



The Passive Antihero in Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and *an Unnecessary Woman*

SALMA KAOUTHAR LETAIEF 

YOUSEF ABU AMRIEH 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

RESEARCH

]u[ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the gradual transformation of the female protagonist into a passive antihero figure in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine* (2001) and *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013). It assesses the traumatic experiences of war and patriarchy that have triggered each transformation. The regression of the two protagonists, namely Sarah in *I, the Divine* and Aaliya in *An Unnecessary Woman* is thoroughly scrutinized in relation to the traumatic events of war and the oppressive patriarchal mores that these female protagonists encounter and experience. Sarah and Aaliya exhibit some typical features of a passive postmodern antihero such as acceptance, submission, lack of action, alienation, mechanistic dehumanization and estrangement. The absurdity of their lives is manifested in their acceptance of the absence of free will. All these features make of them prototypical passive, estranged and dehumanized antiheroes. The analysis of the female antiheroes in this research relies on the theoretical framework of feminist psychic trauma in order to relate the traumatic turmoil of the female characters to patriarchy and war following Laura Brown's article "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" (1995). In other words, this article examines mainly the external factors that engendered the two protagonists' transformation into passive antiheroes. The analysis endeavors to highlight that the protagonists follow the passive model, one of the prototypes of the antiheroic archetype.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Salma Kaouthar Letaief

Jordan University, JO

salmakaouthar@hotmail.com

KEYWORDS:

passive antihero; war;
patriarchy; postmodern;
psychic trauma

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Letaief, Salma Kaouthar and Yousef Abu Amrieh. "The Passive Antihero in Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and *an Unnecessary Woman*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 20, issue 1, art. 3, 2022, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.75>

1. INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the gradual regression of two of Arab American novelist Rabih Alameddine's protagonists, namely Sarah in *I, the Divine* and Aaliya in *An Unnecessary Woman* as a result of the traumatic experiences of war and patriarchy that they endure. Sarah and Aaliya exhibit some typical features of a passive postmodern antihero such as submissiveness, inertness, alienation, mechanistic dehumanization and estrangement. All these features make of them prototypical passive, estranged and dehumanized antiheroes. The analysis of the female antiheroes in this study relies on the theoretical framework of feminist psychic trauma as outlined by Laura Brown's article "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma". In other words, this article examines mainly the external factors that shape and influence the two protagonists' transformation into antiheroes who exhibit typical features of a passive postmodern antihero such as submissiveness, inertness, alienation and detachment. All these features make of them prototypical, passive, estranged and dehumanized female antiheroes.

The definition of the concept of the antihero underwent significant changes throughout the centuries. In effect, anti-heroism emerged early in literature, but it only began to gain prominence when the central character began to lose the trappings that are traditionally associated with classical heroism traits such as courage, bravery, ability, orthodox behavior, brave deeds, and noble qualities. Frye classifies the hero according to his power of action, starting with the superior divine hero, the hero of the romance, the hero leader, the hero of comedy and realistic fiction, and finally the ironic hero. The classification shows the steady shift of European literature from idealized mythical heroism to the ironic unheroic mode. The traditional ironic antihero is described as a minor character, inferior in power or intelligence to the common man. He embodies antiheroic traits of bondage, frustration, and absurdity (33–34). Thus, in contrast to the classical hero, the antihero embodies traits that include: a complex character, cynicism, defiance to laws and standard morals, imperfections, unorthodox methods, and he is engulfed in inner struggles.

I would like to highlight that this research draws a thick line between a villain and an antihero. A villain, by definition, is wicked and driven by evil forces and intentions. His orientations are malicious; he is not concerned about law, basic humanity, or ethics. He is able to kill to attain his villain objectives without any sign of remorse. On the other hand, the antihero is a flawed character, but driven by good intentions. It is important to note that though the antihero is portrayed as a character who typically lacks the traditional traits and qualities of a hero, yet he is not evil. The antiheroic transgression is often associated with a traumatic past that justifies the antihero's inability of heroic action, and his position as an outcast. Thus, despite their antisocial inclinations, moral ambiguity, and sometimes shady tactics to get things done, these characters are intriguing as they showcase the complex nature of the antihero. Hence, apart from offering an interdisciplinary methodological framework, this paper investigates the antiheroic mode that has taken a central position in postmodern fiction.

The concept of the antihero has gained significant literary critical attention particularly in postmodern war fiction. This period was marked by a nihilistic and absurdist approach. Accordingly, the tormented psyche of these antiheroic characters often positions them as antiheroes. Skulsky argues that characters' transformation into antiheroes is "considered as a psychotic breakdown or rather serious mental regression" (171). Indeed, under the conditions of war, it would not be surprising to find a hero alone and disillusioned. The antihero's recoil and metamorphosis can be considered as a prolonged *cri du coeur* of anxiety, constraint, physical discomfort, and above all estrangement (Skulsky 171). Gurung asserts that "the postmodern antihero is [...] a victim of alienation, cultural or spiritual sterility, seeking solace and refuge in alcohol, self-deception, power, social withdrawal and anonymity" (8–9). In other words, the contemporary antihero is a product of damaging external factors that influence and shape his regression into an antihero.

