The Existential Arab Antihero in Rawi Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society*

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Abstract this article aims at investigating the transformation of the contemporary Arab protagonist into an existential antihero in Rawi Hage's *Beirut Hell Fire Society* (2018) which is set during Lebanon's civil war. The crafting of postmodern antiheroism in the context of war has become a medium to voice out the traumatic experiences of this individual around whom events of death, loss, destruction, and chaos are centered. The representation of the antihero in postmodern Anglophone Arab war fiction is of paramount importance as it reclaims the past through depicting historical events. It also dwells on the representation of the antihero's psyche reflecting the complex nature of the antihero figure in times of conflicts. This research is theoretically framed using *The Archetypal Antihero in Postmodern Fiction* (2010) by Rita Gurung to scrutinize the character's evolution and transformation into an antihero, and trauma studies including Cathy Caruth's readings of traumatized literary figures and her findings of trauma in her *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). It also incorporates Craps and Beulness' ethical direction of trauma to understand how war can shape and influence the antihero's transformation, and to position the existential Arab antihero in Hage's novel in the field of Anglophone Arab war fiction. Thus, interweaving politics, history and psychology, this article aims at bridging the gap between postmodern Anglophone Arab war literature and the concept of antiheroism through examining the deranged psyche of Hage's protagonist Pavlov in order to delineate the metamorphosis he undergoes to becoming an existential antihero in the context of war.

Key words antiheroism; Anglophone Arab war fiction; existential antihero; metamorphosis; trauma

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Introduction

In the Western literary stream, in the postmodern age, the antihero becomes deeply afflicted by existential concerns and nihilism. Major postmodern writers of the twentieth century such as Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Beckett and others who followed wrote in a nihilistic fashion to reflect realistically the fragmented contemporary world, and to exhibit the failure of the contemporary hero to fulfill the role of archetypal heroism. Similarly, in Anglophone Arab War fiction, the postmodern Arab antihero can also be approached from an existential perspective to discuss how war can shape and influence characters to become existential antiheroic figures. Hence, this study will investigate the traumatic experiences of war in Lebanon as represented by the diasporic Lebanese novelist Rawi Hage in his novel *Beirut Hellfire Society*. Clearly, the existentialist antihero is a man absorbed by feelings of fear, anxiety, isolation, angst, boredom and nausea, and he/she represents nothing more than a puppet in the greater scheme of things.

Research Methodology

The definition of the concept of the antihero underwent significant changes throughout the centuries. In effect, antiheroism emerged early in literature, but only began to gain prominence when the central character began to lose the trappings that are traditionally associated with heroism. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye classifies the hero according to his power of action, starting with the superior divine hero, the hero of the romance, the hero leader, the hero of comedy and realistic fiction, and finally the ironic hero. The classification shows the steady shift of the European literature from idealized mythical heroism to the ironic unheroic mode. The traditional ironic antihero is described as a minor character, inferior in power or intelligence to the common man. He embodies antiheroic traits of bondage, frustration, villainy, and absurdity (33-34). Suitably, this research investigates Frye's ironic antiheroic mode that has taken a central position in the postmodern fiction.

The concept of the antihero has gained significant literary critical attention

particularly in the postmodern war fiction. This period was marked by a nihilistic and absurdist approach. Accordingly, the tormented psyche of these antiheroic characters often positions them as antiheroes. Harold Skulsly (1981) argues that characters' transformation into antiheroes is "considered as a psychotic breakdown or rather serious mental regression" (171). Indeed, under the conditions of war, it would not be surprising to find a hero alone and disillusioned. The antihero's recoil and metamorphosis can be considered as a prolonged *cri du coeur* of anxiety, constraint, physical discomfort, and above all estrangement. Rita Gurung (2010) asserts that "the postmodern antihero is…a victim of alienation, cultural or spiritual sterility, seeking solace and refuge in alcohol, self-deception, power, social withdrawal and anonymity" (8-9).

It is important to note that the interpretation of a flawed character can be justified differently in accordance to his/her perturbed psyche due to the destructive environment by which he/she is surrounded. Rita Gurung (2010) sets different categories of the postmodern antihero that includes those who feel estranged in the world, those who are disillusioned with a distorted spirit, those who feel inferior and are oppressed by the system, those who choose to remain passive and alienated, those who feel outsiders and outcast in their own land, the nihilists, and the antiheroic rebels whose rebellious actions always end up in failure (27). As a matter of fact, these diverse categories elucidate the complex and heterogeneous nature of the postmodern antihero figure. Some antiheroes turn villains, while some are transformed and metamorphosed into rebels, and some others remain static and passive. Alternatively, this article will discuss the existential antihero shaped and influenced by war. The antihero in Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society* is restrained by violent circumstances that hinder his attempt to overcome the traumatic experiences generated by war.

