Women and the Trauma of War in Beirut Hellfire Society: A Gender Study

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Abstract

This article examines the traumatic effects of the Lebanese civil war on women in Rawi Hage's novel Beirut Hellfire Society (2018). It explores women's madness and gender identity disorder as two effects of war trauma and examines how indulgence in orgiastic acts of self-annihilation and sexual transgression is a means of countering this trauma. The article also depicts sexuality as one cause of women's exclusion in war making their bodies simultaneously vulnerable and defiant to all forms of sexual assault exacerbated in times of war. The gender studies approach that focuses on women identities in real wars is used to analyze the women characters in this novel. It aims to show how these traumatic effects and the civil war repercussions pertain to the gender hierarchy of power and the gendered social constructions prevailing before and not during the civil war.

Keywords: civil war, Rawi Hage, trauma, madness, identity disorder, exclusion, gender studies

1. Introduction

The study of literature tends in many cases to analyze discourse and focus on the poetics of texts or to search for the authoritarian systems hidden within these texts (Foucault, 1970, as cited in Young, 1981). Subjecting the literary texts to this type of study enables the researcher to go beyond the aesthetic structures of texts and search for the inherent authoritarian patterns created by the mental structures generated by the society.

And if every discourse of any kind according to Foucault (1969) carries an authority that emanates from a system of contingent power relations within a society, including the discourse producer and his/her authoritarian position, then the literature concerned with war is often a literature where the microphysics of power are dominant. This suggests the importance of a thorough examination of these authoritarian patterns in order to identify the textual manifestations that deal with conflict struggles and concentrate on power.

The general consensus of war is that it focuses on hegemony and power. It is a clash of wills and forces which are often characterized by bloodshed and the fragility of the human being. Hence, the study of war literature examines the quality of the authoritarian patterns embedded within war texts and explores their violent and traumatic effects on characters. Perhaps, the presence of woman in war literature is distinguished by virtue of her representation as one of the orbits of conflict and a source of control to the conflicting parties; this makes women more vulnerable to trauma and more liable to be labelled as victims. However, this does not mean that she might not adopt an active rebellious role in war and become a defiant against trauma.

Accordingly, the gender studies approach might be considered efficient in analyzing war literature and researching the traumatic effects of war on women. It provides the researcher with the sufficient methodology to analyze the authoritarian relations, gender structures and hierarchies, and the various representations of women in war literature.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the traumatic effects of war on women in *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018) by the Lebanese-Canadian author Rawi Hage. The gender studies approach that focuses on the woman identity in real wars is used to analyze the woman character in this war novel. Therefore, it is important to start with showing the differences between the woman identity in gender studies and the woman character in literature.

2. Gender in War: Between the Woman Identity and the Woman Character

Gender studies address the state of woman in war through examining the effects of real wars on her identity (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009; Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Yuval-Davis, 1997). These studies originated in the field of women's studies, feminism, gender, and politics (Wiesner-Hanks, 2019) unlike literature that explores the woman character in fiction.

The woman identity in gender studies is conceived as the woman state or the woman case. Her experiences are shaped by the social arrangements that intersect with the social structures of her community. Her presence is then interwoven by the economic, historic, social, and political reality. However, the woman in fiction is a fictional character whose actions are controlled by a sense of causality created by the author. She performs the roles directed by the author who, at times, conforms to the distinctive nature or features of the narrative style.

Consequently, the woman character in fiction is seen in a series of intersecting relations within the narrative realm of the novel where action is solely controlled by the author.

Cohn (2013) writes that the woman identity in war takes the form of "collective identity" at the symbolic level. The woman symbolizes the nation, the home/mother land which a male citizen/soldier must protect against violation, penetration or conquest. The female bodies are seen as "the repository and reproducers of national, racial, ethnic, tribal or religious identity—they are the vessels through which men of the nation or other collectivity can (re)produce new members of the group" (p. 14). These bodies then represent the "territory" men must have control in order to preserve these "national identities, bloodlines, and their familial and national honor" (p. 14). In this case, the woman in war can be doubly represented. She can be a source of power because she stands for the nation and the identity on one hand and a source of weakness because she is vulnerable to rape on the other hand.

The woman character in war literature can adopt many identities intended for characterization by the author. These fictional identities are gendered ones entreated with different implications that might match or clash with the women's representations in gender studies. For example, gender studies present facts and statistics about women raped in war to look up for solutions while the author in literature uses the war images of women depicted in gender studies to create the woman character in fiction. The author focuses on the effects and the repercussions of war on women for the purpose of creating a certain influence on readers and achieving an authorial intent. Moreover, gender researchers study the real state of woman in war regardless of her religion, race, class, ethnicity, or culture, whereas, the author in fiction might select certain women for creating the authorial intent as presented in the novel *Beirut Hellfire Society* by Rawi Hage.

