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The Displaced Arab and the Question of Authenticity in Robin Yassin Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008) and Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008)

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the Master's Degree in Anglophone Literature and Civilizations

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Declaration

We hereby declare that this thesis is entirely the outcome of our research, with due references and acknowledgments to the literature and the work of other researchers.

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Signature

Dedication

We dedicate this thesis to our loving and supportive families.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the different interpretations of authenticity and identity in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008) and Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008) through an existential lens. Drawing on the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard, the study examines the identity crisis and struggles of Arab immigrants in Canada and the United Kingdom. Sartre's concept of existence preceding essence, bad faith, and alienation, along with Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety, provide a suitable framework to analyze the characters' search for their authentic selves. Through a close analysis of the novels, this study shows how the characters' experiences of displacement and marginalization result in contrasting renditions of identity crisis and obstruction of authenticity. Additionally, it offers insights into the challenges Arab immigrants face in the Western Milieu, in addition to how their struggles relate to larger existential questions about the nature of human identity and existence.

Keywords: Authenticity, Diaspora, Existentialism, Identity, Immigrants, West.

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General Introduction

The Middle Eastern migration is a multifaceted phenomenon, in which citizens of the region flee their homes in search of refuge and a better life. This phenomenon is driven by various factors, including economic collapse, social pressures, political corruption, and armed conflicts. Wars in particular play a significant role in the region; as in recent history, the Middle East witnessed a series of terror events. These events range from the Lebanese civil war, which lasted 15 years from 1975 until 1990, to the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011. Circumstances of such caliber contributed to the influx of displaced people in the region, which reached a magnitude never seen before, as "Of the 60 million displaced people worldwide, close to 40 percent originate from the Arab region" (Yahya and Marwan, par.1). Hence, causing the estrangement of millions of immigrants in foreign societies.

These refugees, more often than not, attempted to integrate with Western society and become a source of cultural enrichment and economic growth, leading to the creation of large Arab communities within Western countries. However, along with their adaptation to the Western space and lifestyle, the Arab refugees started to suffer from a crisis of belonging. They became associated with a liminal identity between the West and the Orient. They were not Western by virtue of their Arab ancestral lineage, nor were they Middle Eastern due to their physical and psychological disconnection from it.

From these large gatherings of fragmented and distressed immigrants immerged cultural leaders of the Westernized Arabs. Authors, who shed light on stories with unique prospectives, and drew from their rich cultural heritage and experiences as immigrants. From the poems of Gibran Khalil Gibran to the contemporary poet Suheir Hammad, these authors explored themes of belonging, identity, and displacement, often relating these narratives to their own struggles to

fit in. They further tackled issues of exile, homesickness, and alienation, by particularly reflecting on the state of the Arab diaspora in their works.

Subsequently, the Syrian Robin Yassin-Kassab and the Lebanese Rawi Hage follow similar steps in their depiction of the Arab diaspora's trauma and distress. Both novelists attempt to shed light on the experiences of Middle Eastern refugees in the West through their narratives. Their works often cover issues, such as Islamic identity, the Western standpoint on migrant existence, and the disturbed self-perception of refugees. In many ways, the dream of a better life for Middle Eastern immigrants was met with oppression, alienation, and subjugation to an identity crisis. Such complications are faithfully addressed in Yassin-Kassab and Hage's remarkable novels, *The Road from Damascus* (2008) and *Cockroach* (2008).

Therefore, the following study accentuates how the two aforementioned authors portray in their works characters of oriental origin, who struggle to balance their attachments to the past with the occurrences of the present, rendering them lost souls in nations to which they are foreign. Hence, becoming voiceless empty shells, who can neither connect with themselves nor with those around them. In other words, the two protagonists are alienated and unable to penetrate nor identify with society or with their authentic selves.

Born in West London, Robin Yassin-Kassab is a contemporary Syrian British novelist as well as a regular media commentator on Syria and the Middle East. He co-authored *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (2016), contributed to *Syria Speaks* (2014), and is a co-editor of *Critical Muslim*. However, he is known for his critically acclaimed novel, *The Road from Damascus* (2008).

The Road from Damascus is Yassin-Kassab's first published novel. The plot revolves around Sami Traifi, a British man of Syrian origins, who aspires to be a scholar like his father

had planned for him. In the hopes of finding inspiration for his Ph.D. thesis, he decides to go back to his roots in Damascus. When going back to Britain, he faces his wife's sudden desire to wear a hijab, a matter he strongly disapproves of, due to his secular beliefs. The book follows the journey of Sami towards self-destruction as a reaction to all these events, and his subsequent quest to regain his Muslim Identity.

On the other hand, Rawi Hage is a contemporary Lebanese Canadian journalist and author, who is known to write about exile and the experience of immigrants. His first published book, *De Niro's Game* (2006), earned the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for the best English-language book. He also wrote *Carnival* (2013) and *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018) as well as his widely acclaimed dark comedy novel, *Cockroach* (2008).

Hage's *Cockroach* is a grotesque tale on the life of an immigrant whose name is undefined and believes he is an insect (Hage 3). The unnamed narrator goes on to tell a series of events that shape the dark and lowly nature of his community. He takes drugs, breaks into apartments, and often commits theft in order to survive. He also gradually submits to his illusions and turns into a complete cockroach. In other words, the novel depicts an extreme case of identity dysmorphia as well as the aftermath of social detachment.

This study scrutinizes *The Road from Damascus* and *Cockroach*, in hopes of shedding light on the characters' inner struggles regarding social disconnection and self-identification. Both novels are literary works of major significance to Arab literature. Featuring characters of oriental origin dwelling in foreign lands, the authors reflect on their Arab roots to tell the tales of millions of Arab immigrants in the West. Numerous scholars have critically analyzed the respected narratives since their publication resulting in several different interpretations.

Literature Review

In his article "British Islam and the novel of transformation: Robin Yassin-Kassab's The Road from Damascus" (2012), C. E. Rashid analyses the novel in the context of the British literary response to the Satanic Verses affair. He contends that the novel strives to oppose the contrast between secular literature and Islamic beliefs, an opposition that is unarguably created by the aforementioned Satanic Verses controversy. He also asserts that through the bildungsroman fashion of the protagonist's journey, in which he ends up embracing Islam, the novel presents an alteration and growth of the self that goes beyond typical oppositions and Islamic identity politics. Thus, Sami's character arc functions as an objection to the duality that exists between religious and non-religious. The article, however, does not take into consideration the protagonist's existential dilemma and the role it partakes in the character's transformation and his quest to find identity through religion.

Similarly, Yousef Awad and Barkuzar Dubbati, in their research "Hamlet's Road from Damascus: Potent Fathers, Slain Ghosts, and Rejuvenated Sons" (2018), conduct a comparative study with William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), only to make the same inquiry about the novel's critical approach to the opposition of secularism and Islamism. They argue that "the hero of Yassin-Kassab's novel shares some of Hamlet's dilemmas, disillusionments, and experiences of attempting to find answers for urgent and persistent ontological questions" (1). Consequently, both characters undergo similar journeys seeking the truth. Awad and Dubbati both add that the parallel between the two characters serves the major purpose of shedding light on the conflicts regarding the identity of Arab Muslims in the diaspora. Nonetheless, the tragedy of Hamlet is one of pride and vengeance, while Sami's is of self-identification and alienation, as this study highlights.

Furthermore, in "Writing Back to Culture Talk: Reinvention of Muslim Identity in The Road from Damascus" (2022), Amirhossein Sadeghi, Hamed Habibzadeh, and Zadmehr Torabi focus on the aftermath of the events of 9/11 and the impact it had on British literature. They demonstrate how Islam started to become the "Other" in the West, instigating anti-Muslim sentiments in the Western world. *The Road from Damascus*, as the article suggests, is a writing back to the Othering of Islam. It is "an attempt from within the Muslim community to offer a reconstructive image of Islam and Muslims against the imagined identities constructed of them in the Western public sphere" (1). Differently, this study will not aim to regard the novel from a sociopolitical lens, rather, it will deal with individual Muslims and how they survive alienation in a prejudicial environment.

Likewise, Hage's *Cockroach* has also been a subject of study for both foreign and Arab scholars. The several pieces of research conducted on the said novel tackle the vast array of themes and ideas transmitted within it. These bodies of critical work aim to facilitate the understanding of Hage's narrative.

In her article "The Internalized Vermin of Exile in Montréal: Rawi Hage's Cockroach" (2015), Wissam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar draws from the conceptual framework of internalization by Kenneth C. Wallis and J. L. Poulton to argue that the unnamed narrator manifests his internal struggles in the form of an introjection. She elaborates that according to the narrator "The city seemingly exercises imprisoning effects" (3). He is a man, who finds himself in a city hostile towards him due to its unfamiliarity and his inability to feel a sense of belonging. Consequently, unlike Franz Kafka's protagonist, the unnamed narrator willingly transforms himself into a cockroach: a vermin, which can escape from the unwelcoming city towards the underground. However, rather than just envisioning the city as an entity that is hostile towards the narrator and

the transformation as resistance, the following research elaborates on how the city's inflicted sensation of alienation further distances him from an authentic existence.