The complex nature of the contemporary antihero in the context of war is better explained in relation to trauma studies theorized by Cathy Caruth and Craps and Beulness' ethical direction of trauma to provide a wider and deeper insight to the eventual metamorphosis of the central antihero characters in the field of Anglophone Arab war fiction. Trauma theory has increasingly gained more attention in the critical field of literature since the 1980s. Cathy Caruth registers the earliest evidence of this shift in her *Trauma*: *Explorations in Memory* (1995) in which she highlights the phenomenon of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, commonly abbreviated as PTSD, "which include[s] the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis" (1). She links it to different disciplines through examining "the impact

of the experience, and the notion, of trauma on psychoanalytic practice and theory, as well as on other aspects of culture such as literature and pedagogy" (2). In other words, trauma can now be approached via different disciplines with contributions by clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, creative writers and literary critics. Based on Freud's description of trauma, Caruth (1995) wrote of trauma as a wound that carries "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (2). She further argues that traumatic experiences are located in the way the traumatic event "returns to haunt the survivor later on" (3). Trauma theory, then, traces the psychological wound that troubles survivors in their lives. Alongside Caruth, the primary scholars who have made substantial contributions to trauma theory are Shoshanna Felman and DoriLaub (1992), Judith Herman (1992), Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart (1996) and Geoffrey Hartman (1995). These theorists agree that traumatic memories are unlocatable and intrusively appear as flashback and nightmares.

However, it is important to note that the experience of war trauma is not confined to the Western culture exclusively; it is a universal concept that differs according to different sociopolitical conditions and circumstances. In this respect, this study will investigate the traumatic experiences of war in the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon as represented by the diasporic Lebanese novelist Rawi Hage in his novel *Beirut Hellfire Society*. Craps and Beulnes (2008) argue that trauma studies are exclusively concerned with traumatic experiences in the Euro-American context and they note that:

> Instead of promoting solidarity between different cultures, trauma studies risks producing the very opposite effect as a result of this one-sided focus: by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world. (2)

Notably, Craps and Beulness position trauma theory in postcolonial and ethnic studies. Their literary critical contribution aims at spotlighting colonial traumas to examine problems such as "dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide" (3). They also call to relocate every trauma narrative in its specific geographical, historical, and sociopolitical national stances. In so doing, the focus is put on the collective rather than on the

individual in order to approach the suffering of the non-Western post-war societies (4).

As the above survey shows, while the concept of the antihero has been thoroughly explored in the numerous Western literary works, a scant theoretical attention has been paid to the critical concept of the antihero in the field of Anglophone Arab war fiction. In this respect, this article will position traumatic experiences of war in the Arab world through delineating the concept of the antihero in the Anglophone Arab war literature. In "Bringing Lebanon's Civil War Home to Anglophone literature: Alameddine's Appropriation of Shakespeare's Tragedies" (2016), Yousef Awad notes that diasporic Arab novelists such as Rabih Rabih Alameddine in his novels *I, The Divine* (2000) and *An Unnecessary woman* (2013) strategically put to light the devastation that Lebanon's civil war caused to universalize and to demonstrate how Arab writers in diaspora writing in English for an international readership represent the traumatic experiences of Arab characters. Awad (2012) further attests that Arab Writers in diaspora "straddle two cultures" and skilfully use English to relay the experiences of Arab characters in the Arab world and in diaspora (12). Therefore, having defined the critical concept of the antihero along with the theoretical framework of the present study, it is worth noting that this research bridges the gap between postmodern diasporic war literature and the concept of the antihero in the context of war in the field of contemporary Anglophone Arab fiction.

In the light of the civil war in Lebanon, this study endeavors to highlight the explicit connection between the failure of the antihero and war. In *Beirut Hellfire Society*, Pavlov experiences traumatic events related to the civil war in Beirut that provoke his transformation into an antihero. Caruth (1995) wrote of trauma as a wound that carries "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (4). Pavlov's eventual metamorphosis into an existential antihero is revealed through his schizophrenic temper, particularly highlighted when he converses with the headless body of his decapitated dog. According to Gurung (2010) "the antiheroes' inability to mediate between the external society and the internal world and between the outer and the inner real self leads to the splitting of their personalities (15)". In Pavlov's case his failure to externalize his internal trauma culminates into deep loneliness, self-alienation, pathos, schizophrenia, self-degradation, loss of faith in humanity, and tendencies of grotesque hedonism.

