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Representations of Death in Rawi Hage's *Beirut Hellfire Society*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the representations of death in Beirut Hellfire Society, a novel written by the Lebanese author, Rawi Hage, and published in 2018. The novel indulges in immoral and varied casts like the de-romanticizing subjects in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian which help illustrate the realities of life during wartime. All the characters portrayed in Beirut Hellfire Society are colorful and complicated vignettes. They span the four seasons following the death of Pavlov's father, who is killed in a bomb explosion when he is in the middle of digging a grave. In this novel, Hage portrays the dilemma that people faced during the Lebanese civil war and the meaninglessness of death. He deliberately presents a striking description of death that overflows in the city of Beirut throughout the civil war and links it to a myriad of aspects associated to it; mourning, burials, funeral dancing, lunacy, a sense of humor and jokes regarding death, and above all, cremation, to personify the abundant death and destruction that pervaded Beirut on that period of Lebanon's history with its utmost horrible and devastating face. Pavlov, a twenty years old undertaker, and his father are extraordinary characters and members of the "Hellfire Society," a secretive organization of infidels, hedonists, idolaters, in which the members cremate people at their own request. Hellfire Society is a mysterious, rebellious and anti-religious sect that arranges secret burial for those who have been denied it because the deceased was a homosexual, an atheist, and an outcast or abandoned by their family, church and state. With death front and centre, Rawi Hage's Beirut Hellfire Society is a treatise on living with war. In short, it is a novel that practically defines iconoclasm and registers the horrible, prevalent, and immeasurable shocking death that ensues as a real consequence of war and its atrocities.

1. Introduction

"Cry woe, destruction, ruin, and decay;
The worst is death, and death will have his day."
- William Shakespeare, Richard II, Act III, Sc. II

Rawi Hage is a Lebanese-Canadian, born in Achrafiye, Beirut, in 1964. Half of his teenage years, he experienced the Lebanese Civil War. When he was 18, he left Beirut in 1982 and migrated to Montreal, Canada, where he still lives. His fictions have

been set in Canada and Lebanon. Published in 2006, *De Niro's Game* is his first novel, which won the IMPAC International Dublin Literary Award. His second and third novels, *Cockroach* (2008) and *Carnival* (2012) were also shortlisted for many literary awards. *Beirut Hellfire Society* was published in 2018, and was named as a longlisted nominee for the Giller Prize and a shortlisted finalist for both the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Governor General's Award for English-language fiction.

Commenting on his novel and the concerns he had as motifs for writing it, Hage (2019) says: "Death is such a risky subject to tackle in a novel. It's been done before, of course, but literature and death are two themes that are connected." Hage also says: "I got to a certain age when I began losing close people around me like family and friends. The book started as a eulogy — that led me to explore subjects like mourning and death burials. And that led me back to Beirut during the civil war".[2] In the midst of bombings and chaos, Hage presents a vivid description to illustrate the horrors of war; a description similar to Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, in which he provides a real portrait of the war and its aftermath in Baghdad through the events of everyday life. Both novels portray the stark reality of war and the consequences on the civilians. *Beirut Hellfire Society* depicts the city of Beirut during the civil war period in Lebanon and unfolds the story based on the character of Pavlov, a 20-years-old undertaker, and his unexpected experiences with a secret society that gives proper burials for the secluded dead. Part of the Hellfire Society mission is to arrange secret burials for the outcasts of Lebanon, who are disclaimed or rejected for reasons such as being atheists or homosexuals. As Hany Abdelfattah (2012) states, Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* also deals with Lebanon's civil war.[3] The only difference it has from *Beirut Hellfire Society* is that it does not portray cremation and has the element of revenge. These novels depict the war torn society, and they tackle what it feels like to live through war facing death and what it means to feel alive.

2. Literature Review

This research deals with how Rawi Hage represents death in his novel *Beirut Hellfire Society*. There are many studies that deal with Hage's other novels, but few deal with his last novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society.*

One major book on Hage's novels is *Beirut to Carnival City: Reading Rawi Hage*, edited by Krzysztof Majer and published in 2019. The book includes a number of critical essays on Hage's works. These essays aim to give an account for Hage's fiction in the context of Lebanese diasporic writing, as well as trans-geographical literature. They also hint at his detachment from the realist paradigm. Hage's fiction is illustrated by the diversity of thematic concerns and critical approaches to it. The book significantly includes an essay entitled "Beirut Hellfire Society: Beyond the Carnevalesque". The author of this essay compares and contrasts *Beirut Hellfire Society* to the other texts written by Hage, showing what renders it different from them. Krzysztof Majer suggests that while *Cockroach* is abundant with water imagery and *Carnival* with the metaphors of levity and flight, *Beirut Hellfire Society* is controlled by the element of fire, as its title suggests. However, what is in the center of the novel is not the fire of explosions, but that of burnings in funerals, which are carried out for forbidden reasons; not adherent to the religious systems. "The novel thus becomes, among other things, a meditation on fire's destructive yet purificatory potential, and on its connection, through smoke, to air, already linked in *Carnival* with notions of freedom and unrestricted movement" (Majer, 2019, p. 254).

Another source related to this paper is an article entitled "Apocalyptic Narrative Recalls and the Human: Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game"*. In this article, Najat Rahman (2009) elaborates on what she calls discourses of 'security' that have been closely linked to power. Such discourses have often taken the form of an apocalyptic vision. In the case of Rawi Hage's novel, *De Niro's Game*, the novel presents visions of history in which the human quest for freedom and relation opens to a beginning and a future. Similar to other diaspora authors who immigrated to North America from Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, Hage invokes the past and its memories of losses and war traumas. Hage forms a new language for Arabic literature at a time when mass relocations, immigrations and emigration around the world are redefining national boundaries and national identity (p.7).

[2]**.** Rawi Hage. (May 16, 2019). Episode of the CBC Books' video series Why I Write.

Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/books/rawi-hage-on-the-reasons-writing-is-a-form-of- personal-freedom-1.5170478> (accessed April 9, 2020).

[3]. Hany Ali Abdelfattah. (2012). National Trauma and the 'Uncanny' in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game. CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 14*(1), 1-7.

