

Immigration and Liminality in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*

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Abstract

The official policy of Canadian multiculturalism would have it that immigrants might “fully participate in Canadian society” while still being able “to identify with the cultural heritage of their choice”. Yet Arnold Itwaru, in his text, *The Invention of Canada* argues that Canadian immigration narratives work to undermine the official doctrine by exposing the very paradox of such a program and, consequently, de-stabilize the Canadian desire for a unified multicultural nation. Rawi Hage's novel, *Cockroach* allows us to examine how the contemporary immigrant experience in practice reveals the flaws inherent in the ideals of Canadian multiculturalism. The book shows us that in order for the nameless narrator to “fully participate in Canadian society”, which here means (among other things) to get a job and consequently survive, he must first begin a process of self-erasure, eliminating the parts of his heritage that exist outside of social and cultural acceptability. The narrator is, in fact, unable to blend the two possibilities suggested in Canada's multiculturalism policy and instead wavers between two seemingly bleak positions throughout the novel – the conforming exotic immigrant or the non-conformist cockroach. The narrator desires to fit into normal, legitimate, acceptable society because his very survival depends on it, but in order to do so he must transform into someone that he's not. I argue, however, that the novel does offer the concept of the liminal space between human and cockroach as a space of possibility for the immigrant. A recent convention of contemporary Canadian literature is to position characters (often nameless) within a liminal space that is

specifically a generative space and Hage's similar positioning of his own narrator here is crucial in my discussion.

Key Words: Multiculturalism, immigration, Canada, liminality, postmodern, fiction, literature

The Canadian government is often praised and, in fact, often praises itself for its official policies on multiculturalism and immigration. These policies are generally compared favourably to those in the United States and one often hears about the benefits of the Canadian cultural mosaic versus the American cultural melting pot. Regardless, scholars such as Arnold Itwaru in *The Invention of Canada*, argue that Canadian immigration narratives often succeed in revealing as well as challenging the myths of multiculturalism by displaying how the immigrant is unable to retain his or her culture while simultaneously fully participating in Canadian society. Ravi Hage's recently published novel *Cockroach* certainly reinforces this by positioning the book's narrator in a liminal space between the culture he identifies with and the role he is expected to perform to be a successful Canadian immigrant. Yet it is here within this liminal space that his nameless narrator is able to succeed. Using Itwaru's theories on the Canadian immigration narrative, I intend to show that Hage's text subverts the official state position on multiculturalism and immigration by positioning its narrator in a space between his cultural identity and his desire to live successfully in Canada. By placing the narrator in this position, I argue that the text offers the space of liminality as a place of possibility for the immigrant and an alternative for the current system operating in Canada while at the same time, recognizing the irony inherent in being dependent on the very system it works to subvert.

In order to illustrate the novel's positioning of its narrator in an in between space, I will first examine how this relates to the narrator's status as a Canadian immigrant in light of the arguments put forth by Arnold Itwaru. In his introduction to *The Invention of Canada*, Itwaru argues that, "The mosaic concept [in Canada]... presents a national self-statement, a façade in which the object of desire, 'multi-cultural Canada,' conceals the inner chambers of assimilationism."¹ Consequently, the Canadian immigrant experience in practice contradicts the official state policy of multiculturalism. Itwaru goes on to note that the policy, which promises "the retainance of ethnic identity" along with "full participation in national life" fails in reality because these "are contradictory concepts."² The immigrant, then, finds it impossible to both preserve entirely the identity that he or she has brought with them to Canada and simultaneously take advantage of the benefits of being a Canadian. As just one example, Itwaru writes that "the immigrant must learn the dominant language" before full participation can occur.³ The conclusion, then, is that the immigrant must either choose between fully participating "in national life" (the preferable option as, in many cases, survival is predicated on full participation) and retaining the "ethnic identity" that he or she has brought with them. *Cockroach* reaffirms Itwaru's argument in the sense that as a fictional narrative representing the lived experience of an immigrant in Canada, the novel undermines the official ideals of Canadian multiculturalism by revealing the contradictions that are inherent within. At the same time, though, the book uses the "contradictory concepts" of "full participation" and "retainance of ethnic identity" in order to create a space for the narrator that does not put him in either category, and instead places him in a space in between.