Discussion

Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society* is a war narrative in which the plotline traces the evolution and metamorphosis of the novel's existential antihero in relation to traumatic war experiences. The novel chronicles the quotidian experiences of war-torn Lebanese society during the civil war. Pavlov stands at the center of these events. He is an undertaker, a profession he inherited from his father. The antihero in this novel is set as an observer of death and the wrecking war in Lebanon. The reason Pavlov posits a focal position in this war narrative is to explain the existential crisis of the Arab postmodern man to reconcile with the outer world that is succumbed with loss of faith, despair, inhumanity, nihilism, wars, and restlessness. Gurung (2010) argues that "the traditional rites of initiation and quest and the existential ordeal culminate either in the isolation of the hero or in his defeat" (21). In view of this, the protagonist embraces alienation and positions himself as an outsider.

The civil war in Lebanon was initiated essentially because of sectarian issues and religious differences. It is prominent to note that the distinctiveness of the Lebanese society lies in its religious variety, for it encompasses a collection of eighteen officially recognized religious and sectarian groups. With this complex and divided society, Lebanon becomes a sectarian state par excellence. However, Murat Tinas (2017) notes that "the existence of different, if not contradictory, ideas of 'what Lebanon is' and 'what Lebanon should be' [led] these sectarian groups to search different and sometimes contradictory outcomes regarding both foreign and domestic affairs of Lebanon" (90). In consequence, between 1975 and 1990, Lebanon experienced one of the longest and bloodiest civil war. In fact, Florence Gaub (2015) argues that "the civil war erupted in 1975 because the Phalangists, a Christian militia, clashed with Palestinian factions over the latter's armed struggle against Israel from Lebanese territory. But the conflict changed rapidly into a fight over the Lebanese state and its political system" (1). The massacres of civil war that has lasted fifteen years, took the life of around 90.000 people, close to 20.000 people who have been kidnapped or disappeared, nearly 100.000 were injured, and close to a million of the Lebanese population experienced displacement (Sune 1). The war then continued because it had evolved beyond its alleged initial causes.

Moral and Religious Regression

In this novel, religious and moral breakdown in relation to the civil war in Lebanon is well highlighted. In fact, the novel can be seen as a dark satire of the Lebanese

civil war. First, because it highlights the absurdity of war; it refers to societal, moral, and religious decadency related to war. In addition, it also gives the reader insights into the psychological impacts of war on the contemporary Arab man. The title of the novel is in itself edifying as it refers to an elusive community that burns corpses into ashes in which Pavlov's father is one of the associates. The hellfire society is a group of members who hold defiance against the petty rulers that fuel conflicts in their Lebanese community. They are described as "hedonists, heathens, idolaters, infidels, *Kouffar*" (Hage 43) who live by *libertine* principles. The story takes place in Lebanon, Beirut, during the ravages of the civil war where "the undertakers, the father and the son named Pavlov, operat[e] during war times after the ceasefire [to] collect stray corpses" (Hage 3). They load the remains of the corpses that are "trapped, lost, ignored, [and] dejected" (Hage 5) in plastic bags. They maneuver in a house called the "society's mansion" (Ibid) in the mountains of Lebanon, a secluded area in the high summit.

The position that Pavlov holds in the society exposes a number of stories that display physical and mental chaos that war has caused in Lebanon. Being a member of the Hellfire Society, Pavlov's role is to find astray corpses to burn them. Each visitor sent by the society to Pavlov recounts a story in which regression of values and morals is the reason behind the visit. The stories of El-Marquis's *libertine* explorations, Jean Jacob's story about his homosexual son who has been shot and thrown with his lover into a dumpster, Salwa's intercourse in the cemetery and many other stories that all portray the regression of the Lebanese society during armed conflicts. During the war, El-Marquis affirms "morality looks banal in the presence of such a grand and total loss" (Hage 7). Indeed, Hage revisits the past to lament the bloody events in a city encumbered by religious quarrels where death has become the only way to freedom. Hence, the evocation of the past and its losses permits Hage through his war narratives as Najat Rahman (2009) puts it in her article entitled "Apocalyptic Narrative Recalls and the Human: Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*" to "form a new language for Arabic literature at a time when mass relocations, immigrations and emigration around the world are redefining national boundaries and national identity" (7).