One of the author's intentions in this war novel is reflected in his selection of the women characters. The Christian women are the only women presented by Hage in his novel. The Lebanese civil war that took place from 1975 to 1990 was between armed militias of Christians and Muslims. The author only symbolically alludes to the Muslim women through the Saudi Arabian princesses and the women of the Royal Moroccan family who come to Lebanon to have sex with the Marquis and to enjoy listening to his erotic stories. Hage does not include any Muslim women in his novel but dramatically presents them through the Saudi Arabian women and the Moroccan Royal Family. He mocks the honor of the women of Saudi Arabia - the source of authority for Muslims and a direct line back to the prophets with the sacred shrines of Islam - and the women of the Royal Moroccan family who claim to represent the descendants of the dynasty of the prophet. In this case, Hage is mocking the *real* identities of those women who stand for ideologies of Islam and uses them to serve his fictional characters. This suggests that the author himself whether intentionally or unintentionally has become involved in a symbolic civil war using gender to belittle and desecrate the honor of the opponent's archetype of Muslim women.

This in turn coincides with Cohn's representations of unmanning the enemy. Cohn states that attributing dehumanized representations and exposing the opponent's women to rape or sexual assault are means of humiliating the enemy. Hage's allusion to the interest of those Muslim women in the Marquis erotic stories and how they send him messages hint at the sexual dissatisfaction of those women, thus denigrating their men's masculinity. The writer again has become a part of this civil war by showing the men of those women as *less* masculine and the women as prostitutes coming to Lebanon for sex gratification.

Cohn argues that the gendered identity in real wars is not based on the biological identification (two sexes/ males and females) but rather on the hierarchically structured relationships of people and on how activities are symbolically associated with masculinity or femininity. That is to say, gender studies view gender as a social system that structures hierarchical power relations. In such case, the control of some men over other less masculine men is justifiable. In *Beirut Hellfire Society,* the author endows the physically strong Madame Fiora with masculine qualities. She strikes her husband Monsieur Fiora, who labels her barbaric, and is capable of protecting her female lover, Janette Chaletta. Hage (2018) here does not stick to the hierarchical power relations but creates a woman character whose power is derived from her physical strength.

Madame Fiora is biologically able to destroy the gender hierarchy but fails to control the religious side. The priest uses gender to exert his religious power. He incites Monsieur Fiora, who kneels and weeps in front of the priest, to take control of the situation saying, "You are the man of the house. Do whatever you have to do. It's your house" (p.146). The prominence of "patriarchy" here is seen as one aspect of the system that structures power relations. Cohn writes that men dominate women and exercise power through their control of the society's social, economic, cultural, and religious institutions. The priest is trying to restructure gender and ensure the centrality of power in hierarchical social constructions. In holding the gun and firing five bullets at Madame Fiora, Monsieur Fiora is regaining his masculine gender role and the priest has got rid of an unbeliever, one outside the circle of his control.

Evidently, one can say that Hage is using the woman character in fiction to highlight the role of religion in maintaining patriarchy. Madame Fiora is not allowed to have a proper burial even after her death due to "the scarcity of lots" (p. 147). This illustrates the supremacy of religious beliefs in intensifying the gender hierarchical construction. She stands for the symbolic gender coding of the nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation in war. She becomes a threat to this pattern especially "after the outbreak of the war, as religious zealotry became fierce" (p. 146). The rejection of her burial is justified by her society because she is an "unbeliever" of "overt atheism" (p. 147) at a time when the concept of collective identity must be stronger, particularly the Christian identity (Christians are less in number than the Muslims in Lebanon). In this case, the nonconformity of Madame Fiora and her rebel against the collective identity of woman and religion are more dangerous than the enemy in the Middle Eastern mindset.

The woman identity in gender studies stands for the general image of woman in real wars. However, the woman character in war literature is viewed from the peripheral side of war; that is to say, from the various positions or roles characters undertake in war. For example,

Hannah and Mannah are two characters who suffer from gender identity disorder in the novel and whose roles switch between femininity and masculinity depending on the situation. They do not match the gendered social construction of power. Similarly, the Bohemian struggles to belong to the masculine realm of war through holding arms and joining militias in order to hide his gender identity disorder. This shows how the quintessentially masculine realm of war entrenches a crisis of masculinity.

To conclude, the study of the woman identity in gender studies differs from the study of the woman character in war literature. The author in literature can intentionally adopt the woman identity in gender studies to present an effect or *affect* on readers of fiction through the characterization of traumatic women characters.

