



Negotiating Identity across Borders in Arab Anglophone Diasporic Writings: Reflections on Abbas El-Zein's *Leave to Remain (2008)*

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ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Generally, diaspora narratives are about leaving and returning. Throughout these processes, diasporas engage in negotiating their identities, inside and outside their country of origin, construct different memories, and exhibit a plethora of feelings and attitudes. In this regard, Abbas El-Zein's memoir Leave to Remain is preoccupied with a constant search for identity and being in Lebanon and elsewhere. The current paper examines El-Zein's discourse on belonging through the identification negotiation. It discusses how his multiple identifications as Lebanese, Arab, and Australian are at work through a continuous struggle informed by different attitudes and feelings. El-Zein had "inhabited" and visited many places like America, England, Japan, Paris, Iraq, Australia, etc. This makes him a transnational diasporist, experiencing multi-placedness.

Keywords: *Identity, Borders, Multi-Placedness, Diasporic Writing*

INDONESIAN ABSTRACT

Umumnya, narasi diaspora adalah tentang kepergian dan kepulangan. Melalui proses ini, diaspora terlibat dalam negosiasi identitas mereka, di dalam dan di luar negara asal mereka, membangun ingatan yang berbeda, dan menunjukkan berbagai perasaan dan sikap. Dalam hal ini, memoar Leave to Remain karya Abbas El-Zein dipenuhi dengan pencarian terhadap identitas yang terus-menerus saat berada di Lebanon dan tempat lain. Artikel ini juga mengkaji wacana El-Zein tentang rasa memiliki melalui negosiasi identifikasi. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk membahas diskursus tentang bagaimana identitasnya sebagai orang Lebanon, Arab, dan Australia yang bekerja melalui perjuangan terus-menerus yang didasari oleh sikap dan perasaan yang berbeda. El-Zein telah menghuni dan mengunjungi banyak tempat seperti Amerika, Inggris, Jepang, Paris, Irak, Australia, dll. Hal ini membuatnya menjadi diasporis transnasional dan memiliki pengalaman di banyak tempat.

Kata Kunci: *Identitas, Perbatasan, Multi-Penempatan, Penulisan Diaspora*

Introduction

Crossing borders is endemic to diaspora people. Different reasons push different diasporas to opt for departure. This “leaving” is at the heart of El-Zein’s memoir, as its title reveals. The word “leave” is frequently repeated throughout El-Zein’s text, which indicates his preoccupation with the need to go elsewhere. “Leaving” is seen as a path out of the turmoil brought about by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). In light of this, El-Zein’s memoir yields complex perceptions of home in allusion to Lebanon and different hostlands. Towards the end of the first part of the memoir, El-Zein writes that:

Home is a concoction of physical and mental dwellings. I travel between them and I live in a virtual metropolis of my own making. I am still very much part of my family in Lebanon and I now have family and friends in Australia, and enough loyalty to them to call Australia home. My children [...] were born in Sydney...My wife [...] is an Australian of South African origin and there is a distinctly geographical element to our relationship. (El-Zein, 2008 :156-157)

In addition to the reference to the fact that home is not only about bodily dwelling but also mental dwelling, this passage unpacks El-Zein’s hyphenated identity, that is, Lebanese-Australian. However, this hyphen is dropped on different occasions in the text, denoting the transnational dimension of the diasporic identity and place. There is textual evidence of identity fluctuation between Lebanese, Arab, and Australian, to cite just the salient ones. This fluctuation is shaped by a continuous negotiation across different spaces and sites wherein the personal and the public blend together. This multiplicity of identification is the focus of the coming sections.

This paper employs a close reading approach to study Abbas El Zein’s *Leave to Remain*, integrating concepts such as diaspora, space, mobility, border crossing, memory, and nostalgia. These conceptual frameworks serve as a critical terrain for reflecting on the issues at stake in El Zein’s text. Additionally, relevant concepts pertinent to contemporary debates on migration are incorporated as needed to reach a good comprehension of El Zein’s diasporic experience.

