



Surviving the void: Identity threats and the plague of violence in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*

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Abstract

In the postcolonial era, many third-world countries, instead of enjoying prosperity, were driven into long-term civil wars and political unrest. Among the Arab countries which were plagued by a prolonged social conflict is Lebanon where the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) lasted nearly 15 years, devastating the social fabric of the country. Among the novelists who capture this critical period in the history of Lebanon is the Lebanese-Canadian author Rawi Hage. Characterized by his nihilist and apocalyptic tone, Rawi Hage portrays, in his *De Niro's Game* (2006), the chaos of war and its impact on personal and national identities. Through the lens of Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process theory, a social psychological framework, this paper aims to explore the different identity threats that the protagonists face during the chaos of violence, the correlation between public and private spheres and the versatile collection of coping strategies they adopt during wartime.

Keywords: civil war, identity process theory, identity threats, violence, coping strategies, *De Niro's Game*.

التيه وسط الفراغ: تهديدات الهوية وآفة العنف في رواية لعبة دينيرو لراوي حاج

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ملخص

في حقبة ما بعد الاستعمار، لم تنعم العديد من دول العالم الثالث بالازدهار المنشود، بل انجرفت إلى حروب أهلية طويلة الأمد واضطرابات سياسية مزمنة. ومن بين الدول العربية التي ابتليت بصراع اجتماعي ممتد تبرز لبنان، حيث استمرت الحرب الأهلية اللبنانية بين عامي 1975 و1990 لما يقارب خمسة عشر عامًا، مخلقة دمارًا واسعًا في النسيج الاجتماعي للبلاد. ومن بين الروائيين الذين وثّقوا هذه المرحلة الحرجة في تاريخ لبنان يأتي الكاتب اللبناني الكندي راوي حاج، الذي يتميز أسلوبه بنبرة عبثية

وكرائية. ففي رواية لعبة دينيرو يصوّر حاج فوضى الحرب وتأثيرها العميق في الهويات الفردية والوطنية. ومن خلال منظور نظرية "تشكيل مسار الهوية" لعالم النفس الاجتماعي غلينيس بريكويل، يسعى هذا البحث إلى استكشاف تهديدات الهوية المختلفة التي يواجهها البطلان في خضم العنف، والعلاقة بين الحياة الخاصة والعامة، فضلاً عن مجموعة استراتيجيات التكيف المتنوعة التي يلجأ إليها في زمن الحرب.

كلمات مفتاحية: الحرب الأهلية، نظرية عملية الهوية، تهديدات الهوية، العنف، استراتيجيات التكيف، لعبة دينيرو

Introduction

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) is considered one of the most protracted social conflicts due to Lebanon's complex sociopolitical history (Azar 41). Among the novelists who capture this critical period is Rawi Hage, a Lebanese-Canadian novelist born in Beirut in 1964. Having witnessed nine years of the deadly civil war before immigrating to the USA in 1984 and then to Canada in 1992, he is traumatized by the Lebanese Civil War and feels the urge to write about it (Arbor). In an interview with Amanda Ghazale Aziz, Hage shows how much he has been haunted by the civil war as he says that in writing *De Niro's Game*, "what concerned me the most was the trauma that I could not escape". Thus, portraying the chaos of war and its impact on the identity formation of individuals, Hage wrote his first novel, *De Niro's Game* (2006), winning one of the most distinguished literary prizes, the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (Hage "imaginative" 343). Therefore, the historical background of the Lebanese Civil War is considered the canvas on which Rawi Hage paints his novel. Characterized by its cynical and nihilistic tone, *De Niro's Game* chronicles the nightmarish experience of surviving everyday random bombs and bullets, shedding light on the friendship story of Bassam and George, nicknamed De Niro, two adolescents brought up amid the chaos of war. At the beginning, they are strongly bonded to each other, sharing everything together. Struggling to find identities for themselves, they have different inclinations: while George takes pleasure in the lawlessness of Beirut so that he joins the Christian militia, Bassam refuses to take part in the war and fights to escape to Paris. Accordingly, the novel highlights the quirky twist that spins their relationship. The more George gets involved in the Christian militia's violence, the more his friendship with Bassam fades away until it turns into hostility and enmity. The novel is divided into three parts entitled Roma, Beirut, and Paris, respectively. The first two parts chronicle Bassam's and George's life in Beirut while the third part follows Bassam's flight to Paris, where the riddles of the political game are solved when meeting Rhea, George's half-sister.

