agreed to give her one if she would have sex with him first. She was shocked that he wanted her but agreed to the proposition and even seemed to enjoy the encounter.

An Oak Desk

When Aaliya first saw her boss sitting behind this oak desk at the bookstore she believed the desk symbolized prestige and luxury. After the owner of the store died and the store was closed, Aaliya was given this desk. She put it in the reading room of her apartment.

“A Tale of Two Cities” in Arabic

The illustrated comic of “A Tale of Two Cities” symbolized Aaliya's love for literature even as a young child. Aaliya was 10 when she arranged a barter so she could own the comic book. She keeps the book on her work desk.

Night Carpet

Aaliya uses the prayer rug that Hannah gave her as a night carpet beside her bed. Hannah gave it to Aaliya because she was disturbed that Aaliya did not have one. Hannah also taught Aaliya how to pray. Aaliya, however, did not follow Hannah's religious teachings and used what some consider a holy object merely as a way to keep her feet from being cold when she first stepped out of bed.

“Crime and Punishment”

Aaliya tells her readers that Raskolnikov's novel “Crime and Punishment” was the novel that first piqued her interest in translating novels.



Hannah's Journals

Before Hannah committed suicide, she indicated by use of a note that she wanted her journals to be given to Aaliya. Aaliya used these journals as a way to try to determine why Hannah had decided to kill herself. Because Hannah had stopped writing in her journals a few weeks before her death Aaliya never found for sure why Hannah had died.

Electric Alarm Clock

Aaliya believes the best invention of her time is the electric alarm clock. She loves this invention because it does not tick like a traditional clock. Aaliya believed that the sound of a traditional clock sounded like the sound of her life ticking away. Since the electric and battery operated clocks don't make the ticking noise, she doesn't feel oppressed by them.

The Ant Farm

Aaliya often speaks about needing to rattle the ant farm or dispel the ant farm. It seems this is her phrase for needing to clear her brain just as some people say they need to clear the cobwebs out of their brain.

A Mother-of-Pearl Encrusted Music Box

Aaliya sees this mother-of-pearl encrusted music box when she goes to visit her mother. Aaliya remembers this music box from when her mother bought it as a gift to herself. The box symbolizes the beginning of Aaliya's love for Chopin because the box played a Chopin piece.



Settings

The Bookstore

It was in a small bookstore that Aaliya worked for fifty years after her husband left her. She met Ahmad when he came to this store looking for a specific book. Additionally, Hannah often spent a good deal of time with Aaliya in the bookstore while Aaliya read and Hannah knitted.

Sabra

Sabra is the Palestine camp where Ahmad had once live with his mother. When Aaliya went to look for Ahmad in that camp she learned that he no longer lived there.

The Maid's Room

It was in the maid's room in Aaliya's apartment that she stored the completed versions of her translations. Because the room had no windows and Aaliya was scared to change the light bulb, she had to use candles or flashlights when she went to look for a manuscript. The crated copies of Aaliya's translations were soaked by water when a pipe burst in an upstairs apartment flooding the maid's rooms of each of the apartments below.

The Maid's Bathroom

Aaliya used the maid's bathroom as overflow storage for her translations.

Aaliya's Reading Room

Aaliya's reading room was stacked with books. It housed the dark stained oak desk that Aaliya had admired when she first began working at the bookstore. It was in this room that Aaliya not only read but also worked on the translations of her novels.

The National Museum

The National Museum is the place to which Aaliya went on the day she told the women who lived in the apartment building with her that she couldn't have coffee with them because she was going out. Although the museum usually comforted her, Aaliya was unable to enjoy it because it was crowded and had two unruly children as visitors. Aaliya snuck into a strange room she found under the staircase and cried before she left the museum that day.



Aaliya's Mother's Apartment

It was at her mother's apartment that Aaliya met her great-niece and realized she didn't feel uncomfortable around the girl. She and the teenager discovered that Aaliya's mother's feet hurt because they were dry and her toenails overgrown. They went to work giving her a pedicure even though Aaliya felt demeaned by having to do so.



Themes and Motifs

Introversion

As Aaliya tells her story she also shares with her reader that even though a person may be introverted, it doesn't mean they haven't lived. Aaliya demonstrates all of the classic signs of being an introvert. She prefers to be alone. She is at her happiest when she is immersed in her work. When she is around people she feels off balance and awkward. Even though she tries to be polite, Aaliya is relieved when she is left alone again. Through the course of her life Aaliya had only one friend with whom she felt really comfortable.