Moreover, Madoline Massaad, in her "Predicaments of an Exile in Rawi Hage's Cockroach" (2020), implements both of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003) and *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays* (2000), in addition to the notion of in-betweenness by Homi Bhabha, on the novel. She does so to illustrate that although Canada prides itself on its multiculturalism, immigrants still feel out of place. She elaborates that "the immigrants from the East have to play the role constructed for them by the West" (52), meaning blindly following the Western discourse and ignoring whether they identify with it or not. However, the unnamed narrator finds himself in a predicament that "places him in a space in between" (Massaad 53). Therefore, this current study examines the liminal space inhabited by the narrator and accentuates how it shapes his internal struggle for belonging and self-conceptualization.

In addition, in her paper "Montreal the Underground City in Rawi Hage's Cockroach" (2016), Monica Bottez relies mainly on a narrative analysis to display the importance of the city in the novel. She highlights the personification of some key elements of the city such as the snow and the cold as a counterargument to the multicultural image of the city as promoted by the West. She further dwells deeper into the imagery of the city's underground to elaborate that the filthy subterranean space is merely a symbolic reference to the moral filth of the city's dwellers above it. However, this paper demonstrates how the underground in the city is a form of pursuit of an authentic existence amid the city's moral decay.

The above-mentioned studies cover the major themes and issues from Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* and Hage's *Cockroach*, such as Islamic politics, the influence of 9/11 on British literature, the representation of internalized antagonism, and the isolation of Arab

immigrants within the West. Nevertheless, the critics do not acknowledge the existential essence that manifests in the protagonists' disturbance of identity and detachment from a foreign society. Be that as it may, this current study elaborates on how the two authors depict a sense of disorientation and an unstable sense of being in their identities, rendering them alienated in a novel environment that fails to contain them as contributing members of society.

Theoretical Tools

The study draws from a variety of theories, articles, and literary works concerned with identity, consciousness, and authentic existence. As a starting point, the research hinges on Jean-Paul Sartre's scope of existentialism as the primary theoretical framework to be used in conjunction with other concepts to discuss and analyze Hage's *Cockroach* as well as Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*. Throughout *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre develops the idea of 'Bad Faith'. He suggests that humans act in an inauthentic fashion toward their reality. They, in effect, attempt to "convince themselves of comforting beliefs that we know they know to be false" (Detmer 75). Sartre uses this concept to deal with inauthenticity, whether via humans playing a character designated to them by society or by themselves, as well as denying reality. The philosopher argues that humans consciously manipulate their perception of their inner and outer space to soothe their Anxiety and Anguish.

In addition to 'Bad Faith', this study also relies on Sartre's propositions that existence precedes essence. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1948), Sartre elucidates the distinction between existence and essence and argues that the first precedes the latter. He explains that, as opposed to inanimate objects that possess a predetermined function before their creation, humans come into the world without a purpose. Rather, they are first born, and then throughout their encounter with life, they gain a motive that drives them to find meaning in their sufferance. The philosopher argues for such order due to his fascination with the idea of freedom, because "If

existence precedes essence, man himself, will create his essence, and thus will be responsible for his actions" (Eyüp Şahin 1). Sartre calls these two modes of existence: being-in-itself (en soi), which is being with an essence but without consciousness, and being-for it-self (pour soi), which describes humans, who are sentient but lack a greater purpose.

This research also borrows from the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, specifically his concept of anxiety. In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Kierkegaard contends that anxiety is the product of one's freedom of choice, in that when faced with many choices and alternatives at disposal, one becomes anxious. He elaborates on this conception, via the example of gazing into an abyss (61); upon looking into the deep dark chasm for an extended period, one may feel dizzy and disoriented. In a similar fashion to gazing into the pit of infinite possibilities and choices. In this sense, anxiety is not a negative emotion; rather, it is a necessary experience of human existence.

The Outline

Furthermore, the research includes two analytical chapters in addition to a conclusion. The first chapter is entitled "*The Road from Damascus*: a Road towards True Being." It is devoted to the existential analysis of the first novel, as it studies the protagonist's journey of self-identification, in order to unravel his torn sense of identity. In addition, it explores the dilemma of the Arab refugees, who suffer to keep an authentic Islamic identity within secular lands, and how it affects their mental stability and causes them to alienate themselves. This is mainly achieved via relying on the theories of Sartre and Kierkegaard.

The second chapter respectively is entitled "*Cockroach*: A Conflict of Reality Versus Illusion in the Depiction of Self". It exposes how the struggle of fitting in manifests itself in the protagonist in the form of total separation from humanity via an illusionary transformation into a

non-human being. Moreover, it analyzes the fake facades built by immigrants in hopes of fitting in within the Western domain, and its outcome on the mental state of said subjects. This chapter also namely draws on Sartre's scope of existentialism and Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety.

Lastly, the conclusion accentuates the study's findings. It uncovers how Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* and Hage's *Cockroach* both conceive characters of a lost and estranged identity, caused by the burden of their transmigration. Hence, they are characters who reflect countless Arab refugees in the West.

Chapter One

The Road from Damascus: A Road Towards Authentic Being

1. Introduction

This chapter thoroughly investigates the Existential aspects present in Robin Yassin-Kassab's novel, *The Road from Damascus* (2008). The primary objective of this analysis is to unravel the intricate and complex issues of self-perception that confront the characters in the narrative. In conjunction, Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard are employed as the primary theoretical tools to examine the complexities of the characters' self-perception. Additionally, this chapter aims to illustrate the relationship between the Existential predicament portrayed in the novel and the unique experiences of the Arab diaspora, which serves as the primary focus of this thesis**.**

2. False Persona

The notion of identity is central to the philosophical framework of Existentialism, as it is inherently intertwined with the concept of individual autonomy and accountability. According to this school of thought, creating a false identity is an act of abdication of one's inherent liberty and moral obligation (*Being* 48). Against this backdrop, the present investigation scrutinizes instances of spurious self-representation and insincerity as portrayed in the novel while invoking the theoretical tenets of Sartre's philosophy, particularly the notion of "Existence precedes essence" as well as his conception of 'Bad Faith'.

2.1 False essence

The concept of essence has been a long-standing philosophical inquiry since the flourishing days of ancient Greece. Consequently, stemming several dissimilar conceptualizations of it. On such notion, Plato defines essence as the ideal form of a thing that

exists within a world beyond the physical one (Shanjendu 1). David Sedley expands on this definition, elaborating that for Plato, knowing the essence of a subject or an object, corresponds to the ability to "articulate a successful definition of it" (5). These definitions reside within a realm that transcends material classification. Therefore, the essence of an agent is the ideal definition or blueprint of it residing in the realm of Forms. Accordingly, Plato identifies existence as merely the physical manifestation of a pre-established essence in the material world.

In contrast, Jean-Paul Sartre refutes the idea of a fixed pre-established essence and instead posits emphasis on the significance of existence. He contends that existence precedes essence, elaborating that "Man makes himself; he does not come into the world fully made" (Existentialism 46). Through this claim, Sartre advocates the notion that Man creates his own essence rather than being assigned a pre-established purpose. Eyüp Şahin expands upon this concept, suggesting that for Sartre existence is a process of transcending the realm of possibility to attain the realm of actuality (44). This perspective aligns significantly with Man's freedom of choice, rendering each individual solely responsible for his being.

The Road from Damascus emphasizes this notion of essence and the responsibility for being via the protagonist Sami. He is a manifestation of a lost soul in pursuit of what is seemingly a legitimate essence. His objective is namely to write a thesis and acquire a Ph.D.; therefore, becoming a respected academic like his father (Yassin-Kassab 2). In this regard, one may initially fathom that Sami's conviction is consistent with the Sartrean ideology of individuals creating their own purpose. However, the purpose Sami aims to achieve and the essence he is in pursuit of are not his own. Instead, they are manufactured by non-other than his father, who had "planned for him a career– all this before the boy's sixteenth birthday" (9).

Consequently, the imposition of his father, as well as the lack of personal evolvement in manufacturing his purpose, jeopardizes the legitimacy of sami's claim for a credible essence.

Furthermore, the authenticity of Sami's essence is once again put into question when coming to the conclusion that his father's effect goes beyond his career. His entire ideology, belief system, and identity are the products of his father's creation. In this respect, Yousef Awad and Barkuzar Dubbati draw a comparison between *The Road of Damascus* and *Hamlet* concerning the stagnant effect of the deceased fathers on their sons. Sami is merely "following a map that had been drawn for him years before" (Yassin-Kassab 31). Thus, the essence Sami faithfully allocates to himself is a predetermined one, which contradicts Sartre's claim that "we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature" (*Existentialism* 23). Correspondingly, this negates his freedom, because "Determinism . . . would make free choice impossible" (Pleydell-Pearce 43). The absence of personal choice regarding his purpose instigates a conflict between reality and his inner self. Sami experiences the world according to his father's standards; he is the axis around which Sami's life is constructed. His dependence on an essence that is not his own renders his authenticity vulnerable if not inexistent. Although Sami attempts to identify with his purpose, he is equally unable to resonate with it. This negatively affects his self-perception and identification.