Many critics explored several themes in the novel, underscoring the complexities of life during the Lebanese Civil War. For example, Hany Abdelfattah, in his "National Trauma and the 'Uncanny' in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game*", explores the manifestations of national trauma, showing how George embodies the psychological aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. In

addition, Syrine Hout and Lisa Grekul examine the concept of home and land, especially for adolescents; Hout focuses on the missing sense of belonging, while Grekul analyzes the feminization of the state in the context of the characters' experiences. Moreover, Dina Georgis, in "Masculinities and the Aesthetics of Love: Reading Terrorism in De Niro's *Game and Paradise Now*", examines the interplay between violence and masculine identities, seeing the characters' violence as a reflection of the political game. Additionally, Rahman discusses the novel's apocalyptic narrative that resonates with the apocalyptic nature of war. On the other hand, Rita Sakr explores Rawi Hage's surreal style that presents the unrepresentable. These analyses provide a thorough investigation of the novel, highlighting its multifaceted themes and threads. However, there has been limited exploration of the relationship between the chaos of war and identity formation. While some studies acknowledge the personal consequences of war, they often overlook the dynamic identity processes involved in the characters' evolving self-concept. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to fill this gap by reading the novel through the lens of Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process theory, which links social change to individual identity development, to understand how Bassam and George's identities are shaped by the violence surrounding them and how they adopt different coping strategies to alleviate the intensity of threats. The relevance of this study lies in its attempt to show how the chaos of war distorts the identity of individuals and influences their choices. Reading *De Niro's Game* through the lens of Identity Process theory, this study examines the relationship between political upheaval and personal identity, highlighting the fluidity and malleability of identity during periods of protracted social conflicts. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1- To what extent does the chaos of war influence the identity formation of both George and Bassam?
- 2- How does the civil war threaten the identity principles of adolescents?
- 3- What are the coping strategies both George and Bassam adopted to mitigate the intensity of the surrounding threats?
- 4- How effective are George's and Bassam's chosen coping strategies in maintaining their identities in response to the pervasive violence?

The following section presents the major tenets of Glynis Breakwell's Identity Process theory, a social psychological framework that examines how identities are constructed and modified in response to different social changes.

Theoretical Framework: Identity Process Theory

Identity Process Theory (IPT), first established by Glynis Breakwell in her 1986 book *Coping with Threatened Identities*, examines how identities develop and evolve in response to social changes. According to Breakwell, identities are not fixed or static, but rather they constantly evolve according to an interplay between the individual's inner traits and the outside social environment ("Identity Resilience" 575). According to IPT, there are two processes regulating the identity structure of individuals: the assimilation–accommodation process and the evaluation process. The former entails incorporating new elements into identities and making the necessary adjustments in the structure of identities to assimilate the new element, while the latter means attaching value and meaning to identity components (Breakwell, "Identity Process" 253). These two processes, which entail accepting or deflecting the incorporation of new elements, work to satisfy certain identity principles. In her *Coping with Threatened Identities*, Breakwell outlines four main identity principles: continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (25). Subsequent researchers proposed two additional principles, namely, the principle of belonging which refers to "the need to maintain or enhance feelings of closeness to, or acceptance by other people, whether in dyadic relationships or within in-groups" (Vignoles et al. 310) and the principle of meaning which refers to "the need to find a significance or purpose in one's life" (311).

Accordingly, whenever the processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation fail to satisfy any of these identity principles, individuals experience identity threats (*Coping* 26). Responding to the source of threats, individuals adopt a coping strategy, "any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity" (Breakwell, *Coping* 78). Coping strategies are divided into three main categories: intrapsychic, interpersonal, and intergroup strategies. First, intracoping strategies operate at the level of cognition, and they either require adjustment in the process of assimilation-accommodation and strategies by developing tactics like denial, fantasy, and transient depersonalization among others or require modification to the process of evaluation by developing tactics like changing the criteria of judgement (Breakwell, "Strategies" 198). Second, interpersonal strategies involve altering social interactions to mitigate threats by developing tactics such as isolation or negativism (*Coping* 109). Third, intergroup strategies entail changing social conditions by seeking multiple group memberships or group support, for example (Breakwell, "Strategies" 199). Individuals can adopt one coping strategy or a bundle of coping strategies, either simultaneously or consecutively, depending on the context and the intensity of threats. In the context of Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*, IPT provides a valuable lens for analyzing Bassam and George's identity development in response to different identity threats posed by the Lebanese Civil War.