Even though Aaliya prefers to be in the sanctuary of her own home or lost in a book it doesn't mean that Aaliya had not lived. She worked in a bookstore for 50 years. She taught herself how to appreciate classical music. During the war years she got a gun, an AK-47 to be exact, in order to protect herself and her property. The story she tells of how she procured this gun is not at all what one would expect of one who was an introvert. She went to a young man who had helped her in the bookstore for help in getting her gun. He agreed to give her one as long as she would have sex with him. Aaliya not only agreed to the man's proposition but also seemed to enjoy their one night stand.

Family Relations

Aaliya's relationship with her family is a major theme in the novel as Aaliya speaks of how she has struggled to come to terms with what she called her family's "unnecessary appendage" (p. 13). Aaliya's sex was the first strike against her. At the time she was born females were still not valued in Lebanese families. Aaliya says she remembers people telling her that her father loved her, but her father died before she turned two years of age. Aaliya's mother was most proud of the four boys she had later with her second husband. Aaliya believed that when she stopped trying to find a place for herself in her family she basically disappeared.

About the time that Aaliya writes about the three-day snatch of her life her family apparently remembered that she did exist. Her mother is brought to her by a man who Aaliya refers to simply as her half-brother the eldest. He demands that Aaliya must keep their mother as he and his wife can no longer do it. When the old lady looks at Aaliya, she screams as if in fear for her life. Aaliya was backed up in her demands that her mother could not stay with her by Fadia the woman who owned her apartment building. Fadia demanded if they did not leave she would call the police.

Her mother's scream disturbs Aaliya and makes her wonder why her mother reacted to her in that way. Almost against her will Aaliya visits her mother again hoping that the terrible scream will not be the last memory that she has of her mother. In this visit her



mother recognizes her and admits that her feet hurt. With the help of her great niece, Aaliya washes her mother's feet and trims her nails. As she watches her mother she wishes she knew if her mother ever cared for her at all, if she rocked her to sleep, sang songs to her or played with her as a young child. Along with the grief that she doesn't know her mother any better, Aaliya also feels fear when she looks at her mother because she believes her mother symbolizes the future to which Aaliya can look forward.

Beirut

Aaliya's home city of Beirut and the way it has changed through the years is often a theme in her thoughts as she walks around the city. She admits to her reader that through her 72 years of life she's spent only ten nights out of the city. She's seen it through its years of civil war and random attacks by Israeli neighbors. Even though the city is at peace at the time that Aaliya writes about it, she sees and acknowledges its faults, but still loves it.

One of the aspects of Beirut that Aaliya shares with her reader is its unpredictability. Even as she sits in her kitchen drinking her tea the city's power grid unexpectedly fails. She recounts a tale of an expensive hospital wing that had been built that included self flushing toilets. Although it had been a brave attempt at modernization the power in the city went out so often that people had to be hired just for the purpose of recalibrating to toilets each time the power went off.

On her walks around Beirut Aaliya shares her memories of Beirut in her younger years. She remembers a record store where she once bought albums to teach herself how to enjoy classical music. That store now houses a Pizza Hut. She remembers the Green Line in the Beirut civil war where more people were killed than any other time in the war. She remembers the burning of a stable full of horses at a racetrack. She remembers how the curators of the museum in Beirut dug a crypt under the museum to hide and protect their artifacts while the war raged.

In other parts of the city Aaliya remembers the buildings that one had open stairways before half walls were built in an attempt to protect inhabitants from gunfire. She remembers a time when there were still green spaces and gardens in the city. Now she says even when one does find a tree in the city it is likely it isn't a native species.

Although she's grown old in her city, Aaliya grieves because she feels her city has grown younger. She watches the younger generation drinking coffee at Starbucks and wonders if there will come a time when she will no longer be able to dodge traffic and take long walks. She wonders if she has grown too old for the city she loves so much.

Literature/Art

Literature specifically and art more generally make up an important theme in the novel as Aaliya tries to immerse herself in art in order to escape from reality. Aaliya's main



escape from reality comes through literature. Through the course of the novel Aaliya also shares that music as well as the art at the Nation Museum have also provided solace for her.

Even as a young child Aaliya began reading as a way to escape from the world around her. She believes she might have been interested in literature because her family discouraged her from reading by asking her if she really wanted to be so different from others. At that time Aaliya realized she did want to be different from others because she wanted to learn. It is this concept that one can learn all manner of things through books that Aaliya tries to impress on her great niece when she has a chance to meet the girl during a visit to her mother.