In regards of the inter-religious conflicts, Pavlov's religious skepticism reveals a critical examination to religious tensions and issues that fueled the Lebanese civil war. In an interview with *Arts & Opinion*, Hage talks about the "tribal loyalties" that hindered religious coexistence in Lebanon and argues that his secularism "no longer relate[s] positively or negatively to people or groupings of people based on their religion or ethnicity" (2). He adds: "I much prefer to be in community with

people with whom I share common values and morals or ideology" (Ibid). In the novel, Hage's critical stance to the religious tensions is evident through Pavlov's preference to burning corpses into ashes rather than burying them. For him, the practice of burning corpses rather than burying them transcends the different religious rituals, and facilitates the transcendence of souls regardless of their beliefs.

In addition, Hage also criticizes external interventions that supposedly was meant to cease the bloody war in Lebanon. In Hage's attempt to lament international and regional interests to end the civil war, he refers to the French antique dealer who comes to Pavlov to buy antique acquisitions they collect. He says:

> The richness and historical layers of this city are its wealth and downfall. Let me help you liberate your people! Get rid of it all, all these artifacts that contribute to and justify tribal and religious affiliations . . . Bombs shall cease and flowers shall bloom once all these historical artifacts are sold and shipped to France . . . History is a curse. (Hage 52)

This passage clearly indicates that the culmination of the sectarian issue into a bloody war in Lebanon has soon developed to be a regional affair, which later led to international interventions to control the bloody hostility in Lebanon. Lebanon, thus, becomes trapped amidst regional and international interests at the cost of thousands of people's lives being taken away or destroyed. The hostility of war becoming both international and regional affected the Lebanese population dreadfully. In the novel, Pavlov feels infuriated in regards of this situation, yet he remains paralyzed to act against it. In view of this, in the same above-mentioned interview, Hage remarks:

> I began to see the civil war in its absurdity, not of two sides fighting for their rights and beliefs but two sides being manipulated by regional and not so regional powers whose interests had very little to do with anything either Christian or Muslim. Any number of foreign corporations were funding and funneling arms to both parties. (2)

Indeed, the foreign infiltration made the conflict more extensive and irresolvable, which in time further deepened mutual suspicions and enmities based on the differences in sectarian identities. Echoing this, the novel laments the absurdity of war that has put the Lebanese either to death or to internal and external diaspora. Furthermore, the passages prominently highlight the absurdity of war from which Pavlov's trauma emanates shaping his transformation into an antihero.

The Psychological Implications of War

Alternately, the focal of this research is set prominently on the psychological impact of the civil war in Lebanon. The armed conflict in the Lebanese society did not affect the social and religious structure of the Lebanese society solely; it had also a profound impact on individuals psychologically. The psychological impact of the war in Lebanon is thoroughly examined through tracing the evolution of the protagonist into an antihero protagonist. Pavlov, in this novel, is a strange character whose work revolves around corpses in a bizarre way. Pavlov burns the corpses instead of burying them. The protagonist in this novel is described as "the man whose name declared his preference for dogs over humans" (Hage 20). The name of the protagonist is ironically revealing as it shows the protagonist's preference to dogs over humans. It is, in fact, related to the Pavlovian theory and school of Behaviorism.

The Pavlovian theory indicates an experiment conducted on a dog. Andrew P. Johnson (2014) notes that Ivan Pavlov noticed that presenting meat powder to his dog caused it to salivate. During the conditioning, the meat powder was paired with a neutral stimulus. The neutral stimulus was a bell. The bell and the meat were then presented together many times. Each time, these paired stimuli produced the same response which was salivation. The bond between the bell and the meat power became strengthened so that eventually the bell by itself produced the same response, salivation. The salivation then became the conditioned response because the dog had to be conditioned to respond to the bell this way (2). In Pavlov's case, church bells which are associated to death is the stimulus; El-Marquis declares: "your father described how, over the next few weeks, every time the bells rang for a funeral the dog would appear at the door and you would feed the creature. That's when he began to call you Pavlov, isn't it?" (Hage 33) Throughout the novel, death and danger become the stimulus for Pavlov's behavioral change to a dog. He howls like dogs as a reaction to church bells each time they ring for a coming funeral, and grins like a dog when he is approached by danger. Evidently, Pavlov's kinship to dogs manifests his internal trauma to the overwhelming events around him. It also reveals his lack of social interactions, physical detachment, and aloofness.

