

BOOK REVIEW

The Last Migration: Jad El Hage's tale of diaspora and love

Novel draws on author's experiences as a journalist in Europe

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BEIRUT: In the wake of his inamorata Claire's unexpected death, a devastated Ashraf Saad meanders about aimlessly, trying in vain to extract meaning out of life as a peripatetic Lebanese journalist based in London's derelict Shepherd's Bush district. His daughters and ex-wife thousands of miles away in Australia, and his mother steadfastly refusing to leave a Cana now devoid of miracles, Ashraf finds succor only in drinking binges with fellow Lebanese reporter Marwan, and a frustratingly brief but wistfully redolent visit from Claire's daughter Francoise.

Not even loyal Anna, Ashraf's petite but fiery Irish buddy, can alleviate his down-trodden spirits. On the verge of capitulation, Ashraf meets and falls for Jenny, an attractive masseuse who does wonders for his perennially troubled left shoulder. But no sooner does a relationship of sorts develop and Ashraf begin to heal – both emotionally and physically – than he realizes that he must confront a new and perhaps even more formidable adversary, unrequited love.

Subtitled *A Tale of Diaspora and Love*, *The Last Migration* draws heavily on Lebanese writer Jad El Hage's experiences as a Europe-based journalist for the Arabic-language Al-Hayat newspaper. Having garnered scant attention when first released (in Australia), the book has recently made its way to the Middle East, where it has met with modest success.

Related in first-person, *The Last Migration* chronicles lovelorn Ashraf Saad's tumultuous odyssey against the backdrop of simmering tensions between Lebanon and Israel in the mid-1990s. Hage's first work in English, the novel boasts a number of appealing features, but never solidifies as either personal drama (Ashraf's love problems are hardly unique) or wider social commentary (the implications of a large Arab diaspora in the West are dealt with only superficially). One cannot but feel that this book is essentially light reading, peppered throughout with a few substantive issues as ballast.

Though Hage's English is fluent, too often his choice of words sounds an undeniably awkward ring. This is perhaps best attributed to the fact that the sentence structure of the novel is too studied, the fastidious author deeming it necessary to augment Ashraf's every thought and emotion with a grandiloquent metaphor, often



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having something to do with powerful environmental forces and shipwrecks ("I was overjoyed but still heavy with sorrow, like a shipwreck nearing land and constantly pushed back by the waves" ... "The smell of roasting coffee beans fell over me like a warm blanket over a shipwreck.") A heavy-handed, almost turgid style is the result, especially when at the center of all the overblown imagery are Ashraf's often banal sentiments.

There are two literary devices Hage employs to generally good effect, however, both serving to enhance his story's appeal: the practice of relating memorable anecdotes, and the description of the protagonist's sexual escapades. Not every anecdote is winning, of course,

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and his portrayal of the physical act of love does not break any major barriers, but such attractive features help offset some of the more uninspired stretches that plague this book, despite its relative brevity (184 pages).

Just when we are about to write off alcohol-friendly Marwan as strictly a cardboard character, his only purpose to get childhood friend Ashraf besotted, an unexpected twist is introduced, as we are provided with a glimpse into the man's true aspirations. A delightful story involving the allure of landscape gardening, the Biblical significance of Cana, and Lebanon's poet laureate Said Aki, serves to explain Marwan's current job as sportswriter for a Lebanese newspaper and his longing for an entirely different life. And the account of Ashraf's wedding night with his now ex-wife Sabina, a disastrous affair

reminiscent of a shockingly powerful scene in Israeli Arab film-maker Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee*, effectively encapsulates the absurdity of outdated Arab sexual mores. Elongated and refined, these and other sketches, such as a few of Ashraf's more raucous childhood tales, would make very engaging short stories.

A youthful ebullience pervades Hage's zesty descriptions of Ashraf's more successful sexual encounters, both in flashback with the late Claire, and in the present with current companion Jenny. Writing in English and therefore freed from the stifling restraints of the straitlaced Arabic literary establishment, Hage, though never quite explicit, parlays a fertile imagination and an exuberant attitude into several very sensuous scenes. After the more mawkish ruminations on love and loss found throughout the novel, and the ethereal poetry – excerpted from Claire's personal journal – that ushers in every chapter, such earthiness is most refreshing.

There are serious problems with much of the story, however, and the most manifest is Hage's caricaturesque depiction of Westerners as ultimately dysfunctional beings. In several countries, directly or through indirect reference, we are treated to an endless cavalcade of loveless women, transvestites, transsexuals, religious extremists, college students posing as prostitutes, suicidal teens, child molesters, and a general array of offensively pathetic characters. The eccentricities of these people are overdone, and at times one wonders whether Hage situated Ashraf's London residence in Shepherd's Bush solely for its exploitative promise, something especially apparent in the gratuitous story of a former mental patient and his supremely annoying habits.

In marked contrast to the surrounding perversion and decadence, those Arabs depicted by Hage as residing in Western countries emerge as islands of stability, largely unruffled by their neighbors' depravity. For example, though Hage briefly alludes to the gang problem rife among Lebanese youth in Australia, the expatriate Arabs to whom we are actually introduced – both in Australia and the UK – are all remarkably well-adjusted as well as strikingly liberal in outlook. Significantly, the exceptions – like Ashraf's ex-wife Sabina – have been corrupted by elements of the host country. There is no talk of culture clash, or Islamic fundamentalism, indeed of any

of the common difficulties that accompany immigration to totally different countries. To his credit, however, Hage does tackle a few of the problems faced by Arabs in their native societies, and Ashraf's conversations with fictitious Moroccan author Nassri Mahmoud produce some trenchant criticisms of the state of literature in the Arab world.

The tense relationship between Ashraf and his daughter Layla, who, along with her sister Reem, lives in Australia, is a lingering issue never fully explored. Layla's open rebuke of her father in a long letter seems as though it might finally detonate the latent envy she feels at the attention he lavishes upon Reem. Yet the issue seems to evaporate as soon as Layla gets a boyfriend – a sad commentary on Hage's apparent faith in escapism.

Anna, Ashraf's trusty Irish pal, is a real virago by most accounts – including Ashraf's own. Muliebrity fortunately assumes many different forms, however, and Anna's increasing importance as the novel progresses allows us to appreciate her as a possible romantic rival to Jenny, who seems incapable of properly returning Ashraf's affection. Nevertheless, as a character Anna remains somewhat ill-defined, the author relying on her only intermittently and never allowing her to develop an existence outside the world of Ashraf's needs. Only with the novel's conclusion is her true purpose fully revealed, but by then it is too late to fully flesh out her role.

The story climaxes just as a period of increased military activity along the south Lebanon border culminates in Israel's sanguinary Grapes of Wrath operation. Launched against Lebanon in April 1996, it included the shelling of the UN compound at Qana, causing the deaths of one hundred and three civilians sheltering there. This tragedy, along with the unexpected turn Ashraf's personal life takes, makes for a well-crafted ending tying together Ashraf's romantic yearnings, his mother's desperate existence in Qana, and his daughters' lives in Australia. Indeed, it is the conclusion that gives the book its title, the hope being that a final migration will inaugurate a more tranquil existence for the novel's central characters.

Alas, the tautest of knots cannot salvage a perforated balloon; despite entertaining segments and the author's flair both for humorous tales as well as the mysteries of physical love, the novel remains inchoate in many important respects.