PHD THESES OF ASSMA NAGUIB , EXETER UNIVERSITY

Between Diasporic and Exilic: Jad El-Hage's *The Last Migration* (2002)

"My homeland isn't my home anymore" (82).

The third novel to be discussed in this chapter is - like Nada Awar Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home* and Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* - another Lebanese Anglophone novel written in the West. However, Syrine Hout maintains that there is an important distinction to be made between Jad El-Hage's *The Last Migration* and the remaining corpus of post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction produced in the West. Explaining the differences between exile and diaspora, she introduces *The Last Migration* as a prototype of Lebanese diasporic fiction [that] may usher in a new brand of post-war fiction" (Hout 2007:288). Hout points out that the novel's subtitle "A Novel of Diaspora and Love", affirms the identity of the novel as diasporic and not exilic; in contrast for example to the novel discussed in the previous section which Hage dedicated to his "exiled friends". Hout cites Israel and Hammer who explain that diaspora is more focused on adaptations than longing, and that diasporas are less inclined towards suffering than exiles.

She goes on to argue that *The Last Migration* is an example of diasporic fiction because although its characters may exhibit a mental condition of exile as they maintain unresolved feelings towards the homeland either critical or nostalgic, the novel differs than its predecessors since "it offers a balanced perspective on the effects of living abroad on personal and collective identities" (288). For example, Ashraf, the novel's protagonist, in stark contrast to Rawi Hage's nameless narrator is a well integrated journalist. He "activates his longing to belong to a self-devised portable "home", and he performs affective as well as intellectual work which make possible a more meaningful future"(288). Ashraf, in Hout's opinion, is thus different than protagonists in other post-war fiction because he doesn't present an image of the migrating Lebanese as "alien, solitary and melancholy, out of place"[1] ; the former post-war novels - Hout maintained- "stress the exclusions of exile rather than the adaptations of diaspora" (289); they portray their experience outside of Lebanon as one that is in constant suspension (292). *The Last Migration* thus diverges from these novels since it further complicates the notion of home, by locating it within "the geography of [the] soul"[2].

As discussed in earlier chapters, the definitions of notions of exile and diaspora often overlap, and occasionally are used interchangeably; that without further clarification from Hout, it becomes difficult to pin some of the Lebanese novels produced in the West as either diasporic or exilic or even, more one than the other. In the two novels discussed previously for example, Nada

---

[1] Hout was quoting McClennen's description of exiles, which Hout believes fit the description of most of the protagonists in Lebanese novels written in English.

[2] A phrase that Hout explains that she borrowed from the Palestinian author Fawaz Turki

Awar Jarrar and Rawi Hage offered different perceptions of home: neither novel referred to Lebanon as the ultimate home. Instead Jarrar offered suggestions that homes can be embodied within families, love and self fulfilment, while Rawi Hage highlighted the aspect of material deprivation and global oppression that prevented his protagonist from completely securing a home in Montreal. Although exile and diaspora are fundamentally different concepts (Israel 2000:3) that carry within them different experiences of displacement at different stages, in the process of writing

> "the rhetoric of displacement is less ideologically certain or fixed than Ahmad, Nixon and others often assume it to be , and more profoundly ideologically over determined, emitting (in Jameson Frankfurt's school derived terminology) both "reifying" and "utopian" political charges, with neither force ultimately having the final say" (14).

In other words, the elements of force/choice, dispersion/cohesion, melancholy/adaptation that epitomize either exile or diaspora could figure in the same text in different degrees, a state which renders either label; diasporic or exilic futile.