Adolescents' Identity Threats

Hage's *De Niro's Game* depicts the impact of chaos on the identity processes of both George and Bassam, showing how the civil war has threatened their identities. From the very beginning of the novel, it is revealed how chaos and random violence shatter the meaning principles of Lebanese adolescents. According to the identity process theory, the meaning of life is a salient identity principle; once lost, the identity structure is threatened (Vignoles et al. 311). The absurdity and randomness of war are represented through the repetition of the poetic refrain "ten thousand". Bassam uses this refrain, throughout the novel, to refer to "the enormity and intensity of widely disparate things and events" (Hout 39). For instance, he uses it to refer to the endless bombs falling on Beirut, the cigarettes he smokes, the slaps he receives during his torture, and the number of war toll: "ten thousand bombs had landed" (Hage 11), "ten thousand cigarettes had touched my lips" (22), "ten thousand slaps landed on my tender skin" (157), and "ten thousand coffins had slipped underground" (88). The repetition of the slang "ten thousand" points out to repetitiveness of everyday violence, the unrealistic nature of war, and the breakdown of certainties.

Having grown up amid this chaotic atmosphere, Bassam and George find no meaning or significance in their life; they have no definite goal or value to pursue. The aimlessness of Bassam and George is stressed at the beginning of the novel when Bassam narrates how he enjoys riding motorcycles with George roaming streets with no particular goal:

We were aimless, beggars and thieves, horny Arabs with curly hair and open shirts and Marlboro packs rolled in our sleeves dropouts, ruthless nihilists with guns, bad breath, and long American Jeans (Hage 13).

The above quotation shows the void in Bassam's and George's identity structure. The reason for this void is the lawlessness of Beirut, which is even aggravated by the low social status of Bassam and George. Neither has finished their education, as both of them belong to poor families with no parental supervision. Both are workers; while George works at the casino owned by the Christian militia, Bassam works at a port carrying and unloading goods. In addition to their inferior social position, there is another factor that shapes their identity—their absorption of the western culture. They imitate the western heroes' style and look by wearing 'American Jeans' and carrying 'Marlboro packs'.

In fact, Lebanese adolescents are greatly influenced by American war movies during wartime. At the top of these movies to which the novel alludes is Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), a movie, performed by Robert De Niro and others, about the story of American soldier friends during the Vietnam War (Borossa 119). The heroic acts transmitted in such war movies are

absorbed by many Lebanese adolescents to the extent that they “glamorize violence” (Whidzik 100). Thus, both Bassam and George find enjoyment in imitating war heroes not only to compensate for the void they face during wartime but also to foster their masculine identities. Accordingly, they seek strength in carrying guns to camouflage their inferior social status. Dalia Mostafa notes that the gun has become an integral part of their identities to boost their masculinities and to impose power (36). Dalia’s remark is evident when George asks Bassam to ask to help him destroy the car of Chafiq Al-Azrak, his neighbor, for parking in George’s aunt Nabila’s place. When George points at Al-Azrak’s car, Bassam slows down the motorcycle he is riding, and “George shot the wheel of the car, and the air in them was released. He aimed higher and shot the car’s light, the door, the tinted glass, the seat inside...it was a lethal, entertaining act of vengeance, and I like it” (Hage 14-5). The hilarious amusement of their violent act is even intensified when Al-Azrak apologizes to Aunt Nabila the following day, offering her his place. Thus, they resort to violence to reinforce their masculine identity and to resist marginalization.

Losing the value and meaning of life, Bassam and George are transformed into thugs, addicts, and thieves. Throughout the first two parts, the reader follows their successive trials to steal the poker machine of the casino at which George initially works. They acknowledge their thuggishness, linking it to the lawlessness of the war. Bassam narrates in the novel, “war is for thugs. Motorcycles are also for thugs, and for longhaired teenagers like us, with guns under our bellies, and stolen gas in our tanks, and no particular place to go” (Hage 13).

