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## The last taboos – love, sex and yearning for home

*The Last Migration takes a literary swipe at censorship and the Arab novel*

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Special to The Daily Star

The Last Migration by Lebanese-born Jad el-Hage is a cathartic literary experience – both for the reader and the author. Appealing predominantly to the ex-pat reader, the novel – Hage's first in English – is an unconsciously intimate, even personal, story about one man's unremitting yearning for lost love and homeland.

Although Hage, whose 30-year journalistic work includes reports for Al-Hayat, An-Nahar, and the BBC, admits concern in writing his first novel in English, he succeeds in creating a piece of great literary value. Moreover, he significantly contributes to a new form of literature, one that can be characterized as purely "diasporan."

The story centers on Ashraf Saad, a traveling arts journalist based in London, who grieves as he tries to let go of his attachment to Claire, who died shortly after they fell in love.

The attachment haunts him relentlessly, much like his home in South Lebanon. This is revealed subtly through recurring references to Mediterranean foods. Ashraf's childhood friend anchors him throughout the book, sharing colorful and often humorous anecdotes of their memories growing up in their village, Qana.

Ashraf is pulled emotionally in many directions: In 1996 Qana was bombed by Israel in Operation Grapes of Wrath, killing 106 civilians. Despite several pleas by Ashraf to leave the war-torn village, his mother insists on staying there, attached to her need to nurse the wounded. On the other hand, Ashraf is also affected by the

distance with his two daughters from a previous marriage, who live in Australia.

Meanwhile, his shoulder pains him, which takes a growing significance as the story unfolds, leading him to see Jenny, a reflexologist. Jenny begins to relieve not only his shoulder-ache, but the hollow emotional vacuum left by Claire's death.

The relationship, which begins as a steamy sexual adventure, soon confronts deep cultural differences as Ashraf's warm and chaotic Mediterranean roots clash with Jenny, a vegetarian single mother who chooses relationships that "don't last for more than a

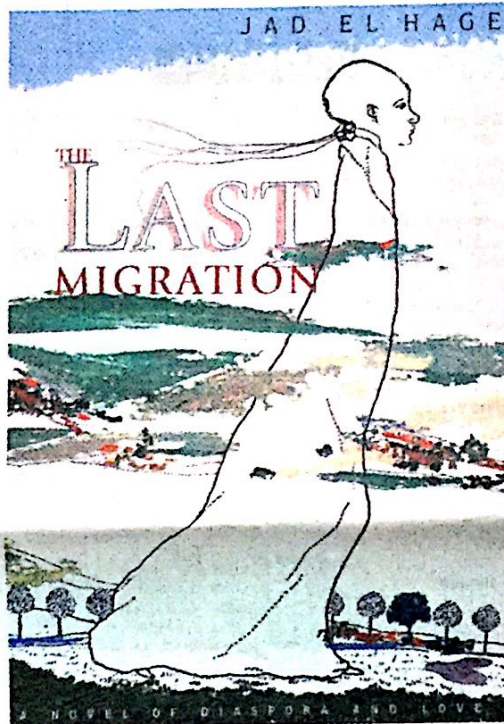
|| 'I have to turn to ... English to fulfill ... the basic need for communication'

year" and believes that belly-dancing is a harem slave dance.

Throughout the story, Ashraf's closest friend, Anna, a decidedly un-feminine squatter, supports him with her casual Irish humor. While not knowing or caring much about Orientalism or other theories, her interest in Ashraf's culture is sincere and wholehearted.

Hage's literary talent shines as he describes every detail with captivating intimacy. Literary devices – similes, metaphors, characterization, foreshadowing – are used appropriately, making the novel fit for inclusion on university reading lists.

Through descriptions, letters, dialogue, anecdotes, and narration, the story rolls along with every detail bearing significance, keeping the story



firmly woven to its larger soul.

The voice of the novel, a first-person narration, breaks the boundaries between novel and autobiography, literary character and author. This is intentional: The voice of the novel is the fine line on which both fiction and fact walk.

Like Hage, Ashraf is an arts reporter traveling to cover film festivals, literary conferences and theater; like Hage, he comes from the South, lives in London and visits his two daughters in Australia. Even Hage's poetic dimension – he has published several selections of his poetry and prose over the past 30 years – is evoked in the prose poems from Claire's Little Book, which begin each chapter like a relentless reminder of his pain.

Even Hage's impressions about Middle Eastern society are mirrored in the text. The opening chapter begins, significantly, at a writers' conference in Amsterdam where writers from Europe and the Arab world are brought together.

Hage describes a drunken Moroccan novelist disorging

the problems – *houmoum* – of Arab writers.

"The Arab writer is surrounded by *houmoum* – mentally, spiritually and politically he's in chains. He can't even piss in peace ... Censors lurk everywhere," he says. "Publishing is medieval in our countries. Arab writers rarely make a living from their work. There are no royalties ... yet writers are expected to be ... the carriers of high morality."

In a recent interview, Hage echoed similar sentiments. His first political novel, published in 1988, *Al-Akhdar wal-Yabes* (The Green and the Dry) – the first novel to be published in Australia in Arabic – was sold out in Lebanon.

"Publishing as an industry is a problem in Lebanon. There are few publishers ready to pay for your work or ready to contribute to the publication of your work. You can't tell where it's published or how many are sold. It's not dealt with in a serious professional way," he says.

Hage singles out his years as senior editor for the Arabic

branch of Harlequin Press, explaining that the books, which ranged from romance to crime, were stopped after Saudi Arabia, which made up almost half of its sales, censored the books.

"I was very depressed after that," says Hage, "because I was hoping that this venture would bring a lot of life to the Arab writing ... In Arabic these days it's so hard because you have so many obstacles. You write the book and you're not sure its going to be read in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia. Even here in Lebanon censorship will stop the book if it's talking explicitly about sex, for example."

The Last Migration confronts all this. The story is peppered with allusions to love-making, homosexuality, smoking joints and adultery.

As such The Last Migration is as much a catharsis for the author as the emotional migration is for Ashraf.

"In many ways, this book symbolizes my last migration from Arabic to English," he says. "If the Arab world had the same openness ... I would continue writing in Arabic. But instead I have to turn to writing in English to fulfill the purpose for the basic need for communication," he explains. "I was really affected by the literature of James Joyce and the way he mixed language, English and Irish. I thought I would do the same thing with Arabic and English."

And with The Last Migration, he does just that. The book's English language is not only infused with Middle Eastern issues and references, but is, in form, a reflection of its content: "Love is the end waiting," Claire wrote, and the story concludes with a vindication from Ashraf's personal and cultural turmoil.

In Anna he finds the merger and convergence of worlds, the acceptance and mutual compassion of one world's way of thinking for the other. Ashraf is the embodiment of the socio-political crevice that contains both fictive and factual reality.

An otherwise oil-water relationship between East and West is thus merged through the use of language, making The Last Migration a brilliant piece of diasporan literary art.

Jad el-Hage will be signing The Last Migration at Virgin Megastore on Feb. 14 at 6pm