In an article entitled "Commemorating Violence as Therapy for Trauma in the post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese Novel", Pamela Layoun (2015) deals with how Anglophone Arab Lebanese writers focus in their writings on the experience of Lebanon's civil war and its consequences including trauma, in particular. These writers include Rabih Alameddine, Dimitri Nasrallah, and Rawi Hage. Such authors "published their works independently using writing techniques such as narrative interruption and fragmentation to reflect the chaotic and violent world of the Lebanese Civil War, a theme that constitutes a common denominator in all their novels, and expose language's limitations of expressing trauma. The cited authors were inspired by their own experiences of the Civil War to create characters who struggle to express and come to terms with their personal traumas" (p. 170). However, Layoun's main concern in her article is to focus on a less acknowledged literary technique that thrived at the turn of the twentieth century. These Anglophone writers express themselves with the language of their host country, presenting topics and concerns that appeal to audiences inside and outside Lebanon. Thus, they emphasize the idea that the new generation does not forget the history of their country, but that the audience in the host country would understand it as they would like to recount it through their protagonists.

One more source related to this paper is an article entitled "Marking Territory: Rawi Hage's Novels and the Challenge to Postcolonial Ethics', written by Mark Libin (2013). Libin suggests that "what is significant about Hage's fiction- specially *De Niro's Game* and his second novel, *Cockroach* – is the way in which its narratives challenge conventional representations of postcolonial trauma and expose the imbalances in the standard models of cross cultural ethics. In Post War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction, Hage's novels fall into a genre that is markedly diasporic, insofar as its subjects have no firm foundation in either the home country or the new host country, in the past or in the present, upon which to build a stable identity." Libin asserts the fact that Hage's narratives use the trauma of the Lebanese Civil war to trouble, rather than confirm, the mainstream (Libin, 2013, p. 11).

In "Cultural Hybridity, Trauma and Memory in Diasporic Anglophone Lebanese Fiction", Syrine Hout (2012) proposes that western readers sense an analytic empathy, a superiority bred in safety and luxury. Certainly*, De Niro's Game* initially presents itself as an explicit attempt to represent the trauma of war- particularly the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians in Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Beirut. It can be seen in its presentation of the two young men from Beirut: Bassam who eagers to escape to the West while his best friend George becomes drawn to Phalangist militia in a way that eventually destroys him. For critics such as Syrine Hout, the conclusion of *Cockroach* offers a neat catharsis and denouement to the traumatic narrative that could be said to begin in *De Niro's Game* and culminates in *Cockroach*. Hout concludes her article by pointing out that Anglophone Lebanese war fiction is transnational literature that is able to "commemorate its recent history of war, even if their primary by-product has been and continues to be expatriation" (Hout, 2012, p. 202).

Yousef Awad (2016), in his essay "Bringing Lebanon's Civil war Home to Anglophone literature: Alameddine's Appropriation of Shakespeare's Tragedies", suggests that similar horrific elements of Lebanon's fifteen years of civil war can be found in the works of the Arab American novelist Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine* (2000) and *An Unnecessary woman* (2013) which valorize the novelist's contrapuntal vision and demonstrate how Arab writers in Diaspora, writing in English for an international readership, strategically draw on Western canonical texts to represent the experiences of Arab characters. Awad argues that both novels of Rabih Alameddine provide the protagonists a platform from which to recount the otherwise inexpressible fears, apprehensions and anxieties they have experienced as a consequence of the conflict.

In an interview Amanda Ghazale Aziz (2018), Rawi Hage, the author of *Beirut Hellfire Society,* says that when one experiences a certain trauma, the only way to see the narrative clearly is through images. He says when he recalls the war he recalls it in images, not verbally or by text, but by fragmented images in different sizes that can be interpreted or projected on or be used as a memory to recall events. When asked about the protagonist Pavlov's obsession with Iliad in *Beirut Hellfire Society*, Rawi Hage says that although he has read the Iliad many times, he likes the multiplicity of the Greek gods and goddesses but does not want to idealize them.

The main source of this paper is Rawi Hage's novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018), which narrates the story of Pavlov, the son of a local undertaker, whom we meet as readers on a ravaged street overlooking a cemetery in a Christian enclave in war-torn 1970s Beirut. When his father dies suddenly, a member of the mysterious Hellfire Society, which is an anti-religious organization that arranges secret burial for outcasts denied last rituals due to their religion or sexuality. Pavlov consents to take on his father's work for the society, and over the course of the novel becomes a chronicler of the tormented and worn community he lives in during the epoch of Lebanon's civil war. Thus, in his novel, Hage explores the idea of what can be done

in front of particular changes and overwhelming death. The answer comes in the novel as a deep meditation on what it really means to live through war.

Accordingly, as most literature related to Hage and his novels focusses on texts other than *Beirut Hellfire Society*, this research paper comes to fill the gap in literature pertinent to this particular novel. It is hoped that this research paper will enrich the field of literary criticism on Hage's novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society*, and add new dimensions to studies about it, especially with the fact that it deals with an issue that comes at the core of the novel; death and aspects that revolve around it, which has not been dealt with enough in previous literature.

3. Research methodology

This research uses the qualitative descriptive method to achieve its objective; exploring the representations of death in Rawi Hage's novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society*. Such a method is adequate as the results are introduced through the discussion in a descriptive manner. Data in this research is collected from various sources, consisting of primary and secondary references. The primary source of this research is the text of Rawi Hage's novel *Beirut Hellfire Society*. Secondary sources are books, journals, articles, interviews and some internet websites. The research starts by laying down the theoretical framework related to its main subject. For this purpose, it makes reference to different sources related to the topic. Then, it points out and introduces main dimensions related to the core topic of the paper; including the issue of death, cremation, lunacy and funeral dancing. After that, the paper scrutinizes the primary text, *Beirut Hellfire Society*, analyzing and discussing most aspects and representations of death in it. The research ends by giving concluding remarks on how Hage represents death in his novel and implications on this.