Certainly there are many examples throughout the novel where we see the narrator being forced to abandon aspects of his

cultural identity in the name of fitting more smoothly into Canadian norms. The most striking example comes near the end of the book when the narrator recalls an earlier experience in the host country:

I could smoke, I thought. I could climb up to some roof and watch the neighbourhood from above. But the last time I had tried this, it took two minutes for the police to come and ask me why I was on the roof. Some lady had complained that I was looking into her bedchamber and called them. It was summer and all I wanted was to hang out on the roof like millions of people on countless planets do in this universe. Billions of farmers, forgers, waitresses, and housewives stand on roofs and look around and smoke, hang laundry and contemplate. When I told the policemen that I had always done this, all my life, he replied: Well, here people do not look at each other from their roofs. I will only look at the stars then, I said. He forbade me from looking at the stars, and threatened me with jail. Where all you would be looking at is walls and men in the shower, he said, and his partner laughed.⁴

This passage certainly works to reaffirm Itwaru's argument. Here we have a very obvious case where the law is working coercively to modify behaviour. The behaviour that the narrator describes seems to be not only entirely innocuous but also common to many cultures. He notes, quite amusingly here, that "millions of people on countless planets" participate in this activity and that he, himself "had always done this, all my life". The reply of the policeman, that "here people do not look at each other from their roofs" suggests an attempt to shape a fixed Canadian identity. If the narrator wants to fit in, he will have to abandon the behaviour that is acceptable to his culture *there* but unacceptable *here*. This

passage, as a whole, affirms the claim of postcolonialist Chelva Kanaganayakam, that “the multicultural ideal...in practice...leads to ghettoization rather than belonging.”⁵ In this moment of the text, the option for the immigrant is either assimilate or be pushed outside the margins of acceptable society with the threat of imprisonment.

Certainly the narrator desires to fit into normal, legitimate, acceptable society. The text suggests that the very basis of his survival is predicated on fitting in when he notes: “I have to get some money before the end of the month, before I starve to death in this shithole of an apartment.”⁶ Since for him, the best way to get money is to “contribute my share” and “become a good citizen,” we become immediately aware of the stakes of his survival⁷. In order to “become a good citizen” he must transform into one. As a result, the narrator is often wavering between retaining his cultural identity and transforming in order to survive.

Cockroach suggests, though, that the narrator is not entirely caught between being an assimilated Canadian and retaining his cultural identity. Instead, the text demonstrates that the host country does not merely force the narrator to be like everyone else in order to survive; rather, the transformation necessary for the narrator is to live up to the perception of ‘the immigrant’. While those that were, perhaps, born in Canada are often bound to fulfill the conventions of the national identity, the immigrant, upon moving to the new country, is often bound to fulfill the conventions of an identity that is somewhat different. Itwaru, in fact, says so himself in his article when writing:

The stranger in the name and label ‘immigrant’ is already invented as ‘immigrant,’ a distinctiveness which is also anonymous, upon arrival. This person is no longer only the bearer of another history, but has now become a particular

other, the bearer of a label, invented by the 'host.' This person has become the immigrant - this term of depersonalization which will brand her and him for the rest of their lives in the country of their adoption.⁸

In other words, then, the role of the immigrant is constructed as being something other than the role that is constructed for the dominant group. This in itself makes sense, for if the manufactured national unity of Canada is based on a "mosaic concept", then there should still be "particular *others*" insofar as the *others* absorb (and, consequently assimilate) the deeply held assumptions about the immigrant. Mridula Nath Chakraborty discusses this phenomenon in terms of immigrant writers and argues: "Writings by subjects who are constituted as the racialised and minoritised Others of the dominant majority within the context of liberal pluralist, multiculturalist white settler nations have the burden placed upon them of being representative of their mythical and cultural originary."⁹ The "burden" of which Chakraborty speaks here is presented in the lived experience of the immigrant narrator in Cockroach, as he struggles between refuting the assumptions made by "the dominant majority" about his "cultural originary" and reaffirming the myths.

Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* is useful in exploring how the narrator is caught between refuting and affirming assumptions about a mythical essence of the *other* – in this case, an immigrant from not only the East but also the Muslim world. According to Said, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."¹⁰ In effect, a binary was established to not only contain the scope of this area of the world¹¹ but also construct difference and attach an arbitrary value to those differences, thereby fashioning the East as

inferior in order “to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for ‘us’ to deny autonomy to ‘it’.”¹² Here, Said is referring to “the Oriental country” but the same standard could be applied to individuals from the East. For Said, in order to maintain this construction of difference, those from the Orient are often imbued by the West with essential, unchanging traits.¹³ He argues that, historically, the West typically has constructed the Oriental as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’” and that these traits hold as being natural, as if one were not authentically Oriental, or from the Orient, without these traits.¹⁴