3. Women and the Trauma of War

Massive warfare makes all people (men, women, children, old, young etc.) vulnerable and weak in the face of war. All struggle for survival and experience constant fear and terror especially during civil wars which are the most vicious and traumatic of wars. The civil war (1975-1990) in the tiny multi-religious Lebanon was a Muslim-Christian conflict that aimed to shield religious ideologies. It fostered the necessity of destroying the enemy through abolishing his identity and anything that might be procreated by this identity. Cohn writes that human condition in war is determined by "the fragility of our flesh against the destructiveness of our weapons, and against the power of our institutions to mobilize, construct, and manipulate the identities and ideologies that make us willing to inflict terrible harms on other human beings" (p. 28). This is very true in the case of the Lebanese civil war which saved no civilian, man or woman, from killing or attack.

In civil wars, women must be protected by the males of her own community because women stand for honor and religion. Their ability to procreate adds power to the religious identity of the first group and intensifies the threat for the opposing group. Therefore, women in a patriarchal society represent the honor and the target for violence at the same time. This is mostly the consequence of the gender hierarchy of power in the construction of society before and not during war. This means that women are vulnerable to trauma when they lose the males' protection (father, brother, son) in war and when they are raped or exposed to sexual assault; henceforth, they become stigmatized in their own community. These twofold manifestations of trauma in *Beirut Hellfire Society* are presented in forms of madness and identity disorder.

3.1 Women and Madness

Michel Foucault (2006) states that madness is a form of exclusion associated with confinement and marginalization. Undoubtedly, the highest level of exclusion can be found in war where many are excluded from life. The exclusion inflicted in the Lebanese civil war circumstances appears in the form of traumatic madness in the novel. The Lady of the Stairs and Pavlov's mother are two illustrations of this trauma.

The Lady of the Stairs is a typical example of the severe bereavement in war. She lost her brother during their father's funeral procession. Hence, she lost all means of protection and all sorts of support. The motif of losses and burial in the novel has a double effect on the Lady of the Stairs. Firstly, she is excluded. This means that she has become an easy target for any physical violence or sexual assault (rape, marginalization, hunger, exploitation, etc.) and that is why nobody notices her presence (even Pavlov, who helps her at a certain point in the novel, exploits her sexually at the end). Secondly, her traumatic madness is clearly reflected in her silence and continuous laughter. Her silence indicates that there is no rational explanation that can describe the reverberating severe effects of the Lebanese civil war back then. It is the sound of death associated with the massive bombs that dumbs her. She stands for the image of death within a framework of death. The absurdity of death in the civil war is juxtaposed with the absurdity of her laughter. Hage writes:

> The Lady of the Stairs stood up, took off her clothes and walked out into the living room, so Pavlov took off his pyjamas and followed her. They both laughed at the musicality of the explosions, the faint smell of rain, the moonlight that passed through the window and fell upon their nakedness. The shower of bombs made them hysterical, and they started to dance and then to re-enact scenes of killing, mocking death, burial and resurrection. (p. 126)

They were dancing naked at the sounds of the bombs which have become the music for them to laugh hysterically. It is the process of facing the mad reality with more madness. Madness for Pavlov and the Lady of the Stairs becomes a means of rationality when they both mock the silliness of the beliefs and the illusions people fight for in war.

> Silly humans, Pavlov whispered, the things they believe.
>
> The things they believe, the lady repeated.
>
> You talk! Pavlov said, overjoyed. Talk some more. (p. 127)

Another traumatic figure of madness in the novel is Pavlov's mother. She embodies the vulnerabilities of war at its utmost. In her childhood, she is described as a poor orphan whose mother had to sell her body to survive. She was sexually abused by the same man who abused her mother. Pavlov's mother is an example of the woman who is victimized by the vicious consequences of war. She always experiences fear and her madness is a protest against death. Pavlov says:

> Her madness had begun on a deceptively calm morning. She had awakened the neighborhood with her loud screams as she pointed at the cadavers. *The voices of the dead!* she had screamed… *The dead are everywhere, they are walking in the cemetery, they are coming to snatch our children,* she would scream, and she would tear off her clothes and run to hide in the

bathroom. (p. 119)

The scent of death spread all over Lebanon which became similar to a cemetery in the civil war. Pavlov's mother becomes the stereotype image of every Lebanese woman overcome by the traumatic effects of war. Rationality cannot exist for after all "Who in their right mind would live in the middle of a cemetery?" (p. 119). It is this intolerable madness that was spread all over Lebanon during the civil war and which made women more vulnerable to the trauma of war.