Moreover, this divergence from Sartrean essence causes severe repercussions on Sami's identity. His expectation of finding himself within his father's plan manifests a lack of understanding of himself and his true nature, resulting in a sense of self-alienation as well as anxiety, making him feel like a stranger to his own body. Furthermore, he suffers from a total absence of awareness regarding reality and what is beyond his father, "now that his father was gone? He searched for his belief, looking mutely into his own silence, and found none" (Yassin-

Kassab 167). Nonetheless, Sami continues to associate himself with his deceased father, as his purpose was to follow along a predesigned path "After that the future became fuzzy" (Yassin-Kassab 28). His father did not plan for what succeeds the Ph.D.; consequently, Sami has no apprehension of his existence beyond that. Furthermore, Sartre believes that man is "that which he wills himself to be" (*Existentialism* 22). Therefore, the lack of subjective will in Sami's purpose condemns his actions to be inauthentic by association.

Despite Sami following a predetermined path as his own, he demonstrates awareness of the existence of alternative paths. He acknowledges that there are other paths that are not necessarily invalid, such as those taken by his mother or his wife (Yassin-Kassab 9). This perception of the world is utterly Sartrean; by acknowledging the existence of other paths, he is by association acknowledging the fluidity of identity and essence. This fluidity relates to freedom of choice; on this account, Sartre elaborates, "Man is defined as the choices he must make" (59). Therefore, Sami's aforementioned struggle for identification and meaning is a struggle of rebellion against an enforced choice.

Man can only determine himself when he acquires the ability to autonomously act (Poellner 15). Thus, for Sami to attain an authentic sense of self, he must confront his father's death and relinquish his predetermined path. Only after he accepts his freedom of choice can he become responsible for his existence. Hence, Sami abandoning his predetermined essence results in the loss of any stable definition of himself (Yassin-Kassab 181); nonetheless, "he felt bright and free" (Yassin-Kassab 171). This sensation of liberation, which arises from his autonomy, is Sami's drive toward authenticity. In other words, by accepting his freedom and responsibility toward his own existence, he is able to establish a meaningful sense of self.

According to Sartre, choosing one's self over the world is what constitutes freedom (Detmer 122), rendering it by interrelation an authentic essence. Similarly, when Sami separates himself from the world, he feels most authentic. He neglects the definitions of those who reside in the space around him, he forgets his father's teachings, and relieves himself from the pressure of the world. Hence, when Sami acknowledges his freedom and renounces his father's path, he establishes his own essence based on his present person; consistently, "He no longer experienced body claustrophobia" (Yassin-Kassab 313).

Upon careful examination of the subject matter, it becomes apparent that Yassin-Kassab employs Sami's narrative as a space to explore the predicament of lost essence within Arab diasporic communities. Hence, it indirectly associates the issue with the Sartrean tenet of existence preceding essence. Moreover, Yassin-Kassab places great emphasis on the tribulations encountered by these minority groups concerning personal identification within a Westernized space due to the conflict between individual autonomy and social pressure.

2.2 Authenticity Behind a Mask

Within existentialist thought, the concept of authenticity is the act of living in accordance with one's personal values and beliefs. Contrarily, leading an inauthentic existence is antithetical to this notion, as for existentialists, "Inauthentic existence rejects 'freedom of choice'" (Patil 5). Thus, it can be established that inauthenticity is the process of denying one's freedom, responsibility, and judgment. Sartre further describes this phenomenon as Bad Faith, an inclination towards self-deception in disregard to one's genuine self.

In *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1957), Sartre introduces Bad Faith as "the attempt to escape from freedom and responsibility, to pretend that we are not what we are and that we do not have the power to choose our own way" (22). He argues that when Man yields to

social pressure, he unintentionally designs a facade in order to integrate himself into society. In the process, he detaches himself from his freedom of choice and he is deluded into believing that fulfillment is only achieved in accordance with external conventions. As such, it can be contended that “bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that distinguishes the lie to oneself from lying in general” (Sartre 48). The evident difference being that lying in general is the act of deceiving others by saying things that are known to be false, while Bad Faith is the deception of oneself by denying aspects of reality that are accepted to be true.

To further elucidate his conception, Sartre provides the illustration of a café waiter. He asserts that upon observing the waiter’s mannerisms, one would assume his behavior feels inauthentic; "His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer" (Sartre 47). In an attempt to comfort the customer’s expectations, the waiter does not act according to his usual demeanor. Rather, he adopts an act designed to fulfill a social role, which does not reflect his genuine desires or intentions; hence, the waiter is in bad faith.

Progressing from this premise, it can be argued that *The Road from Damascus* carries several instances of Bad Faith. The characters, particularly those of Arab descent, exhibit a significant degree of inauthenticity throughout the novel, mainly stemming from their backgrounds as immigrants. A similar issue is tackled in an article titled “The Anguish of Freedom: Using an Existential Approach with Arab Immigrants,” (2016) in which Dareen Basma and Melinda M. Gibbons examine the experience of an Arab refugee named Mohammed, and they observe: “Mohammed felt like he needed to hide parts of himself from others to avoid

discriminatory attitudes. The more he tried to connect with others in the new dominant culture, the more he became disconnected from his authentic self and his culture of origin" (159). Accordingly, the characters of *The Road from Damascus* suffer similar complexities, as the following analysis proves.

Sami is arguably the most inauthentic character in the novel. He demonstrates a plethora of disingenuous mannerisms, which are traceable to several causations. One of which is attributed to the influence of his father, Mustafa. As previously mentioned, Mustafa's influence over Sami's choices disorients him and shakes his sense of self-conceptualization. This is formerly interpreted in the light of Sartre's "Existence precedes essence." However, it is possible to regard Sami's eagerness to chase his father's ghost as a form of Bad Faith. "Like his father. But better than His father. Leaping forth from the giant's shoulders, he'd go further. After that the future became fuzzy. Surely, there would be more good things, more achievement, stretching into the interminable distance. The thought of it made his small heart beat fast" (Yassin-Kassab 33).

Evidently, at this point of the narrative, Sami's self-perception is characterized as that of a child reliant upon his father's anticipations. This dependency is what causes him to fall victim to Sartrean Bad Faith. Aldojan and Awad assert, "Sami needs to redefine himself away from his father" (6). Indeed, it is a necessity for Sami to reconnect with his genuine sense of being without depending on Mustafa. The narrative, however, keeps reminding Sami of his father's feats. In an instance, Sami's supervisor continuously compares his efforts to his father's: "There was Mustafa Traifi, the flaking standard, the sepulcher" (Yassin-Kassab 141). This denies Sami the ability to escape his father's shadow, "Making him, in his own eyes, not much of a man – unsettled, out of place, unexplained" (Yassin-Kassab 36).

Another instance of Sami's inauthenticity can be located in his rejection of his Arab heritage. Being progressive as he claims, Sami does not take pride in his oriental roots. He "despises Syria, its people, and their religion-culture traditions" (Aldojan and Awad 3). Even when asked about his motherland, Sami would falter from mentioning Syria being Muslim or Arab because, in accordance with his father, his origin is nothing to be proud of (Yassin-Kassab 55). The reason behind his hatred is that "He didn't like supernaturalism, no backwardness in general" (Yassin-Kassab 10), in addition to his claims that Syrians conceive feelings of loath towards each other.

In a similar instance of the character rejecting his roots, upon returning from Syria, Sami opposes his wife's newly found faith and her decision to wear a hijab. He rejects the idea, for "Her hijab upset him most of all" (Yassin-Kassab 89). This is a sign of Sami's hatred of all that is Orientalist. However, it is probable to interpret it as his envy of Muntaha for finding her path while he is still far from reaching his own: "Given that his directions turned out to be dead ends he resented Muntaha finding her own." (Yassin-Kassab 89). Clearly, this hatred toward his heritage arises from his desire to belong. Similar to Basma and Gibbons' example, Sami needs to integrate himself into his new cultural context. In order to do so, it is imperative for him to disentangle himself from his Arab identity and adopt a more fluid sense of self, one that is compatible with the dominant culture.

Thus, Sami is a clear case of Sartrean Bad Faith. Having constructed a fake persona to reach a false sense of social inclusion, he does not behave in accordance with his genuine self. The motive behind his self-deception is elucidated in Sartre's words: "The essence of bad faith is to flee from our freedom" (48). Hence, it is evident that Sami negates a life of honesty and clarity in order to escape his own freedom and responsibility.