It is important to note that the interpretation of a flawed character can be justified differently in accordance with his/her perturbed psyche due to the destructive environment by which he/she is surrounded. Gurung sets different categories of the postmodern antihero that includes those who feel estranged in the world, those who are disillusioned with a distorted spirit, those who feel inferior and are oppressed by the system, those who choose to remain passive and

alienated, those who feel outsiders and outcast in their own land, the nihilists, and the antiheroic rebels whose rebellious actions always end up in failure (27). Evidently, the destructive nature of the outer world is the crucial element that defines the changing antiheroic features and categories. Furthermore, these diverse categories elucidate the complex and heterogeneous nature of the postmodern antihero figure. Some antiheroes become burdened with existential issues, while some are transformed and metamorphosed into rebels, and some others remain static and passive. This article will discuss the passive female antihero whose identity is shaped and influenced by both patriarchy and war. In this study, a critical focus is put on the gradual regression of two of Arab American novelist Rabi Alameddine's protagonists, namely Sarah in *I, the Divine* and Aaliya in *An Unnecessary Woman* as a result of the traumatic experiences of war and patriarchy that they endure.

Alameddine is an Arab American novelist who was born in Amman, Jordan, to Lebanese parents, and grew up in Kuwait and Lebanon. He was educated in England and America and has an engineering degree from UCLA and an MBA from the University of San Francisco. He published six novels and a collection of short stories. His works, to cite the words of Yousef Awad, "recount the horrors of the Lebanese civil war" (87). Awad shows how Alameddine "draws attention to Shakespeare's representation of traumatic events in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and links it to his own depiction of his nation's tragic domestic strife" in *An Unnecessary Woman* and *I, The Divine*, respectively (87). In *The Angel of History*, "Alameddine transposes Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to the contemporary era and counters Prospero's one-sided representation of Sycorax as a wicked witch" (Awad 803). Thus, one may convincingly argue that by virtue of his position as an Arab American novelist, Alameddine draws on both cultures to depict the experiences of traumatized characters who live in the interstices of cultures.

This study shows how in Alameddine's two novels a female's identity is a site over which the traumatic past converges with local experiences, socio-political circumstances and oppressive Arab patriarchal mores to form and shape the regression of the Arab female protagonist. Al-Samman notes that narratives about Arab women written in diaspora allow writers to revisit, deconstruct, and reconstruct fictions and replace them with their own postmodern narratives (2015, 22-23). Indeed, the concept of rewriting trauma is a pivotal one in the writings on Arab women. It recentres the role of diaspora to launch a socio-political critique through revisiting traumatic events of war. In so doing, the transformation of the female characters into passive antiheroes is assessed. Their journey of national reconstruction is an interdisciplinary and transformative project expressed in form of war narratives and political commentary in the two novels under scrutiny in this article.

The analysis of the female antiheroes in this paper is conducted using the theoretical framework of feminist psychic trauma in order to relate the traumatic turmoil of the female characters to patriarchy and war. Brown attests that "[f]eminist analysis calls us to look beyond the public and male experiences of trauma to the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal realm" (102). To understand this trauma, one must understand "how some experiences have been excluded and turned inward upon their victims, who are then blamed for what has happened to them" (Brown 102). Feminist analysis of trauma deals with "the private, secret, insidious traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated" (Brown 102). Feminist Therapy theory also attempts to make "central the experiences of girls and women and to attend to the diverse and complex aspects of the gender in such theorizing" (Brown 103). It also deals with "survivors of gender-based violence such as wife abuse, incest, and rape" (Brown 104) who go through victim-blame such as the case of the antihero Sarah in *I, the Divine*. The theory draws attention to women living in a culture where there is a high base rate of sexual assault, and where such behavior is considered normal and erotic by men. Indeed, in this article, the traumatic experiences of the female characters will be analyzed to examine the external factors that shaped their transformation into passive antiheroes.

Recently, Arab writers in diaspora have depicted the experiences of antiheroes in their fiction. For instance, in "The Existential Arab Antihero in Rawi Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society*", Letaief and Awad discuss how "the postmodern Arab antihero" can be approached from an existential perspective (235). Letaief and Awad "investigate the traumatic experiences of war" in Lebanese novelist Rawi Hage's recent novel *Beirut Hellfire Society* and show how the novelist represents

his protagonist, Pavlov, as an “existentialist antihero [...] absorbed by feelings of fear, anxiety, isolation, angst, boredom and nausea” (235). By depicting Pavlov as “a victim of the Lebanese war-torn society,” the novel demonstrates the absurdity of war and “gives the reader insights on the psychological impacts of war on the contemporary Arab who falls into the pits of the breakdown of religious, social and moral values” (250). Thus, this article contributes to the ongoing discussion of the representation of the Arab antihero in the works of Arab writers in diaspora by examining Alameddine’s representation of *female* antiheroes in his novels *I, the Divine* and *An Unnecessary Woman*.

2. SARAH, THE PASSIVE ANTIHERO OF *I, THE DIVINE*

Alameddine’s *I, the Divine* has received significant critical attention since its publication in 2001. It has been examined by numerous scholars, including Hout who investigates postwar trauma focusing on Sarah’s traumatized psyche. It also discusses the issues related to Sarah’s hyphenated identity and her state of perpetual restlessness in between two cultures (59). Hartman explores elements of Druze history and the tensions of this specific identity within a world literature framework (339). Pickens conceptualizes the relationship between being displaced and feeling embodied and focuses on scenes that take place within the hospital space to draw a link between exile and illness (67).