4. Discussion

4. 1. The Issue of Death

Literature provides us with different ways of approaching death and imagining it from different perspectives. Rawi Hage's novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society,* marks his first return to the Lebanese civil war. In this novel, he explores the emotional motley experienced by individuals while encountering death and dying. As a novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society* draws on Hage's antic, many-voiced gifts to make a historical record of war and constant death into a provocative entertainment (Williams, 2019).[4] Death gives way to other themes in this novel, ranging from grief, cremation, to dancing during funeral. Rawi Hage (2019) discusses how he wrote *Beirut Hellfire Society*, which is on the shortlist for the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the shortlist for the Governor General's Literary Prize for fiction. He says:

> It started with the death of a friend, and thinking about his family and the perpetual and continuous war in the Middle East. (. . .) It led me to think about the whole burial process. (. . .) This is what triggered this book, this idea of death. You get to a certain age where you are confronted with it in a more quantitative way. A great deal of mourning was also involved in writing this book. Particularly I was remembering people who have passed. But the book isn't about any specific real-life person, rather it's more about the very idea of death.[5]

Thus, we see that among the main motifs Hage had in his mind for writing *Beirut Hellfire Society* is to portray death as one of the most dangerous consequences that eminently took place in Beirut as a result of the civil war that changed the outline of the country during that period of Lebanon's history and massacred the fate of its citizens. The novel can be seen as a story of death and a vivid recording for this horrible scene of war.

The Lebanese civil war was Lebanon's bloodiest conflict. The unprecedented violence of battles such as Sabra and Shatilla and Israeli occupation shocked citizens and international observers alike. Many men died in captivity, hundreds of thousands died of diseases, many lost their lives in the line of duty and many were killed during the war. The human cost of the civil war was beyond anybody's expectations. As Salah D. Hassan (2008) puts it, "Ripped apart by civil war and continual political and military interventions by regional and international powers, Lebanon is an 'unstated state [… that] has no strength and no authority."[6] The largest human catastrophe in Arab history, the Lebanese civil war, forced the young nation to confront death

[4]. John Williams. (Aug. 7, 2019). 'A Bawdy Novel Considers the Tragic Absurdities of Lebanon's Civil War.' The New York Times.
Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/books/review-beirut-hellfire-society-rawi-hage.html> (accessed April 5, 2020).

[5]. Rawi Hage. (May 16, 2019). Episode of the CBC Books' video series Why I Write.
Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/books/rawi-hage-on-the-reasons-writing-is-a-form-of-personal-freedom-1.5170478> (accessed April 9, 2020).

[6] . Qtd. In Yousef Awad. (2016). Bringing Lebanon's Civil War Home to Anglophone Literature: Alameddine's Appropriation of Shakespeare's Tragedies.

and destruction in a way that has not been equaled before or since. Yousef Awad (2016) hints at "the psychological damage that Lebanon's civil war has caused and continues to cause for the Lebanese people." [7] In *Beirut Hellfire Society,* Rawi Hage combines comedy and tragedy and illustrates how death plays a vital part during war and what it entails to be a part and parcel of the war torn society. The novel draws on Hage's antic, many-voiced gifts to make a chronicle of war and unrelenting death.

4. 2. Cremation

One major aspect associated with death in *Beirut Hellfire Society* is cremation, which we find throughout the novel. Cremation is a very old concept and common custom in many parts of the world. It signifies the burning of the human body until its soft parts are destroyed by fire. The skeletal remains and ash residue often become the object of religious rites, one for the body and one for the bones. In classical antiquity, it was a military procedure and thus was associated with battlefield honors. Both cremation and the burial of corpses in funeral rites of cremated remains are described in Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey*, dating from the eighth century B.C. Cremation is not only a recognition of social custom in some cultures but has also been used on battlefields to save the dead from the devastation of the enemy and as an immediate action during plagues, as in the Black Death of the seventeenth century. For some people, the act of cremation illustrates the belief of the Christian concept of "ashes to ashes." In India, cremation and disposal of the bones in the sacred river Ganges is an appropriate vehicle for expressing the transitoriness of bodily life and the eternity of spiritual life.

However, Islamic teachings never promoted such practices and always emphasized the burial of the body. In an essential ritual of the Sunnah of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, the corpse is washed with the purpose to physically cleanse the deceased. This can be seen in the chapter "Acting" in *Beirut Hellfire Society* when the widow asks for body wash for her dead husband according to Muslim rites and to be buried with his face facing Mecca (p. 200).[8] The theological tenet of bodily resurrection through burial is also emphasized in both Orthodox and Catholic Christianity in a cemetery with a splash of some holy water on the grave. Cremation is not authorized by the religious tradition in Beirut. By being cremated, it means to reject the fundamental principle of faith and a challenge to the will of God both in Islam and Christianity. Since Islam and Christianity strictly forbid cremation, the organization in *Beirut Hellfire Society* has to be secretive and participate in cremation. In addition, Pavlov's father follows the rituals of mourning for the dead whom he cremates as much as he buries.

4. 3. Funeral Dancing

Another aspect related to the issue of death and can be seen in *Beirut Hellfire Society* is funeral dancing. This burial ceremony is often performed by the persons akin to the dead upon the aftermath of bereavement and prior to the burial of the corpse in the grave. This 'Dance of Death' is also called The 'Danse Macabre', a concept of allegory during the medieval ages which gained momentum by an epidemic of the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century and the devastation of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between France and England. Throughout history, dance, like other forms of art, is a vehicle to express human fascination and has treated the subject of death continually. Since immemorial time, rituals have surrounded the mystery of death. Funeral processions with music are an example of organized movement which expresses grief. Every culture has their own unique funeral rituals, but they still have some traditions in common, like performing funeral dances. Evidence can be found on the tradition of a funeral dance in Egypt, which probably began in the Nagada II Period, as early as 3500 B.C. and the Kenga people of central Sudan who perform the Dodi or Mutu mourning dances on the day of the burial.[9] Since prehistoric times, funerals featured dancing and music to provide a sense of dignity and respect within the community to the dead. Sue Carter (2018) points out that in *Beirut Hellfire Society,* we find many scenes which depict funeral dancing. One realistic scene from the novel portrays a funeral procession Hage once witnessed where the dead body of an unmarried virgin was dressed in white, and mourners dance and a band plays around the coffin.[10] It is indeed ironic to have a funeral parade as bombs are falling and dangers lurking all around. In the chapter "Dancing," we follow

Critical Survey and Berghahn Books, 28(3), 86-101.

[7]. Ibid.

[8]. Page references from Rawi Hage's novel are given in parentheses in the text, and refer to the following edition: Beirut Hellfire Society. (2018, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.).

