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Broken Heart and Broken Self: Mental Illness and Immigration in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*

قلب مجروح و نفس مكسورة: المرض النفسي و الهجرة في رواية الصرصار لراوي حاج

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Abstract: This article seeks to analyze Rawi Hage's novel *Cockroach* (2008) by focusing on the intersections between trauma, mental illness, immigration and identity. It traces the roots of the protagonist's mental illness back to his childhood in his Middle-Eastern war-torn country to demonstrate the lingering effects of the past over the present, manifested in his pathological defense mechanisms against the discrimination he faces as a dark-skinned poor immigrant. It argues that his insanity, his schizophrenic splitting of the self and his violent acts are empowering and liberating means of displaying his defiance against a diseased multicultural policy, which raises important questions about the fixity of meaning, the rigidity of cultural boundaries and the self/other discourse that still characterize Western thought.

Keywords: trauma, immigration, mental illness, cultural boundaries, schizophrenia, multiculturalism, discrimination, identity

الملخص: يهدف هذا المقال إلى تحليل رواية الصرصار لراوي حاج و تسليط الضوء على العلاقة بين مفهوم الصدمة, المرض العقلي, الهجرة و الهوية. تثبت الدراسة أن جذور المرض لبطل الرواية ترجع إلى طفولته في بلده العربي الممزق بالحرب الأهلية, و تشير إلى استمرار تأثير الماضي على الحاضر و الذي يتجلى في آليات الدفاع المرضية للبطل ضد التمييز الذي يواجهه كمهاجر فقير و ذو بشرة مختلفة. نركز على أن جنون البطل, انقسامه الفصامي للذات و ردود فعله العنيفة تمنحه القوة لتحدي سياسة التعددية الثقافية المزعومة, مما يسلط الضوء على أسئلة مهمة حول صلابة الحدود الثقافية واستمرارية خطاب الذات / الآخر الذي لا يزال يميز الفكر الغربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة , الهجرة, المرض العقلي, الحدود الثقافية, انفصام الشخصية, التعددية الثقافية, التمييز , الهوية

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1. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial theorists promote the idea of the porosity of cultural boundaries and the creation of a third space of enunciation, a hybrid space in which identities meet but do not clash, in which cultural exchange and co-existence are possible. But are the boundaries permeable to everyone? Who are the border-crossers? For whom, as Friedman (2015) asks, is "such cultural transmigration a reality" (p. 79)? These questions and more are the central issues in Rawi Hage's novel *Cockroach* (2008) which stands against celebrating the metropolitan migrant experience. The novel portrays the suffering of the immigrant, his troubled past, his unlivable present, as well as his bleak sense of the future through an ambiguous character whose self-view is pathological. The author rejects the stereotypical image of the happy and grateful immigrant, or the at-home-in-the-world cosmopolitan traveler, who is able to negotiate many cultural identities and enjoy the privileges of cultural hybridity and the third space. Instead, the author presents at the hand of his reader a protagonist who is an anomalous creature. Torn between existing as a human being and existing as a cockroach, the protagonist creates his own form of transgression, one that differs from Bhabha's hybridity but shares its critical reflexivity and rejection of essentialism. At the core of the novel lies an extensive critique of multiculturalism through the narrator's transgression which happens on the boundaries between human and insect, between sanity and insanity, as a way to upturn and criticize hierarchies, to highlight the rigidity of cultural and social boundaries and to expose claims of their porosity, at least for the less privileged immigrants.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that crossing the boundaries between western and immigrant, between rich and poor, is not a smooth process, nor is it without pain; on the contrary, it only intensifies and brings forth the immigrant's internal crisis, which is the product of both his traumatic past as well as the racist society where he finds himself. In an interview with Rita Sakr (2011), Hage explains that "*Cockroach* focuses on the themes of immigration and mental illness" (p. 348); thus, we attempt to shed light on the intersections of mental illness, immigration, trauma and identity.

