

National Trauma and the 'Uncanny' in Hage's Novel De Niro's Game

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Hany Ali Abdelfattah,
"National Trauma and the 'Uncanny' in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game*"
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Abstract: In his article "National Trauma and the 'Uncanny' in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game*" Hany Ali Abdelfattah attempts to decipher the "uncanny" in the character of George who has been haunted by the memories of Bassam, a Lebanese survivor of trauma. Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* crystallizes the national trauma of Lebanon and the massacre of Sabra and Shatila as it unfolds in the story of the friendship between George and Bassam. Abdelfattah employs the psychoanalytic method of analysis with a focus on Freudian concepts such as "repression," "belatedness," "effacement," "displacement," and "non-abreaction of experience" in order to trace the uncanny as narrated in the novel. He postulates that the Lebanese nation, just like the Lebanese individual, has been traumatized by the memory of the massacre of Palestinians in the camps of Sabra and Shatila.

Hany Ali ABDELFAH

National Trauma and the "Uncanny" in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game*

The chase of the "bird" throughout the demolished streets and buildings of Beirut parallels the journey protagonist George in Rami Hage's novel *De Niro's Game* and its hallucinatory style of narration into the self of a guilty killer who has been obsessed by his crimes of killing and mutilating Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila camps in Lebanon. George was one of thousands of Christian Kataeb Party followers, driven to retaliate against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon because of the assassination of their leader Bashir Gemayel. In *De Niro's Game* — winner of the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the MacAuslan Prize, the Hugh MacLennan Prize, etc. — Hage probes into George's psyche whose character has been taken as a trope through which his best friend Bassam, the first narrator of the story. Hage examines the intricate layers of the Lebanese national trauma and questions the historical and the sociopolitical conditions which shaped Lebanese guilt over the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. The story unfolds the friendship between two friends who are living in west Beirut (i.e., the Christian side of Beirut). They are always on the run, chasing people or running from people; they are reckless, irrational, and undeterred by the war that is going on. George joins the pro-Israel Kataeb Party, headed by the charismatic leader Bashir Gemayel, where he eventually ends as one of the thugs who participates in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. Meanwhile, Bassam remains non-aligned to the end, and seeks to get out of the country until he finally succeeds. George's participation in the Sabra and Shatila massacre is a turning point in his friendship with Bassam as he begins to experience flashbacks, stress, and his behavior is marked by gratuitous violence. The two friends undergo changes, yet George's situation turns worse as he ends up a cocaine addict. Bassam finds himself entangled in a successful plot where Gemayel is assassinated and all blame Bassam's socialist uncle Naeem, who had used Bassam to deliver a map to the detonators. Bassam turns to be a fugitive overnight and traveling abroad seems to him a salvation. Later, and after traveling to Paris, Bassam recounts to Rhea, George's sister, how her brother refused to hand him to the Kataeb and chose to play Russian roulette or "De Niro's Game" — in reference to Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter* — where Bassam won and lived whereas George lost and died.

The objective of this article is to excavate the "uncanny" in the character of George with a focus on Freud's neurosis theory and his article "The Uncanny" in order to read the uncanny of the bird in the novel and its constant haunting of George. I postulate that the Lebanese nation, just like the Lebanese individual, is traumatized by the memory of Sabra and Shatila as witnessed in the memory of Hage where the Lebanese are haunted by their guilt and they suffer from being the perpetrators of the trauma. The hypothesis is that the Lebanese national trauma can be placed within the context of national trauma such as, for example, the Vietnam War (with regard to Vietnam and the U.S.), the Argentine dictatorship and the disappearance of thousands of Argentineans, the war in the former Yugoslavia, the 9/11 terror attack on the U.S., etc. I examine the historical and the sociopolitical conditions of Lebanon during the civil war between 1975-1990 and propose that memory not history is to be analysed. In so doing, I employ an interdisciplinary approach to examine streaks of psychology, historiography, philosophy, and film studies as relevant areas to the discourse of national trauma and its interpretation.