[9]. Jenny Goldade. (January 31, 2017). Funeral Dances Among Different Cultures.
Available at: <https://www.frazerconsultants.com/2017/01/funeral-dances-among-different-cultures/> (accessed April 17, 2020).

[10]. Sue Carter. (Fri., Aug. 24, 2018.) Rawi Hage's new book *Beirut Hellfire Society* explores mourning, language, ritual.
Available at: <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2018/08/24/rawi-hages-new-book-beirut-hellfire-society-explores-mourning-language-ritual.html> (accessed April 19, 2020).

Pavlov to a funeral of the Son of the Mechanic, where he joins with his uncles and the group of fighters, his feet tapping to the new repertoire of death tunes played by a hired band (p. 210). In another scene, Pavlov narrates about a hedonistic professor, El-Marquis, whose death wish is to be hung from the ceiling while his guests enjoy grand party and engage in orgy below. The description of death wish above is like a sort of phantasmagoria of suffering and dreams.

4. 4. Death Portrayal in Beirut Hellfire Society

Beirut Hellfire Society begins in 1978, with Pavlov, the son of an undertaker who inherits his father's business. After his father's death, he is nominated as a member in the Hellfire Society group; a secretive, pagan-like sect that admires fire and gives proper burials to those denied and cremates the dead. Even though Lebanon consists of Catholics and Orthodox Christians, the majority of Lebanon is operated and affiliated to Islam. Since Islam strictly forbids cremation, the organization has to be secretive, and in those days it was not a wide-spread practice in Roman Catholicism and Judaism, either. Therefore, the Hellfire Society arranges secret burial for the deceased who may be a homosexual, an atheist, an outcast or abandoned by their family, church or state because society denies giving a proper burial to those who lack belief or have religious or sexual conflicts.

The Lebanese civil war was one of the most devastating conflicts of the late twentieth century and the physical destruction was massive. In De *Niro's Game*, another novel by Hage, the narrator tells that ten thousand bombs had landed in Beirut. Ten thousand symbolizes immensity, multitude, and fullness of quantity. It refers to time; any predetermined time that God chooses. Similarly, in *Beirut Hellfire Society*, Pavlov, over the course of the novel, acts as survivor-chronicler of his torn and fading community, bearing witness to both its enduring rituals and its inevitable decline. As an observer, he is much like the hero in Greek myths who has a sense of justice and understanding to the chaos of the world around him. In an interview with Rawi Hage (2018), Hage says, "The Greeks have influenced that region," and Pavlov's obsession with Greek heroes justifies his character.[11]Pavlov proves to be a compassionate and understanding figure as he sympathizes with the dead who are brought to him to be buried and he does his best to prepare them for burial and cremation. He does not question or reject any case brought to him by the Society; he carries out the preparation, burial or cremation at his highest speed and ability, as their trusted agent or undertaker.

Pavlov is a twenty years old protagonist and the son of an undertaker. After his father's death, he agrees to take up his father's role in the Hellfire Society that offers burials and cremation for fellow dissidents. Hage comments in one of his interviews (2018): "Maybe I just wanted to show how easy it is to construct a religion".[12] *Beirut Hellfire Society* calls into question the paradox of religion. Sometimes people make arrangements in advance for rites and rituals for the cadavers and the dead bodies. Even rituals, as Hage suggests in the novel, may become futile. For instance, in an ironic incident in the novel, we are told that a sheikh and a priest trade prayer over the body of a Muslim who was turned a Christian for three hours. Both of them were pushing for the last word and ensuring that the deceased ends up in the right afterlife, until even the mourners have had enough. Therefore, Hage voices his criticism in *Beirut Hellfire Society* for the chaos of war that brings with it the killing of people and thus ultimately leads to such futility both in death and religious rituals as a consequence.

Pavlov lives alone with his father in a two-storey house above the cemetery road. He has become the custodian of the window of death, the sole observer above the cemetery road (p. 14). Since his birth, for twenty years he has been witnessing the traffic floating caskets passing under his prominent nose. He can recite the priests' chants by heart. The passage of coffins was a ritual in the neighborhood. He observes his father when he washes the dead and sometimes his father mumbles to the cadavers that they are filthy; at the same time, he also utters words of love and of disdain. His father occasionally mentions the mysterious Society that is somehow connected with fire. Pavlov's father chants during a secret ceremony at the Society's crematorium in the hills, "they say ashes to ashes, but we say fire begets fire" (p. 16). Pavlov feels a perverse privilege through the years in watching the mourning daughters, sisters and mothers pass underneath his window. He witnesses women with elegant black dresses carrying white handkerchiefs to wipe their tears during the time of burial. Pavlov watches from his position as a spectator the women's chorus of grief, and this leads him to think about the catastrophe and brutality of life.

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[11]. Amanda Ghazale Aziz. (September 12, 2018). 'What I Fear Most is Homogeneity': An Interview with Rawi Hage.
Available at: <https://hazlitt.net/feature/what-i-fear-most-homogeneity-interview-rawi-hage> (accessed March 10, 2020)

[12]. Carly Rosalie Vandergriendt. (Fall 2018). Profane Rituals, Montreal Review of Books.
Available at: <https://mtlreviewofbooks.ca/reviews/beirut-hellfire-society/> (accessed April 8, 2020)

Hage's novel portrays the real and horrible consequences of war that cannot be ignored. Fire is *Beirut Hellfire Society'*s rudimentary core, and it is mainly associated with death. Hage introduces the myth of fire in his novel to give a meaning of power to create a symbolic meaning that reinforces social identity. The fire regime tends to strengthen group ties in socio-cultural regime. Through the years, Pavlov has learnt the value of fires and wood. Hindus, unlike the Abrahamic sons of Beirut, burn their dead, as did the ancient Greeks, and it is the duty of the male heir to light the fire (p. 57). The extent to which a group may identify with fire can be inferred from the custom of referring to one's group affiliation. As an undertaker, Pavlov goes against the Abrahamic religion of established faith and is absorbed in the purgative rituals of pagans. El Marquis, when visiting Pavlov, says: "Our nation lives within a culture of shaming and shame, and we decided to challenge it by committing the most daring acts of transgression" (p. 38). He also says that he and the rest of his acquaintances have never believed in the existence of God and that they express in libertine ways. Thus, he and most of the members want to be cremated, not "blessed" by any priest or clergy or traditional religion.

