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MONTREAL-THE UNDERGROUND CITY IN RAWI HAGE'S COCKROACH

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Abstract: *The article sets out to demonstrate how in his novel *Cockroach* the Canadian writer Rawi Hage deconstructs the image of Montreal as a romantic hospitable city. The nameless first person narrator is an Arab exile from an unnamed country of origin (probably the author's native Lebanon) to Canada. The article first dwells on the recurrent image of the harsh weather as a symbolic equivalent of the city's hostility. Then it focuses on the protagonist-narrator's chief existential strategy of survival, namely his delusional refuge in a temporary cockroach metamorphosis, so his view of Montreal is frequently given from a cockroach's perspective. He emphasizes that the underground physical filth of this modern city corresponds to a moral filth. He illustrates this moral decay with a presentation of the circle of Sylvie's hypocritical friends, who pretend to be nonconformists and masquerade as poor marginalized or outcast people. They regard the narrator as "the noble savage", a role he self-consciously assumes, and thus his picture of the city acquires strong postcolonial accents in addition to its social perspective. This dimension is also enhanced by the instances of racism the narrator gives. As an immigrant belonging to a different race he sees his way to promotion barred, and thus becomes acutely sensitive to his permanent humiliating subaltern position. He frequently feels he is an outcast regarded with suspicion on account of looking different and uses his cockroach guise to feel empowered.*

The city of Montreal is the setting that looms large as the background of the Canadian writer Rawi Hage's novel *Cockroach*, the first person narrative of a nameless Arab exile from an unnamed country of origin (probably the author's native Lebanon) to Canada. The protagonist-narrator reveals a split, contradictory personality or even multiple personalities hiding behind masks, which makes him a typical postmodernist character. The narrator is a born city dweller, open spaces make him "feel vulnerable" and nature horrifies him. (487)

The protagonist feels alienated in Montreal and the hostility of this city gets a symbolic equivalent in the harsh weather and the falling snow that claims "every car windshield, every hat, every garbage can, every eyelid, every roof and every mountain." (18) Reminding the reader of the atmosphere in the second part of Dostoyevski's *Notes from the Underground* (entitled "Apropos of the Wet Snow"), the freezing weather appears as a leitmotif throughout the narrative embodying the unfriendly, even menacing, attitude of its inhabitants:

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And how about those menacing boots, my friend, encasing people's feet, and the silenced ears, plugged with wool and headbands, and the floating coats passing by in ghostly shapes, hiding faces, pursed lips, austere hands? Goddamn it! Not even a nod in this cold place, not even a timid wave, not a smile from below red, sniffing, blowing noses. All these buried heads above necks strangled in synthetic scarves. It made me nervous, and I asked myself, Where am I? And what am I doing here? And how did I end up trapped in a constantly shivering carcass walking in a frozen city with wet cotton falling on me all the time? (18-19)

The cold gets human attributes displaying maiming, even murderous inclinations: it shows "no mercy on your toes, [is] oblivious to the suffering of your ears, mean and determined to take off a chunk of your nose." (324) The sheer infinite number of the falling snow flakes fills the narrator with downright terror of extinction:

Little creatures that seem insignificant and small are murderous in their sheer vast numbers, their conformity, their repetitiveness, their steady army-like movements, their soundless invasions. They terrify me. (347)

By animating the inanimate this description gives the reader a vivid sense of the impression Montrealers make on the protagonist inducing a feeling of oppression into him because of their collective conformism to social norms, a conformism that the epithet "army-like suggests to be mechanical, like the military obeying orders.

The wind that does not allow him to light his cigarette also gets personified as it laughs and mocks at the narrator (430)

The narration oscillates between the narrative present in Montreal and episodes from his past revealed to the Canadian therapist he has to see under a court decision following his suicidal attempt to hang himself from a tree branch in the park. He gives the following explanation to the therapist:

...my suicide attempt was only my way of trying to escape the permanence of the sun. With frankness, and using my limited psychological knowledge and powers of articulation, I tried to explain to her that I had attempted suicide out of a kind of curiosity, or maybe as a challenge to nature, to the cosmos itself, to the recurring light. I felt oppressed by it all. The question of existence consumed me. (10-11)

This confession foregrounds some of the most important archetypal oppositions underlying the novel, namely light/darkness, existence/non-existence, survival /extinction, life/death, but also his overwhelming feeling of oppression in the new country, in the city of Montreal. At the same first therapy session he reveals his chief existential strategy of survival: his delusional refuge in a temporary cockroach metamorphosis, so his view of Montreal is frequently given from a cockroach's perspective. This identity was first playfully suggested by his teenage sister:

Come, my sister said to me. Let's play. And she lifted her skirt, laid the back of my head between her legs, raised her heels in the air, and swayed her legs over me

slowly. Look, open your eyes, she said, and she touched me. This is your face, those are your teeth, and my legs are your long, long whiskers. We laughed, and crawled below the sheets, and nibbled on each other's faces. Let's block the light, she said. Let's seal the quilt to the bed, tight, so there won't be any light. Let's play underground. (13)

Her words emphasize the central opposition above ground /under ground, clearly related to, and possibly derived from, those already mentioned above. Moreover the scene likewise underlines the narrator's sexuality, one of his chief features. He feels it his challenge to conquer any attractive woman. He repeatedly expresses his animality in the terms he uses to describe his behaviour to women and the feelings he experiences for them.

The unnamed narrator's cockroach metamorphosis is definitely associated with an underground existence and has multiple symbolic valences:

Insecthood, for this victim, is a phantasmal extension of his own multifaceted idea of himself: as immigrant outcast, seething sensualist, Dostoevskian Underground Man, undetectable thief, future inheritor of the earth, agent of exposure among the hypocritical bourgeoisie and all-round connoisseur of the tang and sting of reality. (Lasdun "Half Man , Half Insect")

Wisam Abdul-Jabbar singles out antagonism as the chief signification of the recurrent delusion. The critic emphasizes that this immigrant struggling with an inhospitable city, "internalizes this unflinching feeling of estrangement through introjection", he "introjects the vermin as a representation of internalized antagonism." ("The Internalized Vermin of Exile in Montreal")

As we have seen that his suicide and his confession also reveal the protagonist's desperation, the "desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable and stranded in corridors of bureaucracy and immigration." (25)

He feels frustrated by the law and order in his new country: "in this northern land no one gives an excuse to hit rob, or shoot, or even to shout from across the balcony, to curse your neighbours' mothers or threaten their kids." (10) When he is saved from suicide by the Mounties, the representatives of power, is hospitalized and then sent to weekly therapy sessions, the narrator perceives these people as representatives of the ordered world that tries to enforce bourgeois normalization on him, to which he does not want to conform. He feels different and knows that racial difference is perceived with suspicion and regarded as possibly dangerous by the representatives of authority:"Everything on this street had to have a purpose. Stillness and piercing foreign eyes would soon be questioned by uniforms under whirling police-cars." (447)

The protagonist's identification with a cockroach stems mainly from his sensation that they both belong in the underground physical filth of the modern city, to which a symbolic moral filth corresponds. "They are all filth, these people, walking above the earth. (430) He keeps imagining the journey of domestic refuse down the drainage to the city gutters populated with real and imaginary creatures: "Long hollow tunnels [with] packs of rodents, insects, pet alligators, thirsty vampires, and blind rats." (365) But he also confesses his strange ambivalent

feelings of revulsion and attraction to dark places, an ambiguity that this reveals his postmodernist contradictory nature: “To tell the truth , they kind of repulse me , but I always end up coming back to them. I am drawn to dark places like a suicidal moth to artificial lights.” (375)

His being able to borrow a cockroach identity also instills ambivalent feelings in him. It initially fills him with a sense of superiority when, as a child, he feels it enables him to become “a master of escape” (43): “I escaped most when I stole sweets, pens, chewing gum, and, later on, cameras and cars . Primitive and uneducated as I was, I instinctively felt trapped in the cruel and insane world saturated with humans.” (44)

But his perception of the adult world as a threatening, dangerous place enhances his pride about his physical dexterity at sneaking and creeping into dark tight spaces, good hiding nooks, and strengthens his sense of getting empowered by his cockroach metamorphosis:

I loathed the grown-ups who were always hovering over me and looking down on me. They, of course, ruled the heights: they could reach the chandelier, , the top of the fridge; they could rumple my hair anytime they pleased. But I was the master of the underground. I crawled under beds, camped under tables. (44-45)

Therefore in a generally hostile adult world putting on the cockroach identity becomes for the protagonist an efficient element of self-defence.