Before I delve into the concept of national trauma, it is important to analyze what does "national trauma" mean? Consequently, the question "What is a nation?" arises. In my view, Benedict Anderson goes too far to argue that a nation is an imagined society, in which he lays the blame on the "convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (Anderson qtd. in Hutchinson and Smith 97-98). On the other hand, Homi Bhabha sees the nation as narrative in his book *Nation and Narration*, in which "nation as narratives that lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (Bhabha qtd. in Hutchinson and Smith 306). Simply put, the nation must have a

concrete basis, as well as an abstract one: it must have territories, language, and its own people, and at the same time it must have its own literature and culture which solidify the idea of nation and its presence in the past and the present. Ernest Renan considers the Nation as a "legacy of remembrances": "Only two things, actually, constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other is in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of remembrances, the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage which we all hold in common" (Renan qtd. in Hutchinson and Smith 26).

From a Lebanese perspective, this "legacy of remembrances" turned into a legacy of bitterness and suspicion against all the neighbours of Lebanon by the Lebanese themselves. Lebanon is a country surrounded by Syria and Jordan from the east and the north and Palestine and Israel to the south. For a long time, the political climate of the region has affected Lebanon in which its neighbours always meddle in its business. Hage's *De Niro's Game* delineates the intense sectarian and civil war that had been raging while Hage lived in Lebanon. The novel exposes a society where bombardment and killing are the daily routine of life, a community where friendship is the only credible guarantee, a place that its youths regarded as a transit station to Europe or the U.S. or Canada. However, the majority of the Lebanese remained non-aligned and moderate, watching with sadness how Lebanon turned into a playground for regional and international powers and many Lebanese polarized around various sects and militias just like the Kataeb, Sunni, Shiite, Druze, and others for religious, national, or economic reasons. Many regional events helped to install the Palestinians in Lebanon: first the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1978 but that disappointed the Syrians and drove Syrian president Assad to use the Palestinians in Lebanon as "a shield in war by proxy" (Suleiman 212). The impossibility of going to war alone without the Egyptian side convinced many Arabs at the end of the war in the Middle East and at the beginning of the guerrilla war: "The Six Day War in 1967 marked the beginning of public Arab acceptance of the commando movement, for after the massive, swift and humiliating defeat of their regular Armies, the Arabs needed somebody on which to pin their hopes. Suddenly the commando movement became fashionable; what the massed regular forces could not accomplish, the guerrilla would" (Bulloch 46).

The Lebanese militias found a fertile ground for spreading and recruiting individuals and groups like George in the novel. His participation in the Sabra and Shatila massacre is the turning point in the novel, as the ordinary Lebanese were in disbelief and shock of the massive killings of thousands of Palestinians. Even more appalling, they are the perpetrators of the massacre, not the victims. This change of roles from victim to perpetrator shakes the principles that the majority of the Lebanese have about their country. The repercussions of the massacre increased day by day and the Lebanese were shocked to find that they were the killers of innocent people. In the eyes of the Arab people, it was regarded as treason where in Israel itself it was a shock to many people as well. Building on these events, the question arises: can a nation have a trauma? And if so, how? In time of war, individuals suffer and fall easy prey to the trauma of war: they cannot comprehend gratuitous cruelty and mayhem which accompany the crisis. In order to understand national trauma in historical narration, we have to examine its origin in psychology and historiography. Thus, the works of memory, not history, take precedence here: "the terrible war that is just over has been [World War I] responsible for an immense number of such maladies and at least has put an end to the inclination to explain them on the basis of organic injury to the nervous system due to the operation of mechanical force" (Breuer and Freud 8). So hapless and helpless in front of trauma, especially in the time of war, victims of trauma cannot put up with the severe shock, so unconsciously they attempt to hide the consequences of the terrible events in what Freud and Breuer referred to as "repression": "A first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child's development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed" (Leys 20). It is the second event that awakens the repressed feelings which had been effaced from memory and posed them as a reminder of the first one. There is "belatedness" between the first and the second event in which the trauma is not fully integrated into the psyche until later and it necessitates another incident to excavate it and make it come to the surface.