Literature has not only given Aaliya an escape from real life it had also provided her with a job. Because she was well read, Aaliya got a job in a bookstore. She worked at that job for 50 years supporting herself as a single woman. All the time she was earning a living at the bookstore Aaliya also enjoyed her hobby of translating books into Arabic. During the course of her life she translated just shy of 40 books into that language.

Along with literature Aaliya also found solace through music and art. When she worked at the bookstore her one luxury came in the form of buying one record a week so she could teach herself how to appreciate classical music. Often when Aaliya was too distracted to read she would turn to her music to help clear her mind. Art was another place of refuge for Aaliya. She would often go to the National Museum to enjoy the art on display. She liked the museum because it gave her a chance to be in public without actually having to interact with people.

Grief

Grief is a major companion in Aaliya's life. Hannah, the only person to whom Aaliya had ever felt close killed herself many years prior to the time in which the novel takes place. Although years have passed since she lost her friend Aaliya still grieves and tries to come to some satisfactory explanation of why Hannah died.

The story of Hannah's death and Aaliya's grief seems to be tied up in and resurrected by Aaliya's mother reappearing in her life. When Aaliya's mother first looked at her daughter after they had been apart for so many years, the old lady screamed as if she were in fear for her life. Perhaps spurred by her memories of her last days with Hannah, Aaliya doesn't want this scream to be the last memory that she has of her mother. She goes to visit her mother to somehow make amends with her. While there Aaliya, with the help of her great-niece, washes her mother's feet and trims her nails when she sees what bad shape they are in. All the while Aaliya grieves as she wonders if her mother ever really loved her. She is also grieved by seeing her mother because she believes that her mother represents what her life will be like in the future.

Aaliya's grief reaches a maximum when a freak bursted pipe floods the room where she had the majority of her translations stored. The pages are soaked. Aaliya knows it will

take more time than she has to dry out all the pages and transcribe them but the women in her apartment building pitch in to help. One of them, a university professor, suggests that Aaliya should have her work published. The women also suggest to Aaliya that she could make changes in the rules she has set up for her transcribing. Aaliya's grief lifts and she becomes excited as she considers counting the flood as a new beginning and translating one of her favorite books.

Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the first person point of view of 72-year-old Aaliya. The reader knows the story is told from the first person point of view because Aaliya uses the first person pronouns “I” and “we” throughout the novel. This point of view works well for the novel as it tells the story of Aaliya’s life and her greatest grief. Aaliya is the best person to tell this story. Because she is so introverted and has probably told no one the story of Hannah and her death, there is no other character who could tell the story as well. If the story had been told by an omniscient narrator, the reader would not have felt as intimate as they do with Aaliya as she tells her own story through her thoughts.

Aaliya narrates the entire novel as if she were speaking directly to her reader. She jokes with them, quotes literature to them and in some places in her work she even directly addresses the reader. For instance she describes her act of reading books and trying to make herself a part of that book so she can really understand the heart of the story. She turns to her reader at this point telling them: “If you read these pages and think I’m the way I am because I lived through a civil war, you can’t feel my pain. If you believe you’re not like me because one woman, and only one, Hannah, chose to be my friend, then you’re unable to empathize” (p. 100). Through this speech to the reader Aaliya hopes to be able to impress upon them the interconnectivity between all people. The whole being of a person cannot be summed up by one experience or situation.

Language and Meaning

One of the first aspects of the language that a reader will notice is that Aaliya’s love for literature shows through her thoughts. She treats the experiences she has had through reading books just the same as she views those real life experiences she has had. She quotes literature, argues with the opinions of philosophers and men of great thought, and provides her own thoughts in the form of metaphors, simile and personification.

Along with her references to literature, Aaliya additionally makes a number of references to the Christian religion in her story. These references are interesting because Aaliya describes herself as being a student of the Quran. At some point she familiarized herself with the principals of the Christian religion as she often refers to different important facets of this religion. For instance, she refers to her mother as a cross she must bear, a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. At one point in her story she talks about the Christmas holiday and speaks of the Christians covering themselves in “gold, frankincense, and Chanel to honor their savior’s birth. Trivia matters naught to me” (p. 5). She pokes fun at the three traditional gifts believed to have been presented to the baby Jesus at His birth by substituting the popular perfume Chanel for the traditional myrrh.



Structure

This 291 page novel has no chapter divisions. It is a continuously told story by a 72-year-old lady as she looks back on her life. The story covers only a physical period of about three days sometime around the Christmas holiday. As Aaliya goes through the business of her day-to-day life she compares her life to the literature she has read and remembers important occasions from her past. Because the story follows for the most part the thoughts of Aaliya there is very little conversation. The story is told mostly through Aaliya's thoughts and remembrances.

