

Predicaments of an Exile in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*

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Abstract— Anglophone Lebanese literature is a unique subcategory by itself where the Lebanese themes, especially the Lebanese Civil War, are discussed and analyzed in English language (Al-Maleh par. 2). Lebanese writers shed light on the psychological and social effects of the war on the Lebanese subjects, exploring many themes such as memory, trauma, identity, and exile. One of the well-known Anglophone Lebanese writers is Rawi Hage, a winner of the Hugh MacLennan Prize for fiction in 2008 and 2012 for his novels *Cockroach* and *Carnival* respectively. Hage said in an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that he intended to explore through immigration in *Cockroach* the issues of poverty, alienation, and displacement. This article discusses the novel *Cockroach* and examines the protagonist's predicaments through implementing Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Reflection on Exiles* along with Hommi Bhabha's notion of *in-betweenness*, related to its respective theme of exile and the portrayals of the characters' lives spent outside their homeland.

Keywords — Alienation, Anglophone Lebanese literature, *in-betweenness*, Orientalism, exile.

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Cockroach*, a poor nameless Middle Eastern narrator leaves his nameless war-torn country and settles in chilly Canada. He lives as an exile: foreign, unwanted, and entrusted. While in therapeutic sessions, memories of his childhood overshadowed by war are presented, and family tragedy in which he failed to prevent resurfaces. Throughout the narration, the protagonist is seen torn between “two planes” (*Cockroach* 119). And as he wanders the snowy streets, falling in love with fellow exile Shohreh, he realizes that to find a place in this alien world, it is necessary to become someone else; someone he never dared to be in his past life.

II. REFLECTION ON EXILE IN COCKROACH

Edward Said in the *Reflection on Exile* defines exile as a “discontinuous state of being... Exiles are cut off from their roots, their lands, their past” (177) and torn from the nourishment of tradition, geography and family (174). Said continues defining the modern form of exile as being the cause of imperialism, tremendous destructive wars, and “quasitheological ambitions of totalitarian rulers” (174) which renders our time as the age of mass immigration, displaced people and refugees, having most of the time a sense of non-belonging and loss of contact with the native land.

In *Cockroach*, the protagonist arrived to Canada on a fake visa, but later he acquired the status of a war refugee and therefore legal residency. He escapes the chaos of the

ravaged war in his home country and his past literalized by his failure to save his sister from her militia husband which comprises the traumatic event burdening his conscience. Though his status entitles him the status of an immigrant, his narrative and thoughts reflect that of an exile cut off from his homeland, unwilling to return and unwilling or unable to put down roots in Canada (Hout 255). It is clear when he says early in the novel “I cursed my luck. I cursed the plane that had brought me to this harsh terrain” (8). So although technically an immigrant, he remains emotionally and behaviorally an exile.

In addition to the protagonist, readers encounter multi-national characters, such as Shohreh, Reza, Farhoud, Majeed, etc. who relate stories of torture, rape, persecution, and imprisonment at the hands of their country's dictators, both secular and religious, which they endured before fleeing to Canada and becoming immigrants. They hoped for a better future but were let down for a second time by the international system (Hutchinson 7). Ironically enough, Majeed reveals the hypocrisy of the democratic Western World who support the dictatorship in the Third World by saying “You know we come to these countries for refugee and to find better lives, but it is these countries that made us leave our homes in the first place” (223). Along with the injuries and pain experienced in the home country, there is an added insult of what these new comers have been through: “the desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable, and stranded in corridors of bureaucracy and immigration”

(*Cockroach* 13); they “manage to survive out there but can never thrive” (Hout 258).

Said continues defining the exile as the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” which is accomplished by an “essential sadness of the break which can never be surmounted” (182). The protagonist has no attachment to Canada though he comes from a country devastated and destroyed by war. Thus he remains “out of place” (24) and experiencing exile as “a kind of orphanhood” (Said 182). The protagonist uses the word *sadness* many times throughout his narrative and especially in moments of intense loneliness, revealing the internal trauma and the alienation the narrator experiences in Canada. He reveals his intense sorrow when he tells the reader “A deep, deep sense of fear and sadness overcame me...” and “when the sadness intensifies, he drops the razor he was using” (118). In another scene, he “weeps for no reason, as if he were crying for someone else” (119), presumably his sister Souad.