Torn between two events, George's dilemma remains inexplicable throughout, marked by the temporal delay between two major catastrophes. The second event, which is the obvious one, is

George's participation in the Sabra and Shatila massacre and the subsequent aftermath of anxiety, fear, addiction, and flashbacks. Hidden until unearthed, the first trauma, represents the panacea to all problems, however, its "uncanny" link, which is the bird, provides the common thread running throughout the events. Once picked, it will undoubtedly explain the extreme anguish of George, and opens a floodgate of explanations in various things in his past and present. In searching for the first trauma, we encounter another one, in which the title of the novel itself, *De Niro's Game*, is a reminiscent of another trauma: the Vietnam War or the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder of Vietnam veterans. Many Vietnam veterans were caught in the vicious grip of the "Traumatic Neurosis" – a fully-grown research genre now, after the innovative preliminary work of Freud and Breuer's. George's metamorphosis into a ruthless monster draws parallel to the transformation of Michael (Robert De Niro) in *The Deer Hunter*, where Michael turns into a professional killer whose Russian roulette game becomes his only weapon against himself and his enemies. This infamous game ended the life of Nick the friend of Michael as it ends the life of George in the novel. In "Staging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence," Sylvia Huey Chong asserts how the Russian roulette game "mimics the fate of the American soldiers, who could fall victim at any time to the ambushes, mines, and booby traps of guerrillas" (97). Playing games with death is not George's only vice: he is also obsessed with killing birds. Bassam recounts how they quarrel over killing the bird: "We [Bassam and George] stood still and watched for branches bowing under the weight of a feather, bowing to a mating call. And soon we wounded a little bird. I held it in my hand. Kill it if it is still alive, George told me. Kill it! ... George snatched the wounded creature from my open palm. He laid it on a rock, and with the butt of his rifle he hit it on the head, more than once, and then he walked away, looking for more" (*De Niro's Game* 268).

What is strange here is the amusement of killing a wounded bird for nothing except that the poor bird tries to flee to no avail. Turning to be a recurring object, the bird appears once again when George initiates to kill the Palestinian refugees: "I saw it, George shouted and took another sip. I chased it again, and it entered a hut. I ran inside, and I saw it slip under a bed. I lifted the mattress; two small children duality were huddled in fear under there. Their dead mother's body was in the room, staring at them with open eyes. I just wanted to hunt the bird, George said. All I wanted was to hunt" (*De Niro's Game* 178). The chase of the bird until it reaches the bed where the dead mother staring at her children recalls the image of George's mother. In the first chapter of *De Niro's Game*, Bassam recounts how he met with George in his own apartment: "that evening, I met George at his place. He lived alone, down beside the French stairs, in an old stone house with little furniture, a photo of his dead mother under a high ceiling, and emptiness. He never mentions his father. The word was that his father was a Frenchman who had come to our land, planted a seed in his mother's young womb, and flown back north like a migrating bird" (*De Niro's Game* 34). George's mother stood obstinately by her son, nevertheless: being a single mother in a conservative society like Lebanon was a harsh life had to endure. Bassam feels how this is an open wound in George's psyche, even more that society stresses it in various forms. For example when Bassam has been advised by one of the old Lebanese women to travel a while abroad and return back to get married simply because "our women are the best in the world, they do not dishonor you" (*De Niro's Game* 29). Honor is indispensable to women in this society. George's mother dishonors him and her guilt is that she falls in love with a French man, a foreigner, and this is the explanation of George's first trauma. George's biography is central here: given the circumstances that he is an illegitimate son, George joins the Kataeb Party and thus chivalry and bravery represent a mechanism of self-defence shielding him from the guilt of his mother.

The novel's recurring theme of trauma corresponds to the concept's definition: "the term 'trauma' is applied, in the first place, to an event in the subject's personal history that can be dated and that has subjective importance owing to the unpleasant affects it can trigger. No complete view of traumatic events is possible without taking into account the subject's particular 'predisposition' (*Emfänglichkeit*). For there to be a trauma in the strict sense of the word — that is, non-abreaction of the experience, which remains in the psyche as a 'foreign body'" (Laplanche and Pontalis 466). "The non-abreaction" of the experience or the inability to release his feelings is what troubles George. Eventually, this turns into violence and killing of the birds wherever he sees them and the bird becomes the "uncanny" of the novel.