Trauma and Antiheroism

It is important to note that Pavlov's trauma is the major reason behind his transformation into an existential antihero. Caruth (1995) defines trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the

schemes of prior knowledge…and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time" (153). The antihero in this novel is clearly a victim of traumatizing events of the civil war in Lebanon. Pavlov's unstable psyche as an existential antiheroic character is displayed via his inability of affirmative action and indecisiveness. Pavlov's incapability to progress is first exemplified particularly when he chooses to follow up his late father's career of burning corpses to earn money for a living regardless of the ordeal this job brings him. It is evident when the Bohemian addresses Pavlov saying: "I know you, Pavlov. They say you belong to a secret society, but I know you are alone in this world. You enjoy the warmth of cadavers. You are torn between the spectacle and participating in it" (263). The only time Pavlov acts, his reaction comes in violence which condemns him one more time as unheroic; the Bohemian adds: "but you killed Faddoul, so I guess you're no longer just an observer. You are only half-delusional, and I admire you for that" (Ibid). Another instance that demonstrates Pavlov's *échec* is when he stays in Lebanon. His sister says: "you stay here among the dead, then. I am going back to the country, to a place where everything is always alive'. He responds cynically "nothing is alive forever" (27). Hence, instead of playing a part in the scheme of active life, he retreats to philosophy and literature. He is a reader, a laconic; El-Marquis sighs and says "your father said you're a reader, perhaps even a laconic, silent little scholar" (38). Pavlov is, thus, half dead and traumatized.

Alienation

In postmodern literature, deliberate alienation is a trait that characterizes the existential postmodern antihero. In this novel, Pavlov chooses estrangement. After the death of his father, Pavlov follows the bizarre career of his parent as a corpse burner. At the beginning, Pavlov questions the deranged job he has to perform: "it all made Pavlov wonder if his father might be a madman, a deranged heathen" (Hage 6). However, later, his profession defined who he is and what he is. In fact, Pavlov's alienation is connected to his profession which is associated to death. He is dehumanized and estranged. He is swallowed by his vocation and becomes kind of a cold robot-like that is unable to express any emotions or opinions or to keep any relationship. Gurung notes that "in the postmodern context…this alienation and separation becomes the central, inescapable fact of existence" (Hage 20). He is seen as an omen of death by his surroundings. It is noted that "upon seeing Pavlov's car, some of the men crossed themselves and began shouting to their driver. The driver looked in his rear-view mirror and accelerated to get away from the omen of death" (Hage 103). Indeed, since his early childhood, Pavlov had been a spectator to life's

cruelest acts of extinction; yet, his alienation and hysteria have intensified since the war has started in Lebanon.

During the intense period of conflict, Pavlov was the collector of dead corpses that lay astray in the barren streets. Lucidly, Pavlov's job as a corpse burner exposes the traumatic war experiences that influenced and shaped his deranged psyche. Pavlov is described as a loner; he rather enjoys the company of a dog named Rex as he sits "on the sofa and conversed with his dog. They both drank what was left from the bottle in his father's cupboard and Rex tried to howl with difficulty" (Hage 203). This delusional act reveals Pavlov's hysteria stemming from traumatic experiences of war, and mass death under his very own window. For Pavlov, existence is his exile and nothingness become his home; he "had become the custodian of the window of death, the sole observer above the cemetery road" (Hage 14). Accordingly, the intensity of the stories of death, nihilism and destruction that are related to war transforms Pavlov into a half dead, existential, traumatized, and hedonistic character. It also explains his transformation into an existential antihero. From his position as spectator of death, he ponders whether to put direct blame on killers, brutality of life, war or to blame rulers and deities.

Pavlov's retreat can be seen as an escape from the absurdity of the outer world. Gurung argues that in the postmodern age "the contemporary-self recoils from the world having discovered the absurdity of life" (18). In view of this, Pavlov feels being held captive in a world full of bloody agonizing desolation. His solitude succumbs only in the company of his dog Rex and the Lady of the Stairs that he nurses at his house to nurse her after she has lost her entire family in a bombardment at the cemetery. Pavlov's affectionate care for the madwoman he nurses at his house and for his dog Rex reveals his alleged attempt to act heroically. He helps out people who have been hurt in the bombardment day in the road of cemetery and offers to help the mad lady. He brings her water and food. The mad lady and his dog represent a comfort company for him: "the Lady of the Stairs, her silent affection, her gestures, her madness and caresses that had made him feel whole, and Rex the dog's wagging tail each morning made him briefly withdraw from his solitary existence to join the cycle of life-some cycle, any cycle" (Hage 132). They were solitary "at the musicality of the explosions" (Hage 126). Her company brings him consolation regardless of her silence. Soon later, however, the Lady of the Stairs eventually leaves as well. Pavlov's failure here resides in his inaction to persuade her to stay. He felt defeated by her departure: "he felt regret in his heart…her playfulness and laughter had made him happy" (Hage 130). This failure to romanticize highlights another antiheroic characteristic of Pavlov. He