As stated earlier, Hage links the portrayal of death in the novel to the ritual of dancing. "It is the custom in Lebanon", Hage (2018) says in article about his novel, "to dance at the funerals of those who have died before they could marry or have children, to symbolize the celebrations they will never have".[13] This kind of custom is still in vogue among the ancient Israelites and exists till today. A documentation presented by Ruth Eshel (2000) gives clear evidence of funeral dancing by the Ethiopian immigrants Jews in Nazareth in 1992.[14] El Marquis, an egotistical hedonist, reminds Pavlov that the body should be simultaneously celebrated (p. 32) and after his death, the Hellfire Society members should enjoy lavish food, drinks, and dance freely and wildly (p. 47). Standing in the kitchen, Pavlov sometimes hears the drumbeat of the brass band, the band that is played for the dead youth and he feels the urge to shift his hips and stretch his back before padding out to the balcony. Funeral practices around the globe are deeply ingrained in culture and reflect a wide spread of beliefs and values in varied traditions. Cultural anthropologist Kelli Swazey shares 'The New Orleans Jazz Funeral,' which is one of the prototypical images of New Orleans, Louisiana: the boisterous, jazz-tinged funeral procession is led by a marching band. Cathartic dancing is generally a part of the event, to commemorate the life of the deceased.[15] In *Beirut Hellfire Society* Pavlov suddenly thinks, "What an absurd idea to dance with wooden boxes carrying a dead person inside! What a parade, a charade, a mockery of the fine art of dancing! (…) On the day of Tariq the fighter's burial, mourners danced and wept, and the deceased's dog trailed the pack of men to the cemetery" (p. 57, 60). Pavlov reasons that weddings and burials exist side by side.

Hage believes that rituals, religious or not, are a bonding mechanism. Individual differences in religiousness can be partly explained as a cultural adaptation of two basic personality traits, agreeableness and conscientiousness, says Vassilis Saroglu (2010), a professor of Psychology, University of Belgium.[16] Pavlov, the protagonist in *Beirut Hellfire Society*, has witnessed burials all his life and realizes that ceremonies that pass under his window have no meanings. He has been a spectator to life's cruelest acts of extinction (p. 72). People from all sorts of religion and background come to Pavlov; from idolaters, hedonists to infidels, all asking offerings of burials and cremations. Jean Yacoub, a father of a homosexual son who could not deal with the idea of sodomy and profanity of his son before, now mourns for the loss of his son who is shot like his father. Pavlov is asked to perform prayers and cremate Jean Yacoub's homosexual son against the dictates of the clergy. Yacoub also asks Pavlov to spread the ashes in the valley up in the mountains. Another character is a prostitute named Najda, who murders a friend's murderer in vengeance. El Marquis is another character, a former professor of French whose "unorthodox' teaching consciously sought to corrupt the youth, comes to Pavlov seeking an orgy for a funeral. Pavlov nods and accepts in carrying out his Society duties while Hanneh and Manneh, two lipstick and heel wearing male guardians assist him in various logistics and arrangements. Individuals who participate in collective ritual activities are more likely to cooperate and enhance the social bonds that connect its participants.[17] As Carly Rosalie (2018) mentions, Hage believes that "Pavlov tries to follow

[13]. Rawi Hage, (August 28, 2018). An article on freedom, extinction and his new novel, *Beirut Hellfire Society*, published in The Globe and Mail, a Canadian newspaper.
Available at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/article-montreal-author-rawi-hage-on-freedom-extinction-and-his-new-novel/> (accessed May 1, 2020)

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[17]. Veronika Rybanska. (2020).The Impact of Ritual on Child Cognition: Scientific Studies of Religion: Inquiry and Explanation. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

his own path without getting swept up in violence".[18] In his novel, Hage portrays Pavlov as an understanding character, much like the heroes of Greek myths, as he tries to understand the chaos in the world without bringing the doctrines of religion. His tolerance for the divergent modes of rituals binds people together and makes him an advocate, a good member of the Hellfire Society.

A large number of people went to their graves during the Lebanese civil war, where young fighters were killed and died every day. Hage (2019) writes in the novel's acknowledgements, "This is a book of mourning for the many who witnessed senseless wars, and for those who perished in those wars".[19] Even the epigraph in the beginning of the novel suggests the dreadful tone of death that will pervade the narrative throughout. The civil war in Lebanon has taken a tremendous human toll on the country. People living in the war zones have been killed in their homes, during a burial procession, in markets, and on roadways. They have been killed by bombs, bullets, fire, improvised explosive devices, etc. The result is battered infrastructure and poor health conditions arising from the wars than directly from its violence. In the chapter "Introducing the Lady of the Stairs," Pavlov is standing at his window sipping warm coffee and watching a burial procession when suddenly he hears the whistle of a bomb. Glass shatters and falls on his head. A bomb lands in front of the priest and shreds him into pieces. The body of the priest is decapitated; his shoe is filled with his five toes and an ankle lands on Pavlov's balcony. A woman loses her entire family and goes mad. Howling and incoherent screams and shouts fill the dusty road in vertical and horizontal trajectories (p. 72). Pavlov stands in the middle of a canvas of fragmented bodies arranged in a careful geometrical shape with rectangular coffin at the centre, a coffin splits in half. In the middle of the scene, Pavlov sees a pair of shoes blown off, exposing the cadavers' toes. In short, the blown off shoes is similar to 'The Falling Man' of 9/11, a picture of a falling man perfectly bisecting the iconic towers as he darts towards the earth like an arrow. The photo taken by Richard Drew of the falling man and the collapsing buildings in the moments after the September 11, 2011 attacks is almost similar to the bloody descriptions Rawi Hage offers in *Beirut Hellfire Society*. "The Costs of War" (2010) records the toll that war takes on civilians and their livelihoods, including the lasting effects of death and injury on survivors and their families. [20] Likewise, in *Beirut Hellfire Society*, Pavlov thinks it is the end of *Homo erectus*, the complete final destruction of the world (p.72). This is apocalypse that summarizes the absurdity of the world.