Being Lebanese in Diaspora

As noted above, there is a braiding of different identifications in *Leave to Remain* as a text about migration and return. Albeit in constant movement across many borders, El-Zein exhibits his loyalty to the place of origin. About the notion of place of origin and

place in general, El-Zein reiterates their importance in defining who one is. By the end of a conversation with one of his old schoolmates about living elsewhere, El-Zein realizes that:

[E]verything was tied to the place where we grew up. Everything would lose its meaning, wither away and die if we turned our back on that place [...] places define who we are, that we have no choice in the definition, that while we were not expected to stay in those places often than not, we moved away from them, we should never lose our spiritual bonds to them and had to return to them one way or another. (153)

This illustrates the complex relationship diasporas develop about places. The latter is significant as an element that shapes one's identity. In stressing the weight of where one "grew up," El-Zein tacitly alludes to Lebanon as his original homeland. In doing so, his identification as Lebanese comes to the fore. In this sense, one can argue that a sense of place is achieved through developing a relationship with that place. To keep this bond, a return is warranted. Indeed, return is not always the same and not necessarily physical; it plays a vital role in the construction of the meaning of place. Interestingly, El-Zein is hyper-aware of the fact of movement across places, remarkably in the postmodern era of mass migration and mobility. However, on no account should these movements encumber one's relationship to the original homeland. In seeking to maintain these ties with Lebanon, El-Zein meets one of Safran's characteristics of diasporists; that is, they continue to relate to the homeland (Safran, 1991: 84). The ancestral homeland, whether real or imagined, always keeps lingering in the minds of the diasporists. At once porous and impervious, the homeland is a site about which a desire for home/return is developed. It is no coincidence that the above quote is loaded with implicit references to this desire. What can be inferred here is the role of identity as a way of understanding the diasporists' experience of place, namely the original place. In negotiating these experiences, identity and belonging are foregrounded.

Echoed in El-Zein's previous statement is also his commitment to a collective subject's voice. Although El-Zein's memoir is an interpretation and translation of himself, it also communicates a collective experience. The narrating "I" is plural and "decentering," in that it is directed towards the inclusion of others. The use of the subject pronoun "we" caters to this objective of sharing the experiences, mainly of other migrants across borders. Indeed, El-Zein's text is laden with this subject shift from "I" to

“we,” thus revealing how his memoir is a reflection of the history of the dislocations experienced by many generations. These shifting subjectivities leave room for a renegotiation of the subject position in the discourse of identity and belonging. In Paul Gilroy’s words, “the self can no longer be plausibly understood as a unitary entity but appears instead as one fragile moment in the dialogic circuit that connects ‘us’ with our ‘others’” (Gilroy, 1997: 315). The diasporic discourse is by nature plural, notwithstanding the nature of the diasporic text which articulates it. In negotiating his Lebanese identity, El-Zein reiterates the use of “we” to allude to the group identity of the Lebanese. What is more, El-Zein goes further to defend this group identity against “external” threats/Western aspects of life. Living in Australia, El-Zein contemplates how “East met West in Lebanon every day, and the middle classes spent much energy fending off undesired aspects of Western culture, from open homosexuality and premarital sex to drugs and rap music, all of which were described as un-Lebanese” (61). Despite the religious differences that characterize Lebanon, the country’s two poles (Christians and Muslims) meet to ward off the negative aspects of Western culture. The aim is to keep the shared, though different, Lebanese identity. Here, El-Zein is keen on critiquing attempts at homogenizing cultures, rather than on attacking the West. More specifically, his criticism springs from the need to dismantle power relations that challenge “minor” identity constructions.