Similarly, Sami's wife undergoes a case of self-deception, especially during her adolescence as a recent immigrant. Parallel to numerous Arab refugees, Muntaha's family fled from a nation in a state of distress, in search of tranquility and a better livelihood. Stumbling upon a culture shock, Muntaha feels a strong desire to adapt to this new environment, like all "teenagers, she wanted to fit in. The usual desire to belong increases in proportion to the feeling that you don't, and she, with her Stumbling sing-song accent and instinctive politeness to teachers, knew she didn't" (Yassin-Kassab 81), because "the immigration experience necessarily involves an Identity shift" (Danzak 2). Correspondingly, in order for Muntaha to assert herself in a new community, she attempts to transmute herself; however, she cannot change her father. Because he does not fit her new identity, "she was embarrassed of him" (Yassin-Kassab 81). Her father remains faithful to his Iraqi self, and for that, she refrains from associating herself with him.

Consequently, akin to her spouse, Muntaha experiences a form of self-deception to mask her authentic identity, conforming her adolescent persona to Sartre's concept of Bad Faith. However, she eventually embraces a more transparent self-presentation.

3. Estranged Among Others

The notion of alienation functions in conjunction with existential philosophy, referring to the sensation of disassociation from one's self or a set of individuals (Naushaba 10). Hence, in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre provides a comprehensive examination of alienation, identifying it as a direct consequence of human freedom. By virtue of their freedom and consciousness, individuals are solely responsible for themselves, which creates a sense of separation from the world and the other individuals in it (263). Therefore, Sartre conceives alienation as the inherent human condition.

Furthermore, Sartre distinguishes two types of alienation: Self-alienation and Historical-alienation. Self-alienation refers to the evasion of one's inherent freedom and corresponding responsibilities (Busch 152). Accordingly, individuals obstructing their authenticity, as demonstrated above through Bad Faith or through the adoption of an essence that is not their own, constitute an alienation of the individual from the authentic self and the outside space, thereby generating a self-manufactured disconnection and estrangement. On the other hand, Historical-alienation describes the estrangement that individuals experience from their society, culture, race, nationalities, and other uncontrollable factors (Busch 154). It constitutes compulsory isolation that individuals encounter from their surrounding world. This type of alienation, according to Linda Bell (1979), is insurmountable, and can only be temporarily avoided (415). Consequently, exposure to such alienation is inevitable. Yassin-Kassab incorporates both concepts in his novel, depicting characters, who bear a profound sense of estrangement with respect to themselves and their environment.

3.1 Self-alienation

The novel expands on the notion of self-alienation, particularly among individuals of Arab descent, through several characters, who confront the sense of otherness on a daily basis. In this context, when describing the protagonist, Yassin-Kassab writes that Sami compares his physical appearance to the people around him, hence, objectifying himself. Sami deems that he has a "face that was trying too hard. There was too much crammed in, too much life. The features were too big, too expressive for his English-style emotions They suited someone else. Someone foreign" (69). This resonates with Sartre's assertion that self-alienation is equivalent to individuals viewing themselves as objects (*Being* 261). When individuals encounter others, they become objects of judgment in comparison with those around them, hence casting upon

themselves the alienation of the other. This sensation of objectification alienates Sami, he becomes isolated from his inner self and confined within a space that reduces him to a set of defined physical assets; thus, identifying as a foreigner to his own body.

Although alienated, Sami continues to objectify himself by comparing his skin tone to that of English people, he thinks to himself that he is "the only dark tone in an assembly line of pastels" (Yassin-Kassab 138). This spirals him further into self-isolation and estrangement, assigning himself as a foreign variable. Additionally, this notion of objectification is not exclusive to him; it rather extends to encompass other figures including Marwan, Sami's father-in-law, who is an Iraqi refugee. The latter, in effect, reflects upon the idea that in a foreign setting, "he himself was an object of study" (Yassin-Kassab 69). He solidifies himself as the object of interest acknowledging that he is an anomaly within the space, a source of exotic curiosity that stands apart from the norm. Therefore, according to Sartrean philosophy, Marwan creates a sense of alienation in his life by objectifying his very existence.

According to Sartre, objectification equals degradation (Busch 152); consequently, the act of disassociation from society is viewed as a protective measure, given that the existence of other individuals is a prerequisite for objectification to occur. As a response to their predicament, these estranged individuals disengage from society, which further ostracizes them. Sami and Marwan express reluctance regarding communication or association with other individuals. Sami, for instance, develops a sense of self-loathing, which prompts him to sever communication with his wife (Yassin-Kassab 31). Therefore, he alienates himself from the people close to him, confining himself in a metaphorically solitary space, which is emblematized in his father's office. Similarly, Marwan isolates himself from the world, minimizes contact with people, and disassociates from the social environment altogether (Yassin-Kassab 68).

Further instances of objectification within the narrative bring forth the same sense of self-estrangement. These individuals are judged as objects instead of conscious beings. This dichotomy between objects and conscious beings is what Sartre establishes as being For-itself and being In-itself in his work, *Being and Nothingness*. The latter of the two being the inferior form of existence, as it lacks a subjective consciousness. Hence, when individuals are defined as being In-itself they become alienated from being For-itself; that is to say, the objectification of individuals removes them from their consciousness, rendering them self-alienated because they are denied the opportunity to express themselves as conscious beings. Consequently, by elaborating on the harmful effects of objectification, Yassin-Kassab sheds light on the struggle of establishing self-worth and self-recognition within estranged Arab communities.

3.2 Enforced alienation

The narrative depicts individuals, who not only experience self-alienation but are also subjects of enforced alienation. These characters not only feel estranged from themselves but also feel detached from the individuals and the environment around them. In addition, while an individual's consciousness can eliminate self-alienation, enforced alienation is inevitable. On such notion, Sartrean philosophy holds that this type of alienation is the unavoidable human condition (Bell 409). Hence, the characters within Yassin-Kassab's work confront their self-alienation, only to encounter a society as well as a city that exacerbates feelings of isolation and separation.

Accordingly, the city of London in itself acts as an object of alienation. It is a domain of unfamiliarity, exuding an aura of detachment, which distances its inhabitants from each other and from themselves. This staggering effect of isolation and lack of personal attachment to the city is emphasized through Marwan's description of London as "stately-sold, autonomous,

indifferent . . . more prosperous than Baghdad but harsher, tidier but more desolate" (Yassin-Kassab 65). Juxtaposing London with the homelands of those minority individuals solidifies the alienating sensation of the English capital. Furthermore, the estrangement of the city extends to Sami, who experiences isolation from his surrounding, describing the effect of suburbia as suffocating (Yassin-Kassab 50). These significant indicators of alienation align with Sartre's contention that such detachment and isolation are unavoidable and unsurmountable, concluding that the individuals active within the city are involuntarily subjected to alienation.

Furthermore, Sartrean philosophy acknowledges the inherent isolation of individuals from one another (Bell 214). Similar to the city, its inhabitants alienate each other as well, which becomes evident when taking the perspective of Muntaha. She reflects on the striking contrast between her Westernized life and her upbringing in Iraq, acknowledging that in Baghdad, her neighbors were her sisters and the people on the street were her brothers and uncles (Yassin-Kassab 206). This underscores her profound sensation of belonging toward her origin. However, when returning to her current reality, she experiences loneliness in a busy city to which she is a stranger (207). The loneliness of Muntaha within the populous city correlates remarkably well with Sartre's aforementioned contention, proving that the members of the minority Arab communities, albeit being surrounded by people, are painstakingly isolated.

Sami also relates to this isolation among others, commenting on several occasions on the alienating lifestyle in the Western hemisphere. He identifies several occurrences of estrangement as the Western norm, whether that be people privatizing every aspect of their life even the mundane aspects of it, or people simply not acknowledging the existence of others within their social space. The intensity of the isolation prompts Sami to describe his life as being "surrounded by an alien army" (Yassin-Kassab 138). The hyperbolic nature of the statement serves as

evidence of the severity of the disconnection that the Western lifestyle promotes. A lifestyle that further alienates an already estranged community of individuals.

4. The Anxious Self

Emotions occupy a prominent place in the philosophical framework of Existentialism; they are viewed as critical elements in the constitution of individual subjectivity and the generation of meaning. According to Sartre, emotions give meaning not only to one's own existence but to the world around us as well (57). However, he does not solely refer to positive emotions, as existentialism deems negative emotions as equally essential components of human experience, with anxiety particularly given a great significance.

In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1946), Søren Kierkegaard contends, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom" (80). Indeed, for Kierkegaard, anxiety is the result of freedom of choice. He illustrates this assertion by drawing an analogy to the experience of gazing into an abyss (61). When an individual looks down into a deep chasm, their eyes may induce a sensation of dizziness. Similarly, one, who gazes into the infinite abyss of possibilities and choices, may experience a sense of vertigo and anxiety. Thus, anxiety is not a negative state of being; rather, it is a necessary price to pay for freedom.