This Switzerland of the Middle East (O'Ballance, 1998) became the land of madness. No wonder then the Lady of the Stairs leaves the cemetery after her dance with Pavlov, that is after she becomes *rational;* rationality is in leaving the cemetery, in leaving Lebanon. The author of the novel has shown women inflicted with madness whereas everyone in Lebanon during the civil war was in a state of madness. [1]

While it is crucial to explore madness in *Beirut Hellfire Society* as the first traumatic effect of war, it is equally important to indicate how gender identity disorder is a second traumatic effect of the civil war in Lebanon.

3.2 Gender Identity Disorder

One of the major characteristics of war is that it is closely related to the masculine realm. Cohn believes that the theme of women's vulnerability in war reverberates across centuries with the heroic man in battles fighting to protect women, children, and nation. She does not see war as an aberrant event which breaks out suddenly from a peaceful context, but views it as a "creation and creator of the social reality in which it thrives" (p. 21). Cockburn (1998) views the violence in war as part of a "continuum of violence" (p. 80) that women experience. Accordingly, one can say that war is a cycle in a chain of continuous violence on which the true definition of masculinity is represented by the male who can protect the female or kill and be part of an armed group. This in turn sharpens the distinction between genders in war and excludes any gender construction that does not belong to war classifications of gender. It is an absolute either/or classification (either belong or does not belong, either masculine or feminine) where the *less* masculine and the *less* feminine are excluded in war. This traumatic exclusion of the less gendered identity in terms of the war implications results in gender identity disorder.

The number of characters who suffer from gender identity disorder in the novel exceeds the number of those with classified gender. Seven characters in the novel exhibit gender identity disorder. They are the Bohemian, Hannah and Mannah, Madame Fiora and Monsieur Fiora, and the two nuns. The trauma caused by the violence of war and the sharp distinction between the masculine and the feminine spheres reinforced the exclusion of the less masculine males when compared to the militia men and of the defiant females who resist the victimized role in a patriarchal society.

Firstly, the Bohemian is a typical example of the less masculine in the context of the war specifications. His character is shaped by a surrounding disorderly gendered society where the mother strikes the father and takes Jeanette Challita as her female lover. His father is attracted to the same sex. He is similar to his father who loves the physically strong. The Bohemian's sleeping with Hannah and Mannah, who resemble his mother in their physical strength, reveals a gender identity disorder stemming from an unresolved Oedipal complex. They all "looked like a still photograph from the aftermath of a massacre or a Roman orgy" (Hage, 2018, p. 178). The Bohemian's mother rejects him for his weakness and prefers his brother, a strong doctor. The Bohemian joins the militias to conform to masculinity just like his father who holds a gun to kill his wife. His mother's indifference and nonconformity to the stereotype image of the loving mother exacerbate his gender identity disorder and confirm that there is no place for the weak in war.

Secondly, Hannah and Mannah are two other examples of gender identity disorder. The fears of gender classifications that intersect with gender identity disorder become, at times, a means of protection for the self from the violence of war. This particularly applies to women who are armless and do not fight in war but are continuous targets for physical and sexual assault especially if deprived of male protection. Hannah and Mannah attempt to hide their gender identity to avoid any kind of violation or victimization. They perform the gendered masculine roles in war. They go out at night, ride motorcycles, wear masculine clothes, and when stopped by the militias, they were let free[2] for they are less masculine. In this way they would not be exposed to death because they are protected from sexual assault (as females) and from joining war (as males). They are always in disguise, neither males nor females. Their disguise has saved them from all forms of violence just like the nuns at the Marquis death party. The nuns hide their homosexuality and dress with large crosses on their chests at the party to protect themselves from the rifles of the villagers who have been informed of the "sinful activities…and of a murdered woman [the Marquis] hanging in the middle of the main room" (Hage, 2018, p. 252). Here, one can say that at times of war, each is in disguise with a double gender identity to use when the need for self-protection is deemed necessary.

Thirdly, gender identity disorder is strongly reflected in the character of the Marquis. Eagleton (2005) states that the holy, the terror, and the sexually ambiguous are inseparable. The Marquis encounters the unbearable horror of the Lebanese civil war, which is religious in nature, with more erotic immersion. Marquis describes his sex with Florence:

In the midst of falling bombs and fighting we would drink, and smoke the best hash in the world, and fuck for hours. The thrill

[1] For example, the case of the Lebanese poet Khalil Hawi who committed suicide with a rifle in his apartment in Beirut as a protest against the Israeli invasion and support for some militias in Lebanon against others during the civil war.

[2] Killing and slaughtering of civilians during the Lebanese civil war was done at checkpoints upon the militia's checking of the people's religion written on the Lebanese identity card.