In proceeding with these lines, El-Zein’s self-identification as Lebanese runs through his memoir. El-Zein is preoccupied with home-making practices in the diaspora. These practices are meant to show belonging, and they also provide a tool to recognize minority identity formations. Preparing home food is a strategy used to make a home away from home as a form of identity negotiation. When his mother visited him in Australia, El-Zein informs us about one morning when “she was having black Lebanese coffee that I insisted on making for her- she is my guest in a foreign city when, more usually, I am hers in Beirut, and we are both delighted and awed by this reversal” (279). Making Lebanese food is a way to keep loyalty to the original homeland. It accounts for belonging to the diaspora. Through these cultural signifiers, El-Zein engages in a process of identity negotiation across borders. Despite residing in a foreign space, he strives to construct a mobile home to maintain his cultural affiliation. Feeling at home seems to be

achieved through these liminal spaces that diasporas create. It is a way to heal the sense of displacement that is brought about by the reality of living elsewhere.

The need to identify as Lebanese is also reflected in the names that El-Zein gives to his children. For him, names are significant elements of identity. Through one's children, one can "fulfill one's need for cultural reproduction" (287). Children are like empty vessels to be filled with the cultures of their ancestors to pass it to the next generations. The choice of the children's names stems from this conviction, that names are revelatory of identities. El-Zein's children, though born in Australia, hold Middle Eastern names. The latter allows El-Zein to be in touch with the identity and culture of his forebears, without betraying them. However, like other migrants who inhabit the liminal space of the culturally displaced, these children may experience a range of difficulties. El-Zein is cognizant of this dilemma as he states:

I am aware that the Middle-Eastern names that Ann and I have given them may make their lives more complicated than they need to be. They are Australians and we could have conceivably given them more Western names. It is not easy to be perceived as hailing from a Muslim background in the West nowadays. This is likely to remain the case as my children go into high school and university, as they hand over their passports to immigration officials at airports, and as they walk into their first job interviews. Are their names a gift we gave them or a life sentence we handed down? Was it the bravest, most terrible, or most irrelevant thing we could have done to them? (283-284)

Inherent in the concept of diaspora is the idea that, as suggested by William Safran (1991), diasporists think that they cannot achieve full acceptance in the host society, which makes them go through a sense of alienation. The passage is axiomatic because it reflects El-Zein's ambivalence towards the need to restore identity in the diaspora. Names are cultural signifiers loaded with identifications. This very process of identification, through which these children project themselves into their cultural identities, poses a challenge to them. The problem of negotiating identity is what is at stake for El-Zein who seeks to construct a narrative identity for his children and, accordingly, for himself. These attempts are hindered by the difficulty of gaining acceptance in different walks of life in the diaspora, including schools, universities, workplaces, public spaces, etc.

No wonder, the passage brings important issues related to identity construction and negotiation in the diaspora. Cultural manifestations promoted by migrants in host

societies are often opposed by the power dynamics exerted by these societies. In the quest to perform and maintain the culture of the country of origin, migrants are faced with difficulties to be included and accepted abroad. Different cultural manifestations such as the veil, the names, the language, and religion, to cite but a few, render migrants outsiders and often deprive them of opportunities to build their lives in the diaspora. Interestingly, El-Zein, at a later stage, becomes aware of this ambivalence when attempting to keep a national culture in the diaspora, particularly in this era of post-modernity. Talking about his children, he writes that “[w]e never want to give them the lives we have had. But neither do we want their lives to be so radically different from ours. Our attitude towards our children suffers from this ambivalence” (287). It is not an easy task to reproduce one’s national culture by reproducing some of its practices and aspects in the diaspora. Such practices/processes are dislocated by globalization and the mass interactions brought about by time-space compression. By the same token, cultural hybridity becomes the product of these encounters. In this sense, many elements form one’s narrative identity. This narrative emerges out of different circumstances and experiences, whether incongruous or otherwise. This idea is best incarnated in the memoir’s closure. Thus writes El-Zein: “For what is one’s life but the story once painful and sublime- of coming to terms with the savage intimacy between self, history and culture” (288). Identity is formed by forces of history and culture. In light of this, different stories and attitudes come to the fore, as they are shaped by different, and at times traumatic and painful, conditions, events, and experiences.