Said continues examining the isolation and displacements which “produces a kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community” (183), where an exile can make a fetish of exile and thus distancing himself/herself from all connections and commitments. He distances himself from his homeland when he does not mention its name explicitly. Here, the reader knows that the narrator’s country is Lebanon from his descriptions of the culture there and the few references to the mountains, the Lebanese food, the Mediterranean shores, and Cedars. In addition to his wish of not integrating in Canadian society, he also does not have any connection with his fellow Lebanese immigrants, but strangely this connection is somehow found with the Iranian immigrants. Moreover, Said compares the exilic mindset with the season of cold, barren drear (186). The “rigid prescription” (186) of exile, characterized by solitude and estrangement indicating coldness, is found in *Cockroach* when the narrator is looking for a means of communication or acknowledgment in the new soil but in vain, and thus identity crisis arises:

Where am I? And what am I doing here? How did I end up trapped in a constantly shivering carcass, walking in a frozen city with wet cotton falling on me all the time? And on top of it all, I am hungry, impoverished, and have no one, no one. Goddamn it! Not even a nod in this cold place, not even a timid wave, not a smile from below red, sniffing, blowing noses. All these buried heads above necks strangled in synthetic scarves (9).

Then he continues saying: “If you ask why the inhumane temperature, the universe will answer you with tight lips and a cold tone and tell you to go back where you came from if you do not like it here” (193) that becomes a metaphor for lack of connection to the new soil leading to a feeling of alienation and displacement.

III. ORIENTALISM

Said’s *Orientalism* is beneficial in examining how the protagonist is caught between asserting and refuting the presumption about the essence of the Other which intensifies his feelings of alienation and his status as being an exilic foreigner. According to Said, “The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes with remarkable experiences” (1). Thus a binary opposition between the East and the West is constructed, giving the latter the right to define, describe, and articulate the Orient. In effect, the West constructs differences and attaches an arbitrary value to those differences; thus the East is seen as inferior in order to “dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for ‘Us’ to deny autonomy to ‘It’” (Said 36). To Said, those from the East are often imbued by the West with essential unchanging traits, constructing the Orient as “irrationally, depraved, childlike different” (38).

In *Cockroach*, the success of the immigrant, and in this case from the East, is often based on playing the role of the Western-constructed Oriental, where the protagonist notes that “the exotic has to be modified here – not too authentic, not too spicy or too smelly, just enough of it to remind others of a fantasy elsewhere” (20). The narrator conveys that the immigrants from the East have to play the role constructed for them by the West of being “the fuckable, exotic dangerous foreigner ... Play it right and they will toss you from one party to another” (199). The West does not expect authenticity because it could ultimately lead to the failure of the immigrants. The best example of the exotic foreigner is fulfilled by Reza who plays “exotic tunes” (25) in a restaurant, where the protagonist later works in and tells exotic stories for “gullible heads” (25) who are around him. So playing the exotic tunes gives him a steadily paying job; whereas, the exotic stories allow him to “couch surf in women’s houses” (25). In addition, playing the role of the exotic foreigner is useful for the protagonist to avoid going back to the madhouse which is literalized when the protagonist starts telling his therapist stories to enthrall her.

The reference to *A Thousand and One Night* though it is implicit but clear, and it is confirmed by the narrator when he says that “the doctor, like sultans, is fond of stories”

(102). Here, of course, the role is reversed in which the male is the creative narrator who wishes to avoid, not losing his head, but his freedom by sending him to the madhouse. On the other hand, the therapist functions as a narrative device to begin each chapter of the novel and facilitate the controlled release of information about his past trauma. He is manipulative when stopping to ask if the time of the session is over to determine how “hooked”

(104) she is on his exotic stories.