> of fucking in close proximity to bullets and bombs was, in my opinion, the most appropriate political act one could engage in. But our daring escalated. We started fucking at the window and watching the bombs fall, and the little bursts of smoke here and there from the bombs as they landed excited us even more…. But war was always one step ahead of us with its transgressions, profanity and cruelties. War is the master fucker, and no matter how we tried to degrade our bodies, war always degraded it more, and won…So what could we do but obey it and worship it? (Hage, 2018, p. 39)

The Marquis declares openly that sensual fantasy swaddles him from the surrounding world of bombs and enables him to confront this brute force on bodies by indulging in deviant sensual pleasures that exceed gender boundaries. It is the act of challenging war through crazed rapture or what Slavoj Žižek (1991) calls "obscene enjoyment" (p. 59) in his book *For They Know Not What They Do.* It is a state of interwoven self-affirmation with self-dissolution or a pleasurable unconscious with a relentless self-aggression. Florence and the Marquis are in a state of fathomless unconsciousness that eliminates all gender and body boundaries enjoying the pain inflicted on the self in a process of transgression and challenge of the dull reason of war. The Marquis says:

> Sexual transgression became our way of dealing with the boredom that is so widespread in our traditional society, with its omnipresent war, its meek religiosity. Our nation lives within a culture of shaming and shame, and we decided to challenge it by committing the most daring acts of transgression. (Hage, 2018, p. 38)

He adds:

> I was inside her anus, holding the rifle at my side. I handed the weapon to her and she aimed it in the direction of the highway. She started shooting indiscriminately at passing cars on distant roads. She would say, Now, and I would push myself farther then pause my thrusting, and she would pull the trigger on innocent drivers. Later, we would turn on the radio to hear the news announcer warning about snipers on that distant highway (Hage, 2018, p. 40).

This symbolically stands for the total immersion in pleasure associated in its strangeness with death, pain, and the pleasure of killing oneself or the other. Florence shoots at the rhythm of the penetration in her anus and the Marquis thrusts farther. The sexual transgression here (through the anus) is concurrent with killing innocent people (man and child were killed).

As well, using the rifle which stands for masculinity in the hands of Florence—who herself becomes a sexual object for the Marquis—is an act of eliminating gender boundaries. In the same manner, Hage presents Chantal who hangs herself as an example of those deviants who indulge in war through her body and whose "only choice is to become even more mutant…and disappear from this region" (p. 47). If the Marquis here is presented as the "prototype for the Hellfire Society membership" (p. 33), then he is like Dionysus, the god of wine and blood, not only in their carnal practices but also in their female followers. Florence and Chantal, with the only addition of cocaine, are just like the Bacchantes who indulge in ecstatic drinking, self-dissolution, and throwing human organs to the winds in their rapture (similar to Florence's killing of the people and Chantal's killing of herself).

Hage repeatedly alludes to the absurdity of war through the people's extreme indulgence in sex to escape the war's intolerable effects. It is the apathetic state of life-in-death manifested in sex-in-war. And this is what makes the Marquis severely condemn the hypocrite piety claimed at the Lebanese civil war. He tells Florence that puritanism "is a self-serving lie created by the perverse, those who secretly long for filth" (p. 37). He believes that the pious have a sickly sado-masochism and hypocritically disavowed instincts.

Finally, the characters at the death party of the Marquis are examples of the traumatic identity disorder reflected in the civil war. The party is a Dionysian embodiment of the hedonistic and deviant pleasure that overcomes gender boundaries. The party resembles the Bacchic jovial and riotous orgy in the Greek mythology. The nuns, on one hand, use religion to hide their identity disorder. They indulge in homosexual sex and place a cross on their chests to assure the villagers that they were misinformed of any sinful activity inside. Here, Hage depicts the false piety of the Lebanese society which hides orgiastic sensations at times of war. The war is seen as the only outlet for those bodies that crave for the forbidden sexual pleasure; the bodies that do not acknowledge boundaries but are captives of the false piety that controls their sexual drives. On the other hand, the nuns' disguise of their homosexuality explains the trauma of exclusion caused by the gendered social constructions. This trauma turns to an unrestrained Dionysian pleasure at the Marquis death party where destroying gender boundaries and indulging in Dionysian orgies are forms of self-gratification. In this sense, the war for the genderly disordered nuns turns to jubilant extravagance with wine, sex, debauchery, and cocaine. Hage here suggests that indulgence in this crazed orgy—where gender boundaries are no longer detaining—destroys the boundaries between the fiery lusts and the fire bombs, both of which have no limits, are absurd, and result in self-annihilation and alienation.