Through the course of the novel the author uses a good many references to literature and even quotes from classics to enhance his writing. When Aaliya's mother screams at her, for instance, Aaliya wondered if she should have quoted Milton to her when he wrote in "Paradise Lost:" "Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem / Now in thine eye so foul?" Notice also that when Aaliya makes a point during her novel she will lay out her argument then will sum it up with a short, snappy sentence. After her encounter with her half-brother the eldest and her mother at her apartment with the screaming by her mother as well as Fadia's demands that Aaliya's family leave, Aaliya thinks that, "Here at the quiet limit of the world it isn't so quiet" (p. 76).



Quotes

One hairstylist described on the radio how he finally convinced this old woman that her hair was much too blue. But his client still refused to change the color. It was much more important that she see her hair as natural than the rest of the world do so.”

-- Narrator (None paragraph 9)

Importance: Aaliya thinks about how some older ladies prefer to have their hair look blue to others because it actually looks right to them when it is that color. Aaliya thinks she prefers the women who want their hair to look right to them in favor of the hairdressers who want them to fix their hair in a way that it looks normal to others but strange to the women.

Transmuting this sandy metaphor, if literature is my sandbox, then the real world is my hourglass — an hourglass that drains grain by grain. Literature gives me life, and life kills me.”

-- Narrator (None paragraph 20)

Importance: Aaliya uses a sandbox to describe the way she sees her relationship with literature. Literature is a toy, a place she goes to enjoy herself. In this same way she describes real life as an hourglass in which the sand, representing life, drains away.

I am my family's appendix, its unnecessary appendage.”

-- Narrator (none paragraph 62)

Importance: Aaliya believes that she is out of place in her family. She compares herself to an appendix, the part of the human body that seems to serve no real purpose.

In other words, most of us believe we are who we are because of the decisions we've made, because of events that shaped us, because of the choices of those around us. We rarely consider that we're also formed by the decisions we didn't make, by events that could have happened but didn't, or by our lack of choices, for that matter.”

-- Narrator (none paragraph 115)

Importance: Aaliya indicates she believes her life was laid out by the choices that other people made, or failed to make, rather than her own conscious decisions.

I worked for the paperback dilettante for fifty years, and mine was the only face anyone associated with my bookstore.”

-- Narrator (none paragraph 121)

Importance: Although the owner of the bookstore agreed to hire Aaliya only temporarily, hoping that someone else more attractive would come to take over the bookstore, it turned out she worked there for fifty years.



Someone shot in my home. I procured a Kalashnikov.”
-- narrator (none paragraph 36)

Importance: It was after a Palestinian defecated in her home while Aaliya was hiding in the basement of the building next door during a bombing that she decided to get a gun. She decided she wanted to stay in her home and protect it and herself even if the city was being bombed.

Ahmad must have killed many a lizard. During the war in Beirut, the powerful had power, but only those with true power had water.”
-- Narrator (none paragraph 207)

Importance: When Aaliya went to see Ahmad about getting a gun, she knew that he must be powerful because he had running water in his house and agreed to let her take a shower.

My books show me what it's like to live in a reliable country where you flick on a switch and a bulb is guaranteed to shine and remain on, where you know that cars will stop at red lights and those traffic lights will not cease working a couple of times a day.”
-- narrator (none paragraph 277)

Importance: Even though the city in which she lived had unreliable electricity and street lights among other things, Aaliya is able to know what it is like to live in a reliable city through her books.

Once I stopped trying to impress myself into her life, she forgot about me. If she considers her youngest daughter Fanny Price, I'm her Quasimodo, to be confined in the bell tower.”
-- Narrator (none paragraph 369)

Importance: In this comparison Aaliya uses characters from literature to explain the difference in her mother's attitude between Aaliya and her youngest daughter. Quasimodo is the hunch back in the book “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” while Fanny Price appears in the novel “Mansfield Park.” She is the heroine of that novel.

The child looked up to me as a young bride; she despised me as a divorcée. Yet as we aged, after she married and had her own family, she seemed to soften. She became civil; she may not like me, but she doesn't loathe me either, and from time to time she exhibits a kindness and generosity so profound as to confound me.”
-- Narrator (none paragraph 415)

Importance: In this quote Aaliya describes the way that Fadia's attitude toward her had changed through the years.