I, the Divine delves into the memories of the female antihero Sarah. It assesses the psychological issues resulting from revisiting a traumatic past which is replete with haunting memories. The journey in time and space undertaken by Sarah as a diasporic woman moves beyond a fixed locale and into multiple locations and temporalities. The novel prioritizes mobility, fluidity, and nonfixed routes. It also provides a sociopolitical critique of the war-torn Lebanese society and tackles issues such as oppression, estrangement, and patriarchy in relation to traumatic events of war in the Lebanese context. It documents the distorted process of forming a female identity amidst the chaos of war and a patriarchal culture. These issues shape and form Sarah’s identity and trigger her striking transformation into a passive traumatized antihero.

Sarah’s trauma is conveyed in the novel’s very structure, where the protagonist refuses to follow the typical division of chapters, instead labelling all chapters as *Chapter One*. Her psychological turmoil is conveyed in her act of writing it; as she notes: “I drag my forefinger across the computer [...] out pops my manuscript. Mine; I tense, feel a knot building in my right shoulder. I feel about to faint” (240). The technique of presenting the novel with chapters entitled only *Chapter One* emphasizes the importance of revisiting beginnings. It allows Sarah to recapture crucial memories of her life that engendered her transformation into an antihero. This genre of writing disrupts illusory unity and exposes the temporal and the spatial properties of two countries – Lebanon and the United States of America. In effect, the novel bridges a connection of the lost temporal, familial, and cultural experiences of Sarah in Lebanon to her present day in the US through piecing together her fragmented past with a haunted present.

It is important to note that the actions of the antihero are often dictated by past traumas and inner conflicts. Hence, in order to be able to assess Sarah’s transformation into an antihero, it is necessary to examine Sarah’s inner conflicts that seem to stem from her past. To start with, the patriarchal culture in which Sarah has been raised affects the formation of her identity deeply. In early childhood, Sarah realizes that she is the reason that terminated her parents’ marriage for being born a girl and not as a boy. As a traditional Arab man, Sarah’s grandfather refuses to accept his daughter-in-law in his family. She notes: “It is said [...] my father had divorced and sent back [my mother] to New York because she could not deliver him a boy to carry on his name” (37). Janet’s last pregnancy with Sarah disappoints him because he desired a boy. Knowing she is seen as a liability for her family, Sarah decides to behave like a boy. Her family has always viewed her as a tomboy in her childhood. It is evident in the memoir that Sarah carries the burden of being a female in a patriarchal society. This burden culminates into influencing her alteration into an estranged antihero.

Indeed, earlier in her childhood, Sarah became aware of her father’s innate desire for a son. She, thus, detested her femininity and any association with culturally assigned domestic female tasks such as cooking, cleaning, marriage, and childbearing. She grew up believing that she was the Divine Sarah. She could do anything she wants. She notes:

Growing up female in Lebanon was not easy. No matter how much encouragement parents gave their daughters, pressures, subtle and not subtle, led girls to hope for nothing more than a good marriage. Being the Divine Sarah, I was oblivious to such pressures, much to the consternation of many. As a child, I was a tomboy, unaware of how girls were supposed to behave. I became a good soccer player. I excelled at mathematics in school. I wore dungarees and tennis shoes. (78)

Sarah's early rebellious character is an attempt to go beyond patriarchy exercised on women in Lebanon. She talks about Druze marriage traditions saying: "according to tradition, getting married is what we live for" (167). She tries to imagine what is it like for her stepmother to marry a man of a higher station, she observes "the men in her family all proud, happy, one less mouth to feed, one less honour to defend" (167). Nonetheless, eventually Sarah realizes that she herself is a victim of patriarchy because the whole tomboy phase mirrors her father's wish for a boy.

In the same cultural context, Sarah grows up while the civil war was raging in the streets of Beirut. Brown argues that "war and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas" (101). In the memoir, Sarah is manifestly traumatized from the cruel events of war in Lebanon that have taken away her sister and were the cause to her perturbed mental instability. During the civil war, Sarah was raped. Her transformation into a passive antihero is chiefly related to these two cruel events, namely: war and rape. The sexual assault she endured in Lebanon is primarily the cause to her striking metamorphosis into a passive person. She, thus, decides to write a memoir to alleviate her trauma. In so doing, the reader grasps the regression and relapse of her character and what engendered her undesirable transformation. She documents the first days of war: "the first day of the war in Beirut, April 1975 [...]. The stairwell seemed the safest place [...]. In time, the smell of cordite, of garbage, urine, and decaying flesh, would become familiar to us, banal and clichéd" (38–39). Sarah vividly remembers the horrible events of Lebanon's civil war.