Kierkegaard proceeds to categorize anxiety into three classifications: subjective anxiety, objective anxiety, and spiritual anxiety. In the definition of the first, Kierkegaard writes, "Subjective anxiety is the anxiety that is posited in the individual and is the consequence of his sin" (75). Simply put, it is the anxiety that is triggered by personal fears and concerns. Objective anxiety, on the other hand, arises from the fear of external intervention, like the uncertainty and dangers of the world around us. Finally, spiritual anxiety is similar to subjective anxiety in that it is caused by internal conflicts. However, it is particularly related to religious and spiritual

beliefs. It stems from questions and concerns about personal values, beliefs, and purpose in life (Kierkegaard 96-97).

Drawing upon this conception, the subsequent analysis identifies and examines instances of anxiety in *The Road from Damascus,* followed by their classification and contextualization in relation to the Arab exodus.

Commencing with Marwan, it is discernible that his persona harbors a significant anxiety disposition. As discussed above, unlike his daughter's apparent adaptability, Marwan exhibits difficulties assimilating into his novel surroundings. This discrepancy is largely attributed to Marwan's refusal to camouflage his authentic identity. As a result, he experiences profound sentiments of estrangement, leading to a sense of anxiety: "he certainly didn't fit London. People looked at him in the street. It had nothing to do with his race. Muntaha is darker, like her mother was, and anyway there are enough dark People about for people not to notice. So that wasn't the reason. It was the way he looked at others, and the way he moved, as if he was guilty of something". (Yassin-Kassab 74). The previous quote demonstrates a form of subjective anxiety. Clearly, Marwan does not face any external fear or uncertainty. However, as an Arab refugee, he feels nervous about his novel Western environment and culture. The fact of which is unsurprising, as extant research has consistently demonstrated that "depression and anxiety are among the psychosocial disorders immigrants commonly face" (Escamilla and Saasa 2).

Contrastingly, Sami confronts spiritual anxiety that triggers him to question his beliefs: "Sami had been waging his own battle with Time. Trying to make it stop, he avoided thought and activity. He avoided Change. He tried to stabilize his temperature, and watched the weather, which was stuck in a loop" (Yassin-Kassab 135). From this point onward, the conflict of the narrative arises, and Sami's psyche starts to dissolve. His relationship with his wife becomes

distressed, his thesis is rejected and he falls deep into a pit of drugs and alcohol. Sami's identity at this point is at its most anxious and unstable state.

In due course, Sami's apprehension by law officers for drug consumption invokes a sense of comfort (Yassin-Kassab 160). This anomalous reaction correlates to Kierkegaard's philosophy since he identifies freedom as the facilitator of anxiety. Therefore, the absence of such a facilitator necessitates the absence of the latter. In conjunction, Sami forfeits his liberty but gains an undeniable serenity due to the lack of responsibility and choice.

Subsequently, while locked in a jail cell, he feels relief: "He'd lost too his childish ability to speak to his dead father, this most intimate of his comforts. His innocence was gone. The angry fidgeting state he'd been in up to then seemed to him like innocence." (Yassin-Kassab 172). This part is intriguing because Kierkegaard's philosophy links innocence with anxiety; he argues that "The anxiety that is posited in innocence is in the first place No guilt, and in the second place it is no troublesome burden, No suffering that cannot be brought into harmony with the Blessedness of innocence" (61). For Kierkegaard, to be innocent is to be free from sin and guilt; however, humans can never obtain that. Hence, for Sami to be innocent, prior to this point, is unlikely to occur. This can be perceived as a form of escapism, in the sense that Sami believes himself to be innocent in order to shield himself from anxiety.

Upon a rigorous analysis of the subject, it is unequivocally discernible that Yassin-Kassab displays the theme of anxiety in his novel to exemplify the psychological instability experienced by the Arab diaspora. The character of Marwan is employed to reflect the arduous process of adapting to an unfamiliar environment, while Sami's character represents the internal struggles faced by Arabs, who either conform to a secular mindset or live inauthentically.

4. Conclusion

Throughout his narrative, Yassin-Kassab highlights the several difficulties associated with the exiled Arab's attempts to reform their identities with respect to their alien environment while simultaneously maintaining an authentic self-conceptualization. Via depicting his characters' encounters with inauthenticity, estrangement, and anxiety; he offers a broad reflection on the challenges faced by Arab immigrants within the Western space. Indeed, the existential struggles of the individuals in the novel are effectively used as a vehicle for exploring themes of cultural identity and self-discovery. Yassin-Kassab portrays lost inauthentic beings coming to achieve self-validation and awareness, in a milieu that nullifies their authenticity. Overall, *The Road from Damascus* depicts an accurate and vivid struggle in regard to the identity crisis, suffered by numerous displaced individuals.

Chapter Two

Cockroach: A Conflict of Reality Versus Illusion in the Depiction of Self

1. Introduction

The second chapter of this thesis is devoted to the analysis of Rawi Hage's novel, *Cockroach* (2008), with the primary aim of unraveling the issues of self-perception faced by the characters in the narrative. The analysis employs the same philosophical frameworks of Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard to demonstrate the characters' struggles with identity and estrangement. Additionally, the chapter aims to explore how the themes of alienation, oppression, and marginalization, that are depicted in the novel, reflect the experiences of displaced Arabs in Western societies

2. The Vermin versus the Human

Cockroach by Rawi Hage embarks upon the conceptualization of essence preceding existence and the overwhelming strive for authentic being through its protagonist. The unnamed narrator embodies a free being, who forges a distinct identity that is authentic to his own existence within a new unfamiliar space. He resists prescribed societal roles and norms, and instead manufactures for himself an essence that genuinely represents his desires and needs, such as when he identifies himself to his therapists as "A cockroach" (Hage 3). Although the essence the narrator aligns with himself may seem nonsensical, his method and thought process of establishing an essence true to himself corresponds with that of Jean-Paul Sartre. The latter emphasizes the significance of individuals creating an essence that is authentic to their unique existence (Existentialism 59).

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator attempts to assert control over his existence via committing suicide (Hage 2); a controversial decision that results in him being obligated to

attend therapy sessions. Nevertheless, his choice still resonates with the philosophy of responsibility over personal existence that Sartre addresses in *Being and Nothingness*. He asserts, "I become responsible for my death as for my life" (532). He further argues that death is an integral aspect of life, and that it is the act of dying that ensures the significance of life (532). Accordingly, the protagonist explains that his course of action is an act of defiance against an oppressive world (Hage 3). Thus, by taking responsibility for his death, the protagonist is by correlation taking responsibility for his life in accordance to Sartrean thought.

Following the unsuccessful suicide attempt, the narrator descends into a state of profound introspection regarding his existence, increasingly contemplating his cockroach-like nature. Additionally, it is apparent that the cockroach only prevails over his human nature in certain circumstances. According to Kit Dobson, the protagonist's "Kafkaesque morphing into a cockroach occurs whenever he begins to contemplate any questionable act" (263). Specifically, situations, which involve nefarious or unlawful acts, such as stalking, seducing women, and home invasions. The association of all that is stigmatized with his Metamorphosis or becoming implies a symbolic connection between the insect and the protagonist's lowly status as an immigrant.

Accordingly, the arrival of the narrator to an unfamiliar land and the subsequent inhabitation of an uncanny space necessitates the manufacturing of an essence that truly reflects his existence within this new environment. In his work *Existentialism is a Humanism,* Sartre defines man as "a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it" (22), underscoring the primacy of subjective existence over essence. Therefore, as the narrator lives in the inhospitable city of Montreal, he confronts the Western agenda against immigrants;

consequently, he allocates the essence of a cockroach to himself as a measure of self-preservation.

On such notion, Amir Taheri notes, in his review of *Cockroach*, that Hage's protagonist "builds the cockroach aspect of his persona willingly and as the key element of a mechanism of self-defence in a hostile world" (par. 8). The protagonist experiences existence within the Western domain, then he embodies an essence that serves his authentic identity within the given space. This ideology of assuming an essence that assures the continuation of a pre-established existence is utterly Sartrean.

However, the protagonist does not solely identify as one of the two options. According to Jesse Hutchison, "the narrator resists falling into the trap of adhering to the binary opposition established by the country's multicultural system" (8). Via doing so, the narrator reinforces his individuality by committing himself to subjective agenda rather than a mass-enforced one. Nonetheless, the presence of two personalities creates a conflict when he comes to accept that he is not "fully human" (Hage 203). This idea stems from a previous conversation between the narrator and a fictitious man-sized cockroach (Hage 200). His introspection culminates in a revelation that the human within the narrator is the inferior form of existence when compared to its cockroach counterpart, as he conveys to his physiatrist: "being human is being trapped" (Hage 203).