These ideas inform El-Zein’s ongoing negotiation of identification. Having gone through different experiences of multi-locationality, El-Zein has displayed very complex cluster notions of belonging. His identity is thus one that is plural, provisional, and interactive within and across imagined and encountered boundaries. He has introduced his identity in many ways. In addition to the Lebanese identity reflected on many occasions in the memoir, introducing an Arab identity cannot go unnoticed. Developing a sense of Pan-Arabism - with a concern with issues in the Arab world - can be interpreted as an incarnation of his identification as an Arab.

Identifying as an Arab Muslim

This section dilates upon the tension between the “Western” and the “Arab” in the construction of El-Zein’s identity. His identification as Arab springs from the need to foreground the malaise of the Arab world, side with this region, and deconstruct the Western discourses. *Leave to Remain* is thus not only a reflection of the self, but it offers perspectives about the world. In his article “Interpreting Oneself: on memoirs, essays, fiction, and travel writing,” Abbas El-Zein concludes that “writing a memoir becomes [...] not just an act of interpreting oneself, but an act of interpreting the world through oneself” (8). In interpreting the world around him, El-Zein, one can argue, identifies with it, and expresses different attitudes. At the very outset of the memoir, he, writing about himself at the age of seven, shows this affiliation as an “Arab”. In this, he dwells on different historical events that pivot around the Arab world:

By the time I turned seven, the man had not long walked on the moon, the Vietnam war was raging, the nuclear non-proliferation treaty had been signed, the entire Egyptian air force had been wiped out in a few minutes, and we had lost the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and Sinai in six days in 1967, a historical record by all accounts, rivaled only by the Netherlands falling to the Germans over breakfast, twenty-seven years earlier. Abdul Nasser had resigned, only to be brought to power by popular demand. (5-6)

In bringing these events to the fore, El-Zein narrates some chapters of Arab history. In doing so, his identification shifts from Lebanese to include Arab. This shift can also be deduced from the fluctuation between the subject “I” and “We”. The reader is offered soulful insights into El-Zein’s identity, as an Arab with a concern with the turmoil brought about in the Arab world. El-Zein acts hitherto as a transnational agent who transcends the national identity to deal with questions of Arab concern. The author’s discussion of these events is a sign of his defense of the Arab cause, identity, and hence cohesion. His pan-Arabism is also manifest in everything that is associated with the “Arab” society, including language, culture, and religion, to name just a few. This ethnic solidarity, so to speak, is meant to shift responsibility to the West regarding the ravages brought about by imperial interventions in the “Global South,” particularly the Middle East and Africa. Interestingly, El-Zein focuses mainly on contemporary history. His frequent allusions are to America as a modern colonialist, which has taken over the

world culturally and economically. This process laid the ground for globalization which has redefined power dynamics and has drawn a new world order.

El-Zein's sentiment of pan-Arabism is simultaneously informed by a sense of anti-Americanism, particularly with the increasing role America has played in several incidents. Talking about America, El-Zein writes: "I knew little about the US and, in any case, what mattered to me were the bad things America did to my fellow Arabs and to the world [...] There is, of course, a salient political background to the anti-Americanism of my twenties. I had lived through the death of many Lebanese and Palestinian civilians by American weapons" (105-106, emphasis mine). Ethnic identification becomes a voice to speak about and communicate the atrocities committed against Arabs. It is equally important to mention here the role of diaspora writers as new voices of migrants and victims throughout different times in history and different places. El-Zein's memoir engages in the production of discourses meant to decipher Western discourses. His memoir thus becomes a political space for the writer to express his attitudes vis-à-vis the predicament of the Middle East. The attention paid to Americanism in Arab literature is the product of America's frequent intervention in the Arab region. Writing therefore becomes a strikeback. More than this, in debunking Americanism in his memoir, El-Zein accentuates his Arab-ness. In a sense, his identity is negotiated through a shifting set of conflicting goals that the memoir seeks to convey. As shall be made clear, El-Zein's attitudes are always on the move, as they are informed by different interests as well as experiences. However, throughout the memoir, he invests in constructing and asserting his Arab identity.