Apocalypse illustrates the horror, the absurdity, and the futility of war, but most importantly, it portrays war's damaging psychological effects. Najat Rahman (2009) writes: "In biblical renditions of apocalyptic violence, humans are not able to intervene. In apocalypse visions, humanity itself is at stake. Apocalypse is revealed and happens to humans; the traditional apocalyptic vision announces an end to humanity, proclaiming inhuman violence as inescapable and implicitly legitimate".[21] In Hage's fiction, narrative recalls are apocalyptic, and apocalyptic discourses that speak of endings and destruction ultimately signal historical trauma. It is a big loss and a catastrophe as Rawi Hage describes a bombing scene in the novel: "The unholy smell of power, metal and flesh joined that of holy incense around the coffin. Stray shoes were scattered across the ground. Some mourners died, with their faces towards the earth while others faced the clouds, the blue of the sky reflected in their eyes, two bright dots in a sea of red" (p. 73). Another description of catastrophe is found when the narrator in *Beirut Hellfire Society* says: "The building had been bombed, its remaining walls were pitted with bullets holes. It smelled of moist cement, and the stairs were littered with broken glass and chunks of concrete. Human feces dotted the hallway" (p. 160). It seems people were using the hallway as an open latrine during the human catastrophe of war.

Hence, *Beirut Hellfire Society* has recurring themes of death throughout. Accidents and gunshots were common in the presence of war. Pavlov witnesses all sorts of deaths and killings that come under his own balcony. He knows about "a stray bullet from a wedding celebration that had landed in someone's head; traffic disputes that had resulted in death; villagers mistaken for birds and killed by urban hunters; and other inexplicable murders of passion, greed, machismo, idiocy, sexual bravado, domestic violence . . . in addition to heart attacks and old age and death multiplied a thousandfold" (p. 81). Rawi

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Hage's narrative in the novel crisscrosses the land of Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War and reveals the human stories behind violence, be it accidents or deliberate killings.

Lunacy is also ascribed as a result of death in the novel. After the death of Pavlov's grandmother who is buried across Pavlov's window of his home, Pavlov's mother Josephine becomes insane. Pavlov would often catch his mother talking to the pink stone and smoking, making an offering of cigarettes. She would scream and complain of the dead bodies scent on her husband's clothing, on his breath and his hands that touched the dead. His mother would say: "Look, the dead are coming back towards us" (p. 121). Over time, Josephine accepts the dead and surrounds her family with decorative objects. On her deathbed, she asked Pavlov to bury her at night in her favorite coffin that she picked, so that no one would attend the funeral but the priest, their children and the Virgin Mary.

Early in September, Souad, who is also called Bovary by El-Marquis, tells Pavlov she does not want to be buried next to her dead husband. She requests Pavlov saying, "After my children bury me with my husband, I want you to steal my body- exhume it. And I want you to bury me with my lover" (p. 141). In another scene during the fall in September, Pavlov wakes up by gun battles and bombs falling. He hears sirens and speeds through the neighborhood. Tales of combats death, sniper deaths, deaths by misadventure, old age, accidents, car crashes, massacres, drowning, collapsing houses, stillbirth, hunger, gluttony, execution, and slaughter- all converge under his balcony. Next day, he overhears about the death of a neighbor, Madame Fiora. She has been shot five times by her drunken husband, but even though she is the victim of his crime, the Church refuses to bury her in the cemetery because she was a communist and an atheist (p. 144). Finally, Pavlov informs Madame Fiora's son that her cremation will be done with utmost discretion by him if the sons keep the location of the crematorium a secret because of the threat of violence and retaliation from an underground society of dangerous people. Pavlov acquires Madame Fiora's body from the hospital morgue and drives to the house in the mountains with the two brothers on deathmobile. Upon arriving, Pavlov opens the furnace door and slides the body (p. 150). Pavlov himself is targeted by a Christian militiaman, and a life defined by death soon wears on him. He hears the voice of his dog talking to him, and he is increasingly entangled in the lives of his extended family members. Hence, different forms of death fundamentally constitute one of the most common themes in this novel.

Likewise, the last part of the novel, given the heading "Winter" by Hage, overflows with the theme of death and its descriptions. The chapter entitled "Dancing" opens with Pavlov waking up one day, standing after a while by his parent's graves and promising that he will do burn them one day and turn them into ashes. "Soon, he said to his father, I'll exhume your body and light you a magnificent fire. (…) I will liberate you from the heaviness of mud and burn you to ashes" (p. 209). Then, we are given the scene of the "funeral-wedding" of Pavlov's cousin, Salwa, to the dead Son of Mechanic. Pavlov joins the participants in the funeral, "his feet tapping to the new repertoire of death tunes," and "danced, carrying the coffin on his shoulder, grabbing a handle with one hand and waving his other hand in the air, stomping and smiling, laughing and jumping in the sunlight" (p. 210). This is an unblemished scene that illustrates the connection of death portrayal in *Beirut Hellfire Society* to the ritual of dancing.

More significantly, in this chapter we are given the details of Jean Yacoub's killing by Assaf's men, as he was unsuccessfully trying to shoot Assaf, avenging the death of his dear son. He was terribly shot until "the blood that escaped his body gathered on the cement and formed a small pool, then gained momentum and ran down the edge to where the sidewalk and the asphalt met" (p. 211). Upon his death, Pavlov carries out the request presented to him by Jean Yacoub earlier to burn him and sprinkle his ashes near those of his dead son.

Another chapter, entitled "Family Outing," narrates Pavlov's familial visit to his married sister in the village of Kafroumeh. Pavlov wants to see his sister and his niece, to whom he is affectionate and loving as an uncle. However, this familial visit turns into a bitter and fearful experience for Pavlov and the whole family of his sister, as they hear a "large explosion" the following morning and an "attack on the village" takes place (p. 217). Overwhelmed by fear and feelings of sadness, the family runs quickly and stays in a cave under the house to protect themselves from the shooting and bombing. After a short while, Pavlov joins them in the underground basement where they spend time very frightened and unable to figure what was going on and why. Joseph and Pavlov dare to go outside the cave, once to bring food and drinks from the house, and once to investigate what was occurring, until they know that two Christian factions were fighting each other and their fighting ground was the village. The narrator describes their status: "Soon, the battle escalated. Bombs fell with an unprecedented frequency, and all noise, songs, voices, murmurs and complaints were subdued, crushed by the sound. The family crouched in silence,

oblivious to the dampness of the walls. In their helplessness, they assumed an instinctive frozen posture, the still form of rabbits in the presence of a predator." (p. 220). Such a situation is too dreadful for Pavlov and his sister's family, fearing the bombs and explosions and frightened to die at any moment. It is like death in life for them.