Not only does the lawlessness of war threaten the meaning principle of their identity, but it also shatters their sense of belonging. According to Vignoles et al., the sense of belonging, “the feeling of closeness to, or acceptance by others” (310), is one of the identity principles that an individual seeks to maintain to avoid identity threats. In the novel, the sense of belonging is absent. Syrin Hout, in her chapter “Looking for Home in All the Wrong places: the Various Lebanon of *De Niro’s Game*,” reveals that the value of “home” is lacking in the novel since it no longer provides its dwellers with safety and warmth. Instead, home rather connotes fear, boredom, and uncertainty. Thus, for Bassam and George, Beirut is just a place “devoid of any emotional significance” (Hage 46). Accordingly, Bassam does not belong to his homeland or any particular sect. The first page of the novel registers his desire to leave Beirut, “[i]t is time to leave” (Hage 11). Throughout the novel, he reiterates his desire to leave for ‘Roma’, an idealized sanctuary in his imagination. What manifests his disidentification with Beirut is his resentment of Fairuz’s songs. He could not bear hearing her national songs that idealize the city, for the war Bassam has been witnessing makes Fairuz’s rosy picture of the city unrealistic. Continuously hearing her songs on his mother’s radio, Bassam curses Fairuz, “that whining singer who makes [his] life a morbid hell” (Hage 12). Although George, unlike Bassam, does not want to leave Beirut, preferring to stay in the city, he

also does not show a real sense of belonging. His insistence on staying in the war-torn city by joining the Christian militia does not mean that he belongs to his homeland; rather, he belongs to the state of chaos. George, from the beginning, is a thug who has no definite dogma or doctrine. He fights not to defend a cause but to maintain power. This idea is accentuated when Bassam counters George's claims of fighting for a noble cause by saying, "[t]heives and thugs like us, [he] said, since when have we ever believed in anything?" (Hage 78).

De Niro's Game highlights the correlation between wartime and the potential threats that masculine identities face. Bassam's self-esteem, a salient principle of the masculine identity, is shattered when tortured at the hands of the Christian militia. Suspected to be involved in the murder and robbery of Monsieur Laurent, a filthy rich businessman, Bassam is humiliated and tortured for days and then released. Ironically enough, just before his arrest, Bassam shows how self-esteem is salient to him during his brief meeting with an old acquaintance of his uncle to hand him an envelope. Annoyed by the man's ill manners and rudeness, Bassam tells him firmly that "[r]espect is very important to me. I love respect, and I kill disrespect" (Hage 147). The juxtaposition of Bassam's expectation and his torture draws the reader's attention to the degree of threat Bassam is facing when losing his self-esteem. Thus, the identity of adolescents brought up in wartime is threatened in more than one way.

The Correlation between Personal and Public Spheres

Not only does the novel disclose the hardships of surviving the ravages of war that vary from the continuous power cut, and the absence of water to the misery of waiting in long lines for bread or "for the meat" (Hage 24), but it also takes advantage of the characters' personal life sphere to allegorically reflect on the public sphere, showing how corruption destabilizes individual identity. *De Niro's Game* explores the theme of betrayal, highlighting how the political intrigues in Beirut are mirrored through the betrayal between Bassam and George. Though both Bassam and George (nicknamed De Niro) are like brothers at the beginning of the novel, their friendship not only fades out but also turns into enmity. The novel captures De Niro's transformation upon joining the Christian militia and receiving training in Israel. Bassam reveals De Niro's new look and outfit upon his arrival from Israel, "George wore a T-shirt with three Hebrew letters on it. He looked muscular, quieter, and his hair was shaved" (Hage 94). He participates in many bloody operations absorbing the merits of the Christian militia. Not only does he drink cocaine (Hage *De Niro* 96), but he also has become a drug dealer selling drugs to Laurent and his wife.

Getting immersed in a stream of violence and drug addiction, De Niro's attitude toward his friend has changed. Bassam passes through successive ordeals, and every time it turns out, to the reader's surprise, that George is the one behind Bassam's ordeals. The reader initially witnesses

this surprising twist when George sends Najib, his cousin, accompanied by two men, to beat and threaten Bassam to get away from the deal of stealing the poker machine. Only under the threat of Bassam's gun does Najib confess that the one who sent the two men is George, "they are De Niro's friends. Please do not tell him that I told you. I beg you" (Hage 101). This incident signals the beginning of George's series of betrayals of Bassam: he steals Bassam's lover, Rana, and more importantly, he is the one behind Bassam's torture because it is George who kills Laurent and his wife, not Bassam.