Attempting to create an Arab identity is ostensible in other forms of ethnic identification, one of which is the language, that is, Arabic. The theme of language is one that also exerts an indisputable appeal today, mainly because of globalization. In the course of his anti-Americanism, El-Zein raises interrogations about learning the English language. He levels much criticism at what he delineates as a "lack of reciprocal knowledge" in language learning. He avers that "Americans were not "guilty" of lack of knowledge. They were "guilty" of lack of reciprocal knowledge. We spoke their language, they did not speak ours. We knew about them far more than they knew about us" (112). Globalization and Americanization are often explained as two faces of the same coin. And both have been criticized for contributing to the homogenization of differences. El-Zein's

statement is a major critique of American inequalities that create and perpetuate dichotomies. It accounts for the asymmetrical power relations that typify America's presence in the Arab world. In facing these globalizing processes, argues Anderson, "ethnic identification is fast becoming only one form [...] of personal and group identification" (Anderson, 1992: 220). This ethnic identification is best incarnated in El-Zein's use of "we" to refer to the Arab world. Interestingly, the juxtaposition of "we"/"our" and "they" / "their" serves as a means to affirm his Arab identity and unveil America's double standards.

Diasporists are voices that celebrate multiplicity and pluralism. However, they are also political voices in defense of the homeland and its culture. They participate in ethno-nationalisms to rehabilitate shared heritage, common languages, collective faith, and culture. These diaspora writers can be ascribed what Wald labels "politicized ethnic identity"; that is, "the tendency of members of an ethnonational diaspora to accord priority to the homeland in their political thinking and behavior" (Wald, 2008: 276). Diaspora works are not bereft of political ideas. They are politically loaded, and this is manifest in their mobilization around Arab concerns. The use of different expressions that show collectivity in El-Zein's memoir indicates his very participation in the ethnonational negotiation of identity. By insisting collectively on developing attitudes towards Americanism, writing, as *Leave to Remain* implies, becomes a political practice rather than a mere expression of experiences of displacement.

Religious identification is also at the core of El-Zein's memoir. This form of identification is explored through allusions to different religious practices and celebrations. At the outset of the memoir, El-Zein taps into the role of the family in transmitting religion. He specifically refers to his father in teaching him religion:

[My father] introduced me to the Quran and told me about the superiority of its language which no human could emulate. He reminded me of God's injunction, Iqra, Read or Recite, the first divine word the prophet had heard...[he] taught me how to perform the daily prayer, how to make my ablutions, how to be a good Muslim and all the rituals of purity that went with it. (11-12)

The role of family in the transmission of culture is striking. The passage showcases different representations of religious beliefs and rituals that are inherited from the ancestors. In writing about his religious experiences, El-Zein reveals his religious identification. The latter is negotiated through different traditions of the

forbears who belonged to religious families. Of course, these broad statements do not hold in all cases, for El-Zein's attitudes are fluctuating. There are instances in which he rebels against these traditions, notwithstanding his deep attachment to religion. Likewise, his father - later in his life when he completed a doctoral thesis in Paris - expresses revealing and complex attitudes towards religion, namely Islam. It is in this regard that El-Zein taps into one of the thorny issues in contemporary Arab-Islamic thought, that is, tradition vs. modernity. He demonstrates how his father "tried to reconcile modernity with Islam by insisting that Islam is modern at its roots and that the real tradition, unencumbered by false interpretations of the scriptures, had to guide us in dealing with contemporary issues" (63). In foregrounding this question, El-Zein participates in the debate about the dichotomy of Islamic tradition vs. modernity. As the statement above testifies, El-Zein developed a reconciliatory attitude about Islam and modernity. This attitude is informed by experiences of displacement, which have brought intersections between the "East" and the "West".

