

Identity Metamorphosis in Rawi Hage's Cockroach

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Abstract

This essay studies Rawi Hage's novel about the struggle against cultural integration. The protagonist embodies a cockroach persona, comparable to that of Franz Kafka's main character in his novella The Metamorphosis. Through the analysis of the challenges of interculturality in Montreal's mainstream society, this essay traces the protagonist's acceptance of his condition of in-betweenness or liminality, which reveals a socio-cultural tension between his Lebanese cultural identity and Quebec's society.

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Introduction

Rawi Hage's novel *Cockroach* (2008) has generated much critical analysis in the literary realm of academia. His main character, who is also the unnamed male narrator of the

novel, presents issues of dual identity as he navigates Montreal's Middle Eastern diaspora. As an Arab Canadian immigrant, the narrator struggles to find his place in society, which leads to his identification as a cockroach. Hage is not the first to use the insect trope as a representation of identity suffocation; Franz Kafka uses this approach in his novella *Metamorphosis*. Using narrative theory, I will demonstrate how the unnamed Arab Canadian narrator undergoes an identity metamorphosis due to Montreal's intercultural society, paired with its Middle Eastern diaspora, which generates a sense of cultural in-betweenness. This is comparable to the discomfiting experience of Franz Kafka's protagonist, Gregor. Comparing the two characters' transformations will allow me to highlight the issues of interculturalism presented in Hage's novel.

Rawi Hage and Cockroach

Rawi Hage⁷ is a world renowned Arab Canadian author and winner of several literary awards including the Dublin IMPAC Literary Award. His 2008 novel *Cockroach* is set in Montreal's Middle Eastern diaspora. The main character, an unnamed narrator, struggles to retain his Arab Canadian identity as he deals with the past trauma of his sister's death in the old country. He is forced into therapy sessions after he is caught attempting suicide in the park. This seems to have been a cry for help due to his distress at his own identity loss. Therapy proves ineffective to the protagonist, yet insightful for the reader's understanding of

⁷ Hage is currently preparing to teach a course at the University of Ottawa in the English department titled Advanced Workshop in Fiction, Transforming Worlds for the winter term of 2020. He has indeed made a splash in the Canadian literary world.

his past. The plot introduces his diasporic friends, Shohreh and Faroud who emigrated from Iran as refugees of government imprisonment.

Imprisonment is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel. The protagonist's friends were physically imprisoned in the Middle East, while he is metaphorically imprisoned by his cockroach identity. In relation to other Arab Canadian authors, Hage can be considered an Arab-Quebecois "writer of exile" (Dahab 1), according to Mary Dahab's study on Arab Canadian writing in her book *Voices of Exile in Contemporary Canadian Francophone Literature*. She localizes exilic writing to Quebec because her research has proved that traditional Quebecois poetry incorporates the themes of "exile/madness, alienation, and a sense of loss, as well as the feeling of an absent or incomplete country" (Dahab 4). She draws an important comparison between Arab Canadian/Quebecois writers and Quebecois-born writers; both groups document their feelings of exile and alienation from an incomplete country. Her study demonstrates the commonality between the Arab Canadian and the Quebecois struggles over identity. In Dahab's framework it is possible to place Hage in a larger spectrum of exilic Canadian writers. Her book lists approximately forty Arab-Canadian writers, most of whom have written on similar themes of exile and alienation. Hage is not mentioned, but certainly is part of this group of exilic writers in Canada because thematically, imprisonment lends to the theme of exile. Through Dahab's study, it is possible to bridge the gap between diasporic and non-diasporic cultures in Montreal by tracing thematic parallels between their struggles. Despite this commonality, Hage's novel presents the reality of division between Montreal's diasporic and non-diasporic communities. I analyze how this social division

directly contributes to the protagonist's feelings of in-betweenness.