The image of the Marquis dangling body at the middle of the salon beneath the Christmas tree that is decorated with plastic penises and porcelain vaginas suggests the image of the risen god amidst a double hellfire society. The first is the hell of war that destroys gender boundaries between bodies ending up in identity disorder and exclusion. And the second is the hell of lust and ecstatic self-dissolution where bodies indulge in a lethal ritual of eroticism. The ritual is similar to how Eagleton (2005) describes a Dionysian "heart-warming, spine chilling liturgy—that orgy of un-meaning, before the dawn of subjectivity itself, in which bloody stumps and mangled bits of bodies whirl in some frightful dance of death" (p. 2). The ritual the guests perform at the death party is a defiance against the normal gender relationships and boundaries between men and women. It resembles the land of Sodom where each is absorbed in free sadistic or masochistic pleasure. Hage writes:

> When the dancing started… A tall woman wearing a long black gown with a cut-out around her buttocks, exposing her anus,

> reached high and touched the hem of his dress…. three men [were] attached to each other, fucking like dogs in heat, screaming and moaning, their hips rocking with a tidal rhythm, releasing foul sounds from their orifices. (p. 248)

The Marquis suspended body with the eyeliner and the red on his lips dressed in a gown and a blond wig resembles Dionysus's end at the hands of the Titans. His party is similar to how Eagleton depicts a "dark parody of carnival" where the "blow-in deity Dionysus and his marauding troupe of female revelers" (p. 3) look like the Marquis with the women touching and swaying around him. Here the Marquis is the god of pleasure positioned at the center of a circle-within-a circle framework. The inner circle includes the sexually self-dissolved bodies of characters whose gendered identity disorder is celebrated in defiance to the large encompassing circle of war that bombs all bodies into pieces. This suggests that the Lebanese have become interwoven in a state of absolute masochism since all are deriving pleasure from their own pain or humiliation. The civil war has metamorphosed them to sexual objects seeking all means of bodily desecration to counter the terror of war. Symbolically, this state of horrific "jouissance" (Žižek, 1991) in war explains the state of Pavlov's penis erection every time he speaks about death and burial. Not only does the state of war make them combine the holy, the terror, and sexual transgression but it also makes Pavlov barter the head of the dog for the dead body of the Son of the Mechanic with his cousin Salwa. This means that the trauma in the Lebanese civil war has not only destroyed gender boundaries but also transgressed to destroy species boundaries (humans and animals).

The erotic practices at the death party of the Marquis reflect a state of absurdity in the masochistic sense. The characters at the party stand for a culture of "death-instincts" (Freud, 1920) where pleasure is reaped from one's own dismemberment. The swaying guests obtain energy from self-abandonment and experience a state of consciousness mingled with annihilation. Hage here presents the absurd civil war in Lebanon as an all-inclusive state of masochism expressed through a collective suicide. Pavlov wonders:

> … But still, the question is: Do those who jump believe they are about to experience another consciousness, another self, or do they hope for absolute annihilation? The act of suicide must be, ultimately, the only path to emancipation, he argued. (p. 249)

4. Civil War and Exclusion

4.1 The Double Exclusion

Geneviève Fraisse (1995) in her book *Muse de la Raison: Démocratie et exclusion des femmes en France* attributes the exclusion of women in social institutions to certain historical and rhetorical circumstances. She believes that the affirmation of equality with men is so abstract and cannot be applied because these institutions are masculine in nature. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) in his book *La Domination Masculine* writes that social structures create gender boundaries that exclude women not only from any social roles in the masculine sphere, but also from power and the public sphere.

If the male-female gender binary in Western societies is still considered unfair where women are to some extent freed from gender subordination owing to the secular political and social systems, then the situation in the Arab societies demands greater attention. One example in *Beirut Hellfire Society* is Jean Yacoub's wife. She is constantly locked by her husband inside the house to read books. Not only is she excluded in marriage but also deprived from the public sphere.

Second, the women's exclusion in the novel is reinforced by two images created in the pattern of the cinematic montage. The first is presented in forbidding women from visiting graveyards and the second in prohibiting the dog from entering cemeteries. Hage here alludes to a culture that forbids women from the public sphere and views them equal to dogs. [1]

Nadja, Salwa, and the Lady of the Stairs are three other examples of double exclusion aggravated at times of war. Nadja represents the vulnerable class of women who turn to prostitution in war times to escape poverty and hunger. She is regarded as a sexual object just like how Salwa (the hyena) was viewed by the militia men upon the death of her lover and was called "a whore!" (p. 258) by the males of her family. Similarly, the Lady of the Stairs is represented as mad and unprotective after the loss of her brother and father during a bombardment at the funeral procession. She could not utter any word, lost her mind, and left homeless.