The condition gets worse by the entrance to the cave of a fighter who dies in front of Pavlov and the family. Hage describes the serenity of the scene: "Pavlov laid him flat on the ground. Now the fighter looked more dignified. The dead, when laid horizontally beneath whatever happens to be above, can face anything, he thought. A panorama of high-rises, chandeliers, high or low ceilings, solemn faces-rain and sometimes clouds, or blue skies if they were fortunate enough" (p. 221). Once again, the corpse of this fighter is taken by Pavlov and his brother-in-law, Joseph, to be burnt, but this time not in the fire house. Rather, he is burnt in the field around with hay, twigs and broken branches. The chapter ends with Pavlov's sense of humor regarding death, which is found elsewhere many times in the novel. He answers his niece's question where the dead go by telling her that they go to Hades, where Pluto is and "he likes to live in the underworld" (p. 225). Then, he and his niece and the dog join their arms to dance in the family house over the cemetery with the music played for the dead.

The description of death continues as Hage points to the unremitting overflow of bombs and its killing of people and destructing of their houses and possessions. "Bombs carpeted the roofs, spliced little streets, landed on coiffed heads and leather-clad feet, spilled human entrails and turned their bodies into butcher's meat-chuck steak, rib, lower sirloin, flank, shoulders" (p. 226). This is a hilarious account of the effect of bombs on the lives of people. Meantime, it is bitter and painful in how the lives of these civilians are destructed by bombs that turned them to bits and pieces.

The scene is enhanced in a more jovial way on the disturbance of the dead corpses in the cemetery and their scattering by falling bombs. The narrator says: "Skeletons, like playful dolphins, flew out of the earth and pirouetted through the air to land again in the mud. A buried grocer's bones were resurrected and piled in the manner of a vegetable display. A real estate agent's body flew in the air and landed in the next lot of land" (p. 227). It had a big effect that it was even dreadful to the dead, as the narrator says, "The names of the deceased were misspelled on bombed headstones, and statues of virgins were riddled with holes and lost their reputations for Immaculate Conception. The dead screamed in terror, from the end of the street came a loud hyena laugh, and in Pavlov's rooms the memory of Rex the dog's howl echoed" (p. 227). The bombing makes huge chaos on the dead graves that makes Pavlov go with his uncles to recollect the remains of the dead and return them underground!

Hage even makes a reference to classical literature on the theme of death as he provides an account of Pavlov's rage when he goes to his uncles' house, scorning them for beating his cousin, Salwa, since she gets pregnant: "Death to those who dare lay their hands on a goddess's face. Death to those who turn bodies black and blue before death. Death will come to those who dwell the abode of death. Death to those who refuse to set fire to the dead. Death to the hands that beat the living dead" (p. 231). In addition, jokes on death are found throughout the novel. One example is when Faddoul says to Pavlov: "You undertakers, you must have special powers, being so close to death. Have you ever seen the devil? … Maybe you've seen a jinn crossing from the other side into our cemeteries? It's a Christian cemetery, after all-or whatever remains of land in this region for these leftover Nassarah" (p. 234). In *Beirut Hellfire Society* Hage has a dual approach towards death that blends serious description for it with sarcastic remarks.

This part of the novel also provides us with details of how Pavlov prepares El-Marquis cadaver for burial. Pavlov strictly follows El-Marquis's request for the procedures of his burial and cremation, agreed upon earlier between Pavlov and El-Marquis himself. As Pavlov arrives to the luxurious residence of El-Marquis, he finds him laid in an expensive bathtub in which "the paws were cast in gold." The bathroom is filled with the scent of lavender, and the study room where El-Marquis body is then taken by Hannah and Mannah to be prepared for the burial ceremony is also "filled with lilacs-El-Marquis favorite flower" (p. 243-244). Even the casket brought to put El-Marquis corpse in replicates the luxurious, libertine existence he went through, both dead and alive. The narrator describes it: "In the background, against the wall, was El-Marquis' imported Italian casket-a vibrant fucsia with silver and gold handles. The edges of the coffin were covered with seashells. The long pole that passed through three handles on each side was shaped like a penis. The front of the casket was dotted with pink mosaic stones-aloud, colorful mosaic that from a distance revealed the shape of a vagina" (p. 244). A life that has overflown with deviations and misdeeds for El-Marquis is ultimately finalized by bizarre and excessive rituals of a death ceremony and burial.

The ceremony takes place in El-Marquis's villa, with incredible, libertine, filthy scenes and sinful acts of an orgy that continued while El-Marquis's dead body was hanged up the salon beneath "a large Christmas tree decorated with plastic penises and porcelain vaginas" (p. 246). Even when Pavlov takes some moments of escape out of this libertine scene and sits to smoke a cigarette in a nearby cliff close to the villa of El-Marquis, he contemplates the probability of death as a consequence of committing suicide from that cliff. Pavlov wonders, "But still, the question is: Do those who jump believe they are about to experience another consciousness, another self, or do they hope for absolute annihilation? The act of suicide must be, ultimately, the only path to emancipation, he argued" (p. 249).

Ultimately, El-Marquis's body is taken by Pavlov with the assistance of Hannah and Mannah through Pavlov's deathmobile to the cremation house in the mountains. He is put in the furnace for three hours, and "when Pavlov gathered the ashes, he reassured them that the society would carry out El-Marquis last wishes" to give his ashes to his former student, Florence, whose life he has corrupted and spoilt (p. 254). When Pavlov visits Florence's apartment, he gives her the bag containing the ashes of El-Marquise, which she takes while distancing herself as she opens the bag "fearful some particle might have escaped and carried itself into her pockets or beneath her butterfly collar" (p. 256). We are also told that she "was eying the remains of El-Marquis with disdain," until she takes the bag to the bathroom while Pavlov is standing, closes the door, and "poured it all down the toilet." Bursting into tears, she comments saying: "He made me do things, disgusting things… Here you can keep your bag…That's what monsters like him deserve" (p. 256). This abhorrent reception of Florence for the news of El-Marquis's death and how she awfully disposes his body ashes reinforces the terrible aspect of this man's story, in life and death.