contemplates in agony 'the woman is gone" (ibid). Her existence made him briefly withdraw from his introverted existence. Pavlov's regret stems from his inability to act against himself to keep the loved ones around him. In this regards, Gurung states "the heroes of contemporary fiction not only struggle against the world but also they struggle for and against themselves" (32). Gurung refers to the inner conflicts that contemporary antiheroes undergo in their attempts to overcome their paralysis and inability of action. This struggle causes eventually a personality split that signals the transformation of the hero of contemporary fiction into an antihero. In the novel, soon after, Pavlov's despair intensifies when he finds his dog decapitated in front of his door.

The Antiheroic Metamorphosis

Pavlov's external manifestation to his internal trauma is well demonstrated through his self degradation to a dog. It also exhibits his loss of faith in humanity. It is to be construed as a psychotic breakdown, and it signals his transformation to an existential antihero. Colin Wilson (2001) argues that "the Outsider…is a self-divided man" (58-59). This transformation reveals that Pavlov's traumatization has developed into a personality split that enables him to protect himself from both physical and psychological harm. The major instances in the novel that indicate Pavlov's behavioral metamorphosis into a dog occurs particularly when death or danger are announced. Indeed, in the context of trauma, Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart (1994) mention that:

> the locus coeruleus of the brain which is the 'alarm bell'…properly goes off only under situations of threat, but which, in traumatized people, is liable to respond to any number of triggering conditions akin to the saliva in Pavlov's dogs…[leading] in the direction of 'emergency' and fight-or-flight responses (173).

In effect, Pavlov's traumatization and his conflicted psyche stem from his perpetuated confrontations with death, loss, and destruction. Pavlov observes his surrounding as a barren place arrant with "heads, thighs, shoes, blood. Death was everywhere" (Hage 71). Furthermore, in another passage, the narrator recounts "all that existed was killing and death, and from that moment on, Pavlov… realized that the ceremonies that passed under his window had no meaning… and that from early childhood he had been a spectator to life's cruelest acts of extinction" (Hage 72). In the novel, the narrator notes that Pavlov "had adopted the way of a dog and made a

point of never showing fear or hesitation in moments of pain or danger" (Hage 85). He also notes: "upon hearing the drumbeat of the brass band played for the youthful dead, Pavlov would salivate and feel the urge to shift his hips and stretch his back before padding out to the balcony" (Hage 57). Additionally, in another instant of a felt danger, and at the thought of the arrival of his brute uncle and cousins to his house, Pavlov "hunched his back like the conditioned animal he was, inclined his ear towards the noise and reached for his rifle" (Hage 168).

Pavlov's mental breakdown has intensified with the escalation of bloody events of war. Upon a bombardment near his house, he notes that "death was everywhere" (Hage 71). He adds:

> All that existed was killing and death, and from that moment on, Pavlov, who had all his life witnessed burials on this road but never mass murder, realized that the ceremonies that passed under his window had no meaning, that randomness was everything, and that from early childhood he had been a spectator to life's cruelest acts of extinction. (Hage 72)

The view of this grand massacre summarizes the absurdity of the world for Pavlov. He depicts the situation as follows:

> His head hurt, and for once he felt himself to be an imposter, who had stumbled upon a grand spectacle and forced his way in, a man who had left his seat in the audience and walked up on stage, interrupting a play, to the jeers of the spectators and the annoyance of the actors. Or was he more like a madman who, manifesto in hand, manages to release a few condemning words at the podium before being pounced upon and muffled by guards, and treated not as a rebel but as a fool. (Hage 75-76)

This passage demonstrates Pavlov's helplessness in front of the cruelest acts of extension in times of war. In line with this, Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart (1994) note that "It is likely that psychological and physical immobilization indeed is… fundamental to the development of hypermnesia and dissociation" (175). Pavlov's immobilization exhibits both his failure as an antihero to rebel against the bloody massacres, and it also explains his transformation to a dog.