Migrating with such a heavy psychological burden as one caused by the civil war and with non-reconciled traumas only aggravates the unnamed protagonist's pathological means of coping with the world and self-destructive tendencies. He responds to threatening situations, both in his past and present, and to his marginal state in the host country through a schizophrenic splitting of his self. However, as this article attempts to prove, the protagonist's pathological hybridity does, by no means, paralyze or victimize him. His mental illness, instead, is read as empowering and liberating, as resistance to his current status of the immigrant. It is through the eyes of the insect that he paves the way for a more transgressive interrogation of established social, cultural, political and religious orders.

2. Roots in Childhood

In his seminal work on mental illness, *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1987), Michel Foucault asserts that tracing the roots of "pathological deviation" is as imperative as studying its symptoms (p. 60). This is mainly because there is a psychological dimension to mental illness shaped by "individual history, with its traumas, its defense mechanisms, and above all the anxiety that haunts it" (p. 82). In the same vein, following the logic of spatial thinking, psychiatrist R.D Laing (1969) stresses that time and space "situatedness" is of paramount importance in interpreting the behavior of the schizophrenic (McGeachan, 2014, p. 286). The first spatio-temporal location that is central to the understanding of mental illness is the space of the family and childhood. Viewing mental illness strictly as a biochemical anomaly, as if completely cutting off the mentally ill from the environment of home, family and society is considered incomplete and unfair. A healthy structuring of being into basic elements, like time continuity, boundaries between the self and other, and fantasy and reality, should happen during childhood, Laing (1969) asserts. The splitting, or dividing of the self, is the person's means of protecting an existence that is "precariously structured" because of external threat to its sense of security (Laing, 1969, p. 77). The protagonist, as this paper demonstrates, is subjected to several forms of

traumatic stressors in his childhood which trigger a psychopathological response in the form of splitting into a cockroach to face any form of threat.

Turning into a cockroach, the narrator's structuralizaton of being is clearly ill-formed because the lines between fantasy and reality, false and real self, and even the continuity of time and place are ruptured, as he enters an alternative universe that exists outside the spatial and temporal dimensions of reality. This defensive mechanism , however, does not come without a price, for the paradox here is that it is not outside danger that destroys the self , but the more the self tries to defend itself by dissociating, the more the person destroys his/her self. This prevents the protagonist from healthy adaptation to stress in the future as he immigrates to a new land, carrying this self-defense mechanism with him, which causes various psychological symptoms that he manifests throughout the novel in several occasions.

Right from the onset of the story we learn that the protagonist is mentally disturbed, as he narrates the story of the origin of his self-identification as a cockroach to his therapist, whom he is forced by court to see after his public attempt of suicide. His grotesque hybrid self-image, "part human, part cockroach" and his delusional metamorphoses are traced back to an innocent childhood game he used to play with his sister, Souad, during war time in Lebanon. Creating a secret world, the warm and fluid "underground", under a blanket, they fused their bodies together and fantasized themselves as a giant cockroach seeking safety from domestic violence and from the war. "In my youth I was an insect," he tells his therapist, "because my sister made me one" (p. 7). He narrates to her that when they played their joyful secret game, they "laughed, and crawled below the sheets, and nibbled on each other's faces. Let's block the light, [Souad] said. Let's seal that quilt to the bed, tight, so there won't be any light. Let's play underground" (p. 8).

The novel, therefore, presents a troubled construction of home, as the narrator's childhood home is loaded with violence and traumatic memories. The game he used to play with his sister was their way of creating domestic security by splitting from their selves, as a coping mechanism to living in

an unstable household with a frustrated mother who was constantly cursing her kids calling them "dumb, square-headed, filthy, retard kids," threatening to "dig [their] graves" ignoring the protagonist when he hanged " on her apron begging her not to leave [them]" (p. 34), and an abusive father/husband who was violent towards their mother, as they helplessly watched their fights, betting "which of her eyes would get the first punch" (p. 34), and on top of this they were poor. The psychological trauma of a violent home and his sense of helplessness towards the situations of abuse elicited an escapist behavior in the form of psychic splitting and imaginative space, which enabled the protagonist to become "a master of escape," as he puts it, "I escaped when my mother cried, when my father unbuckled his belt" (p. 19).