A rare example of the narrator being accepted by the dominant culture and the access of that world is when he enjoys the company of the “privileged, white Montreal Sylvie and her friends” (183). The narrator succeeds in entering their world because of Sylvie’s inability to resist anything foreign. He even impresses the ladies’ boyfriends because they feel that they were in the “company of a noble savage and they liked it” (183). The narrator despises this role-playing, but he is doing it regardless in order to gain access to this world and to fulfill a certain “preconceived and pre-packaged idea of what the immigrant is supposed to be” (Hutchison 8). This conflict within himself also reveals that the narrator is positioned in a space in between.

IV. IN-BETWEENESS

According to Canada’s official multiculturalism, immigrants can fully participate in Canadian society while still being able to identify with the cultural heritage of their choice. *Cockroach* reveals that the Canadian immigrant’s experience in practice contradicts the official state policy of multiculturalism. In reality, the retainment of ethnic identity along with the full participation in national life fails, for they are contradictory concepts. These same contradictory concepts are used in *Cockroach* to create a space for the narrator which does not place him in either category, but instead it places him in a space in between. The protagonist resists both concepts, wondering instead how it might be possible “to exist and not to belong” (210) and says that he is “split between two planes and aware of two existences” (119). One of the most powerful examples of the narrator forced to abandon aspects of his cultural identity in order to fit into Canadian norms is when the narrator relates an experience when he was at the top of the roof:

I could smoke, I thought. I could climb up to some roof and watch the neighbourhood from above. But the last time I had tried this, it took two minutes for the police to come and ask me why I was on the roof. Some lady had complained that I was looking into her bedchamber and called them. It was summer and all I wanted was to hang out on the

roof like millions of people on countless planets do in this universe. Billions of farmers, forgers, waitresses, and housewives stand on roofs and look around and smoke, hang laundry and contemplate. When I told the policemen that I had always done this, all my life, he replied: Well, here people do not look at each other from their roofs. I will only look at the stars then, I said. He forbade me from looking at the stars, and threatened me with jail. Where all you would be looking at is walls and men in the shower, he said, and his partner laughed (277-278).

This example reveals how the law is working coercively to modify behavior, and in this case it is the narrator’s behavior which is common to many cultures. The use of “here people do not look...” (277) suggests an attempt to shape a fixed Canadian identity where the protagonist has to abandon the behavior which is accepted There (Lebanon) but unacceptable Here (Canada). Certainly, the narrator wants to fit into normal, legitimate acceptable society because his very survival depends on it, especially when he says “I have to get some money before the end of the month, before I starve to death in this shithole of an apartment” (6). The only way to get his money is for him “to contribute (my) share” and “become a good citizen” (65) which obliges him to transform into one. Here the reader is aware of the stake of the protagonist’s survival fluctuating between retaining his cultural identity and transforming in order to survive.

In addition to the above mentioned examples, what hinders his integration into the Canadian society is the racist representation practiced by the French speaking Maitre Pierre in a restaurant in Montreal where the protagonist worked as a dishwasher. It is when Maitre Pierre refused to promote him as a waiter because of the color of his skin saying that the protagonist is “a little too well done for that... and the sun has burned (your) face a bit too much” (29). And according to Ghassan Hage, a homely space is a place where it has to be open enough that one can perceive opportunities of a better life: “the opportunity to develop certain capacities and skills, the opportunity of personal growth... the availability of opportunities for advancement” (419), and here in this example, the protagonist is denied this advancement which intensifies his feeling of detachment.

V. CONCEPT OF LIMINALITY

According to Homi Bhabha’s concept of liminality, new selfhoods are formed and articulated as alternatives to unitary conceptualization of national identity. Teetering on both literal (geographical) and figurative (emotional)

boundaries between their countries and their new places, the protagonists remain ambivalent, pushed and pulled as they are towards both poles, “in between the claims of the past and the needs of the present and the future” (219). Their experiences of unhomeliness as the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world are defined in many cases of intersections of age, gender, and class, as well as by reason for departure and traumatic war memories.