In *Cockroach*, the success of the immigrant (in this case, from the East) is often based on playing the role of the Western-constructed Oriental. Early in the text, the narrator notes of Canada that “The exotic has to be modified here – not too authentic, not too spicy or too smelly, just enough of it to remind others of a fantasy elsewhere.”¹⁵ The “fantasy” here, of course, is that of the East as only a place of difference. The role of the immigrant then is to reaffirm the assumptions about the East and the people who come from there. The narrator suggests here too that the West does not expect authenticity, perhaps because being “too authentic” could ultimately lead to the failure of the immigrant. The narrator of the novel himself notes that the most appropriate way for immigrants to act is to play the role that has been historically constructed for them by the West: “The fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner...Play it right and they will toss you from one party to another.”¹⁶ For the narrator, playing the role of the exotic foreigner is more likely to lead to success rather than unsettling firmly held Western convictions about the binary opposition between West and East.

No one in the book fulfills the role of the exotic foreigner better than the narrator’s sometimes friend Reza who plays “exotic tunes” in the restaurant where the narrator eventually works and tells exotic stories for “Gullible heads” who circle around him.¹⁷

Significantly, here, Reza's story that he tells plays into many contemporary stereotypes about the Muslim world, wherein he nearly gets killed by the "Iranian Hezbollah, the Guards of God" for playing fast, "non-religious tunes" for "the great leader of the Iranian revolution."¹⁸ Here, in the novel we see the ultimate success that comes with fulfilling the Western perception of the Eastern immigrant. Playing "exotic tunes" gives Reza a steadily paying job, while the exotic stories that he tells allow him "to couch-surf in women's houses."¹⁹ The issue of playing the role of the exotic foreigner becomes useful, again, in examining the narrator's positioning in a space in between. The narrator is critical of Reza's "schemes and lies" and yet he himself enjoys the company of privileged, white, Montrealer Sylvie and her friends²⁰. I stress this because this is the moment in the text where the narrator seems to be the most accepted by the dominant culture and is allowed to gain access to that world. Yet, the narrator succeeds in doing this because of Sylvie's inability to "resist anything foreign."²¹ He even impresses the ladies' boyfriends because they "felt that they were in the company of a noble savage, and they liked it."²² The novel, then, not only shows how the success of the immigrant is based on fulfilling a certain preconceived and pre-packaged idea of what the immigrant (particularly, in this case, the Muslim immigrant) is supposed to be, but also shows its narrator caught between despising this role-playing but playing it regardless in order to temporarily gain access to this world.

The narrator's discussion with a human-sized cockroach in the novel, as well as his repulsion to the cockroach and his desire to be one, nicely symbolizes the immigrant's position between retaining cultural identity and participating to the full in Canada. The talking cockroach says to the narrator: "You are part cockroach. But the worst part of it is that you are also human. Look at you how you strive to be worshipped by women, like those

jealous, vain gods. Now go and be human, but just remember you are always welcome. You know how to find us. Just keep your eyes on what is going on down in the underground.”²³ The cockroach here tells the narrator that he wants to be part of the acceptable social order in order “to be worshipped by women” suggesting that the narrator’s wish for attention forces the same kind of performativity practiced by Reza mentioned above. The narrator soon after admits that “the big roach knows me well” and the accurate remarks by the insect convey the narrator’s desire to both deviate from the norms of society and belong to that society.²⁴ Also, in suggesting that the cockroach’s home is the underground, the text calls attention to a revolutionary discourse and suggests that turning away from the norms of society means to disrupt the social order that the narrator depends on for his very survival. The cockroach then articulates quite accurately the space in which the narrator exists throughout the novel.

The question becomes, what do we make out of the significance of the text’s positioning of its narrator in a liminal space or space in between? In her article, “Displacements, Self-Mockery, and Carnival in the Canadian Postmodern”, Eva Darias-Beutell suggests that liminality points to “the breaking of oppositions between one and the other.”²⁵ In fact, to take Darias-Beutell’s point and expand on it somewhat, as a zone of transition, the liminal space is where all boundaries, borders, and oppositions dissolve. Here, as the quotation above suggests, stable identities become unstable, ambiguous, and beyond traditional categories of definition. I argue that *Cockroach* as a text offers this space in particular as a generative and productive place for the immigrant. After all, Linda Hutcheon in her seminal text, *The Canadian Postmodern* argues that, “The periphery is...the frontier, the place of possibility.”²⁶ It is specifically these possibilities to which Hutcheon refers that are explored in Hage’s book. This helps

explain why, throughout the novel, the narrator is constantly wavering in between playing a role that protects the social order, as we understand it and becoming the cockroach who desires to undermine that very same order. The text even leaves the narrator's full transformation unclear by its conclusion. One might argue that by rushing "toward the drain" with "glittering wings towards the underground"²⁷ the narrator has made his choice to be the free insect, escaping from the "shapes and forms that confine you and guide you."²⁸ And yet, it cannot go unmentioned that *Cockroach* is told in the 1st person and that the story of the narrator's abandonment of society as we know it is ultimately a coherent, unified, and structured narrative. In other words, the very structure that the narrator seems to abandon entirely is required in order for his story to exist in the first place.