There may be much I can't remember, and my memory may have become distorted along the way, but Beirut and how she was, how she has changed through the years — her, I never forgot. I never forget, and I have never left her.”



-- Narrator (none paragraph 472)

Importance: Aaliya describes her love for and her dedication to her home city of Beirut.

You can assume he meant that now we all expect to understand the motivation behind each character's actions, as if that's possible, as if life works that way."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 508)

Importance: In relation to both her mother's act of screaming at Aaliya when she first saw Aaliya and Hannah's suicide, Aaliya wishes that her life was like a novel where all of the characters' motivations are set out clearly so they could be easily understood.

Literature in the Arab world, in and of itself, isn't sought after. Literature in translation? Translation of a translation? Why bother?"

-- Narrator (none paragraph 574)

Importance: Aaliya indicates that she had never tried to get any of her translation work published because those in the Arab world seemed to have very little use for literature, much less literature that had been translated from a translation.

No loss is felt more keenly than the loss of what might have been. No nostalgia hurts as much as nostalgia for things that never existed."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 850)

Importance: In this quote about the loss of the husband Hannah would never have Aaliya explains that it is when hope and the future is lost that the hurt is most bad.

When they arrived at my stepfather's house to ask for my hand, she came along. That was how we met, and by then I met a woman who would take me under her wing, who would become a friend and remain so after my husband left — I met a woman and not a shy girl."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 854)

Importance: Aaliya describes how she met Hannah. It seems Hannah was the best thing that came from Aaliya's unhappy marriage.

I didn't dream of becoming a giant — I wasn't that delusional or arrogant — but I wanted to be more than a speck, maybe a midget."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 870)

Importance: Even though Aaliya admits that she didn't ever dream of being a giant in life, she did imagine that she would not be almost invisible.

I'm not suggesting that I'm congenitally shy, or that I'm a wallflower whose deepest desire is to bloom into a scandalously fragrant tiger lily, just that I try to live without interfering in the lives of others because I have no wish for them to interfere in mine."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1178)



Importance: Aaliya wonders why her family dislikes her so much. Even though the reader may be able to see it from that family's side that they think Aaliya is stuck up or believes she is too good for them. In reality, Aaliya simply leaves her family alone because she wants her family to leave her alone.

No wonder I was so easily infected. The Chopin virus was already latent in my system."
-- Narrator (none paragraph 1208)

Importance: When Aaliya sees the music box that her mother bought for herself she remembers that the box plays a Chopin tune. Aaliya realizes it was from this box that she first developed a love for Chopin.

Even then I realized that I was seeing something extraordinary: new Beirut crashing into old, young driver and old street vendor, modernity rushing in, an orange car covered in red and green, German steel jumbled with Lebanese pine, and everyone in shock. I was spellbound."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1347)

Importance: Aaliya describes the symbolism as she watches as the new — a BMW — literally crashes into the old — a mule drawn wagon — on her way to open the bookstore.

As she approached fifty in 1972, the Valium and Seconal pills would become part of her story, though not in the way one might assume. She plummeted — she dove into her abyss before Beirut dove into its own."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1356)

Importance: Aaliya foreshadows that it was Hannah's doctor prescribed sleeping pills that she first used to try to kill herself. Although the reader might assume the attempt was successful, it is later discovered that Hannah did not die from the pills but instead died when she jumped from the roof of her building.

I promise that once all three of us are in Heaven, I will not be forced to make the impossible decision of choosing between the two of you."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1362)

Importance: In retrospect Aaliya wonders if perhaps it was the Lieutenant's mother's words to Hannah that might have caused Hannah to doubt her belief about the Lieutenant's love for her. Aaliya wonders if were not these words that caused Hannah to be depressed and perhaps influenced her decision to kill herself.

Compared to the complexity of understanding grief, reading Foucault or Blanchot is like perusing a children's picture book."

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1416)

Importance: Aaliya explains to her reader that it is much easier for her to understand



the most complex piece of literature than for her to understand grief and the grieving process.

I stand in the dank and the dark, amid my wasted life, not knowing what to do, unable to make any decision, and weep.”

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1484)

Importance: As Aaliya looks at her water soaked crates of translated works she believes that her life no longer has any meaning. All she can do is look at the destruction and cry.

Marie-Thérèse reaches my landing. If she rings my doorbell, my next project will be Hadrian, if she knocks, then it's Barbarians.”

-- Narrator (none paragraph 1707)

Importance: Aaliya decides she will determine which of two books she will translate next depending on whether Marie-Thérèse knocks on her door or rings the bell.