Consequently, the protagonist becomes more inclined to embrace his cockroach-like essence and negate his predetermined immigrant persona; therefore, he relegates his human self to secondary status. This transformation is reflected in the protagonist's behavioral patterns with his environment. Throughout Hage's work, the narrator demonstrates a rising apathy towards Montreal's urban life, juxtaposed with an increasing fascination with the subterranean world of

the sewers. Thus, illustrating the narrator's gradual abandonment of the human and adoption of the vermin identity.

The protagonist's rejection of the pre-established immigrant label and adoption of the self-manufactured cockroach-like identity runs in line with Sartrean existentialist philosophy. The protagonist refuses to associate himself with the immigrant community because "he feels basically dislocated among them, too. Being a social outcast, his sphere of life is rather limited" (Molnár 61). Instead, He assigns himself a distinct identity that differentiates him from a generalized definition. This perspective parallels Sartre's idea of human subjectivity, where he writes, "Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence" (*Existentialism* 26). Hence, the narrator's subjectivity regarding his identity affirms his alignment with Sartre's philosophy of essence preceding existence.

At the denouement of the novel, the narrator perpetrates a homicide, which is then followed by a full metamorphosis into a cockroach as he escapes to the underground (Hage 303-304). This act symbolizes the protagonist's full acceptance of his essence and renunciation of humanity. Kit Dobson provides an insightful interpretation of this pivotal incident, highlighting that "the protagonist appears to reject the human form, casting aside its limits and pretensions, and diving, instead, for the sewers" (269). Therefore, the narrator effectively embodies Sartrean ideology and embraces his self-established identity.

In light of this analysis, it is evident that Hage employs the protagonist's narrative as a vessel to relay the struggles of obtaining a valid essence that would ensure the viability of Arab communities within the Western domain. He accentuates the adversity these minority groups encounter concerning survival on both the physical and the physiological levels, due to inhabiting the liminal identity of immigrants. Moreover, leaving the protagonist unnamed serves

as a generalization of the issue of identity and essence over all immigrants, suggesting that those tribulations are the accepted norm rather than being a singular case. Consequently, the narrative falls within the boundaries of Sartre's belief that existence precedes essence.

3. The Immigrant's Falsehood

Progressing from the notion of essence and authenticity, it is easily identifiable that *Cockroach* carries recurrent themes of untruthfulness and duplicity. Hage constructs characters that adopt self-deception and dishonesty as a means of life. Consequently, these characters are willingly suspended in a continuous state of falsehood. The latter particularly relates to Sartre's philosophy of 'Bad Faith', which he defines as the process of fleeing from anguish through the negation of certain aspects of reality (*Being* 44). Ergo, the characters within *Cockroach* actively associate with the Sartrean principle.

Although the protagonist fully adopts his authentic essence by the end of the novel, he succumbs to the 'Bad Faith' fallacy throughout the narrative. Being an outsider, the protagonist engages in several acts of deception to accommodate for social expectations. For instance, as he prepares himself for a party, he comments on his attire: "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" (Hage 19). This deception stems from his fear of not being accepted; a common concern among immigrants, particularly "fear that is enhanced by the alienation that they experience if they do not adjust to the economic, political, social and cultural paradigm of a particular nation" (Casco-Solís 184). Thus, the narrator creates a fake facade that is significantly more subtle as an attempt to achieve social acceptability.

The protagonist feels inferior compared to the natives, as he acknowledges himself as being poor, and at the bottom of the social scale (Hage 121). Therefore, he attempts to

compensate for his inferiority via accommodating their desires, while he simultaneously conceals certain authentic characteristics in fear of being perceived as undesirable and unwelcomed. Such instance of this behavior is when the protagonist is around Canadian women as he transforms himself into "The fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner" (Hage 199), in an attempt to infiltrate their lives and become accepted by their standards. He adjusts his behavior and personality depending on which aspects of his life would lead to the most favorable outcome and negates facts that may be detrimental to his survivability.

Sartre comments on such behavioral patterns in *Being and Nothingness*, elaborating that "the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth" (49). This discourse encompasses the obscured authenticity of the protagonist and centralizes his narrative within Sartrean philosophy. Moreover, before completely assimilating the cockroach essence, the protagonist inhabits a liminal space between authenticity and inauthenticity due to the Canadian multicultural system. Elena Rahman comments on this element of the novel noting that the Canadian society utilizes a "systematic approach to integrating immigrants into mainstream culture" (39). Hence, individuals are not treated as subjective beings, but rather they are viewed as dysfunctional and in need of inclusion within a national homogeneous system. This neglect of subjectivity is what creates the rift between the truth and the lie in the protagonist's identity.

In addition to the protagonist's struggle with 'Bad Faith', Hage portrays several other immigrants, who fall victim to the fallacy of inauthenticity. However, none of their cases is as severe as that of the Algerian professor Youssef. Although he is Algerian, the protagonist describes the professor as a "pseudo-French intellectual," who attempts to emulate French thinkers (Hage 8). Unlike the protagonist, who inhabits a liminal space between authenticity and

inauthenticity as a survival measure, the professor attempts to completely integrate himself within Canadian society. In this sense, his case exemplifies a complete embrace of inauthenticity.

This state of inauthenticity is part of the human life, as Sartre states that "It can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people. A person can live in bad faith" (*Being* 50). The professor is one of such people; he encircles himself with lies and deception to maintain the look of a highly esteemed intellectual. This facilitates his enrollment in Western society, as well as compensates for his immigrant inferiority via being a high and respected figure within that marginalized community. Furthermore, he disassociates himself from the behavior of immigrants. When he goes to receive his welfare check he pretends to be at the establishment to provide consulting to the government (Hage 120). The professor's entire life is built upon deception and roleplaying; 'Bad Faith' becomes integral to his existence within the Western environment.

However, the professor's deception of those around him extends to the degree of self-delusion. In his quest to assimilate into Canadian society, he convinces himself that he is no longer Youssef, the Algerian, but rather Youssef, the Quebecois. When the protagonist breaks into his apartment, he laughs at the fact that although the living arrangement of the professor is appalling, the interior is neatly organized in a certain manner, as if he truly believes what he is clearly faking to be (Hage 150). In such a manner, the professor embodies Sartre's 'Bad Faith'; he becomes a man who "lies to himself" (*Being* 48). This eliminates any claim for authenticity by the professor.

Upon exploring the situation, it becomes apparent that Hage illustrates how inauthenticity has a prominent existence within marginalized immigrant Arab communities. The narrator navigates his environment via adapting his personality to whatever serves him best. At the same

time, through the protagonist's solitude, Hage suggests that inauthenticity is destructive, as it can lead to isolation and self-deception. In the case of the professor, the constant lies and shifting identity prevent him from forming meaningful connections with others. The novel provides a comprehensive critique of the pressures faced by immigrants to shed their identities in order to conform to the cultural norms of their adopted societies.

4. Alienated Vermin

Cockroach's representation of the migrant existence is akin to *The Road from Damascus,* in that is also one of detachment and estrangement. The narrative depicts the foreigners residing in Montreal as an alien element that emits the sensation of isolation from the broader world, whether it is caused by their surroundings or their own selves. However, it is noteworthy that the theme of alienation in Hage's work is more distinctly rendered and employs a greater variety of methods to convey its significance.

4.1 A Grotesque Figure

In Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, the grotesque event of shifting into a cockroach serves as a vehicle to depict the character's profound social estrangement. Despite the fact that Hage's protagonist does not undergo a physical change like Kafka's counterpart, as it is rather a psychological one, the same effect remains evident. In his analysis of *Cockroach*, Hilde Staels comments, "The adult protagonist's experience of turning into a cockroach evokes a sense of extreme isolation and social alienation" (18). Therefore, it can be argued that the narrator's grotesque self-image is an indicator of his state of isolation.

During the narrator's encounter with the symbolic albino cockroach, the insect conveys a profound message by asserting that "The world ended for you a long time ago. You never participated in it. Look at you, always escaping, slipping, and feeling trapped in everything you

do" (Hage 201). The discourse highlights the signification that the narrator's lack of engagement in society is rooted in his identification with the symbolic role of a cockroach, an insect that is "hard for humans to detect when it hides in dark corners and it is above all a resilient survivor" (Staels 18). This further explains the narrator's solitude; he is in complete certainty that he is a cockroach. Hence, he acts like one, causing him to fall victim to Sartrean self-alienation.

4.2 A Cold City

Throughout the novel, the harsh and cold weather in the city of Montreal is a recurring theme, with the narrator being mostly the one, who frequently complains about the climate: "This cold world, in this city with its case of chronic snow" (Hage 16). The repeated reference to the weather serves as a symbol of the characters' isolation and struggle to acclimate to their new environment. The weather becomes a physical manifestation of the psychological and emotional barriers that the characters must overcome in order to belong in Montreal.