The refusal to fully accept either identity is reinforced by the namelessness that marks both the narrator and his country of origin – a familiar convention of postmodern and contemporary Canadian literature. Yet the narrator's namelessness and unnamed place of origin contribute to the immigrant's possibilities. Canadian critic Adam Carter writes: "Namelessness may be indeed be a space of freedom and plurality, a generative place."²⁹ In other words, the space of liminality does not merely call into question or dissolve identity. Rather, it is here where identity resists closure and is therefore marked by an ongoing continually altering multiplicity. In the liminal space, identity and selfhood can be fashioned and re-fashioned. Consequently, instead of being trapped by an identity of being, the narrator is forever embracing a process of becoming. The stakes of this are significant. The narrator's namelessness and his lack of origin (and, therefore, his lack of being) is an act of linguistic resistance – while we can make assumptions about the narrator, he is essentially always beyond our categorization whilst occupying this space. Moreover, by refusing to pick sides in the

book – by never fully committing to the world of the cockroach or the world of the human – the narrator resists falling into the trap of adhering to the binary opposition established by the country’s multicultural system, where you either have to choose full participation (and hence, transformation) or risk ghettoization. In that refusal, the narrator is simultaneously resisting the traditional binary that Said discusses in *Orientalism*, which served to construct the opposition between the West and East and continues to construct the image of the immigrant before he or she even enters the country.

The text suggests then that a possible alternative to the current state policy on multiculturalism is the creation of a space of liminality, which resists the oppositions and categories that currently work to curb the individual freedoms of Canadian immigrants. At the same time, though, it must be noted how impossible it is to present a space of liminality as a place of possibility without a great deal of what Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern irony. Hutcheon argues that postmodern Canadian writers “are always in a sense ‘agents provocateurs’ – taking potshots at the culture of which they know they are unavoidably a part but that they still wish to criticize.”³⁰ *Cockroach* as we have seen, refuses to resolve contradictions in positioning the narrator between the human and the cockroach, and likewise draws our attention to the paradoxes of its own argument. The book makes us implicitly aware that any desire for a dramatic change in the stable social order will also be dependent on that very same social order in order for that change to occur. In the same way that the narrator requires the structure of the coherent, unified narrative in order to explain how he finally comes to resist the structures of his own society (from which his own narrative surely derives), the critic of Canadian immigration must also occupy the space they are simultaneously trying to radically change. Nevertheless,

contemporary Canadian literature is particularly receptive to exploring paradoxes and contradictions. Consequently, the text itself can operate as an effective space of possibility for the immigrant to resist categorization and simultaneously criticize the social order from within.

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¹ A Itwaru, *The Invention of Canada: Literary Text and the Immigrant Imaginary*, TSAR, Toronto, 1990, p. 14.

² *ibid.*, p. 16.

³ *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ R Hage, *Cockroach*, House of Anansi Press Inc., Toronto, 2008, pp. 277-278.

⁵ C Kanaganayakam, 'Cool Dots and Hybrid Scarborough: Multiculturalism as Canadian Myth', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?: Unsettling Canadian Literature*, L. Moss (ed), Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 2003, pp. 142-143.

⁶ R Hage, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 65.

⁸ A Itwaru, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

⁹ M Chakraborty, 'Nostalgic Narratives and the Otherness Industry', in *Is Canada Postcolonial?: Unsettling Canadian Literature*, L. Moss (ed), Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 2003, p. 128.

¹⁰ E Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, p. 1.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³ Importantly, for Said, just as it was for England and France, the Orient is very much synonymous with the East and includes (most significantly for our examination here) the Islamic world.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵ R Hage, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 26.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 199.

²² *ibid.*, p. 183.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 203.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 209.

²⁵ E Darias-Beautell, 'Displacements, Self-Mockery, and Carnival in the Canadian Postmodern'. *World Literature Today*, vol. 70, 1996, pp. 314-321.

²⁶ L Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Oxford University Press, Don Mills, 1988, p. 3.

²⁷ R Hage, *op.cit.*, p. 305

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 270

²⁹ A Carter, 'Namelessness, Irony, and National Character in Contemporary Canadian Criticism and the Critical Tradition'. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 28.1, Winter 2003, pp.5-21.

³⁰ L Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 3