The master scene of the novel that shows the twist of Bassam's and George's friendship is the Russian roulette scene. Stabbing Bassam in the back again, George approaches Bassam before leaving for France to arrest him for his involvement in the assassination of Al-Rayess, the Lebanese president. However, having been heavily drunk and hallucinating after participating in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila, George offers Bassam the chance to escape the order of arrest: playing Russian roulette, a game through which Bassam escapes the bullet when he pulls the trigger pointed to his head. This incident, indeed, evokes the famous Russian roulette scene played in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) in which Robert De Niro loses his best friend Christopher Walken when playing the Russian roulette in the Vietnam War after his friend loses his mind as a result of the horror he witnesses in the prison of war camp. Thus, this deadly game mirrors the insanity of the political war game that easily sacrifices the lives of individuals. Steven Salatia indicates the Russian roulette scene played by Bassam and George "signals a complete breakdown of Lebanon's social fabric, mirrored by the disintegration of George and Bassam's friendship into violence" (25). Hence, on the political sphere level, betrayal begets violence and violence begets betrayal.

George's betrayal of Bassam functions as a microcosm of the betrayal and corruption of the Christian militia's leaders. Hage's novel highlights the false claims of the Christian militia, who argue that they are fighting for a noble cause, by showing the corruption and greed within the militia (Bayeh 79). Bassam notices that Abou Nahra is not interested in the cause as much as in gaining money and dominance: "Abou Nahra was into Christianity, money, and power" (51). There are many references in the novel to the very expensive cars possessed by the militia's leaders: "Abou Nahra drove a large Range Rover" (Hage 51), "militiamen drove...in their Mercedes" (37), "[George] was driving a new BMW" (106). All these subtle references to the greed of the Christian militia are asserted by Bassam's conversation with Joseph, a fighter in the militia, in which Bassam draws his attention to the exploitation of the militia's leaders in the war, "[W]hat have the Majalis done for you, Joseph? I saw you on the barricades for weeks on end. You risked your life. And all these commanders are getting sports cars and chalets, filing their bank accounts" (Hage 163).

The absence of the cause is exacerbated by the dirty whisky deal according to which cheap whisky is filled in Johnny Walker bottles and smuggled to the Muslim side. Responding to Bassam's surprise for dealing with Muslims during the war, the manufacturer clarifies, "no religion, no war; this is only business. Muslims, Christians—it does not matter" (Hage 108). Jumanah Bayeh reveals that the slogans of the Christian Cause the militia fighters reiterate are negated by Abou Nahra's brutal torture of Bassam to know the place of the diamonds and by militia's collaboration with Israel in the inhuman massacre of Sabra and Shatila (86). Thus, George's betrayal echoes the militia's betrayal of the Christian Cause which not only devastates the nation but also obstructs the identity process of individuals.

Coping Strategies

De Niro's Game shows a versatile collection of coping strategies adopted by adolescents to survive wartime ravages. Sometimes, when Bassam and George's self-esteem is shattered, they resort to 'negativism', an interpersonal coping strategy that entails direct confrontation with the source of threat, to maintain their identity integrity. For example, when George's identity is threatened after Chafiq Al-Azrak intimidates his aunt over her parking space, George acts violently by smashing his car to alleviate the source of the threat and to boost his self-esteem as well. Similarly, having been brutally tortured at the hands of Rambo, Bassam could not leave Beirut without healing the injury that had rifted his self-esteem. Failing to adopt any of the intrapsychic deflection strategies like denial, Bassam resorts to 'negativism'. Accordingly, Bassam has kept searching for Rambo and "shot him until he fell to the ground" (Hage 171).

In addition, Bassam adopts more than one intrapsychic defection strategy to cope with his marginalized position in both Beirut and Paris. Bassam's identity is threatened in Paris as he loses his self-esteem for being perceived as an outlaw outsider. To alleviate the intensity of the threat, Bassam resorts to 'fantasy', an intrapsychic deflection strategy that entails imagining unreal situations either to induce pleasure or to lessen the intensity of threat (Breakwell Coping 88). In this respect, Hage uses the technique of 'denaturalization of realism', one of the conventions of magic realism that entails "distorting the realistic mode of description" to raise skepticism about the political accounts of events (Whidzik 108). This technique is used not only to highlight the irrational nature of war but also to penetrate into the protagonist's imagination. Seeking refuge in his imagination, Bassam recurrently imagines himself—when walking in the streets of Paris aimlessly—as a soldier fighting in a revolution achieving democracy and justice:

Now I could defend this city that looked so different from the old photographs in history books. Now I could kill Nelson, the British admiral, and become a soldier in the emperor's army. I would be the fastest shooter on a horse... I, a victorious

soldier, returned to my small room with its small desk and scenic window view.
(Hage 204-5)

Similarly, Bassam fantasizes himself giving orders to his soldiers when roaming the streets of Paris with his new lover Rhea, “[o]ut of respect for Rhea, I ordered my soldiers to clean up the war scene and to cease all fire, theft, and disturbance. I ordered them to go underground and fight the invading fascists. My soldiers rejoiced” (Hage 210). These fantasies, and many others, are coping strategies adopted by Bassam to deflect his marginalized position from being assimilated into his identity structure. They, indeed, elevate his spirit, protecting him in one way or another from the danger of his threatening position.

Bassam uses the same coping strategy when he is in Beirut. To counter the horror of the Israeli invasion, Bassam resorts to his imagination, mixing reality with fantasy:

On the West Side, people were fleeing for their lives, and on our East Side, in the night, we could see flashes of resistance aiming at the skies. I went to the roof and looked at the west. The landscape was lit up under lightning bolts that fell from Israeli airplanes. There was one consistent line of red that reached to the sky. It never ceased, and I wondered if my uncle was shooting at the gods. And I wondered if cheap whisky bottles would turn into Molotov cocktails in Ali’s hands. (Hage 145-6)

Bassam averts the fear of the invasion by fantasizing ‘a surreal dream’ of his uncle and of the cheap whisky deal to shield himself from the horror of the invasion (Sakr 30).

Bassam adopts another intrapsychic coping strategy, ‘transient depersonalization’. According to Breakwell’s identity process theory, it is a deflection strategy that entails feeling detached from oneself when facing identity threat as if the threat is faced by someone else. This momentary detachment alleviates somehow the intensity of threat (*Coping* 86). In the scene in which Bassam is cruelly tortured by the Christian militia, Bassam develops an alternative persona to detach himself temporarily from the source of threat:

[Rambo] filled the sink with water and pushed my head in it repeatedly... Fuck him, I thought, I will hold my breath and dive under the sea [. . .] I will stay there and watch the tourists passing in that cruise ship again. This time I will wear my best tuxedo and show those foreigners that I can swing, and wave my dancing stick in the air to those mambo tunes with a belly dancer on each side of my hips... That is what I will do. (Hage 154)

In an attempt to reduce the sense of humiliation he is facing during the torture, Bassam imagines himself on a cruise ship enjoying his miscellaneous adventures to detach himself from his threatening position. In this respect, Jumanah Bayeh notes that by doing this, Bassam could “distance himself from the brutality of torture” (87), thereby preventing his sense of humiliation from being assimilated into the structure of his identity.

Similarly, Bassam sometimes detaches himself from his thuggish persona by using the third-person pronoun when referring to himself. On one occasion, Adou-Dolly, the grocer, confronts Bassam about his thuggishness, cursing him and his generation when Bassam mistreats him, threatening him with a gun in front of his family. At that time, Bassam feels estranged from himself as if the one Abou-Dolly shouted at is someone else. Referring to himself, Bassam says:

The thug walked between the buildings, avoiding the falling bombs. The thug crossed streams of sewage that dripped from broken pipes. He walked with a gun in one hand and a box of tender cotton in the other. (Hage 76)

In the above quotation, not only does Bassam detach himself from his thuggish persona by referring to himself as ‘the thug’, but he also points out the ravages of the war to imply that they are causative factors of his thuggishness.

While Bassam adopts intrapsychic deflection strategies to cope with the diverse threats of everyday life, George accepts the state of lawlessness, assimilating violence and chaos into his identity structure. He has developed from an aimless thug to a soldier in the Christian militia. Bassam notices his transformation upon George’s return from one of the operations; “he was like an American soldier,” holding his Kalashnikov (Hage 124). Unlike Bassam, who refuses his status, resisting everyday threats by adopting deflection strategies, George copes with these threats by adopting acceptance strategies.