While his birthplace is not explicitly stated, the unnamed protagonist is an Arab from the Middle East, a region where warm and dry weather predominates. This is the reason behind his repeated complaints about the Canadian cold climate, such as when he muses, "A joint will warm my bones, I thought, or at least numb my brain Just enough so that I won't feel my misery and the cold" (Hage 17). While the weather serves to underscore the protagonist's impoverished and forlorn state, it also functions as a persistent reminder that he is a stranger in a foreign land.

The climate renders the city even more estranging and increases the narrator's desire to escape his surroundings. Abdul-Jabbar remarks that "The crushing insistence on the unbearable weather in an inhospitable city makes the act of introjection, of becoming a cockroach, not only imminent but necessary" (8). Truly, the city only pushes the character into embracing his cockroach persona; Abdul-Jabbar adds that "The cockroach is also a menacing reminder of

home; the romantic notion of finding a new home degenerates into aimlessness and loss" (8). Such passage suggests that the character's identity crisis causes him to feel lost, and increases his estrangement. Which is all the more evident in the narrator's "how I ended up here" monologue: "I wondered how I had ended up […] here. How absurd. How absurd. The question is, Where to End?" (Hage 161). The passage highlights the protagonist's self-awareness of his alienation and his lack of belonging in the city of Montreal.

4.3 Hell is Other People

According to Sartrean discourse, the individual's existence holds no meaning until they are perceived through their awareness of others (Wassler and Kirillova 7). Therefore, socialization and building relationships with others are necessary to achieve meaning. However, when surrounded by others, our freedom can be restricted or threatened since we are compelled to confront their expectations, judgments, and values. As a result, our relationships with others may result in conflict and distress. In this sense, individuals can become "hell" to each other, leading some to experience alienation in their attempt to escape from such torment. Sartre illustrates his idea in the play *No Exit* (1944), where the infamous line "Hell is other people" (47) is uttered. Progressing from such a notion, it becomes apparent that in *Cockroach*, numerous characters disassociate themselves from others in an attempt to evade the confines of Sartre's "hell." They are portrayed as reclusive individuals who opt for a life of solitude, notwithstanding their numerous acquaintances.

Despite being surrounded by a community of Middle Eastern immigrants, the protagonist isolates himself from his peers. Through his solitary wanderings in the harsh streets of the city, the narrator reveals his sense of profound loneliness: "I am hungry, impoverished, and have no one, no one" (Hage 7). Although he knows Reza, an Iranian musician, who shares the same

immigrant background, he refrains from considering him a friend. Instead, they continuously disrespect and insult each other, using labels like "bastard", "liar", and "selfish, shady exile" (Hage 13). The narrator only acknowledges Reza as a friend when he needs him as a job referral, indicating a fear of developing close relationships and exposing himself to the risk of Sartrean "hell".

Shohreh, another Middle Eastern immigrant, is seen as yet another instance of a character, who is afraid of having relations. Although she occasionally sleeps with the protagonist, she never considers him a lover. In fact, she consistently distances herself from him on several occasions, as depicted in the following quote: “When squeezed Shohreh towards me and slipped both hands onto her torso, she pushed me away and danced alone” (Hage 70). Furthermore, her friend Farhoud warns the narrator to not get too close to her, stating, “I warned you not to become attached” (Hage 105). Shohreh’s fear of relationships likely stems from being raped in jail (145). Having experienced Sartre’s “hell” before, Shohreh develops a fear of attachments and chooses isolation in an attempt to shield herself from other conflicts.

The character of Professor Youccef, the only other Arab in the novel, is similarly estranged. He is often seen alone at the café, as the narrator comments, “I spotted Professor Youssef sitting alone at his usual table” (Hage 8). Despite sharing a common cultural background, the professor displays a certain level of hostility towards the narrator, evidenced by his dismissive and mistrustful demeanor: “He leaned his body into the back of the chair and looked at me with an intellectual’s air of dismissal, as if I were a peasant,” and “He does not trust me” (Hage 9). Professor Youccef’s aloofness and mistrust suggest a similar fear of social interaction and attachment exhibited by other characters.

In conclusion, it is evident that the characters are estranged individuals seeking to escape from the confines of existential "hell." Furthermore, their reluctance to form attachments is attributed to their shared backgrounds as exiles, which presumably include past experiences of disappointment and conflict in previous relationships, in addition to their unwelcoming environment.

5. Anxious Vermin

The current study already mentions that Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety arises from the freedom of choice. Despite the fact that the characters in *Cockroach* seem constrained by their unsatisfactory and impoverished circumstances, they are still individuals, who possess a certain degree of freedom. Therefore, their characters exhibit instances of anxiety. This investigation concentrates exclusively on the narrator and the professor, both of whom share Arab lineage. It scrutinizes the occurrences of anxiety in their characters and establishes connections between these experiences and their backgrounds as displaced Arabs.

The initial portrayal of the narrator's anxiety is evidenced in his admission of a past suicide attempt, which he justifies as "a challenge to nature" (Hage 2). Although the narrator constructs his suicide attempt as a means to reassert control over his life, the presence of anxiety as a driving force behind his suicidal tendencies becomes evident through various instances. This includes a panic attack that renders him immobilized and engulfed by a sense of fear and sadness (Hage 117), as well as his uneasiness towards the residents of Montreal, which causes him to feel nervous and overlooked (7). However, the pinnacle of the narrator's anxiety is his encounters with a mysterious "light."

Throughout the course of the narrative, the unnamed protagonist continually encounters a radiant light that manifests itself in various forms and at different intervals. As the narrator

reflects on his past, he reveals that the sight of the light shooting through his window was what finally pushed him over the edge: "The thing that pushed me over the edge was the bright light that came in my window and landed on my bed and my face. Nothing made any sense to me anymore" (Hage 31). The light is imbued with a symbolic significance, representing a glimmer of hope for the narrator, who is grappling with the miseries of his life. It serves as a reminder that he can still make choices that might lead him to a better path. However, as anxiety is fundamentally rooted in the depths of our choices, the light also triggers an intense sense of anxiety in the narrator. In his own words, "I saw the ray of light entering my window and realized how insignificant I was in its presence, how oblivious it was to my existence" (Hage 32). The light thus emblematizes the narrator's struggle to find meaning and purpose in his life, and the overwhelming burden of freedom and responsibility that accompanies such a quest.

According to Kierkegaard, anxiety serves as a mechanism through which the self is informed of a higher calling, one that compels it to take charge of its own self-becoming (Söderquist 89). In the context of *Cockroach*, the light that the protagonist repeatedly encounters is seen as a representation of this higher calling, a manifestation of the potentiality of what could be. However, the character's response to this call is marked by a sense of futility and despair. As he struggles to find a way out of the overwhelming burden of freedom and responsibility that the light represents, he ultimately succumbs to the urge to escape it, leading to his attempt to take his own life (Hage 32). Through this, the character's tragic fate serves as a reminder of the existential struggles and complexities that arise from one's confrontation with the fundamental questions of human existence. Ultimately, the light also represents the complex and contradictory nature of the narrator's experience as an immigrant, as he struggles to find his place in a new

country while grappling with the traumas of his past. From this finding, it is concluded that the narrator suffers from subjective anxiety, as it is the outcome of his own fears and concerns.

Professor Youccef frequently engages the narrator in discussions about the nature of existence, from which he always manages to escape. Similarly to the narrator, he embodies anxieties that are central to Kierkegaard's philosophy. The Professor's anxiety is mainly rooted in his sense of social isolation. Despite his intellectual pursuits and his engagement with the protagonist, he frequently expresses a sense of loneliness and disconnection from the world around him, a sense of isolation that serves to amplify his anxiety. For example, when the narrator steals letters from the professor's house, he comments "There was nothing in the professor's letters but lost, empty lives and illusions of escape from life's ugliness" (Hage 184). Although supposedly the letters are sent by his lover, they do not contain any hints of romance or any signs of close connection. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the professor usually sits on his own in the café. This isolation makes him an anxious and almost paranoid person. At one point, the narrator discreetly follows the professor to his home, when suddenly "At one point the professor stopped and turned back" (Hage 124). The occurrence highlights his anxiety about anyone seeing his home.

The characters' anxieties serve to display the deep and complex nature of the existential concerns that are central to Kierkegaard's philosophy. Their struggles with the pressure of freedom, and social isolation underscore the immense weight of these concerns and the difficulty of finding meaning in a foreign and unwelcome land.

6. Conclusion

Hage skillfully exposes the challenges encountered by his protagonist and Professor Youccef in their quest to navigate an unfamiliar environment while grappling with their own

sense of authenticity. By portraying encounters with alienation, disconnection, and anxiety, the author offers a profound examination of the trials Arab immigrants experience. Through the existential struggles of the characters, Hage masterfully weaves together themes of cultural identity and self-discovery. In Cockroach, he presents a haunting portrayal of individuals who are lost and inauthentic, striving to find validation and self-awareness in a milieu that continually negates their true selves. Ultimately, the novel offers a poignant and vivid depiction of the profound identity crisis endured by countless displaced individuals.