In "The Uncanny" Freud explains the word *unheimlich*: "uncanny" arouses fear, uncertainty, and Freud turns to literature to illustrate the uncanny in E.T.A. Hoffmann's story where Nathaniel becomes afraid of his father's friend Coppelius who suddenly seizes him one night and is about to take out his eyes lest his father should intercede at the last moment and save him. Freud explains that Nathaniel's obsessive fear of his eyes being plucked out is a fear of castration.

By analysing the events that had passed on George, we find that George's first trauma is not the memory of his unfaithful mother, but, rather, the trauma of a runaway French father. In George's perspective, escape is tantamount to dishonor and that explains why he despises the Palestinian refugees. All these memories along with his hatred of a runaway father are revived and retrieved to ignite his repressed consciousness represented in his compulsive obsession with the bird. Simply put, George hated the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon not because they are making chaos in Lebanon, but because they "emigrated" and "emigration" in George's dictionary means cowardice. As George explains to Bassam why Kataeb has no other alternative except joining Israel, "no, Bassam, we are alone in this war, and our people are being massacred... your father killed ... you ... you ... we will unite with the devil to save our land. How are we to make the Syrians and the Palestinians leave?" (*De Niro's Game* 78). To achieve the Lebanese national dream of sovereignty George is adamant to pursue this route to its end and overlooks everything to achieve a Lebanon free from intruders even if this leads him to become a perpetrator of a massacre. Neither can George overcome the consequences of the first trauma nor is he able to free himself from the consequences of the second one. Torn between many forces within and without, the Lebanese are caught in the vicious grip of the civil war and George and Bassam are no exceptions. The missing link between the two worlds is the bird whose appearance, in retrospect, brings the events of the first trauma to George's mind connecting the two traumas. Therefore, the bird challenges the "belatedness" or the delay between the two events. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth stresses the point of "belatedness": "trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (4; on trauma and history, see also, e.g., Caspi; LaCapra; Lutzkanova-Vassileva).

How trauma is entangled with time and place is perhaps best exemplified in Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in which a French actress falls in love with a Japanese architect while shooting a film in Hiroshima. However, while the actress falls in love with the Japanese architect, she is obsessed with reveries and flashbacks about her old German lover. In the course of the film, the audience cannot differentiate between the settings whether they are in Japan or in Germany, nor can they decide the time whether it is in the World War II Germany or in the aftermath of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This atmosphere of actions in a blur continues with a close-up shot of an embrace between people, which later turns to be the burnt skin of two Hiroshima victims and at the same time turns out to be the skin of the lovers in a sensual embrace. Norman Holland refers to the technique used by Resnais in depicting the trauma of the French actress and how the mind sometimes displaces these memories until another event awakens memory as follows: "the hand of her Japanese lover, twitching in sleep, suddenly became the hand of someone else, twitching as he lay on the ground. At one point, inexplicably but brilliantly, we suddenly, for no reason at all, looked up to an obviously not-Japanese balcony" (594). What Holland describes here is "displacement" in which the woman cannot differentiate between the two places: Nevers or Hiroshima. By the end of the film, the French actress and the Japanese architect see off each other by saying "Nevers," "Hiroshima," the places in which "love has transformed them ... Their love affair is carried on their extra-ordinary life, outside of routine, even hors la loi" (Luchting 305).

From a postmodernist perspective, the hallucinatory narrative style of Hage/Bassam is remarkable as the author grants his characters voices breaking the diegetic storyline or flashbacks. For example, Bassam chooses to narrate the suicide-cum-death of George rather than dramatizing the action unlike what happened in the deaths of other characters in the novel like Bassam's mother, Khalil, or the Muslim girl. This diegetic representation of George's death reflects the problematic of subjectivity and self, where Bassam, who is the first narrator overpowers the implicit narrator (Hage) and introduces the story, pushing Hage in a self-reckoning mode and the readers alike to take a back seat and watch