Trauma is also defined as losing control over one's mind and body. Van der Hart & Spiegel (1993) describe the essence of traumatic stress as helplessness whose "mental imprint" is "a loss of control over one's body" (p. 199).The protagonist, for example, narrates how he used to detach himself mentally to escape his teacher's punishment. In defiance to his teacher's violent punishment, his ego dissociates and his self divides, creating a false self, so he "watched the teacher's ruler as if it wasn't [him] who was receiving those lashes across fingers extended like noontide red above beaches lit by many suns," and he offers her his six "cockroach hands" and uses his cockroach wings to alleviate the pain and cool it off (p. 48). Behaving like a schizophrenic, he becomes a mental onlooker and detaches his self from his body, or unembodies himelf, to use Laing' terms, so that "any damage to his body could not really hurt him" (Laing, 1969, p. 68), as he watched his teacher's ruler falling in his palms "as if it wasn't [him]" (Laing, 1969, p. 46).

The blurred lines between reality and fantasy can give the schizophrenic a real sense of liberation and empowerment. He lives in a false world of fantasies where the false self is "omnipotent and free" since it can be "anyone, anywhere, do anything, have everything" (Laing, 1969, p. 84). He, thus, would rather exist as self-in-fantasy than a nobody-in-reality.

Ever since he created the fantasy of the cockroach in his childhood, and it provided him with a line of escape, the protagonist started to invoke it, whether consciously or unconsciously, whenever the situation demands so.

In one of his stories to the therapist, he tells her that one day, his beloved sister, who also suffered domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, Tony, went back to her parents' home and "her eyes had black rings around them" (p. 69). He was determined to kill him, even if he was a kid and even if Tony was a powerful militiaman surrounded by his powerful men all the time. The protagonist narrates how he morphed into an insect to gain power over Tony and his gang, to use his cockroach wings and fly to pick up Tony's gun and kill them all, or to crawl under their doors and slay them in their sleep, "it was as if I was transformed. May be I even flew a little. And when I spoke, my voice vibrated loudly" (p. 70). Even if "age limitation", as pointed out by Syrine Hout (2012) as characteristic of postwar Anglophone Lebanese fiction (p. 173), between the narrator and Tony prevented him from realizing this wish, his Kafkaesque metamorphosis provided him with a sense of remarkable power. "I felt as if I could slip from under Tony's hand and disappear under the neighbour's door. I was sure that I could… And as if I fluttered somehow, I became lighter and more agile. I even slipped under his feet and jumped over his boots," he recounts (p. 71).

The entire recollections of the protagonist's childhood stories revolve around reaching the tragic story of the death of his beloved sister, Souad, at the hand of her violent husband Tony, and his guilt for his indirect involvement in it, and inability to pull the trigger of the gun to kill Tony upon arriving to the tragic scene of his sister's death and seeing the "brute" there, but was too shocked to kill him. His sister's loss is the ultimate trauma of his life, for in the midst of all the violence and the war, his only moments of joy and happiness were shared with his sister.

The trauma of losing a loved one is "a liminal experience of radical deracination and calamity" capable of creating a psychic rupture that may affect the subjectivity of the individual and even cause mental illness (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 1). After losing his sister, his self is

psychologically shattered, and he starts to avoid the light and live in the darkness of his bathroom cradling in the bathtub. He turns into the cockroach he used to be when he played with Souad, but he also becomes emotionally numb and alienates himself from everyone around him and from his environment, seeking comfort in the warmth of the drains and identifying himself more with the little creatures that live there, the roaches (p. 204).

Burdened by the weight of this traumatic event, after losing sense of himself, the narrator hears "echoes in the drain… telling [him] to leave" (p. 204), and so he escapes in an attempt to disconnect himself completely from his homeland, the place, which with all its violence, he deems responsible for his sister's tragic fate, "I shaved and then I sailed away from that room, that house, that land, thinking that all was past, all was buried, all would come to an end" (p. 204). He imagines that by relocating he would forget about it all, but the trauma becomes memories, and he only carries them to torment his present, in addition to the new traumas of displacement, unbelonging, racism, poverty and all the immigrant's woes he has to face in the new land, which only accentuates his fragmentation.