As a deterritorialized subject in the West, El-Zein strives for a trans-space in which plurality is a trait. The West as both a site of modernity and migration requires a new understanding of the Islamic tradition to meet the socio-political changes of the present day. Generally, responses to Western modernity in the Arab-Islamic thought vacillate between acceptance and rejection. In negotiating the impact of contemporary globalizing processes, diasporic writers occupy a "third space" which provides a fertile ground for intercultural perspectives. The latter is achieved by a re-reading of the tradition to correct the false interpretations of the scriptures and to respond to the contemporary needs of human societies.

In reconciling Western modernity and Islamic tradition, "contemporaneity" in the reading of the tradition probes interesting questions. This is reminiscent of the Moroccan philosopher Mohammed Abed al-Jabiri's call for a contemporary re-reading of this tradition so that it can fit into the contemporary context, a context of massive global interactions and movements. He argues that "modernity would perhaps consist in going beyond this understanding of tradition that is confined within tradition, to establish a modern understanding and a contemporary view of tradition" (Ricci, 2019: 13). The aim is not to break with the tradition but rather make it fit within the modern contexts. For this aim to be achieved, al-Jabiri stresses the importance of "contemporaneity" in

catching up with the changes worldwide (ibid: 13). Seen in the context of diaspora writing, this rapprochement is attained through the diasporists' development of a cosmopolitan consciousness. These diasporists can be thus said to inhabit a "third space" which endows them with Said's "contrapuntal consciousness" (2013). The latter is the product of the interactions with different communities beyond strict borders of nation, religion, culture, and tradition. Likewise, El-Zein's memoir contains examples of this need to find a middle ground between the East and West beyond religious, cultural, and territorial frontiers.

To break away from what they label as "false interpretations" of the Islamic tradition implies that diasporists are liable to openness in the host societies. Therefore, the path is laid to transcending conflicts and tensions. El-Zein is aware of the importance of embracing a plural discourse of identity. In this sense, he goes a step further to negotiate his hybrid identity in Australia in particular and the West in general. Redefining identity in new contexts and under new conditions is characteristic of diasporic communities. This identity is informed by the global post-modern as being dislocated and malleable. The identity of the diasporic is, in Stuart Hall's words, "becoming fragmented; composed, not of single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities" (Hall, 1996: 598). El-Zein seems to match here since his negotiation of identity is ongoing to the extent that his identity is shifting in new spaces and times. El-Zein identifies temporarily with multiple identities across different borders of geography, culture, religion, tradition, and language.

Negotiating the Lebanese-Australian Identity

In *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays*, Laing argues that "the person who moves through different pluralities in a pluralistic society functions in different modes, even simultaneously" (Laing, 1999: 12). Taken as pluralistic, the global post-modern society is constantly changing. Being so, it endows subjects with a dialogical identity beyond any essentialized or fixed conceptions. In its redefinition of identity, *Leave to Remain* celebrates this plurality and discontinuity. In negotiating his belonging, El-Zein perceives "leaving" as a journey towards rebirth. He defines migration as "rebirth, as a form of freedom, as a merit rather than birth" (152). This rebirth metaphor can be interpreted as a way of redefining identity in new contexts. Migration lights the way to

the rebirth of a new subject. Interestingly, this process of migration is determined by the parameters of globalization as well as the unstable status quo in Lebanon. Talking particularly about his migration to Australia, El-Zein writes:

[My] move to Australia was not my first migration, I must have had more realistic expectations than many newcomers. I had encountered hostility and Arab-bashing in Europe and had some idea about what immigration to the West entailed, as well as the gains. Coming from Lebanon, a country ravaged by civil war, corruption, and social stratification, I knew the value of the rule of law, an egalitarian ethos, and efficient institutions. (154)

At stake here are the push and pull forces behind El-Zein's migration to Australia. To remain is to leave Lebanon to the West. While Lebanon is envisaged as a wasteland, the West is a place of law and equality. Drawing comparisons is a recurrent feature in diaspora writing. Comparing is a way to give soulful insights into the reasons why diasporas emerge. Diaspora writing is motivated by the authors' need to unravel the socio-political malaise in their countries of origin. In dwelling on different experiences of migration, they also negotiate social, economic, political, and cultural questions. More than this, diaspora literature, as the passage entails, exposes also the migrants' experiences and challenges while in the host land, including acts of hostility, bashing, and racism.