Framing the Analysis of Cockroach

This essay will use narrative theory, narratology, (Culler 83) to analyse Hage's choice of first-person narration, and his recourse to an unnamed narrator for the novel. According to Culler, stories "are the main way we make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world" (82). I will use this definition of storytelling to evaluate the way the narrator views the world around him in relation to his self-identification. I will focus more specifically on the first-person narration aspect of the storytelling, which reveals information about the protagonist's past and his fleeting thoughts as he battles the desire to "seal the sky" and exist in a state of perpetual darkness (Hage 11). I will also use narratology to explore the way Hage overcomes the limitations of first-person narration to allow readers insight into the lives of Shohreh and Faroud, the protagonist's friends.

Since the novel takes place in Montreal's Middle Eastern diaspora, it is necessary to define the term to fully grasp the problematic at hand. According to (First Name) Ben-Rafael, diaspora designates one group of people from the same origin to a specific neighbourhood or community within a host country. Those who dwell within diasporas who have common ancestry are "engaged in a reflexive project of identity-building" (843). In Hage's novel the diaspora is comprised of people from different Middle Eastern countries, which is what Ben-Rafael calls "transnational diaspora" (845). This kind of diasporic community bans together "despite the absence of a shared

‘old country’... through supra-national organizations, networks cross-cutting borders, and common cultural or religious markers” (843). Hage presents a Middle Eastern, and therefore transnational, diaspora through a cast of expats with mixed heritages including an Algerian professor, Shohreh the protagonist’s Iranian love interest, and their Persian friends Faroud and Reza. The narrator’s country of origin is never specified but critics have speculated that he is of Lebanese heritage. Readers do know for certain that he is an Arab, because he refers to himself as such on a few occasions (Hage 15, 67). This transnational Middle Eastern diaspora acts as a form of resistance to the mainstream Montreal society in that they retain their languages and culture of origin, as Hage illustrates through the café scene, which I will analyze below.

An important distinction that informs my analysis is between the concepts of interculturalism and multiculturalism. I argue that the presence of multiculturalism does not exist in Hage’s novel. Instead, the author presents an intercultural society. In “Interculturalism or Multiculturalism?”, Charles Taylor distinguishes the two by looking at their prefixes. ‘Multi’-culturalism gives a greater attention to the acknowledgment of diversity while ‘inter’-culturalism focuses more on integration. This difference, Taylor suggests, is visible through the comparison of Quebec immigrants to immigrants in the rest of Canada. Those who settle in Quebec are not only expected to find jobs and in general find their place in society, they are also expected to do so in French, thereby fully integrating themselves into Quebec society and adapting their culture (417). On the other hand, the rest of Canada focuses on the development away from an ‘anglo-normative’ society and towards a multiculturalist society which acknowledges all

cultures as part of the Canadian identity, without forced immigrant integration into a set cultural identity (Taylor 417). I will demonstrate how the question of interculturalism in the novel *Cockroach* becomes clear through the protagonist's interactions with his therapist, who treats him like an outsider, and his Quebecois French Canadian friends, with whom he speaks in French.

I will also compare the transformations of Kafka's main character Gregor in *The Metamorphosis* and Hage's unnamed narrator, both of whom change into insects. I borrow Kevin Sweeney's interpretation of identity in Kafka's novella, in his article entitled "Competing theories of Identity in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'", which shows how the main character's consciousness is trapped in a foreign insect body, thereby compromising his original identity. Taking into consideration the concepts of identity and diaspora, I will compare the narrator's transformation within his transnational Middle Eastern diaspora to Kafka's character, Gregor, whose insect body confines him to his bedroom, which isolates him from society. This will allow me to determine what the cockroach, or the insect in a broader sense, represents in terms of social identity.

Bibliographic Review

Hage's novel has generated much scholarly attention. In line with Wisam Abdul-Jabbar, who argues that the main character's feeling of estrangement stems from his loss of home⁸, which leads to his metaphoric vagabond resistance to

⁸ Home is to be understood metaphorically throughout this essay. The narrator is never physically homeless throughout the novel. However, his relocation into a new society establishes a metaphoric homelessness due to his loss of cultural identity and an inevitable sense of in-betweenness as a member of Montreal's Middle-Eastern diaspora.