The depiction of the absurdity of war and the helplessness of Pavlov in front of its grand massacres is an act of lament against the act of killing for the sake of killing: "in this time of lawlessness, in this age of carelessness and hate, in this civil

war that opened windows of opportunity for the most impoverished, that elevated the deprived, the deranged, the meek with a yearning for vengeance and scores to settle" (Hage 80). He also mentions "villagers mistaken for birds and killed by urban hunters; and other inexplicable murders of passion, greed, machismo, idiocy, sexual bravado, domestic violence…in addition to heart attacks and old age and death multiplied a thousand-fold" (Hage 81). He criticizes how death and mediocrity have become normalized in times of war. Indeed, Pavlov's self regression to a dog is justified due to the unscrupulous cruelty of war that has caused him both physical and psychological harm. Thus, the association to dogs, and his transformation into an existential antihero can be analyzed as Pavlov's only means to freedom and to surviving war's trauma.

Psychic Transformation

Pavlov's psychic transformation is predominantly exhibited through instances of hallucinations, flashbacks, and haunting dreams. The traumatic memory of Pavlov seems to go back to his childhood; nonetheless, his trauma has intensified under the current conditions of war. Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart state that "traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions. It occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation" (163). Socially, the only liable relationship Pavlov has and he is capable to maintain is to his dog Rex. Clearly, the death of Rex has heightened Pavlov's hallucinations. He lost what represents to him a faithful company that people of his surrounding seem to be short of. After finding the decapitated corpse of Rex, Pavlov starts imagining "Rex the dog looking his way…he thought he saw Rex at his door. As he opened his door, he saw the shadow of a dog rushing up the stairs to settle on the balcony. So Pavlov joined Rex there" (Hage 154). He converses to the ghost of his dog. Later, the major purpose of Pavlov has become finding the head of his faithful dog to pay attribute to his soul. In so doing, the reader is exposed to the antihero's deranged psyche. He addresses the ghost dog saying "there they are, the hyena and Son of Mechanic. [courting] in the domain of the dead, oblivious to all those who have passed, all those who existed" (Hage 155). He also seems to be haunted by traumatic flashbacks and nightmares of death.

Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart note that "one of the hallmarks of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the intrusive reexperiencing of elements of the trauma in nightmares, flashbacks, or somatic reactions" (173). His thoughts are haunted by scenes of bloody torments, dead corpses, but mainly about "the night's bombing and the new day's inevitable spectacle-the repeated parades of wailing beneath his

window" (Hage 177). Furthermore, he dreadfully thinks about how "the road would flow …with accumulated tears and surfing wooden boxes" (ibid). He thought of the mad's lady dead brother; he also thought of how he enjoyed her silent company, "remembering her last glance towards the window made him want to weep" (Hage 177). As for the nightmares, Pavlov dreams of:

> Bells and he dreamed of the creature of death roaming the streets, reaching inside doors and windows, swinging his long cane. And he dreamed of any army of workers in assembly lines building wooden coffins and gravestones… and he saw headless dogs in heat fucking each other in long chains, and flashes of the decapitated priest trotting around…and he heard his mother's screams, and saw his father dancing with makeup brushes and bowties in his hands. (Hage 176-177)

He blames his agonies on "the location of his house, and the repetitive migrations of death beneath his window [that] had through the years engraved in him a love of tragic beauty" (Hage 16). Eventually, when Pavlov succeeds in collecting the whole parts of Rex's body, he heads to the hill house where he brings out the headless body of his dog "then he sat on the sofa and conversed with his dog. They both drank what was left from the bottle in his father's cupboard and Rex to howl with difficulty" (Hage 203). He then repositions the head on the body to put the whole composition of the corpse of his companion in the furnace. To Pavlov this departure left him in tears. In fact, in order to survive all these traumas, Pavlov becomes identified as a master of survival which is another trait of the postmodern antihero. Having his house situated at the center of death and destruction for living next to the cemetery, being exposed to traumatic events, and working as a corpse burner, Pavlov has become a master of survival. This type of an antihero can fall many times but still manage to continue the survival struggle. The major passages that reveal this trait is when Pavlov is exposed to violence or humiliation.