When he arrives in Australia to work as a post-doctorate researcher at the University of Sydney, El-Zein accentuates the question of identity. He begins with a story about a flyer he saw on the student noticeboard. The flyer is about an "Earless Cat Missing" whose owner offers a reward to anyone who can find it. The flyer is a strong metaphor for identity loss because of the experience of displacement. By the same token, El-Zein engages in a process of negotiating longing and belonging. Talking about the flyer at the notice board, El-Zein writes:

I found myself wondering whether it was more tragic for the cat to go missing or to lose an ear. From the cat's point of view, it would appear that the missing ear was a far more painful experience. But if the pet had any awareness of emotional bonds to its owners, and if its sense of itself was tied in any way to its place of abode, then it was conceivable that the experience of a lost home was just as painful as a lost ear. I had lost all hearing in one ear myself and could not help seeing a personal metaphor in the flyer. Migration as mutilation or amputation. But was it exactly that I had lost? (142)

This excerpt is taken from the chapter “Mutilation Street” in *Leave to Remain*. This chapter is, in a modified form, an article El-Zein published under the title “Being Elsewhere: on longing and belonging” in *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Hage, 2002). The article/chapter explores some of the aspects of Arab-Australian lives, particularly about identity. The cat metaphor is employed to explain the “mutilation” that migration brings about. El-Zein, who is also deaf in one ear, dwells on the loss of home through the deafness metaphor. The experience of displacement and living in another place is a throbbing one, in that it affects one’s bonds to his place/home. In the passage above, the process of migration is associated with the experience of exile and mutilation. In this sense, “leaving” has its pitfalls, because the migrant goes through some kind of cultural displacement. Likewise, the migrant always sees himself as an outsider: “My sense of being a foreigner, although diminished, has not left me” (146). This feeling is due to the loss of home and the rejection by the host society.

El-Zein stands as a microcosm of the intellectual migrant mutilated in exile. Writing about the malaise of the migrants, Theodor Adorno argues “[E]very intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated, and does well to acknowledge it to himself, if he wishes to avoid being cruelly apprised of it behind the tightly-closed doors of his self-esteem” (Adorno, 2005:33). The migrant’s alienation is much related to being elsewhere. El-Zein’s bonds to his roots are interrupted by border crossing; hence the initiation of a search for new identity and belonging in Australia. It is worth noting, however, that the experience of migration is the outcome of the socio-political malaise in the home country and the need for a better life elsewhere. Torn between these two places, El-Zein occupies an in-between place wherein his identity is constantly negotiated.

What is being staged is the complex investigation into the construction of identity that is embedded in the cat metaphor. The “earless cat” is revelatory of becoming of identity. Becoming denotes that identity is in constant change, not firm and fixed. This metaphor/metamorphosis is reminiscent of Deleuze’s “body without organs”: an idea that disrupts the essentialized conception of identity, and marks the transitions and becomings (Deleuze, 1988:19), opening up to multiple negotiations and constructions. In moving to Australia, identity, and hence the way it is perceived, acquires new meanings.