Montreal's intercultural society, I will grapple with the notion of exile throughout the novel to illustrate the protagonist's transforming sense of identity. Moreover, Abdul-Jabbar quotes from Hage himself in relation to Kafka's work in *The Metamorphosis*; the author apparently stating that he never intended to "emulate Kafka" (169). However, I believe that there is substantial value in the comparison of the two texts. Their similarities and their differences are important aspects to the evaluation of Hage's protagonist's identity. Consequently, my approach differs from Abdul-Jabbar in the evaluation of the intertextual reference to Kafka, but accedes to its interpretation of the narrator's vagabond state to in relation to his idea of the diasporic identity.

In "From the Dark Territories of Pain and Exclusion to Bright Futures? Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*", Lisa Marchi, argues that the narrator "refuses to concur with the majority that multiculturalism is inherently good and cheerful" (1). While it is true that the narrator does not concur with the mainstream Montreal society, the novel does debate or reflect on multiculturalism. Contrary to Marchi, I will argue that it is in fact Montreal's and Quebec's interculturalism that the narrator battles. This will prove that the narrator, as the protagonist, is in opposition with society and its intercultural aspirations, which are the Hage's antagonist. Moreover, the focus on interculturalism will allow me to further highlight the narrator's transformation in comparison to Kafka's character. It is important not to think of Kafka and Hage's characters as one and the same. Instead, my objective is to show the importance of their difference. While they belong to the same genre of identity metamorphosis, their perspectives are very different. I conclude that Hage's novel proclaims the impossibility of

retaining one's identity in Montreal's Middle Eastern diaspora due to the mainstream intercultural society that surrounds them.

Therapy and the Imposed Interculturality

The novel's main character attempts suicide in the middle of the park. The novel opens with this dramatic scene as a way of explaining how he ended up in therapy sessions. I argue that part of the underlying reason he is pushed into therapy, aside from the obvious mental health benefits, is so society can better integrate him into Montreal's culture. By portraying this process, Hage presents the functional aspect of an intercultural rather than multicultural society. The therapist, Doctor Genevieve, proves to be unsuccessful at helping the protagonist work through his traumatic past. He confesses to her that his suicide attempt was "kind of out of curiosity, or maybe a challenge to nature... [because he] felt oppressed by it all" (Hage 4). The protagonist opens up to readers from the start of the narration, which is partly due to the effect of a first-person account. He admits that he feels oppressed by the society in which he lives. It is already clear that Montreal's mainstream society has been neglecting his cultural identity prior to the start of the novel's narration, and that it has led him to defy "the majority" through a kind of suicidal test (Marchi 1).

He reveals to his therapist about these thoughts, which is a difficult task since it is such a delicate subject and he is in an unstable state. The therapist's "laconic behaviour" simply annoys the protagonist, as it shows a cold and impersonal approach to their whole encounter (Hage 4). She interrupts his stories with generic questions like "and how do you feel about that," which sterilizes their exchange as a routine procedure (Hage 4). Her robotic attitude here

symbolizes society's systematic approach to integrating immigrants into mainstream culture. The protagonist's story is analogous to an integration assembly line. The new immigrant is unsatisfied living in Montreal's Middle Eastern diaspora; this dissatisfaction breeds an overall curiosity to escape existence, as it did for Hage's narrator. Some social power, in this case that of the park police, intervenes and stops the suicidal attempt (Hage 5); the individual is sent to mandatory therapy sessions where the therapist attempts to convert the patient by deeming his old way of life as misguided. This is certainly the case for the protagonist of *Cockroach*. Instead of helping him understand why he partook in criminal activity in his homeland, which for the record, was a means to survive in a war-stricken country, Doctor Genevieve tries to assimilate him into Montreal's mainstream society by using Western methods of therapeutic processes and questioning.