If in the novel at hand, the protagonist's focus on narrating the aspects which highlight his adaptation and successful integration in London away from Lebanon is perceived by Hout as a reflection of the diasporic outlook of the novel, I maintain however that El-Hage's novel – the subtitle notwithstanding – expresses an exilic outlook in several other ways. Thus while I agree with Hout that El-Hage's protagonist Ashraf suggests an alternative to Lebanon as home ; I also argue that his life outside of Lebanon takes place under the weighty shadow of the past. The narrative thus oscillates between diasporic and exilic in almost equal degrees; with the exilic pull encumbering the process of "homing", and the diasporic pull strengthened by affirming the ties to the homeland through cultural and emotional gestures. This push and pull is not exclusive to Jad El-Hage's narrative; it has figured in the previously discussed *Cockroach*, where the exilic pull was mitigated by the ease of material deprivation, and it has also figured in *Somewhere, Home* in Salwa's narrative, whose home in Australia is made possible by the comfort and security allowed by being surrounded by her entire family. The operation of these opposite forces is highlighted here however in relation to Syrine Hout's discussion of *The Last Migration*, as the prototype of a Lebanese Diasporic Novel that may usher in a different trend in post-war fiction.

A Novel of Diaspora and Love

Jad El-Hage, the writer of the novel in dispute is a poet, a novelist and a playwright was born in Beirut in 1946. He was 31 years old when the civil war erupted in Lebanon in 1975, and he left Lebanon after 10 years of war as he immigrated to Australia. After moving to Australia in 1985, Jad El-Hage worked in several cities including Beirut, Paris, Athens and Sydney ("Jad el-Hage"). Hage now divides his time between Melbourne and a small village in north Lebanon" (Hage). His first ever novel to be written in English, *The Last Migration* (2002) won the "presentation Prize at the writer's festival in Sydney" (Hout 2007:287). His corpus of writing includes six selections of poetry and one selection of short stories that were both written in the Arabic language.

The Arabic alphabet in which Hage has predominantly written makes an appearance in *The Last Migration*, his first English novel; as each of its chapters is headed by one Arabic letter. The last chapter is headed with the letter *Qaf* which is the first letter in the name of Ashraf's native village Qana – spelled Cana throughout the novel, and thus coincidentally corresponds to the Arabic word

that means: was. Each chapter starts with an excerpt from what Ashraf refers to as Claire's Little Book, a collection of thoughts and reflections written by Claire - his deceased beloved- and presented to him by her daughter Francoise after Claire's death. The 19 chapters are then framed by a prologue written in November 1995 and an epilogue written in November 1996. The narration comes to a halt in the middle of this year in April 1996, as the Qana massacre takes place and as Ashraf undergoes his chemotherapy treatment for a cancer that went undiagnosed and the symptoms of which started with the death of Claire. The narration resumes only to sum up the twenty one weeks of medical treatment in an epilogue in November 1996. In between these points of beginning and end, Ashraf, a forty something year old journalist of Lebanese origins – like Jad El-Hage himself - tells the story of his life in London with his lifelong friend Marwan, Anna the "Irish squatter turned commercial landlady, plumber, builder"(10), and the other "unidentifiable aliens"(77) in the cosmopolitan district of Shepherd's Bush.

Having moved to London after living for a while in Australia, Ashraf holds his Lebanese identity, heritage and friends as his coping tools after the departure from the homeland, and the loss of the woman whom he loved more than all others. Only Ashraf's mother remained in Qana refusing to abandon her native village, while Ashraf headed to Australia with his Lebanese wife and daughters after having had his visa rejected by the French authorities. His two daughters Layla, an 18 years old History major who "remembers names and dates and battles and catastrophes like nobody does" (32), and twelve year old Reem who wants "to sing and dance and act and be rich and famous" (32), grew up "unscathed by war" (34) – something for which Ashraf expresses his gratitude to Australia. His two daughters remain in Australia with their mother Sabina after their parents' divorce that was fuelled by Sabina's passion for Jehovah witnesses.