When Pavlov returns home at that night, he stands at his balcony and shouts addressing the dead who are buried in front of him: "No one is important, none of you! There you all are, lying beneath the dirt, competing with one another, hoping to be remembered. Fools! He yelled, and the dog barked" (p. 256). As if he is implicitly sending a message to suggest the neglect and absurdity of the life the dead have lived throughout their past life, as they lie alone neglected and abandoned underground, which is epitomized already by the absurd, aimless life of El-Marquis. It is a universal truth about death and life which is implied by Hage in this novel.

The part of *Beirut Hellfire Society* entitled 'Winter' moves on with many comments and scenes on death and its implications. The Bohemian is a character who contemplates with Pavlov the differentiation between what it really means in his viewpoint to be a spectator and what it means to be an actor, drawing on the tenuous relationship that existed between his mother and father, before their death. According to the Bohemian, his father is a spectacle as he always preferred just to watch the others, mainly his wife, while they took action and assess them. On the other hand, the Bohemian's mother was an actor and not passive like the father. However, the Bohemian's father suddenly stops being a spectacle and chooses to become an actor and kills his wife. The narrator says: "He killed her because she ceased to be as spectacle. Because he refused to turn himself into an actor. . . . She had brought corporal pain to the spectator, to one of the mob, and now he, as the spectator, had turned into a sacrificial subject, against all rules of the game. She became death, his own death. . . . .So, yes. Death-and what better way to get rid of death than death itself, don't you agree, Pavlov?" (p. 262). This shows that death even becomes an end for the Bohemian's father to change his position towards life and to become real, as he comes to aspire.

This 'theory' of actor and spectator, devised by the Bohemian on his parents' attitude in life, is similarly taken further by their son, the Bohemian. It is adopted by him as he tries to get rid of being a spectacle through having a role in actual criterion, taking photos of things, so as in his opinion, he will not stay "neutral;" rather, he will be "cutting the flow of the spectacle into something still. Into fragments. … I shoot to abolish all beginnings and endings. … I chose the medium that is the most disruptive to being a spectator. I render everything into slices of space and time" (p. 262). However, this theory leads the Bohemian further to step into action and become a fighter. He joins the militia, and after some training, he is prepared to take a turn in shooting the enemy. But he is shot on his eye and falls dead. Hence, like his father, death becomes a desire and a consequence for the Bohemian.

Most importantly and sadly, *Beirut Hellfire Society* closes with the burning of Pavlov's uncle's house, and soon after this with his own killing and death. "His cousin had poured gasoline in every room, on every floor. In the funeral home, she had saturated the wood and coffins and the chemicals used for the bodies" (p. 268). It is an awful scene of decay in which the house continues to burn while the bombs "continued to fall" (p. 268). After a while, Pavlov's dog, Barbus, grows older and dies. Pavlov goes to carry out his earlier promise to his parents to be burnt and turned to ashes. He takes the remains of his

father's corpse from the cemetery together with Barbus's corpse. Unfortunately, he is followed by Faddoul's brothers who come to avenge the killing of their brother. Escaping through his deathmobile, Pavlov succeeds in arriving before them to the cremation house and puts his father's remains quickly in the oven. He lights the oven to let his father burn and keeps shooting from the rifle at Faddoul's brothers to prevent them from coming to the house as his father burns for three hours.

However, Pavlov is finally shot at his heart by the brothers of Faddoul, and as he gets wounded, he staggers back to the cremation room with Barbus in his hand, and pulls the hose and gives it fire. After that, the whole house turns into fire and Pavlov is burnt within it. Ironically, Pavlov is burnt in the same way he used to burn the corpses of the dead inside the cremation house; as if his own belief and wish to honour the dead cadavers by cremation is realized to him in the same place, though unintentionally. Then, we are told of Hanneh and Mannah's discovery for a funeral home that will take on the mission of the society to burn the dead. The sign of the funeral home reads: "Big Mustafa's establishment: Burial night or day. Our light forever burns" (p. 272). In this way, the function of Hellfire Society is preserved and the series of cremation is carried on. By this, Hage seems to suggest that death continues its way in the city and has its own patronizers who take care of it without a stop.

With this gloomy scene of fire setting to the house and spreading to the whole valley, this narrative of death, mourning, burial and cremation desolately ends. Nonetheless, it is supplemented with an epilogue which gives an account for the removal of the cemetery where Pavlov and his father and uncles used to bury the dead. A mosque and a road took place instead. Therefore, the sight that held death and its ceremonies for a long time no more exists at the end. Then, we see Pavlov's sister, Nathalie, lying to die. While she is on her deathbed, she is misleaded by one of the two nuns who come to her and say that her brother "had set the cremation house alight and blown himself up" (p. 276). They assure her that he was a heathen and he deserved his hellfire. Finally, Nathalie dies while the last word she utters is "fire." It is a symbolic word that summarizes the overwhelming atmosphere in the novel as a consequence of the civil war that took place throughout Beirut city all over the time and the violence and destruction that ensued. Shooting, bombing, killing and fire spread everywhere and took almost all people's lives and possessions. It also embodies the dominant concern of the Hellfire Society to ensure that the secluded members of the city are cremated and turned to ashes.

5. Conclusion

Death is the horrible side of a double-edged sword: either survive or perish. The unprecedented violence of battles and killings bring experienced bloodshed and deaths. *Beirut Hellfire Society* broadly epitomizes the appalling number of casualties in Beirut due to the civil war that controlled the scene in Lebanon for a considerable era in the country's history. Suffice to say that death's depiction in this literary text is not exaggerated, but Rawi Hage's implementation of it in the novel is quite measured and captured in an effective essence. Death, bombs, and ceasefires pervade the novel, which helps illustrate the realities of life during wartime. In *Beirut Hellfire Society*, Hage associates death in abundance with several dimensions including mourning, burial, funeral dancing, lunacy, cremation, as well as a sense of humor and jokes regarding death. The varied entanglements of characters that are portrayed in the novel depict the unpredictability of government, faith, and ethics, especially in the face of death. By combining comedy and tragedy, Rawi Hage has managed to write something heartfelt, beautiful, and moving in *Beirut Hellfire Society*, and one feels as if it echoes a pictorial representation of wartime Beirut. No doubt, in this novel Hage succeeds in depicting how the Lebanese civil war resulted in unrelenting death and destruction in a manner that has not been equaled before or sense.

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