General Conclusion

Drawing upon Soren Kierkegaard's and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist frameworks, in addition to a meticulous inquiry and comprehensive research, it has become evident that both Robin Yassin-Kassab and Rawi Hage have respectively written *The Road from Damascus* and *Cockroach* as a sociocultural critique on the experiences of displaced Arabs within the Western milieu. Through their works, both novelists have provided vivid representations of the multifaceted issues facing immigrants, particularly concerning the establishment of identity and authenticity within an unfamiliar domain. Consequently, both novelists have acknowledged a marginalized issue and cast a critical light on the Arab diaspora.

The two novelists have employed similar methodologies in the characterization of their protagonists' internal turmoil. They have prioritized the issue of purpose and the establishment of an authentic essence within a foreign space. They have both portrayed displaced individuals, who have suffered from the lack of a relatable essence, resulting in the disregard of external factors and a self-directed pursuit of authenticity. Moreover, they have adopted similar approaches when confronting inauthenticity, as they have established characters, who live in what is concluded to be Sartrean 'Bad Faith' as an attempt to integrate within Western society. Through their narratives, the authors have articulated the internal struggles of their characters as the consequences of their affiliation with a marginalized group; thereby enabling the recognition and validation of said community.

Moreover, both authors have established their settings, London and Montreal, as formidable forces of alienation and hostility. They have effectively illustrated how existence within a new environment has rendered inanimate objects, such as buildings or streets, as well as weather conditions, such as snow and cold temperatures, into elements of estrangement and

disconnection. When contrasted to their Middle Eastern counterparts, the characters of both novels have observed and experienced the hostility prevalent in Western suburbia, and the disconnection promoted by the contemporary metropolises of the West. Thus, the novelists have established a platform of critique concerning Western settings and their effects on self-worth and identity within displaced Arab communities.

Both novels have offered a critical perspective on the dominant cultural narratives and values that underpin Western society.in *The Road from Damascus*, the characters are immigrants, who have struggled to reconcile their cultural heritage with the dominant culture in the West. The novel has critiqued the assumptions and values that underpin Western society, such as estrangement, consumerism, and materialism. The characters in the novel have rejected these values and sought to create alternative ways of living that are more in line with their cultural heritage and personal values. Similarly, in *Cockroach*, Hage has portrayed Western society as oppressive and unjust through his characters' struggles and marginalization. He has also highlighted the inherent inequalities and power imbalances that exist within it. The novel has raised questions about the social and economic structures that perpetuate these inequalities and the complicity of individuals within them. Ultimately, both works have offered a strong criticism of the West that has gone against the typical image often portrayed in Western media. They have described the West as an oppressive and marginalizing force towards immigrant communities, in an attempt to draw attention to the systemic and structural issues that are present in Western societies that hinder the integration and acceptance of immigrants.

Although the two works share several aspects, the existence of similarities does not eliminate the presence of dissimilarities. The two authors have opted for different styles in the telling of their stories. Yassin-Kassab’s narrative has unfolded in a third-person voice, granting

him an omniscient perspective that has allowed him to explore the storylines of several other immigrant characters, in addition to that of the protagonist. This has resulted in a narrative that has focused on the lives of a select group of individuals, in which each storyline is specifically related to that particular character. Conversely, Hage has relied on his unnamed protagonist to divulge his story in the first-person voice, which has denied the association of any label to the narrative. Unlike *The Road from Damascus*, which has associated its narrative with certain characters, *Cockroach* has provided a decentralized immigrant archetype in the form of a relatable unnamed protagonist who has served as a generalized statement on the lives of displaced Arabs.

The differentiating factors have also included the protagonists' final character arcs. Although Sami and the unnamed narrator have taken similar approaches in their journey toward acquiring an authentic essence, the two of them have achieved dissimilar results. By the end of *The Road from Damascus*, Sami has integrated himself into Western society while maintaining an authentic essence that truthfully represents him. He has rehabilitated his relationship with his wife and has become a functioning member of society, thus he has lived according to Sartre's essence. Dissimilarly, by the end of *Cockroach* the unnamed protagonist has failed to assimilate to his new environment and has rather adopted an essence that has permitted him to withdraw from the Canadian multiculturalism as well as the immigrant community to achieve a subjective existence. Hage has illustrated this withdrawal with the protagonist's escape towards the sewers. Both authors have established different conclusions to their narratives, illustrating the striking spectrum of positive and negative possibilities of the Arab diaspora.

Another distinction between the two narratives has been the contrasting conditions and difficulties that the characters have faced. Yassin-Kassab has featured mildly privileged

characters, who despite facing their own problems, have not endured the same level of hardship as those depicted in *Cockroach*. The protagonist and his wife have resided in a respectable middle-class home and has possessed college degrees, with Muntaha working as a teacher and Sami pursuing a doctorate degree. They have enjoyed financial security, to the extent that Sami has been able to focus on his education without monetary concerns. In contrast, Hage has portrayed characters that have encountered significantly more formidable obstacles in the form of financial, social, and mental adversity, impeding their adaptation to their new environment. For instance, the protagonist's predicament has been characterized by his ongoing struggle to secure sustenance, inhabiting a poor residence, a lack of social connections, and severe schizophrenic tendencies. This has provided insight into the diverse challenges facing Arab communities in the West, with some experiencing greater hardships concerning marginalization and the manifestation of identities that allow them to exist in accordance with their truths.

Spirituality has been another difference that has risen between the two novels, as the two protagonists have had severely contrasting attitudes toward religion. Yassin-Kassab has promoted religion as one of the driving themes within his work, as it has been one of the major internal conflicts of his protagonist. Sami has first aligned with his father's thoughts and has lead a secular life. However, by establishing a subjective existence Sami has manufactured the essence of a repenting revert for himself. On the other hand, Hage has provided little to no acknowledgment of religion within his work and mainly has focused on the world of physicality rather than the one of spirituality. The author has established a total divergence from the metaphysical, as his narrative has mainly highlighted the struggles and survival of the immigrants regarding the physical world. Consequently, the novelists have provided dissimilar renderings of spirituality; hence, covering the wide spectrum between secularism and religion.

With the acknowledgment of both similarities and differences, *The Road from Damascus* and *Cockroach* have carried the same existential concern about the establishment of authentic identity. Yassin-Kassab and Hage have provided narratives that have shared and differed on aspects concerning the marginalized Arab immigrants, as they have dissected the social constructs of the Western world and its staggering effect on displaced individuals seeking acceptance in regard to their authentic being.

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Résumé

Cette thèse explore la question de l'authenticité et l'identité dans *Cockroach* de Rawi Hage et *The Road from Damascus* de Robin Yassin-Kassab à travers une lentille existentielle. S'inspirant des philosophies de Jean-Paul Sartre et de Søren Kierkegaard, l'étude examine la crise d'identité et les luttes des immigrants arabes au Canada et au Royaume-Uni. Les concepts d'existence précédant l'essence, de mauvaise foi et d'aliénation de Sartre, ainsi que le concept d'anxiété de Kierkegaard, fournissent un cadre d'analyse de la recherche de leur véritable moi par les personnages. Grâce à une analyse approfondie des romans, cette étude montre comment les expériences de déplacement et de marginalisation des personnages contribuent à leur crise d'identité et à leur quête d'authenticité. En outre, elle donne un aperçu des défis auxquels sont confrontés les immigrants arabes dans le monde occidental et de la manière dont leurs luttes sont liées à des questions existentielles plus larges sur la nature de l'identité et de l'existence humaine.

Mots clés: Authenticité, Diaspora, Existentialisme, Identité, Immigrants, L'ouest.

الملخص

تهدف هذه الأطروحة لدراسة مسألة الأصالة و الهوية في كتابي الصرصار لراوي حاج، و الطريق من دمشق لروبين ياسين قصاب من منظور وجودي. كما أنها تحلل ازمة الهوية و الصراعات التي تنتاب المهاجرين العرب في كندا والمملكة المتحدة، بالإعتماد على فلسفات جان بول سارتر و سورين كيركيغاد. يوفر مفهوم سارتر للوجود سابق للماهية، سوء الطوية و الانعزال الاجتماعي، مع مفهوم القلق لكيركريغاد، إطارا لتحليل الشخصيات و صراعهم في البحث عن ذواتهم الحقيقية. و من خلال تحليل دقيق للروايتين، هذه الدراسة تظهر دور التهميش و الاغتراب في أزمة الهوية و ضياع الأصالة التي يعاني منها المهاجرون العرب. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإنها تقدم رؤى حول التحديات التي يواجهها المهاجرون العرب في العالم الغربي وكيف ترتبط صراعاتهم بأسئلة وجودية أكبر حول طبيعة الهوية البشرية والوجود.

كلمات مفتاحية : المهاجرون، الجالية، الغرب، الهوية، الاصالة، الوجودية.