3. Madness as Resistance: Multiculturalism and Failed Hybridity

The protagonist displays all the classical symptoms of schizophrenia like derealization, withdrawal from reality, alienation, sense of emptiness and deadness, and ontological insecurity. However, his symptoms cannot, and should not, be read merely as signs of his mental illness or his internal and private suffering, but as signs of the ills of the society and culture that drive him insane in the first place. Through a mentally ill protagonist, the novel focuses on the dehumanizing role that social injustice plays in breaking people's psyches and affecting their self-view and self-representation. The author uses a grotesque hybrid figure that deliberately identifies more with his cockroach self than human self to attack hierarchies and the taken-for-granted structures of cultural identification.

As a result, *Cockroach* can be read as a challenge to Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity and nomadism that comes with it. Bhabha (1994) claims that hybridity challenges cultural hierarchies because it opens an "interstitial" third space, "a space of negotiation" that "refuses binary representation" (p. 34). However, opponents to Bhabahian hybridity criticize it for being "completely at odds with the actual experience of difference" undergone by diasporic people (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 16). Aijaz Ahmad (1992) views hybridity as elitist and reflective only of the critics' privileged cultural experience. It "is not everywhere, it is only the elite who can afford to talk about hybridity… it applies more to metropolitan elite émigrés and far less to migrant diasporas" agrees Prabhu (2007, p. 12).

Hage's novel questions if cosmopolitanism and Bhabha's concept of "global citizenship" whose territoriality is "postnational, denational, transnational" (2003, p. 30) are possible at all, putting under scrutiny the conditions that prevent their success. Identity is renewed and gains new meaning in the novel. The protagonist does not portray a privileged cosmopolitan citizen, a nomad with-no-fixed-abode. Instead of oscillating between multiple cultural identities, as permits Bhabahian hybridity, the novel presents a different kind of multiplicity in the narrator's fluctuation between his identity as a human being and an insect. His daily struggles, facing poverty, hunger, and discrimination, show that he is far from enjoying the nomadic feeling of being-at-home in the world. Indeed, it is the protagonist's existence in a site of cultural multiplicity that creates tension between him and the more privileged inhabitants of the city, which triggers his delusional metamorphoses as a defensive act against his social and cultural exclusion.

The novel demonstrates that despite claims of multiculturalism and the dismantling of social rank and class, late-capitalist society still maintains an asymmetrical horizontal power relation and spatial division based on labour and sign value, as high income groups put more space between them and their inferiors. This is best exemplified in the novel in the scene where the hungry narrator is not allowed to stand outside a fancy

restaurant where he can see behind glass a rich couple having their dinner. Despite protesting that "it is a free country, a public space" (p. 61), he is ordered to leave because he transgresses a line marked in space, and decided by income and social class. Space, thus, is proven as segregated by non-porous boundaries. His visible foreignness causes his social abjection and prevents him from entering the space of the more privileged inhabitants of the city.

The narrator's feeling of exclusion triggers one of his moments of metamorphosis. He reacts aggressively, and most importantly, in a pathological way to the discrimination he faces. The couple make an *ad hominem* attack on him, and now all he thinks of is to "show this happy couple what [he is] capable of" (p. 62). In an act of defiance against " the bourgeois filth" as he calls them, he transforms into a cockroach and invades their personal space, as he breaks in to their house, steals their valuable possessions, forces himself into their dreams and helps himself to the fancy food they are dreaming of, and even urinates in their house (pp. 62-64).

This deviance the narrator exhibits has a strong relationship to exclusion and marginalization. His pathological behavior of becoming something else is an expressive line of flight out of a traumatic experience, an intentional and empowering liberating defiance against social injustice and hierarchy. His schizophrenia/madness can be read a resistance to his current status of the poor immigrant situated at the bottom of the social scale. It can also be read a site of power. He feels violated and humiliated for becoming the subject of their entertainment, for being put into display and turned into a spectacle for their Western gaze "as if [he] were some reality show about police chasing people with food-envy syndrome" (p. 62), and his aggression can be understood as an adaptive reaction to his rage which is "the motivation to retaliate" when one's dignity is violated, "anger, rage and violence may be very appropriate reactions to intolerable violations of one's dignity, privacy, and inalienable right to self-determination" (Diamond, 2015, p. 57).