Thus, both Bassam and George have different attitudes toward their social identities. While George’s social group provides him with positive distinctiveness, Bassam does not gain any positive distinctiveness from his social identity. Tajfel and Turner note that once an individual’s social identity is threatened, he will resort to ‘individual mobility’, i.e., the physical or psychological dissociation from one’s group to seek a better group (286). Accordingly, it is noticed that Bassam, from the very beginning of the novel, aspires to leave Beirut to get rid of his low status and to achieve upward social mobility. Eventually, both Bassam and George represent two different kinds of coping mechanisms during the war, for “both refuses to be victimized by engaging actively in the war or by trying to refrain from any involvement” (Whidzik 103).

However, Bassam is the one who has refused to drive into killing disarmed civilians who survive at the end.

The Dynamics of Violence and Its Plague

While coping strategies help mitigate the intensity of different threats, the novel shows how extreme violence renders coping strategies ineffective. A key scene of the massacre of Sabra and Shatila shows how brutal violence obstructs the identity process of individuals. Stopping Bassam before escaping to France, George narrates what happened in the massacre. Upon the assassination of Al-Rayyes, Abou Nahra, with the aid of Israel, entices his militia to take revenge, rationalizing the act of killing disarmed civilians by saying “we have to purify the camp” (174).

The novel highlights the far-reaching repercussions of violence on George and how he is also traumatized after his participation in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. It is noticeable that George compels Bassam to listen to his story in an attempt to share his trauma (Abdelfattah 6), “[d]o you want to hear more?...yes, you want to hear, and I want to finish my story” (Hage 176). He attempts to unload the burden he carries on his shoulder by his hallucinatory confessions of his crimes in the camps:

So we killed! We killed! People were shot at random, entire families killed at dinner tables. Cadavers in their nightclothes, throats slit, axe used, hands separated from bodies, women cut in half (Hage 175).

The desensitization of violence is accentuated by his brutal murder of the woman who called him ‘my son’. Instead of showing mercy to her, he “hit her with the butt of [his] rifle, many times, many times...Blood sprang from her head like a hose” (Hage 178). In this respect, Najat Rahman states that the massacre scene suggests that inner turmoil is not just a personal experience but is shaped by external relationships where the other plays a central role in defining one's own suffering; “at the center of an internal conflict is the spectre of the other 809). Having been tormented by the horror of the massacre, George insists on playing the Russian roulette game with Bassam in an attempt to escape his internal agony.

On the other hand, Bassam, though a victim of the ongoing violence in most cases, is also traumatized. Bassam, like George, compels Rhea at the end of the novel to listen to his story to tell her the whereabouts of George. Having felt the urge to narrate his painful memories, Bassam hysterically tells Rhea his life line in Beirut: the casino scheme to steal money, Monsieur Laurent's story, his torture, the massacre George describes to him, and the Russian roulette he plays with George. Unwilling to listen to Bassam's long story as she wants only to know George's destiny,

Rhea tries many times to leave the room. However, every time, Bassam holds her back, forcing her to listen to his trauma to feel relieved:

I pushed her back, and said, I buried him there. I buried him under the bridge. The gun dropped on my feet, and George collapsed on me. There was an open wound.
(Hage 270)

The ‘open wound’ here has twofold meaning: the physical wound in George’s head and the psychological wound they both suffer from. Bassam’s wound echoes Olanna’s upon witnessing the massacre of her family. Though both have not participated in the massacres, they both are traumatized by violence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novel powerfully depicts the impact of the civil war on the identity construction and development of individuals. Brought up amid the chaos of war, Bassam and George’s identity principles, such as meaning, belonging, and self-esteem, are shattered. The novel portrayal of their friendship betrayal mirrors the plots and corruption practiced in the political arena, which in turn disrupts the identity process of individuals. This allegory underscores the cyclical nature of violence and its capacity to dehumanize. Although both George and Bassam adopt various coping strategies by adopting tactics like negativism, fantasy, and transient depersonalization, the extreme violence they witness and participate in renders these strategies ineffective, as they both are left traumatized by the horror of violence, struggling to survive the void. *De Niro’s Game’s* open-ended conclusion, with Bassam’s uncertain future in Paris, invites readers to reflect on the long-term effects of the chaos of war and the difficulty of coping with violence. Thus, the novel serves as a poignant exploration of how violence can dismantle personal identities, making coping strategies futile.

Conflicts of Interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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