Moreover, the therapy sessions are conducted in English, which speaks to the interculturality of Montreal's society. The novel illustrates a relatively large Middle Eastern diaspora; therefore, there must be Middle Eastern professionals who could conduct the therapy sessions in Arabic. This would create a more welcoming healing environment for the protagonist. However, it is not healing that the mandated therapy sessions aim to achieve, otherwise, he would might have been accommodated. Instead, the English dialect acts as an integration tool to conform to Montreal's intercultural rather than multicultural society. Marchi suggests that the narrator opposes the joyfulness of multiculturalism. She believes that he refuses the "gift of happiness offered by multiculturalism" (7). This is a problematic way to think of his struggles with identity as it negates the pressure of society and ignores the traumatic

past that many immigrants experience. It suggests that he, the victim, is at fault for not conforming to society's expectations and for not being resilient to his migrant circumstance. In a society where people ignore him when he asks to borrow a lighter for his cigarette (Hage 260), in a country where an unsubstantial welfare system does not provide enough assistance for its population to acquire boots (Hage 9), he is somehow supposed to feel "grateful" (Hage 65) for the "multicultural" nation in which he has settled (Marchi 7).

Perhaps if Montreal's society was truly multicultural, he would have more opportunities to be an active participant, which would create a sense of gratitude to the nation-state. On the contrary, the interculturalist society oppresses his cultural identity through mainstream society's general lack of cultural diversity recognition and a fear of losing its own cultural identity (Taylor 419). The society Hage depicts cannot be considered multicultural because the therapist's attitude towards the protagonist represents society's rejection of cultural individuality. When her Western therapy methods fail, Doctor Genevieve blatantly states that the protagonist is using up the "taxpayers'" money (Hage 60). I interpret this is a direct reference to the social 'assembly line' of integration that I referred to earlier. She suggests that the mainstream Montreal population pays for these services to convert outsider cultural behaviours into their own. Out of frustration over the protagonist's lack of cooperation, she accidentally reveals the social fear of losing Montreal's identity to multiculturalism, and shows how the rest of the citizens pay to impose and enforce their intercultural society.

At this beginning stage of his transformation, the protagonist has not morphed into his cockroach persona. He

has instances of cockroach self-identification, for example when he attempts to explain to his therapist that he is half cockroach (Hage 5). These instances are infrequent at the start of the novel, and are associated with the underground. They occur mainly when he breaks into people's homes (80, 90); thus, the metaphoric underground fosters his criminal activity. It does so by paralleling the physicality of the underground, which is dirty, cold, and untamed, to criminal activity, which can be described with the same terms. Thus, criminal activity belongs to the underground where social rules are easily broken and go undiscovered.

When comparing the protagonist to Kafka's character Gregor Samsa at the beginning stage of the plot, there are clear differences. For one, Gregor is completely transformed into an insect from the early on in the story. His is a story of understanding why he has changed, while Hage's protagonist accepts his cockroach identity without question. Unlike the unnamed narrator, Gregor is able to recollect his "psychological past" while he is in insect form "supports[s] the conscious link to the past essential to the dualist theory of personal identity" (Sweeney 24). Hage's first-person narration is essential to the readers understanding that his psychological transformation does not seek to recollect his psychological past or return to his former self. Contrary to Gregor, Hage's character relishes his transformation.

During his cockroach instances, the protagonist narrates his thoughts for the reader's benefit. He takes pride in his ability to transform and "escape" through his cockroach persona (Hage 23). One moment encapsulates his psyche in relation to his experience in an intercultural society. He looks out the window while crying one day and notices his breath and tears have fogged his view. He is in amazement and thinks to himself: "my own breath was

obstructing my view of the world” (Hage 23). From this, readers understand that he has a negative self-perception. His breath symbolizes his identity and he has begun to view it as an obstruction to his worldview. This shows how he has already started to integrate into Montreal’s intercultural mainstream society because he views his breath, which I have identified as a symbol for his cultural identity, as a barrier. Mainstream Montreal also views cultural identity as such, which motivates interculturalism rather than multiculturalism. Here, through the scene’s symbolism, the narrator exhibits the intercultural attitude that society imposes. As I said, therapy does fail to completely integrate him into society, but it initiates a transformation in him through his experience of constant pressure to assimilate. It succeeds in pushing him to think of his cultural identity as an impediment to his worldview. However, it fails because instead of adopting the mainstream Montreal identity, he adopts that of the cockroach.