The civil war in Lebanon was initiated essentially because of sectarian issues and religious differences. It is important to note that the distinctiveness of the Lebanese society lies in its religious variety for it encompasses a collection of eighteen officially recognized religious groups. With this complex and divided society, Lebanon becomes a sectarian state par excellence. As Tinas notes that "the existence of different, if not contradictory, ideas of 'what Lebanon is' and 'what Lebanon should be' [led] these sectarian groups to search different and sometimes contradictory outcomes regarding both foreign and domestic affairs of Lebanon" (90). In consequence, between 1975 and 1990, Lebanon experienced one of the longest and bloodiest civil wars. The massacres of civil war took the life of around 90,000 people, close to 20,000 people were kidnapped or disappeared, nearly 100,000 were injured, and close to a million of the Lebanese population experienced displacement (Sune 1). In the novel, Sarah loses in the early years of the war her youngest sister Rana who has been murdered by a Syrian soldier because she has not accepted his marriage proposal (63). Sarah grieves deeply over the loss of her sister, and thus, she resorts to isolate herself from the world. Practically, Sarah becomes an introvert. She becomes passive and careless as destruction and chaos caused by war become a routine experience. She becomes numb. However, the incident that deepens Sarah's estrangement and provokes her transformation from a rebellious female character into a passive antihero is rape.

As it has been pointed out, during the prolonged years of Lebanon's civil war, Sarah has been a victim of rape. A report by Greenberg Research, Inc 1999 on war in Lebanon shows that during the civil war, Lebanon "did not offer special protection for women" (14). The survey proves that eighty-five per cent of women say they have been the victim of at least one of twelve negative effects of the war "compared with 89 per cent of men. Forty-two per cent of women report experiencing more than four such incidents, compared with 47 per cent of men" (Greenberg Research 14). This shows that women, as men, were fully exposed to danger during the armed conflicts. In the context of war and rape, Baker attests that "rape is undeniably a trauma inflicted upon an individual" (62). Caruth defines the word trauma as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (4). Furthermore, Erikson

notes that trauma “invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape” (183). He adds:

The classic symptoms of trauma range from feelings of restlessness and agitation at one end of the emotional scale to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other [...] a numbed gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of the spirit [...] Above all, trauma involves a continual reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations. (183–184)

Indeed, these symptoms are evidently manifested when assessing Sarah’s situation. After the incident, Sarah becomes suspended in time. She feels restless, traumatized, passive, alienated, and she is haunted by nightmares and even hallucinations that take her back to her repressed memories of rape.

One feature of rape trauma is “psychological dissociation” that occurs mostly after the traumatic event (Baker 62). Kolk and Hart eloquently summarizes this. They note that “many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed from the scene; leaving other parts of their personality to suffer and store the overwhelming experience” (168). In the memoir, the passages that depict the events prior to rape incident are repeated as fragmented flashbacks, but without clear notification of any occurrence of rape, while memories of the incident itself remain blurry. The repression of these memories deteriorates Sarah’s mental state. According to Gurung, the postwar postmodern antihero becomes trapped in a world where communication loses its meaning. As a result of repression and traumatization, they passively accept this hopeless position (15–22). Indeed, in the novel, Sarah becomes suspended in time, and detached from the real world; in short, she becomes an antihero.

In fact, it is not until the final third of the memoir that Sarah, explicitly and meticulously, recounts the events of the rape episode. She provides a detailed description of rape that includes traumatic imagery and bodily sensations. She recounts that she stops a taxi in which there were two men. Once Sarah notices that they are driving towards a route that is unfamiliar to her, she complains. Abruptly, the passenger holds her from behind with a gun in hand. She feels paralyzed. She could not act against it. She was beaten and kicked to her stomach. She looked at the eyes of the taxi driver and saw “a scary mixture of lust and disdain. The desire was not of coveting, or lust, not even of possessing. It was a primitive desire, dominance, aggression. For the first time, she wanted to die. She didn’t wish to suffer what these men wanted to inflict” (Alameddine 95). She bit him. Then they started violating her sexually. The narrator recounts that “she did not want to believe this was happening to her. She wanted to wake up and realize this was nothing than a nightmare” (196). She felt “dispossessed of her own body” (Alameddine 196). At the end of it, “she had not noticed the men dress and leave. She found herself suddenly alone, filthy, covered in dirt and blood” (Alameddine 198). She bitterly muses: “one hour. In only one hour, [my] life had come to an end. In only one hour, [my] dreams were shattered. In only one hour, [I] thought bitterly, [I] had become a woman. [I] was no longer a virgin” (199). Sarah’s life shatters after this incident. This episode represents the turning point of the character that changes Sarah from a recalcitrant character into a passive antihero.

There are numerous traits that categorize Sarah as an antihero in different phases of her life. First, when Sarah knows that she is pregnant, she soaks into depression. She rejects her pregnancy and the child in her womb even prior to delivery. Sarah feels “as though she is being eaten alive from the inside, something is slowly devouring her. A vampire sucks her soul” (211–212). Seemingly, the pregnancy takes her back to the memories of rape. Furthermore, she then fails to fulfill the role of the mother. She chooses to stay in New York to pursue her studies instead of returning to Lebanon with her husband and her child. She, thus, abandons her family. Even her surrounding seems to notice her flagrant failure to establish or create emotional bonds. She notes that “Charlene made sure to mention how surprised she was that I had motherly instincts” (19). Sarah feels inadequate as a mother and as a wife. Critically, this emotional restraint can be explained only in relation to her traumatic experience of rape. It is, evidently, the main reason for her dehumanized nature which is, according to Gurung, one of the attributes of the postmodern passive antihero who is a machine-like, robotic creature without emotions or unable to express them. (30)

Another manifestation of Sarah's regressive state as antihero is particularly revealed through instances that depict Sarah's failure to establish social interactions as well. She feels lonely and estranged; a feeling that defines most of her memoir. In one of the chapters entitled as Chapter "1----," the narrator says:

Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. I shuffled ad nauseam between the need to assert my individuality, and the need to belong to my clan, being terrified of loneliness and terrorized of losing myself in relationships. I was the black sheep of my family, yet an essential part of it. (229)

This fear of being lonely torments her and hinders any attempt to make her relationships last. Indeed, Sarah feels cursed with romance disappointments. She says: "when it came to men, I did not pick the beautiful or the correct. I picked the wrong one" (16). She further adds: "I had failed every romantic relationship I had plunged into. The reasons for these failures continued to elude me, but the resulting feelings did not" (142). Sarah plunges back into loneliness and isolation each time she tries to escape it.