The story that Ashraf starts telling in November 1995 is like most post-war Lebanese fiction intercepted with flashbacks from the past; in *The Last Migration*, they go as far back as five months, or twenty years and more. The starting point of the novel is the visit by Francoise five months after her mother's death in a mud avalanche in Mexico. From this starting point, Ashraf tells us about his first encounter with the novelist during a conference in Amsterdam that was held "to promote the exchange of ideas and [to] encourage mutual translations" (7), and their five months long relationship, a relationship during which they "zigzagged between airports" (14). It is this grief that Ashraf grapples with curing throughout the novel.

The buzz of homing – a diasporic narrative?

Realizing that his "homeland isn't [his] home anymore" (82), Ashraf holds on to water colour paintings from his Southern village, letters that keep him in touch with his daughters in Australia and his mother in Lebanon, Lebanese food –which features excessively in the novel as he proudly presents it to his friends and family, and Lebanese songs, which his children prepare for him on his occasional visits to Australia. As Syrine Hout has indicated, Ashraf doesn't merely endorse these cultural manifestations of Lebanon, but "he also invites his western friends to partake of these delights… [indicating that]...what signifies home is not fixed to walls but rather is an experience of sharing part of one's heritage with interested others" (2007:290) .These are indeed depictions of what Hout referred to as the "adaptations of the diaspora". Ashraf also exemplifies a diasporic identity, since he appears to be well integrated in his new environment; he maintains a successful career and an active social life.

However, in this diasporic state, Ashraf's hunger for home takes the form of a search for a woman's love; a quest that is articulated by his friend Marwan (159); a woman whose love will become his home. This alternative home that Ashraf finds shortly with Claire, and later with Jenny is one that is drastically idealized and romanticized in a manner that is at odds "with the reality of people's lived experiences of home" (Mallet). In other words, Ashraf replaces the nostalgic and romantic yearning for a home in Lebanon with an equally unrealistic idea of home embodied in the love of two women. He refers to Claire as a "safe haven" (31), and to Jenny - the Scottish massage therapist and a "pragmatic Eve" (89) who sets a year long deadline on her relationships with men - as a "refuge" (135). He feels at home in Claire's apartment (13), and in Jenny's "model home" (115). He describes the day he met Claire as a "Monet day" (9) on which they conversed through an "unsung melody" (10) on a night where "the crescent moon was chasing its tail like a silver fish" (12) and "people smiled for the sake of smiling" (13). Although Claire, like Jenny, refuses to share her entire life with him, keeping in place a set of restrictions that won't interfere with her needs as a creative writer, Ashraf throughout the novel holds an idealized memory of her and finds severe difficulty in surmounting her loss. Having lost her to death, he is unaware of any problems that might have tarnished a longer relationship with her. Ashraf thus desires to duplicate the memory of Claire and he attempts to idealize his second possible home personified in Jenny. However as this second relationship is uninterrupted by death and grief, the romance ends before nostalgia gets a chance. Jenny admonishes Ashraf for trying to force his ideals on her: "You cast a mould in your head and you wanted me to fit in it. The statue you made of me isn't real. It's only in your mind" (174).

Ashraf's euphoric "buzz of homing" (109) with Jenny is short-lived and it ends to reveal a cancer that has gone undiagnosed despite frequent visits to the GP who diagnosed him first with SAD (18) soon after Claire's death and later with Vagal Syncope (160). His insistence to idealize a failing relationship, and his failure to correctly diagnose his real ailments cost him a severe and long treatment of chemotherapy. Facing the reality of both his cancer which demanded chemotherapy treatment and the massacre in the Village of Qana that caused the murder of his extended family and neighbours, along with Marwan's mother – Ashraf realizes the drawbacks of both excessive nostalgia and idealized memories. His relationship to the memory of Claire, and his idealization of the idea of her as home exhibits a feature of exiles, who tend to look back at the loss of home as a lost ideal (Salhi 2006:3). His recollections of Claire resembles exilic recollections of idealized homelands that have been lost. Such recollections, McClennen argued are

> "always flawed, always tainted by the distortions of the exile's imagination and desire. The past is only understood in light of the present and vice versa. When one has experienced an extraordinary rupture in time, both views of the past and the present bear the marks of this disjunction" (McClennen 2004:56).