Interculturalism and the Character’s In-betweenness

The protagonist’s cockroach persona is a result of in-betweenness, which the forced interculturalist society inflicts upon him. In-betweenness is the feeling of being part of or belonging to two or more social groups (cite). For the protagonist, this experience of being in between, or inhabiting a liminal space, is obvious through his relation to the diaspora, his home country, and Montreal’s mainstream society. Within the diaspora, he spends his time among his Middle Eastern friends, each from varied countries of origin. His two closest friends are Shohreh, who is Iranian, and Faroud, who is Persian. The Middle Eastern diaspora creates an in-betweenness through its cultural diversity. On the one

hand, they are all Middle Eastern and share similar social traditions, like smoking and drinking coffee at their diasporic café. On the other, the three friends speak different languages, which creates a slight divide. Faroud and Shohreh are often represented speaking Farsi, thereby excluding the protagonist from his supposed place of belonging. His place in the diaspora is thus not entirely secure, and he is certainly no longer an active member of the society ‘back home’ since his immigration to Canada. He is also not accepted by Montreal’s mainstream society, as shown through his interactions with his therapist Genevieve.

This results in what Abdul-Jabbar refers to as the protagonist’s vagabond state. He explains that “the vagabond state and the divided self are apparent literary codes that define the Arab narrator who internalizes the drifting and aimless peculiarity of a vagabond’s life” (170). I argue that interculturalism is largely the cause of the narrator’s vagabond state in Hage’s *Cockcrach*. He resists the forced integration and does not have a defined place within his diasporic group of friends, so he wanders metaphorically homelessly. His identity is forced to transform in order to conform to his aimless lifestyle. Hence, the cockroach persona. His “cockroach wings” (Hage 23) allow him to easily dwell within the designated vagabond spaces, such as basements, drains, and underground pipes (6, 42, 80, 173). Therefore, his cockroach persona is essential to ease his feeling of estrangement from the world. It designates him a spot in society “at the bottom of the scale. But [he] still exist[s]” (122). His dual identity—half human, half cockroach—is interpreted as a survival mechanism in a society that has rejected him through the imposition of interculturalism.

The Sense of In-betweenness and the Arab Canadian Identity

The novel highlights the way the main character's Arab Canadian identity is challenged by his sense of in-betweenness, or his vagabond state. I have discussed how his cockroach persona gives him agency regardless of the social position it allocates him. The end of the novel illustrates the protagonist's full metamorphosis into his cockroach identity. Thus far his transformation has been mapped as follows: his initial proclamation of his cockroach identity to his therapist, followed by his acceptance of existing at the bottom of society's hierarchal scale through his cockroach identity. In my view, the next step in his transformation is represented through his acquisition of boots. He agrees to help a lady in his building steal a chest from an elderly woman's apartment. As a reward, the lady grants him two items from the chest. He decides to take a pair of old army leather boots and wool socks. He removes his old shoes and socks as a kind of ceremonial event and slips on the new boots and socks. During his first outdoor use of them he feels as though he is walking "above the earth and its cold white crust, [finally] feeling warm and stable" (Hage 253). This scene documents the first time that the protagonist experiences the feeling of comfort which parallels his sense of comfort in his in-between or liminal identity.

The boots symbolize his vagabond state overtaking his Arab Canadian identity. There is much to unravel here. First, he acquires the boots through criminal activity, which indicates that because of the lack of welfare support offered to him, his only means to acquire warmth is through thieving. Warmth here symbolizes the conformity to cold weather attire. Yes, he conforms, but he does so through criminal activity, which is only a partial integration to appear

as more of an active member of Montreal's mainstream society. The underlying truth is that his boots are a synecdoche of his cockroach identity. However, they do eliminate his Arab Canadian identity. The removal of his old shoes symbolizes the dislocation of his previous identity, that is his Arab Canadian identity. This identity belonged within the Middle Eastern diaspora but was never accepted in mainstream Montreal. He has therefore figured out that in order to exist within the mainstream, which imposes interculturality, he must rid himself of his diasporic identity. The boots symbolize this. However, mainstream Montreal rejects him because his cockroach side does not conform to the norm; it represents the broken social system at hand through the protagonist's criminal activity, which pushes him underground. It is the part of society that most people chose to ignore, as in so doing they ignore the protagonist among the aimless on the streets.