Michel Foucault (2006) considers that sexuality is a social construct related to the practices and experiences of the individual. This means that sexual abuse is one form of domination that excludes the individual by limiting his/her personal freedom and destroying his/her will to resist. Pavlov's mother then is the best example of the double exclusion caused by her sexuality. The state of war made her a poor orphan child living with her mother, a tobacco addict and a prostitute. She experienced sexual assault by one of her mother's men; an experience that destroyed her will and confined her ability to act in war times. This explains the state of Pavlov's mother who always insists that he hides his sister away from all eyes. She warns Pavlov:

> Look the dead are coming back towards us … pointing at the cemetery… they are laughing at my mother, they are stealing her cigarettes. The guy who never paid us and the big guy over there still come to visit her at night. I used to see them moving under my mother's quilt, and moaning and rocking, and the few bills that guy used to leave under the dish rack he now lays on the edge of the stone. Look, he's helped himself to a pack again and he's smoking outside the gate and looking at us. He's eyeing your sister, dear Pavlov, hide her, hide… (Hage, 2018, p. 121)

[1] The same applies to Islam. There is a Hadith which states that a Muslim's prayer would be cut off by (the passing of) a woman, a donkey and a black dog. See https://sunnah.com/bulugh/2/98.

Pavlov's mother has been excluded as a child and as a wife. She is excluded from childhood after the sexual assaults she experienced by males while living with her mother. She is also excluded from life while living in a cemetery during her marriage, and finally in being locked up by his father in a monastery where she is kept in a room by the nuns up in the mountains. This recalls Foucault's tracing of the history of madness in his book *Madness and Civilization* where he considers that hospital institutions are forms of exclusion.

Finally, Madame Fiora is doubly excluded by religion and by the gendered social constructions. If religious fundamentalism according to Dominique Lormier (2007) in his book *La dérive intégriste* is manifested in the hysteric fear from the other and the belief of possessing the absolute truth and superiority over other religions, the fear of sex and the self-reflective women, and the refusal of other religions as is the case in the holy wars that promote religious exclusivism, then this is the case of the males' relations with Madame Fiora in *Beirut Hellfire Society*. The priest refuses to bury Madame Fiora in the cemetery because she is the other in the religious and gender sense. She is expected to protect the gender hierarchy and defend the values of religion at war times when religious extremism escalates. Madame Fiora is labelled a dissident. She is described as "a heathen" and "a fierce atheist" when she rebelled against her own faith and showed how "her contempt for religion was overt—and often offensive to her neighbors." Besides, she defies gender hierarchy when she uses her height, strength, and demeanor to protect her "most loving companion" from the "men's belligerence, abuse, advances, and sexual insinuations" (Hage, 2018, p. 146). Consequently, she is condemned to a double exclusion, one in life and another in death.

4.2 Defying Exclusion

Women are not always the victims in wars. Cohn rejects the "comfortable assumptions" such as "women are war's victims" or viewing war as "a uniformly gendered phenomenon" (p. 2). Women should not be seen from the "victim-agent dichotomy" (p. 32) where they join armed groups or peace organizations just because they confronted sexual violence inflicted by militia men. On the contrary, women can join wars and take advantage of wars to defy exclusion. Nadja, for example, refuses any disempowerment enforced by war circumstances and instead uses war as backlash against the social construction of gender. She adopts masculine slogans of war like revenge and retaliation for her friend who was murdered by a man. With her friends, Nadja defies exclusion in murdering the man who killed their friend. Also, her control of the second sexual relation with Pavlov who "hadn't wanted her to take off her clothes" (Hage, 2018, p. 98) was a defiance against the exclusion enacted by the gender social constructions in sexual relations. Hage writes:

> Her gaze was fearless now, bolder the more she sucked him—assertive, even confrontational. She took a charge dominating him, pressing her lips hard against his, and pushed him back on the bed, locking his wrists together over the pillow. (p. 114)

Not only does Nadja control his posture but also insists that he repeats words of surrender after her:

> Repeat after me: I am going to surrender, and let go. Just say that, she told him… She went to the window and removed the red ribbon tie-backs from the curtains. These she used to fasten his hands together tightly above the white sheets…. At last, she took his penis and guided it inside her. She moved back and forth, slowly at first, then steadily increasing the tempo into violent fucking. The metal bed squeaked loudly. She slowed, looked him in the eye and smiled an affectionate smile. She kissed his mouth. (p. 114-115)

As well, Salwa or the Hyena (a name connoting strength) defies exclusion by exploiting the love of the Son of the Mechanic to kill Pavlov who slapped her hard upon her laughter at a funeral procession. Moreover, she challenges Pavlov's gaze by proceeding in her fucking and "look[ing] Pavlov straight in the eye and shriek[ing] her loud laugh" despite that "the young man stopped his thrusting" (p. 100). Significantly, her revenge against exclusion and the physical and verbal abuse caused by her family male members is in dancing naked and defying all aspects of honor and religion related to gender social construction. Hage writes:

> His cousin Salwa stood in front of the house with a biretta in one hand and the green-eyed priest's long-lost head in the other. She was screaming her loudest hyena laugh…. His cousin had poured gasoline in every room, on every floor. In the funeral home, she had saturated the wood and coffins and the chemicals used for the bodies. She had locked the doors from the outside and set fire to the house as she ran outside, half-naked, her round belly and her breasts exposed. (p. 267)

Besides Nadja and Salwa, Souad defies exclusion in asking Pavlov to steal and exhume her body after her children bury her with her husband. Souad is afraid that her children will bury her with their father, "an awful tyrant" (p. 138) who would abuse her in life and in death. Souad defies all norms of religious burial and exclusion caused by gender hierarchy and religious institutions to join her lover upon her death.