The Ashraf humbled by one massacre and prolonged chemotherapy sessions, is turned into a more practical/realistic man as he decides to marry his Irish friend Anna who stood by him all along. At the end of the novel, Anna is pregnant with his child, and they are joined by Ashraf's mother who came from Lebanon on her first and last migration (184), and hence reconciling the idealized past with the reality of the present.

Although Ashraf devises his own portable home that replaces his Lebanese village, he does not escape the pitfall of nostalgia that is brought about by the shocking loss of Claire who embodied a temporary home. However, between the two major milestones that mark the two major ruptures

in Ashraf's life; one having spurred the onset of the symptoms of his illness, and the other that spurred its full-scale attack, El-Hage's narration "portrays Lebanon not as a polar opposite to the (temporary) host country but as a stopover (63) while travelling between cities to its East and West "(Hout 2007:292). Ashraf emerges from the narration as an active member of the host countries to which he travels, and engages in forming his own personal home.

Ashraf the Exile

Peter Brooks has warned against the tendency of cultural studies to discard the importance of "the structure and texture of the text" (103) in its study of literature. What is missed by discarding the structure and texture – as previously pointed out in the case of *Cockroach*'s textual erasure of the past – is in this instance El-Hage's excessive employment of war imagery. The diasporic identity of the text that Hout argues for appears to be heavily eclipsed by El-Hage's choices of imagery throughout the novel. Ashraf the cosmopolitan Londoner – it should be remembered- is also a Lebanese immigrant who has endured the war in Lebanon for a period of time, and whose mother still endures the harshness of the war in the southern Lebanese village. As a result, his diasporic identity is occasionally replaced by one that is traumatized – it doesn't look forward diasporically but remains textually bound to the past – in the manner of exiles.

To explain: Ashraf describes the airport where he starts a journey to holiday with his two daughters as "a furniture warehouse with catatonic passengers clutching their hand luggage"(22) , the airport terminal "looked more like a rescue centre for refugees" (22), where "everyone seemed desperate, as if fleeing a country at war"(23). The chaos brought about by a slight delay of his flight reminded Ashraf of "the confusion minutes before the end of a curfew or at the announcement of a temporary cease-fire when people shuffle and run in every direction voicing loudly the pathos of their situation" (23). Words like Crisis, exodus, and forbidden exits litter the text in its description of the airport. The narrator becomes fixated and obsessed with an Italian grandmother who is travelling on her 80th birthday with a bouquet of flowers given to her by her grandchildren, and that she wants cremated with her body upon her death; he sadly thinks to himself: "there was no way that they could accommodate her roses without throwing out someone else's belongings" (26). Even as he arrives and meets his daughters, the imagery of aggression persists; he becomes a bird of prey (30) encountering vultures and vehement kisses from his daughters (30). His daughters' sisterly scuffles remind him of wars and armistice agreements (40). The imagery also persists when he lies down to rest for a few minutes after a date, Ashraf describes his thoughts:

> "Images drifted through my head. Nothing precise, just shrapnel from broken visions and mushrooming tears. Atavistic tremors. Things never seem to happen to me slowly; they come like gunshots in the dark. He who pulls the trigger had severed my better half, leaving me with an amputated soul" (110).

So alive is the past in Ashraf's subconscious that when he is attacked by two teenagers in London, his violent past instantaneously resurfaces:

> I created a cocktail of retribution, buying all sorts of weapons, hunting down the boys, forcing them to hand over their own jackets at gun point. It wasn't until I heard Liz shuffling around upstairs in the early morning that I even thought of reporting the incident to the police (133).