In *Cockroach*, the protagonist’s emotional ties which are revealed through his memories are elicited and stimulated by the force of law embodied by psychotherapist Genevieve. The protagonist never expresses his desire to return to his birthplace which is full of traumatic memories and the feeling of guilt over his sister’s death. His pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question (Said 179). There is nothing and no one to return to in the present because his parents, sister, and his mentor Abo Roro are dead. In addition, and as discussed earlier, his directionless daily life in Canada aims at the mere physical survival in a country which only welcomes him as an exotic figure not giving him an opportunity for integration. As for the protagonist vision of the present and future which Bhabha talks about is “clouded by suppress anger at himself, stemming from feelings of guilt over his sister’s death back in Beirut” (Hout 264). According to Rita Sakr in her paper *The Lebanese-Quebecois Novel as a Liminal Space in Canadian Literature*:

The old and the new spaces are simultaneously present in the narrator’s consciousness, imaginatively and actually, contrapuntally orchestrating the two voices of trauma on a textual level whereby the place names in Beirut are silenced in the double act of forgetfulness and textual erasure while Montreal spaces are repeatedly named with a compulsive obsessive insistence.

For the protagonist, he believes that there are no ideal homes; there is only the harsh reality of immigration to face. Neither Lebanon nor Canada feels like home in the sense of providing a sense of security and promise based on either a new or an old sentiment of loyalty and belongings (Hage 417). Despite fluency in both of Canada’s official languages as well as in Arabic, the protagonist’s personal identity is in no way a harmonious mix of cultures. In fact, he has acquired very little, if anything despite his many years in Canada. *Cockroach* suggests that a possible alternative to the current state of opposition is the creation of a space of liminality. To the protagonist, though disillusioned, the liminal space is the

underground where the cockroaches live (24). He equally curses his sectarian and violent past and his racism infested and deprived present, hoping that the future will be in the hands of cockroaches (201).

While having an encounter with the huge cockroach, the latter states that though they are ugly, “but we always know where we are going. We have a project” (202) and not like the protagonist who is a “vulture, living on the periphery of the kill. Waiting for the kill, but never having the courage to do it yourself” (201-202). The cockroach concludes by telling the protagonist that he is always welcome if he wants to join and advising him to “just keep your eyes on what is going on down in the underground” (203). This encounter with the cockroach affected the protagonist deeply which is shown when he relates it to the therapist saying that being a human “is being trapped ... and to be an insect is to be free ... in a sense” (207). Bhabha states that “the emergence of an interstitial agency that refuses binary representation of social antagonism” (58) is made possible.

In *Cockroach*, one of the instances where the narrative shows the protagonist transforming into a cockroach is when he enters the therapist home through crawling and flipping of his back wings, and thus feeling the freedom he does not possess as a human being: “the intruder, feeling at home” (83). As a final act, exasperated by his mistakes which caused the death of his sister and the unwelcoming present, he stabs the Canadian government appointed bodyguard and kills him; then he proceeds to shoot Shohreh’s rapist twice before he walks back to the kitchen and goes down to the drain to the underground joining more noble creatures. Disillusioned, he performs the only redemptive act which he can perceive, by murdering his lover’s rapist and therefore avenges the loss of his sister to an equally brutal oppressive militia. One might argue that by rushing “toward the drain” with glittering wings towards the underground” (305), the narrator has made his choice to be the free insect, escaping the “shapes and forms that confine you and guide you” (210).

VI. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* captures various dimensions of migration by depicting the immigrant experience in Canada, tracing the reason for these immigrants’ departure from their home countries, as well as examining the struggles they encounter while living in Canada. The protagonist’s traumatic past moves parallel to his alienation on the margins of Canadian society. Hage’s half-human half-cockroach immigrant practically demonstrates the politics that make both Lebanon and

Canada incomplete homes by reflecting on the notions of exile, orientalism, unhomeliness and liminal space.

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