It is important to note that despite the flawed exterior of Sarah, her bad decisions, and dubious moral code, Sarah is guided by good intentions. This proves that though the antihero is complex in nature, the reader can sympathize and even relate to the antihero as a character who is tormented by a traumatizing past. Initially, as an attempt to heal her traumatization, she tries to work as an emotional support for AIDS patients. She also takes painting as a remedy to her trauma. Absurdly, she paints nothing but back diagonals. While black refers to owe, diagonal lines represent her fluctuated state of mind. In fact, this exhibits her refusal to follow a linear structure because of her mental turmoil. It also explains why all the chapters of her memoir bear the single title of *Chapter One*. In her last attempt to voice out her trauma, she starts writing a memoir telling her life in a fragmented temporal and spatial structure that is non-linear, suspended, repetitive, blurry and tormented. She records: "I'm writing this to get it over with, to finally get completion" (115). Thus, constructing personal narratives of traumatic experiences offers her an opportunity to find truce.

Apgar asserts that "one of the major components of the recovery process is the establishment of a coherent personal narrative [...] this task is often facilitated by writing about the abuse and the feelings, people, places, and events associated with it" (48). The last page of the novel carries a sort of reconciliation with herself. She accepts to be identified as part of her family. She writes:

I had to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism, to show how I fit into this larger whole. So instead of telling the reader, Come meet me, I have to say something else. Come meet my family/ Come meet my friends/ Come here, I say/ Come meet my pride. (308)

The importance of reconstructing the past lies in Sarah's assertion of herself, but also establishing herself as a worthy member of her family and society enables her to distinguish herself as separate from but related to others.

In this novel, Alameddine has provided a testimony that exhibits the struggles of being an Arab female in a patriarchal war-torn Lebanese society. Sarah is depicted as a victim of patriarchy, war, and rape. Her experience in diaspora permits her to travel in the temporal and spatial spheres to unearth her traumatizing experiences both in her homeland and in diaspora. These external factors influence deeply her transformation into an antihero. Sarah is characterized as passive, suspended, paralyzed, and estranged. At the end, Sarah realizes that to find truce as a passive antihero, she needs to reconnect with herself and her surroundings in order to survive the antiheroic transformation.

3. THE UNNECESSARY ANTIHERO IN RABIH ALAMEDDINE'S AN UNNECESSARY WOMAN

Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* is the winner of the California Book Awards Gold Medal Fiction. Al-Khatib and Awad examine how Aaliya's journey is represented in *An Unnecessary*

Woman and compare it to that of Oedipa in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (6). Al-Khatib and Awad argue that Pynchon and Alameddine "challenge the androcentric grand narrative of having a male hero go through and overcome dangerous and difficult obstacles" (6). According to Al-Khatib and Awad:

By refusing to conform to the stereotypical roles and social expectations that were assigned to them by gendered societies, Oedipa and Aaliya personify resilience, heroism and persistence by bringing to light a variety of perspectives on heroism and wholeness. They embark on heroic journeys that are traditionally perceived as masculine endeavors. (13)

Al-Khatib and Awad describe the two protagonists as "strong women [who] succeed in affirming their existence in the world and achieving wholeness" (13). In contrast, this article argues that Aaliya is an antihero who remains passive and inept as the following pages try to explain.

An Unnecessary Woman revolves around an alienated aged female character, Aaliya, who chooses to dwell comfortably in her self-imposed isolation. Just like *I, the Divine*, the novel is written in the form of a memoir that chronicles the life of Aaliya while the civil war is raging in the streets of Beirut. Hence, the traumatic experiences of the civil war and its after effects form the backbone of the novel. The narrative reveals the troubled psyche of Aaliya, and the external factors that influence her transformation into a passive postmodern antihero. It also unfolds the desperate state and mediocre life conditions in which people in Lebanon had to endure during the civil war. Indeed, the prolonged war in Lebanon has left people struggle in poverty and financial crises. These traumatic experiences, among others in the novel, explain Aaliya's metamorphosis. Estrangement, immoral paths in addition to the Aaliya's postponement to publish her translations reflect adequately her nature as an antihero. In fact, the title of the novel significantly reveals the protagonist's passive state as it is the first hint to the status of the protagonist as unnecessary and detached from the world. The title of Alameddine's novel suggests a woman who is living on the margins of society.