Hedonism

Hedonism is also another antiheroic feature that Pavlov is characterized with, particularly in relation to the theme of love and its metamorphosed definition in times of war. War in Lebanon has established a new definition of love. Loving and genuine intimacy have become seen as heroic acts in the midst of the cruelest acts of extinction. In the novel, characters and Pavlov himself seem to have lost the genuine meaning of love and humanitarian sympathy because of the brutality of

war. The inability of Pavlov to feel affection and love towards his surrounding and in particular towards the opposite sex is peculiarly justified in times of war which also provides explanation of his hedonistic nature and tendencies. When Pavlov observes his cousin and her lover, he describes their absurd act of penetration inside the cemetery as ironically a "heroic act… that transcends all the tears, music, pain and agony, which for years has paraded past our window… an act of future reproduction above past decay… the proximity of the cycle of birth and death have never been as united as they are in this moment" (Hage 155-156).

Another quotation that proves the distorted meaning of love during war is when El-Marquis says:

> The thrill of fucking in close proximity to bullets and bombs was, in my opinion, the most appropriate political act one can engage in. But our daring escalated…watching the bombs fall…war was always one step ahead us with its transgressions, profanity and cruelties… war always degraded [our bodies] more, and won…war far superior to and more courageous than anything we could achieve in our fucking encounters. (Hage 39)

These quotations demonstrate the damaged new perception of love and intimate connections which reflect the absurdity of the newly bizarre established humanitarian bonds in times of war. In Pavlov's case, it is important to note that his hedonistic tendencies, in fact, reflect his antiheroic nature. At the sight of death burials under his widow, Pavlov feels "a perverse privilege in watching the mourning daughters, sisters and mothers pass underneath his window" (Hage 16). The hedonistic tendency of Pavlov is also exemplified when in exchange of Pavlov's antiques, he asks the dealer to send his wife saying, "I want your wife, Marie, to come over with the payment, a pack of my favorite cigarettes and a tray of coffee in her hand" (Hage 52). Upon her arrival, Pavlov asks her "to howl like a dog if she and her husband wished to seal the deal" (Hage 54).

In another instance, Pavlov chooses to go to a prostitute instead of engaging in heroic acts or humanitarian *bénevolat* in times of war. He, thus, instead, goes to Nadja seeking hedonistic pleasure. He notes "sexual transgression became our way of dealing with the boredom that is widespread in our traditional society, with its omnipresent war, its meek religiosity" (Hage 38). Furthermore, he rejoices at the act of watching a dead corpse while "he and Nadja stood above the dead man and spontaneously held hands" (Hage 30). On the second time he went to Nadja's house, he had a sexual relationship stripped of any emotions. Amidst the act, she holds him

captive, which to Pavlov felt unpleasant. She then said "it was just a game. You take captivity too seriously. If anything, surrender will liberate you from the burden of yourself" (Hage 115). In fact, this passage reflects clearly Pavlov's repression. He feels captive not only in his existence, but also in the most liberating of acts. The only time Pavlov feels genuine affection is when he is in company of his dog Rex and the mad lady. The narrator notes "all that had bound him was affection for a lost madwoman and the company of a dog- and both were gone" (Hage 205). He was turned on in the company of the Lady of the Stairs "resurrection, Pavlov repeated, as he lay on his back panting, smiling with another erection under the weight of the cover" (Hage 127). These passages not only highlight Pavlov's sexual transgression, but most importantly his detachment which proves again his antiheroic nature.

Daunting Recovery

It is important to highlight Pavlov's wish for peace and recovery. It is revealed particularly when he wishes to escape from the horrors of Beirut. Pavlov compared the vast view of the mountains with the one from his balcony in Beirut. He thought: "My window view is morbid and limited. Maybe it was time to contemplate an escape from inherited sadness" (Hage 204). The end of the book illustrates that the freedom of Pavlov is granted only through his death where his body is consumed by the flames of the lit house along with the body of his dog Rex and his father's. Years later, Ingrid Rima's daughter came to revive the flames of fire. The closure of the novel might imply that religious tensions in Lebanon are not yet settled.

Conclusion

This research is an attempt to prove that the protagonist in Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society* can be considered as the prototypical existential Arab antihero. He is a victim of the Lebanese war-torn society. The novel spots light on the absurdity of war. It refers to societal, moral, and religious decadency related to war. It also gives the reader insights on the psychological impacts of war on the contemporary Arab who falls into the pits of the breakdown of religious, social and moral values. Under the conditions of war, the antihero in this novel is transformed into an existential, hedonist, self-alienated character who is a highly adaptable master of survival. These traits make of him the prototypical contemporary Arab antihero. It is worth to highlight that this antiheroic protagonist represents just a small fragment of the complex and heterogeneous nature of the concept of antiheroism that includes a great variety of literary characters. It also confirms its predominating position in the Anglophone Arab fiction of the twenty-first century.

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