His abnormal behavior is attributed to external factors. What drive him to snap and lose his mind are horror, disgust and contempt towards what he deems wrong with the way he stands in society. His madness and unreason reveal a society whose reason is seen as sick in the eyes of the protagonist. Hage, therefore, deconstructs madness by giving it new meaning; liberating and empowering, and by presenting it as a social and cultural construct to provide " a piercing critique against the myth of Canada—and more in general of Western multicultural democracies—as hospitable, benevolent, and humanitarian countries" (Marchi, 2014, p. 53).

Moreover, the novel can also be read as an attempt to grapple with the issue of racism through a protagonist whose position is marginal both in terms of class as well as race. Skin is the most visible sign of difference. It is an external layer that is charged with meaning, as it shapes our relationships to the world and represents the boundary between self and other. Skin also contributes in making space and setting racial boundaries. Sara Ahmed, in her "Phenomenology of Whiteness" (2007), explains that whiteness is the invisible marker of privilege that "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (p. 150). The "body-at-home" in the world is the body that does not stand out as non-white (p. 155).

White supremacy is apparent in the novel, for example, in Maitre Pierre's attitude towards the narrator, which represents overt racism that immigrants face in Canada. Maitre Pierre is a pretentious French speaking Canadian whom the narrator works for as a dishwasher then busboy. When the protagonist asks him for a promotion to a waiter, Maitre Pierre denies him the position because of the colour of his skin, "he looked at me with fixed, glittering eyes, and said: *Tu es un peu trop cuit pour ça* (you are a little too well done for that)! *Le soleil t'a brûlé ta face un peu trop* (the sun has burned your face a bit too much). I knew what he meant, the filthy human with gold braid on his sleeves and pompous posture!" (p. 24). With regards to this matter, Ahmed (2007) discusses that while "white bodies do not have to face their whiteness", a non-white body is noticed, scrutinized, and eventually excluded when arriving in the midst of all this white

background (p. 156). The protagonist is, accordingly, denied upward mobility and admission to the privileged space of the white because of his skin colour.

As a reaction to the racism he has to face here, the protagonist has a violent fit of anger directed at Pierre, the "Impotent, infertile filth!" (p. 24). He goes through a psychotic episode identifying more with the cockroaches than with the humans, "And, and… ! I shouted, and I stuttered, and I repeated, and I added, as my index fingers fluttered like a pair of gigantic antennae" (p. 24), threatening Maitre Pierre that the human world will end and the cockroaches will take over, "Doomed you will be, doomed as you are infested with newcomers" (p. 24). His aggression may be understood as a way of responding to his sense of unbelonging and (in)visibility within a hostile space of whiteness which still persists despite claims of multiculturalism.

In both instances the narrator displays a symptom of schizophrenia known as depersonalization, which is the sense that the person is not a human being but a thing, or an insect in this case. His self-identification with the cockroach can be seen as an internalization of what he believes the others consider him. Becoming a cockroach is his defense mechanism against this fear of being treated like a cockroach. The cockroach is a despised pest against which people take many precautions to avoid infestation. Treated like a pest, the protagonist becomes one as a way to shed light on the true quality of relationships to immigrants and how they are still regarded in the west. The narrator, as a cockroach does not consider himself inferior to the humans. On the opposite, he dehumanizes himself before being dehumanized by rich white society to gain more power over them. Hage here wants to refute the idea of immigrants as infesters, intruders, strangers and abjects, by turning the cockroach into a metaphor, a political statement that criticizes power structures and established order through the eyes of a vermin.

The protagonist's anti-social behavior and delusional metamorphosis are a defensive response to the pain of social discrimination and exclusion

he suffers from as a different immigrant within white society. The tone of the protagonist's language addressing Pierre speaks volumes of his frustration and the deep pain he must be undergoing, which conforms to Laing's definition of the word "schizophrenia" not as "split mind" or "split personality" but as "condition of broken-heartedness" (McGeachan, 2014, p. 285).