the whole action in a "voyeuristic position" (Rahman 294). This happened before with Rhea, when Bassam obliges her to listen to his version of the story of George's death in detail: "Why are you telling me this story? Rhea asked ... okay, that is enough now. I don't know ... I don't know why you have to come here and tell me all this. She shocked her head again ... where is my brother now? You tell me all these things, things that I don't know are even true. We don't know you ... And yet you come to tell me all these evil things ... I ignored her shouting ... when she tried to leave the room, I held her back, cornered her against the kitchen sink" (*De Niro's Game* 269-70). Bassam/Hage is healed through watching with us, in a play-within-a-play, the scene of George's death, narrated to Rhea, by Bassam who exonerated himself from the guilt of survival by putting the blame on George as Bassam goes on telling Rhea his version of the story: "we sat in the car, under the bridge, I said to her. George and I quarrelled. He had come to take me to the militia headquarters just before I was leaving Lebanon. He picked me up in his car. I didn't want to go with him, but he kissed me, he called me his brother. He made me hop in the car, and we drove below the Nabaa Bridge. Your brother was sent to take me back to my torturer, and then they would have killed me" (*De Niro's Game* 270).

Before, George was keen to force Bassam to listen to the details of the killing and the maiming of the Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila: "it was all like a movie. All like a movie. Dead people everywhere. Do you still want to hear? Do you want to hear more? More? He shouted at me, here, drink! He cranked his gun and put it in my face. Drink, I say" (*De Niro's Game* 176). The choice to force someone to hear your trauma, in a diegetic way and not dramatized in a flashback technique, is a mechanism of self-defence to share the secret and the trauma with another one. It is also healing for Bassam/Hage as it shields his subjectivity from being ruptured by his guilty self that is still in the process of healing. Thus, the novel is a semi-autobiographical narrative of Hage's unforgettable memories. Overall, Hage/Bassam are in binary opposition in which Bassam experiences symptoms of trauma whereas Hage is unconscious of that. Nevertheless, they meet each other in a unique way once Bassam kills Rambo, his torturer: "My hands stretched forward, both of my index fingers squeezed the trigger ... My gunshots rang through the deep valley with the sound of mourning bells, with the crack of hunters' rifles in the morning sun ... I touched his leather jacket, his white silk shirt, now turned brown with a mix of blood and red earth. His eyes watched me for the last time. I saw my image sinking down in his black pupils and it frightened me" (*De Niro's Game* 171). In this unique moment, Bassam meets the narrator and it is like a moment of self-reckoning when Bassam sees himself: what Bassam sees is Hage's simulacrum where all the false allegations of being innocent have been revoked and the ugly image of a killer is exposed. Astounded by looking at the reflection of his image, Bassam's image overcomes his reality, frightening the hero himself. Far from being self-destructive in his attitude, Bassam is afraid from his simulacrum.

Coming to terms with the past needs time to recuperate the wounds of memory. Bassam will live a long time in Paris to forget Beirut, yet his memories, susceptible to forgetting and remembering, will always be there as the true record of the Lebanese national trauma more than history can do or present. History, in Lebanon, is flawed as many parties, sects, regional powers, even more international powers interfere to write a controversial history of a torn country. In his "Between Memory and History. Les Lieux de mémoire," Pierre Nora confirms the wide gap between history and memory: "memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetual actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (8-9). History stands as a misrepresentation of reality, vulnerable to political and religious interferences and interpolations, especially in Lebanon. In spite of being contested, memory: "there are many memories as there are groups" (Halbwachs qtd. in Nora 9) is always genuine and real that explains why memory lives in human beings and haunts them for a long time.

In conclusion, George and Bassam/Hage are both culprits and victims, they had undergone past traumas which left them crippled and wounded. In their search for healing they fall as perpetrators of yet another trauma which lets their anger loose on another innocent people. They are both haunted by the memories, which will not easily leave them alone. Movies like *Hiroshima Mon Amour* had paved

the way to understand that type of "belatedness" and "displacement" and helped to fathom the depth of psychological pain of the heroes. The massacre of Sabra and Shatila narrated in Hage's *De Niro's Game* is an example of how trauma shatters the image of the Lebanese and exposes cracks in the mirror of the nation. *De Niro's Game* stands as a work of memory in which the Lebanese national trauma is portrayed in the character of George whose mother and father are metaphors of Lebanon and France — a country deceived by the hollow promises of the occupier-cum-patron. George undergoes two traumas in which he is victim in the first and a culprit in the second.

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