Later in the narrative, cockroaches become a symbol of survival. Two Jehovah’s Witnesses explain to the protagonist that these insects are the future inheritors of the earth, since , because of the expanding ozone hole, “we shall all fry. Only the cockroaches shall survive to rule the earth.” (15) So, when the narrator chooses to become an exile, overwhelmed by the feeling of guilt over his unintentionally causing his sister’s death , his cockroach identity symbolically expresses his moral degradation but also his power of survival :”I am vermin, but I exist,” (298) he declares.

When his Iranian lover Shoreh tells the protagonist about her imprisonment, repeated rape, her executed uncle, her tortured friends by “the filth of the land” (92) cockroaches are attributed the same symbolic valence of moral subhumanity and the narrator states that after the religious revolution “Iran was left to the cockroaches.” (91)

Yet, at the same time, the cockroach comes to be the protagonist’s secret empowering identity as he reveals to the huge albino cockroach he confronts in a hallucinatory dialogue under the influences of drugs. The large cockroach becomes his double whose image he sees when he looks into the mirror (476):

Look at you, always escaping, slipping, and feeling trapped in everything you do. It is not escape, I said. I refuse to be a subordinate. It is my voluntary decision. (339)

Abdul-Jabbar reads this insubordination as “a decolonizing act against a city whose hegemonic order, like its freezing weather, looms large” in the novel, but also

as “a dramatization of the narrator’s subaltern agency.” (Abdul-Jabbar “The Internalized Vermin of Exile in Montreal”)

The cockroach identity helps the narrator in his thieving career. He declares himself a petty thief, an apprentice from early childhood to Abu Roro, who taught him that “when one is hungry, one should steal.” (96) But the narrator does not steal only when he is hungry. He may steal out of curiosity, as he does in the case of breaking into the Algerian immigrant Yousseff’s house and steals his letters from a lover. Or, as we have seen, his undetectable stealing may give him a sense of escape or insubordination and procure him a sense of power, as when he breaks into the therapist’s house and steals her slippers, objects of insignificant value.

The city of Montreal shelters a world of immigrants making a precarious living, confronted with problems of survival (Reza the santour player or Majeed, the taxi driver), or living on welfare like the narrator (between jobs) or Youssef, the Algerian professor who pretends he is a councilor. The narrator is irritated by the Professor’s hypocrisy, but he also hates the immigrants belonging to the prosperous middle class, such as the owner of the Persian restaurant where he works.

Nevertheless, he hates and despises even more the local middle class section of Montrealers who pretend to be nonconformists. The typical example is Sylvie, a piano teacher, with her circle of friends who lead a snobbish artificial “life of beauty”, disguising their shallowness under an apparent “*après la lettre*” aestheticist cult:

All her friends lived in a state of permanent denial of the bad smells from sewers, infested slums, unheated apartments, single mothers on welfare, worn-out clothing. No, everything had to be perfect, every morsel of food had to be well served – presentation, always presentation, the ultimate mask. (306-7)

This cultivation of beauty is a veneer destined to conceal the unsavoury reality, as Marcel Scholten remarks: “He regards any outward beauty as a mere disguise for the actual decay and ugliness that’s underneath.” (Scholten “A psychotic trip into Montreal’s underground”)

Sylvie’s friends’ masquerade as poor marginalized or outcast people also extends to dissimulating their prosperity and education under a camouflage of miserable dressing: “All those McGill University graduates love to hide their degrees, their old money, their future corporate jobs coming here dressed up like beggars, hoodlums, dangerous degenerate minorities.” (380)

The reader’s disgust is enhanced when the narrator mentions that the filth of these “preppie” products of the city is not always merely symbolic, but sometimes just literal as in the case of Thierry, the heretic son of a well-known conservative politician who is so obsessed with feces that he eats them, calling them “*mes petits bonbons*.” (312)

The city middle class circles like indulging in an artificial paradise which they create by consuming drugs and it is generally the immigrants who supply them with mild drugs which they also take, perhaps to make their life just bearable. The narrator does not hide his contempt for Sylvie’s friends:

They were corrupt, empty, selfish, self-absorbed, capable only of seeing themselves in the reflection from the tinted glass in their fancy cars. The women lived a

hedonistic existence, not caring what the boys did as long as their surroundings were fashionable and presentable. I despised them; they admired me. (311)

These people are described as unable of any individual judgment or understanding and their cognitive skills rely on stereotypes. The narrator is smart enough to realize that cater to their expectations by playing the role of the exotic, thrillingly malignant foreigner, which he describes as a lucrative recipe to his friend Reza: “I was *l’aventurier*. ...The fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner, I said. Play it right and they will toss you from one party to another.” (335)