Aaliya's transformation into a passive antihero can be related and traced back to her childhood and teenage phase when she was oppressed by her patriarchal family. Unlike the Arab girls of her age, Aaliya does not spend time considering or fanaticizing whom she will marry or how. She says: "I wanted to be allowed to work. I hoped for a career as a secretary. In those days, I couldn't envision any other job. The only workingwomen I came across at the time were in the service business: maids, cooks, store clerks, secretaries, schoolteachers" (125). Nonetheless, deprived of her ambitions, she is instead married at the age of sixteen. She bitterly notes that she was plucked unripe out of school "and gifted to the first unsuitable suitor to appear at our door, a man small in stature and spirit. Marriage is a most disagreeable institution for an adolescent" (13). These patriarchal practices against Aaliya are further reinforced and perpetuated by her mother.

Aaliya's forced initiation into the domesticated role of a housewife reflects a patriarchal conspiracy enacted through the mother figure because she is incapable of imagining any other suitable role for her daughter. Kandiyoti points out that maternal figures often conspire with patriarchy to ensure the continuation of the enforced rules concerning women's obedience and silence (274). For example, after the failure of Aaliya's marriage, her mother wants her to be grateful. She tells her that "he divorced you. You can remarry a gentle widower or maybe a suitor of women more seemingly who has been rejected a few times. Consider yourself fortunate" (14). In her mother's world, "husbands [are] omnipotent, never impotent" (14). Accordingly, Aaliya's identity is shaped by a patriarchal society that assign women the domestic role of a housewife.

Furthermore, Aaliya was also terrorized by her half-brothers wishing to take her apartment. Brown situates Feminist analysis of trauma from public and male experiences of trauma to "the private, secret experiences that women encounter in the interpersonal level and at the hands of those we love and depend on" (102). Aaliya is traumatized by her own family. It is evident when her half-brother attempts to attack Aaliya at the door of her house. Terrorized, she fails to act against it. Instead, she freezes. She states: "my own family demanded it, suggesting that any of my brothers was more deserving of it" (18). She adds: "more than once, my half-brothers cursed me. More than once, each one banged my door in an attempt to terrorize me.

Terrorized I was” (19). While Aaliya’s mother treats her sons with respect and love, she, on the other hand, is treated “as a second-class citizen, a second gender offspring” (70). Indeed, with the help of the elder maternal figures, patriarchy becomes an indestructible institution. These patriarchal oppressive endeavors against Aaliya as a woman transform her into a conformist passive character which is one of the main traits of a passive antihero.

In addition to patriarchy, Aaliya is also a victim of the terrorizing events of war in Beirut. These events are important to the understanding of her regression into an antihero. She narrates: “and then war, the ultimate distraction, broke out. I plunged into my books [...] books are the air I breathe [...] life is meaningless without literature, all in a weak attempt to avoid the fact that I found the world inexplicable and impenetrable” (252–253). Clearly, Aaliya did not merely suffer from the oppression imposed by the patriarchal institution, but she is also a victim of the traumatizing events of the Lebanese civil war, becoming an escapist, and thus an antihero.

In this novel, through the process of revisiting the traumatic past, Aaliya’s antiheroic metamorphosis is clarified. The display of debilitating memories, anxiety, alienation, immobility, and silence dominate the narrative. Aaliya bears the traits of an antihero whose life is decided by more powerful socio-cultural forces. Aaliya’s hibernation and inertness are the unmistakable marks of an antihero whose fate is decided by others. The regression of Aaliya to an antihero is associated to the trauma of war. In this context, Krystal argues that the result of trauma “may be an inability to act assertively or aggressively. The general picture is of either passivity or blundering” (66). Indeed, Aaliya becomes passive, paralyzed, and unwilling to act heroically.

During the crisis of war in Beirut, as a typical antihero, Aaliya surrenders to her demons in order to survive. Food, water, and basic life conditions became luxury. She notes that “the powerful had power, but only those with true power had water” (40). In such desperate circumstances, Aaliya loses her moral codes. She accepts Ahmad’s sexual advances in exchange for a gun and a shower. She declares “I knew, and I agreed to what he wanted [...] I wanted a gun. I wanted a shower. I made a choice [...] I refused to be embarrassed. The water called my name” (41). This quotation indicates Aaliya’s moral numbness as an antihero. One might argue that the loss of Aaliya’s moral values is in fact a reflection to the world that has lost its values because of war. In such context, the universe might appear without purpose nor meaning. Thus, ignominy and debasement become irrevocable conditions for survival. Aaliya shows little remorse to her unorthodox behaviour. She disconnects from the situation “as if a part of [her] participated in the encounter and another floated high in the air, near the ceiling, and witnessed with disinterest” (43). Inevitably, Aaliya represents the antihero whose morals fall into a grey zone. To restrain her demons, Aaliya detaches herself from the shattering world, and retreats to her abstract world of literature.

Aaliya’s self-imposed alienation positions her as an outsider. She identifies herself “with outsiders, with the alienated or dispossessed” (195). According to Wilson, “the Outsider [...] is a self-divided man” (58–59). Indeed, Colin’s definition of the outsider reflects Aaliya’s split state. She deals with actual events in the world from an abstract viewpoint and portrays them fictionally. She seems to long for a mythical homeland, rather than a physical one. For her, literature is the only place where she feels alive. She considers literature as her sandbox. In it, she rejoices, “it is the world outside that box that gives [her] trouble” (Alameddine 5). She rather retreats into her inner world of books because while literature gives her life, life kills her. To describe this state, she says: “if literature is my sandbox, then the real world is my hourglass—an hourglass that drains grain by grain” (5). As a passive prototypical antihero, she, thus, slips into art to escape life. This paralysing state drowns her into a fading world of isolation and passivity.