It can be said that *Beirut Hellfire Society* presents images of women who are doubly excluded on one hand and who could defy exclusion on the other hand. They either have to escape the constitutive and gendered effects of war in order to survive or to defy war by challenging the exclusion imposed by war circumstances. The state of women's vulnerability in war then can be employed as means of power through their feminine bodies. And here the question arises: To what extent can the woman's body be viewed from two different angles: the honor/identity of the nation or the feast for the male? She is a war value and a war spoil at the same time.

5. The Female Body in the Lebanese Civil War

Cohn considers two conceptualizations for the female body in war. The first is related to feminist analysis and to discourses of nationalism and collective identity where the woman symbolizes the nation/homeland, and her body must be protected by male citizens/soldiers against violation, penetration, or conquest. Cohn states:

> …women and their bodies are seen as the repository and reproducers of national, racial, ethnic, tribal, or religious identity – they are the vessels through which men of the nation or other collectivity can (re)produce new members of the group; thus, their bodies are the territory over which men must have control in order to assure the continuation of their national identities, bloodlines, and their familial and national honor. (p. 14)

The second conceptualization is related to exploitative relationships where women's bodies fall prey to sexual assaults and mass rape is used as a tactic of ethnic cleansing. Cohn writes that raping women in war is justified as long as the woman and nation are associated. This in turn legitimizes war because there is "the need to protect women's religious or ethnic purity" (p. 14).

Since all women characters in *Beirut Hellfire Society* do not belong to the enemy but to one single religious group which is Christianity, then there is no tactic of ethnic cleansing. The novel's women characters experience sexual assaults of men of different positions in war. For example, the men of the militias divide their looks between their rifles and women. Not only does the act of using military weapons in war empower males' self-perceptions about masculinity but it also reinforces their presumptions of their abilities to dominate and view women as bodies fit for sexual pleasure.

The metaphoric association between masculinity and arming the marginalized or the less masculine in the context of war is seen in the Son of the Mechanic act of revenge against Pavlov. The Son of the Mechanic lived his childhood stained by car grease and was physically abused by his father. He decides to join the militia to feel safe in regaining his masculinity and feeling free from the burden of his traumatic childhood. He uses the body of the Hyena as one form of retaliation to revenge himself against Pavlov who witnessed his abuse.

The use of the woman's body in the novel highlights the gendered meanings of male sexuality; women's bodies are viewed as objects of sexual gratification. This justifies the men's labeling of the Hyena, the Lady of the Stairs, Nadja, Salwa, and even Pavlov's niece who belongs to a different culture as whores. Not to forget the Marquis who regards women a rich topic for the Dionysian orgy. He uses his position as a French literature instructor at one of the universities in Beirut to educate, seduce and sleep with his female students, one of whom was just eighteen. This brings to our attention that even the educated view women's bodies in war as objects for males' sexual pleasure.

As a matter of fact, the horrible circumstances of war drive women of different statuses to sell their bodies either directly in prostitution as is the case of Nadja or indirectly in marriage as is the case of Souad. Perhaps it can be implied that prostitution here appears to be less hypocrite than marriage; Nadja chooses to be bold in her sex relation with Pavlov in contrast to Souad who is married to an "inept and boring" husband of "no charm, no humour, no character… no personality… no qualities" (Hage, 2018, p.139). This in turn echoes the novelist's intentionality in depicting the hypocrisy of the civil war disguised in ideologies of honor and piety.

6. Conclusion

Everyone loves Beirut and everyone is scared of Beirut

Hage, 2018, p .45

This paper has examined the traumatic effects of the Lebanese civil war on women in the novel *Beirut Hellfire Society.* The women in this war novel are expected to represent the honor of the nation or are viewed as objects of males' sexual pleasure. They must conform to the gender hierarchy and the gendered social constructions to save themselves from war atrocities; otherwise, they must suffer and bear its traumatic effects such as madness, gender identity disorder, and exclusion. The author presents self-annihilation and transgression as the only means capable of countering the absurdity and the irrational implications of the Lebanese civil war.

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