Becoming one of Sylvie’s circle on the one hand boosts his womanizer’s ego (he sleeps with all of Sylvie’s friends), but he also uses this situation for stealing the men’s wallets since frightening them grants him a gratifying sense of power. Thus he also plays with another stereotypical image that he assumes, namely, that of “*the noble savage*” (308). He relishes that their notion of his savagery fills them with the fear he might vengefully slash their tires, brutishly poison their dogs or rancorously break their stereotypes if they told the police. (469) The reader is left wondering if the *noble savage* is the narrator’s metaimage of himself revealing just his ignorance or it reveals the ignorance of Sylvie’s friends, as this image is usually associated with far-off indigenous populations, whereas the Arab world should be included with the stereotypes used to describe the Near, Middle and Far East that Edward Said dwells on in his book *Orientalism*.

The narrator gives instances showing that the less snobbish circles of Montreal are characterized by racism, which prevents immigrants from getting promoted, in spite of the official laws. Thus when asking Maitre Pierre for a promotion to a waiter’s position the Arab immigrant is told the colour of his skin is against him, “Tu es un peu trop cuit pour ça.” (58) Another instance is the Canadian diplomat that first helps Majeed, the taxi driver, get out of Iran to Canada, but gradually becomes a xenophobic monster. (190)

The narrator’s view of Montreal displays not only a marked class attitude but also a postcolonial hue that we have already hinted at. Thus he sees the empire strike back when, on account of their demographic decrease, the Quebecois are eager to receive new immigrants from former French colonies just because they are Francophone. Class and race hatred merge in his vindictive sense of sexual potency: “Impotent infertile filth!...No one can escape the sun on their faces and no one can barricade against the powerful, fleeting semen of the hungry and the oppressed.” (56)

The narrator sees Canada as stolen land and imperialism and of neo-imperialism as the prevailing forms of contemporary oppression causing intense suffering, and is thus filled with horror of becoming Canadian:

How can I explain to her [Genevieve] that I do not want to be part of anything because I am afraid I will become an invader who would make little boys hunger, who would watch them die with an empty stomach. I am part roach now, and what if my instincts make the best of me and lead me to those armies of antennae, hunched backs, and devouring teeth that are preparing from the underground to surface and invade? (348)

These words practically symbolically equate all Canadians to cockroaches and Montreal to an underground city where cockroaches thrive.

Greed is the value the narrator's cockroach and human identities have in common (he indicates it as the motivation of his actions leading to his sister's death, 379); but he adds many other features that produce his revulsion against humanity, namely, "its stupidity, its foulness, its pride, its avarice and greed, envy, lust gluttony, sloth, wrath, and anger... its contaminated spit, its valued feces, its rivers of piss, its bombs..." (377)

We may conclude that the city of Montréal is depicted as indifferent and even menacingly hostile towards newcomers, which aggravates the condition of the exile and drives him to desperation. To the narrator the surrounding city dwellers seem to live in a death-in-life condition as suggested by the metaphoric description of the phone booths on every corner: they look "like vertical coffins for people to recite their lives in." (66) Moreover the discovery that Canada is selling weapon parts to Iran (466) dispels much of the romantic aura this city usually has for tourists: "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." (467)

Nevertheless Montreal is his chosen place for survival. But after showing that all descriptions of Canada are a conspiracy to create the illusory picture of a welcoming land, he comes up with the only solution, that of assuming his cockroach guise and take refuge underground: "there is nothing but which freezes, and the only way to escape it is to dig deep holes and sail under it." (417) The city underground that he fancies he rules becomes for the narrator a place seen "as a safe haven for the underprivileged from the ruthless urban surface where the taxpayers live." (Abdul-Jabbar "The Internalized Vermin of Exile in Montreal")

Yet the narrative ends on an unexpected redeeming note: the narrator musters the courage to kill Shoreh's rapist and persecutor thus redeeming his cowardice in the case of his sister's murder, a gesture that at the same time condemns him to go forever underground.

In conclusion, the depiction of above ground Montreal suggests that for the diasporic vagabond who has neither a home nor a homeland, this city cannot offer any sense of belonging, which is the natural yearning of any person, formulated in his fundamental existential question, "how to exist and not to belong?" (349) For him Montreal becomes the archetypal city associated with the physical filth of an underground teeming with cockroaches and vermin and the corresponding symbolic moral filth infesting practically all its inhabitants.

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