In fact, while in retreat, Aaliya develops a system and a project of reading books and translating them. Aaliya’s lust for books releases her from a male-oriented social system that is invaded by chaos and bloodshed. This project defines the borders of her entire life. She writes: “for most of my adult life, since I was twenty-two, I’ve begun a translation every January first [...] loose translated sheets. That’s my life” (4). She describes her books and translations as “books of memory, disquiet, but not of laughter and forgetting. Years of books, books of years. A waste of time, a waste of life” (63). Clearly, Aaliya’s words indicate the futility of her project and, thus, the futility of her life. In a way, it is a project that keeps her detached and insulated in her cocoon. It is designed solely to pass time and let her avoid contact with the outer world.

Instead of challenging confining social traditions and carving a niche for herself in society, Aaliya chooses to hide in her apartment and swathe herself in thick fabrics.

It is important to note that Aaliya's escape to books alludes to her state of internal displacement. Aaliya's feelings of detachment trigger a sense of internal dislocation though she still resides in her own country. Indeed, this state of internal displacement troubles Aaliya's sense of belonging. The protagonist recounts that she does not feel at home in Beirut. This feeling is highlighted through her incapacity to accept or to belong to her reality. For example, when reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, she notes that she finds life "incomprehensible with every passing day. I belonged in his book, not mine" (103). Furthermore, she feels that her translation "sounded odd and displaced as well" (11). She feels unfit and unintegrated. She, thus, creates a distant world in literature, shunned from her surroundings.

Aaliya's failure of action is another antiheroic trait. According to Bombert, one of the main traits of the hero figure is the potent potential of action, if he is deprived of it, he becomes an antihero (6). The major instance that exhibits Aaliya's immobility and acceptance of defeat is reflected in her incapability to recognize that her translations are worthy publishing. It shows her submissiveness, apathy and indifference. She addresses the reader thus:

Let me come out and state this, in case you haven't deduced it yet: I have never published. Once I finish a project, once the rituals of the end are completed, I inter the papers in a box and the box in the bathroom/ Putting the project away has become part of the ritual. When I finish my finish edit, I lay the manuscript aside for a few days, then read the whole thing one last time. If it is acceptable, I place in in its box, which I tape shut, hoping the seal in airtight, and attach the original books to the outside for easy reference. I store the box in the maid's room, or now in the maid's bathroom since the former is filled. After that I'm done with it and hardly think of my translation again. I move on to the next project. I create and crate! (106-107)

Aaliya translates books to escape life and to maintain a sense of order away from chaos outside the doors of her flat. There is a sense of banality and futility in what Aaliya says. She belittles her efforts and condemns herself. She believes that her translations are unpublishable. She feels committed to the process and not the final product. This shows Aaliya's endeavour to step away from the original, that is the real world, to the fictional. In effect, the project of translation, though futile and incomplete enables her experience happiness and pleasure. Her head becomes like skylight: "I think that's enough a few moments of ecstasy in a life of Beckett dullness [...] during these moments, I am healed of all wounds [...] I don't wish my life to be any different [...] I feel sacred [...] most often I think I'm delusional" (109). Clearly, Aaliya feels estranged. According to Gurung, the feeling of estrangement causes the antihero's inability to establish any social relationships (29). The protagonist is a traumatized victim, and this traumatization invades her life and transforms her into a detached antihero.

Moreover, in this novel, the antihero is riddled with paradoxical traits. Though Aaliya chooses alienation, she seems to suffer from it. She notes: "I am filled with Byronic loneliness [...] all I am is lonely" (114). She adds: "I am alone. It is a choice I've made, yet it is also a choice made with few other options available" (7). As a result, she rejects any feelings of love. Brown reports that most of her traumatized female patients go through "withdrawal [and] loss of hope" (1995, 104). According to Aaliya, the discovery of poetry is more important than discovery of love. She states: "I knew that no one would love me, so I strove to be respected, to be looked up to. I wanted people to think I was better than they were" (113). Furthermore, she quotes Pessoa: "'isolation has carved me in its image and likeness [...] solitude devastates me; company oppresses me'" (165). This reveals her flawed character. She sees herself as an almost functioning human being.

What is more, Aaliya's illusionary state is mainly represented when a waterpipe bursts in the flat above Aaliya's apartment, flooding the maid's room where she stores her translations. She freezes; "unable to make any decision [...] [she] accept[s] defeat without no white flag to wave, with no strength" (Alameddine 265). She says "why would I want to resuscitate this rotting cadaver? It's nothing if not unnecessary. *I am nothing. I'll always be nothing. I can't even wish to be anything*" (277). This quotation alludes to the state of collapse of Aaliya's external and internal world equally. It also signals her forceless admission and acceptance of defeat. She remains helpless, unable to find truce to her inner conflicts.