Such imagery betrays the label of a diasporic narration and instead indicates towards an identity that is still marked by the history of a traumatized violent past that Ashraf struggles to silence. This traumatic reaction that manifests itself textually is a reaction to constant news of the escalating conflict in southern Lebanon (67), as well as to Ashraf's exilic guilt. Writing about Iranian Exiles, Shahidian stated that

> Exile erects a labyrinth of feelings; guilt shows up at every turn. Among the exile's emotional hurdles, they must come to terms with present life proving easier than the existence they abandoned, for loved ones still endure *that* life. (2000:84)

This is definitely true in the case of Ashraf, whose disease is cured and quest for homing is only resolved when his mother departs war torn Lebanon to join him in the West as the "past and future and present dissolve"(184).

However, this guilt is not the only manifestation of an exilic narration in *The Last Migration*. Reflecting on life in exile, Edward Said maintains that

> "exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share, and it is in the drawing of lines around you and your compatriots that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge: an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders"(178),

He also states that in "clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong" (182). This difference; a set of factors that exiles insist set them apart from their new environment is quite evident in Ashraf's narrative in *The Last Migration.* Ashraf who sees himself as a "perfect Londoner" (2) embraces Said's version of the exile throughout the novel, attributing at times to his Lebanese heritage all that he perceives as positive, and to his surroundings (whether Western, British or otherwise) all that he perceives as negative. These instances where he stresses this superiority of his Lebanese background occur within the folds of the novel in instances marginal to the plot. Thus while the general themes highlight the well integrated Ashraf and his trouble-free (as opposed to Cockroach's narrator) interaction with the members of cosmopolitan London – instances that are sufficiently highlighted in Hout's analysis, these marginal incidents point towards an exilic narration.

One of such incidents occurs when Ashraf shows Claire around Shepherd Bush in London, taking her to the market where he shops for groceries. Ashraf highlights the contrast between the markets in Lebanon and London by providing the description of the London encounter followed with memories from the markets in Lebanon. In London he complains that:

> Beyond the casual, "Can I help you? How many? Thank you," and the occasional, "See you later", they don't say much, even when they're overwhelmed by a flock of Indians, Arabs, Kurds, Jamaicans and other unidentifiable aliens like me who constantly jump the sacred queue, ignoring the Please Don't Touch signs….. 'But it's compulsive for us to smell a lemon, feel a tomato or taste a grape…. We can't understand why we're frowned at'" (76).

This is presented in immediate contrast to the recollected memory of the festive lively market in Nourieh Souk in Beirut where

> "merchants sang the merits of their goods in comic, rhythmic melodies. It was a festival of the senses. Touching, smelling, tasting, *Ya hala*, welcome. They would give away slices of watermelon and crisp lettuce hearts sprinkled with fresh water. There was plenty harvested locally, nothing was frozen or imported. It was a celebration to listen, to buy, to touch, to taste and taste again'" (76).

Attributing to Lebanon the virtues of sensuality, sociability and generosity, this episode also goes on to highlight the lack of British sense of humour in contrast to that of all the unidentifiable aliens in the market. Everyone at the market starts laughing when the African woman with the large bosoms and large behind is seen "holding a long cucumber with her two hands, shaking it like a fireman's hose" (76) and says to the stall keeper: "That's how I like'em" (76). Everyone at the scene laughs except the two main keepers of the stall, here representing the British host opposite the sea of "aliens".

This strategy of excluding himself from the attributes of his London environment recurs often through the novel; Ashraf in another instance maintains that belly dancing – an act of eastern culture that comes naturally to "girls from Tangiers to Baghdad" (93) – is extremely difficult to be copied by Londoners. As he watches a girl learning to dance in the studio of Jeanette – the Assyrian Iraqi – he notes how the blundering dancer "killed herself to oblige [with the dance moves], but she just couldn't make all that abundant flesh loosen up" (92), and he questions if these skills could possibly "come naturally to a Westerner" (94) who would have to absorb this "alien culture late in life" (94). Ashraf insists on setting himself apart as an alien with exclusive attributes that cannot be copied or even shared by his new environment, calling to mind Said's description of exiles.