At this point he has detached himself from his Arab Canadian self, he is rejected by mainstream society, and the only place left for him is in-between the two, which for him means the underground: the cockroach's natural habitat. The end of the novel illustrates the protagonist's complete transformation into this identity. His love interest, Shohreh, realizes that her rapist from her time in an Iranian prison prior to her fleeing to Canada is a business partner of an Iranian restaurant owner. The protagonist happens to find work at that same restaurant. Shohreh and he then conspire to murder him out of revenge. Coming from the Middle East, where "everyone is used to gunshots", neither of them shows signs of reluctance or hesitates to commit to the task (Hage 64). This marks the protagonist's final step in his metamorphosis. He shoots and murders Shohreh's rapist, grows his "glittering wings" one final time and crawls

towards the drain to dwell in “the underground” (305). He completely immerses himself in the world of in-betweenness, relinquishing his Arab Canadian identity and rejecting the imposition of Montreal’s intercultural society. He is completely transformed into his cockroach persona and embodies the vagabond state.

It is now necessary to compare this transformation to Kafka’s character. The overall difference at hand is that Gregor wants out of his insect identity, while Hage’s protagonist embraces it because it is the only place he designates as his own in Montreal’s society. There is a positive side to his in-betweenness or liminality when considering his sense of agency. He is able to proclaim his existence in the world through his cockroach embodiment, regardless of his place of existence in the social framework, as discussed earlier. To Gregor, his insect identity is only viewed as limiting. He is unable to speak audibly to his family, he is stamped at and is thrust into this role unknowingly (Sweeney 25), whereas Hage’s protagonist makes the conscious decision to dive into the underground as a cockroach. However, one similarity arises according to Sweeney’s analysis of Kafka’s text. There is the “possibility that Gregor’s predicament might be imaginary, even though the experience be vivid, [which] challenges the reliability of his narrative point of view” (26). The same speculation can certainly be made of Hage’s protagonist’s narration. He tells the story from the perspective of a first-person narration, and admits to having drug-induced hallucinations of a giant albino cockroach appearing as a form of his inner consciousness (Hage 201). His hold on reality, like Gregor’s, is dislocated and unreliable. Although this challenges the reliability of his narrative, I believe that Hage does so purposely to highlight a larger social issue.

It is true that the protagonist's narration might be unreliable, but his lack of belonging and feelings as an outsider are real. In fact, they are so real that they induce cockroach hallucinations, if we are considering his cockroach moments as imaginary. The intercultural society where he lives has obstructed his sense of self to the point of the fracturing of his own identity through its rejection of his social self.

Conclusion

I have examined Hage's protagonist's metaphoric transformation into a cockroach, which I hope to have shown symbolizes his liminal condition in Montreal's intercultural society. The scenes portraying his interactions with the therapist enables readers to view Montreal's mainstream interculturality, which are the underlying cause for the protagonist's feelings of in-betweenness. This experience renders a multicultural Arab Canadian identity unviable, as it is a form of cultural integration, and thus he transforms into a cockroach. Overall, the novel speaks to the importance of retaining one's cultural identity, but it presents the impossibility of doing so if one's society imposes interculturality, which entails a form of assimilation or the erasure of one's cultural identity. Hage highlights the difficulty of existing in Montreal not only as Arab Canadians and Middle Easterners but any other culture because the cultural identity of outsiders, or deemed outsiders, is constantly opposed by an intercultural society. Therefore, as I have demonstrated, outsider culture is the true antagonist of the novel; this outsider is antagonized by mainstream Montreal culture to the point of a dramatic transformation.

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