In essence, Alameddine in this novel brings to light the impact of war and patriarchy on the formation of the Arab female antihero. The novel portrays the external factors that shape and influence the transformation of the female protagonist into a passive antihero who chooses self-imposed alienation to detach from the world ruled by an oppressive system of war and patriarchy. Simultaneously, the novel reveals the struggles of the female protagonist, Aaliya, to surpass the institution of patriarchy and the tyrannies of war. It also shows how the devastating events of the Lebanese civil war have contributed to transforming Aaliya into a passive, detached antihero.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has examined Alameddine's representations of Sarah and Aaliya as antiheroes in *I, the Divine* and *An Unnecessary Woman*, respectively. It highlighted the traumatic experiences of war and patriarchy that have triggered each transformation. The regression of the two protagonists is viewed in relation to the traumatic events of war and the oppressive patriarchal norms that these female protagonists face. Sarah and Aaliya exhibit some typical features of a passive postmodern antihero such as submissiveness, inertness, alienation and detachment. All these features make of them prototypical, passive, estranged and dehumanized antiheroes. The article has highlighted how the protagonists follow the passive model, one of the prototypes of the antiheroic archetype.

Sarah and Aaliya are two samples of female antiheroes in search of truce. Influenced by ongoing wars and patriarchal mores, the two female protagonists in this research have proved to be passive antiheroes influenced and shaped by patriarchy and war. The novels depict how heinous gender-based crimes during armed conflicts paralyse women and turn them into lifeless creatures. Hence, the novels strategically launch a critique of the above-mentioned institutions that have affected the characters' self-definition, and the formation of their identities as Arab female figures amidst the chaotic and traumatizing events of war. Consequently, their transformation into antiheroes characterized as passive, inactive, dehumanized, and detached from the world, take full shape.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Salma Kaouthar Letaief  orcid.org/0000-0001-7466-7172
Jordan University, JO

Yousef Abu Amrieh  orcid.org/0000-0003-1443-7054
Jordan University, JO

REFERENCES

- Alameddine, Rabih. *An Unnecessary Woman*. Corsair, 2013.
- Alameddine, Rabih. *I, the Divine*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2001.
- Al-Khatib, Dima, and Yousef Awad. "Unfolding The Female Journey in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and Alameddine's An Unnecessary Woman." *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2019, pp. 6–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijclts.v.7n.2p.6>
- Al-Samman, Hanadi. *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings*. Syracuse University Press, 2015.
- Apgar, Sonia.C. "Fighting Back on Paper and in Real Life: Sexual Abuse Narratives and the Creation of Safe Space." *Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women's Writing*, edited by Kuribayashi, Tomoko, and Julie Tharp. State University of New York Press, 1998, pp. 47–58.
- Awad, Yousef. "Bringing Lebanon's Civil War Home to Anglophone Literature: Alameddine's Appropriation of Shakespeare's Tragedies." *Critical Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2016, pp. 86–101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2016.280306>
- Awad, Yousef. "When Caliban writes back: Alameddine's appropriation of Shakespeare's The Tempest." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 56, No. 6, 2020, pp. 803–816. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1816564>

- Baker, Charley. "Nobody's Meat: Revisiting Rape and Sexual Trauma Through Angela Carter." *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*, edited by Onega Susana and Jean-Michel Ganteau. Editions Rodopi, 2011, pp. 61–84. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401200080_005
- Bombert, Victor. *In Praise of Antiheroes, Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature, 1830–1980*. The University Chicago Press, 1999.
- Brown, Laura S. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 100–110.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 183–199.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1957. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400866908>
- Greenberg Research. *Country report Lebanon ICRC worldwide consultation on the rules of war*. International Committee of the Red Cross, November, 1999.
- Gurung, Rita. *The Archetypal Antihero in Postmodern Fiction*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2010.
- Hartman, Michelle. "Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*: a Druze Novel as World Literature?" *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: the Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, edited by Nouri Gana. Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 339–359. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748685554-017>
- Hout, Syrine C. "The Tears of Trauma: Memories of Home, War, and Exile in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*." *World Literature Today*, Vol. 82, No. 5, 2008, pp. 58–62.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with Patriarchy". Richmond College, United Kingdom, vol. 2, No.3, 1988, pp. 274–292. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>
- Krystal, Henry. "Trauma and Aging: a Thirty-Year Follow-Up." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 76–99.
- Letaief, Salma Kaouthar, and Yousef Awad. "The Existential Arab Antihero in Rawi Hage's Beirut Hellfire Society." *Forum for World Literature Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2021, pp. 234–251.
- Pickens, Theri. "Feeling Embodied and Being Displaced: a Phenomenological Exploration of Hospital Scenes in Rabih Alameddine's Fiction." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2013, pp. 67–85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlt031>
- Skulsky, Harold. *Metamorphosis: The Mind in Exile*. Harvard University Press, 1981. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674424982>
- Sune, Haugbolle. "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War." *Violence de masse et Résistance*, No. 1961–9898, 2011, pp. 1–17. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/massviolence-war-massacre->. Accessed April 25 2019.
- Tinas, Murat. "Revisiting Lebanese Civil War." *Turkish National Police Academy*, 2017.
- Van Der Kolk, Bessel and Onno Van Der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Caruth Cathy. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 158–182.
- Wilson, Colin. *The Outsider*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Letaief, Salma Kaouthar and Yousef Abu Amrieh. "The Passive Antihero in Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and an Unnecessary Woman". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 20, issue 1, art. 3, 2022, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.75>

Submitted: 23 November 2021

Accepted: 25 February 2022

Published: 18 March 2022

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Anglo Saxonica is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.