In yet one more marginal episode, Ashraf explains how he lived next door to a group of mentally disadvantaged people who were all on medication who occasionally caused some noise in the neighbourhood by "the occasional kitchen fight and the sounds of heads banging on walls"(74). Of this group, it was Gary who was the most problematic as he played very loud music and started "howling until his hoarse groans died" (74). Ashraf insists to his neighbours that "had this calamity occurred in Beirut, Gary wouldn't be tolerated" (74); to which his neighbours respond by stating that in Beirut Gary would probably be shot, and Ashraf retorts by saying that no one would be punished for his death. As the neighbours wait for a legal solution to deal with Gary and his noise, Ashraf resorts to buying a set of earphones for Gary so he doesn't have to share his music with anyone (75). The sad end to Gary's episode, as he is injured in a fire in his apartment, is then presented in contrast to the more humane treatment that could have allowed those like Gary, a dignified end to life in Lebanon. His narration tells the readers of the deal between his mother and Oum Marwan whereby the latter requested from her friend to end her life with a lethal injection: "When I'm crazy, I'm not Oum Marwan anymore. I'm dead" (70).

Other instances where Ashraf sets himself apart from his new environment abound; his irritation at the image of his daughter as a "full-blown Western woman" (31), his insistence on dressing the Western Claire in a red Jellabia (81) and his discontent with Jenny who didn't want to take part in belly dancing (127) are all instances that together compound to emphasise the identity of the narrative as exilic. Ashraf also forcefully asserts his Lebanese identity in his discussions with Marwan about the political and social situation in Lebanon, they both speak of it as a country to

which they undoubtedly belong (157). However, as he embraces his Lebanese identity, myths and realities included equally, Ashraf never equates the concept of home with that of nation. Instead, as Hout maintained ""home is mobile, portable, circumstantial and transferable from person to person" (Hout 2007:291).

Concluding Remarks

Ashraf, the protagonist in Jad el-Hage's first English novel is quite different from the protagonists that have so far figured predominantly in post-war Anglophone Lebanese fiction. He owes no resemblance to the melancholic suicidal Marianna in Patricia Saraffian Ward's *The Bullet Collection*, and he diverges widely from Rawi Hage's bitter and angry central characters in *De Niro's Game* and *Cockroach*, and unlike Jarrar's three female protagonists in *Somewhere, Home*, he is not still toying with ideas of hopeful return. Indeed, in telling his story, Ashraf does not knowingly present himself as a nameless immigrant, nor as a person traumatized by the effects of the civil strife from which he escaped. But these effects of trauma and excessive preoccupation with being rooted and grounded do figure in the novel on the level of the textual structure and as marginal episodes- like subconscious afterthoughts. As the protagonist pronounces his search for a love of a woman that compensates him for the loss of his southern Village Cana, the search could only take place in the shadow of the past. It is this pull towards the past that Hout chooses to call exilic, in contrast to a diasporic and forward looking pull towards the present and the future. In my reading of *The Last Migration*, I have chosen to highlight Nico Israel's view in relation to the literature of displacement between exile and diaspora: "the two metaphors and experiences [are] involved in a kind of tension without resolution" (2000:18).

Works Cited

EL-HAGE, JAD (2002). "The Last Migration: A Novel of Diaspora and Love". Melbourne: Panache, 2002.

HOUT, SYRINE (2007). "The Last Migration: The First Contemporary Example of Lebanese Diasporic Literature". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, December 2007, pp. 286-296

ISRAEL, NICO (2000). "Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora". Stanford University Press, 2000.

"Jad el-Hage". Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature. Accessed on 6th of March 2010 at: http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/143/jad_el-hage/

MCCLENNEN, SOPHIA A (2004). The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures. Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana.

SHAHIDIAN, HAMMED (2000). "Sociology and Exile: Banishment and Tensional Loyalties". *Current Sociology, Vol. 48, No. 2, 71-99.*