4. Descent into Madness

By the end of the novel, the protagonist comes to an understanding of humanity that makes him even more exiled and alienated both socially, morally and psychologically. He finally makes the decision that he does not want to belong to a species that takes part and causes suffering in the world. "[He is] part cockroach. But the worst part of it is that [he is] part human" (p. 141). His best part is the cockroach part because the pest, as portrayed in the novel, is not a weak and repulsive creature; it is glorified by the protagonist, who "believe[s]that [he] belong[s] to something better and higher" (p. 140). More importantly, the cockroaches are venerated because they are not greedy creatures, but only take what they need, which is why he often transforms into a cockroach whenever he is hungry to live off of whatever little crumbs he can find. It is humans' greed, therefore, that the protagonist sees as the root of all evil and suffering in the world, as he tells his therapist:

> My greed.Greed, doctor. It is my greed that I regret. Humans are creatures of greed.
>
> Aren't all creatures greedy? She said gently.
>
> No, doctor. Other creatures only take what they need. That is not greed.
>
> I stood up. I did not and could not cry. I walked out of Genevieve's office without looking at her. (p. 167)

The novel ends with the protagonist murdering the rapist of his Iranian girlfriend, Shohreh, which is probably his way of redeeming himself of the guilt for his sister's death. This can also stand as his revenge against humans, because the rapist embodies all that is wrong with the human race. The rapist is a powerful Iranian man with diplomatic immunity who is in

Montreal to make a transaction with the government purchasing lightweight weapons so that kids can use them in Iran. This displays the dark political scene lurking in the background of this seemingly peaceful city, "Of course, Canada! Montreal, this happy, romantic city, has an ugly side, my friend. One of the largest military-industrial complexes in North America is right here in this town. What do you think? That the West prospers on manufacturing cars, computers, and Ski-Doos?" tells him his Iranian friend Majeed (p. 192).

In a final statement of madness, in the chaos of the moment following the murder, the protagonist finally descends into the underground where the cockroaches live. Taking refuge into this animal existential territory, he withdraws from the cold, unfriendly and hostile real world into an autistic inner world that is warm and welcoming. Insect life and the underground are attractive to the protagonist because they are simply what they are, with no hierarchies and no layers. He completely dissolves into his unconsciousness, in a scene that is lyrically painted as the protagonist's rite of passage into the realm of (in)sanity, as he peacefully describes it:

> I looked at the water that gathered and rushed towards the drain. Then I crawled and swam above the water, and when I saw a leaf carried along by the stream of soap and water as if it were a gondola in Venice, I climbed onto it and shook like a dancing gypsy, and I steered it with my glittering wings towards the underground. (p. 208)

It is only through his madness that he finds the peace of mind he never had and has longed for his entire life. Renouncing his human self and fully embracing his insecthood, the novel culminates in a symbolic death of the self, a symbolic suicide, which is what he wants to do since the beginning. Perhaps the underground represents to him the fantasy of return to that happy moment when was playing "underground" with his sister, perhaps going back to this past moment comes from his need to defend himself from a more painful present.

5. CONCLUSION

It requires a deep reading to sympathize with the protagonist and look beyond his ambiguities, deviancy and nihilistic behavior. The narrator, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, is but a wounded human being whose progressive alienation from his human self, splitting and psychotic metamorphoses are reactions to all the pains he blames humans' established order, driven by greed, for inflicting. Having no sense of protection and sane belonging in his childhood, being rejected by the bias of essentialism and exclusion that characterize western attitude towards the other, he creates his own form of essentialism, one in which human beings are viewed as the repulsive other of the self, as an alternative means of existing outside human system. His pathological survival strategy serves as a panacea, in the sense that it not only implies transgression or subversion, but for its liberating and empowering potentialities as well. His madness means escape and evasion, but it also stands as an act of resistance to power structures. It allows him to enter a sphere outside of human regularities and assigned identification. Hence, escaping the realm of human beings, and resorting to a new form of subjectivity, he revolts against the inhuman(e) aspects of our era.

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