When he arrived in Sydney, El-Zein declared that “identity was not foremost in [his] mind” (143). It is at this juncture that he commences to negotiate his Lebanese-Australian identity. This hyphenated identity is informed by the attachment to different places and the development of mobile identities. The following excerpt tellingly shows this multiple belonging and negotiation of identity:

I return to the Middle East as often as I can, keeping this part of me alive. There are Arabic books and tapes and CDs in my library as well as English. My love for Beirut has not diminished- its bushing streets, the unrelenting warmth of its inhabitants, is stoicism, humor, and endearing paranoia- and I have become addicted to Sydney, its colorful inner suburbs, its hedonism, its social conscience, and its waterways that keep surprising me when I least expect it [...] Migrants survive by growing body parts. New ears and new eyes are perhaps their most valuable acquisitions (157-158).

From the minority position of the Lebanese Arab-Australian diaspora, El-Zein deconstructs the narrative of singular belonging and fixed identities. Allegiances vacillate between the homeland and the hostland, making the process of belonging always deferral. The passage proffers new ways of belonging, indicating how the diasporic subject inhabits a continuous oscillation between the wish to keep the roots and the will to adapt to the new changes brought about by different routes. While El-Zein foregrounds the national identity that is maintained through return as well as the construction of mobile homes, he also shows a vested interest in Australia as a new space of belonging. In this sense, identity as pregiven loses ground for the plurality of identities, a state which is the upshot of displacement and border crossing experiences. Here, diaspora is interpreted as a third space wherein boundaries get blurred, and identity as a process is emphasized. Diaspora is a liminal space that dismantles the grand narratives of identity, history, and culture:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation, in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as integrated, open, expanding code. Such intervention quite properly challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as [a] homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by [an] original Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people [...] it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity. (Bhabha, 2012: 54-55)

Put differently, in the third space, the diasporic subjects belong to neither “here” nor “there.” They penetrate through the interstices and inhabit a site that is open to different belongings. This space emerges out of interactions between the host land/homeland, here/there, and now/then. In highlighting shifting allegiances, El-Zein’s enunciation/performance of identity is informed by a way of seeing beyond homogenizing cultural identity. The interstitial space permits the diasporic subject to articulate multiple identities. As a space that destroys and circumvents representation, the third space endows cultural identity with new meanings in new transcultural contexts. In so doing, identity, as a process, dislocates ideas of fixity and unity. In inhabiting a new space, the meaning of identity is made anew. In this regard, the boundaries between cultures are bridgeable and porous, resulting therefore in cultural hybridity. The latter is manifest in El-Zein’s multiple cultural affiliations, an idea that challenges old definitions of identities as primordial and static.

The diasporic space is significant, in that it is one where identities are redefined, reinterpreted, negotiated and “can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and made anew” (Bhabha, 55). The monolithic being of cultures and identities is distorted, and authenticity is dubbed a myth. Maintaining a link with the place of origin is disturbed by the need to belong to the countries of destinations as well. In searching for this belonging, the diasporic subjects create new spaces. Through the deconstruction of singular identifications, these spaces offer a middle ground for communication and understanding. They grant the diasporists a plural consciousness whereby they engage in a cosmopolitan and globalized world. Such awareness is attained through recognizing a blurring of existing boundaries and binaristic identities, offering new definitions for identities and cultures. In this respect, the third space is “a type of dialogue; that is, a means for describing a productive and not merely reflective, space or encounter. The potential for the productive means that this is an ‘interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative’ space where new ways of being and innovative kinds of cultural meaning can be brought into existence” (Russell, 2006: 3). Living in the third space, the diasporic writer-character is no longer fully Lebanese, yet not exclusively Australian. It is in this context that Lynette Russell qualifies this form of literature as “boundary writing”.

In this same vein, Russell argues that the construction of dichotomous either/or categories is often too limiting. Many Australians, of different backgrounds, “occupy an

‘in-between position’ that is neither one thing nor the other but both” (1). This situation yields complex permutations of identity, brought in turn by different interactions and encounters in the diasporic spaces. Thus, the old discourse and labeling of identity are disrupted by new (dis)locations. Migration itself poses a challenge to what defines “Australianness”. The latter is continuously negotiated, in that it is no longer singular as the Australian literature itself. This literature is one shaped by different factors and impacts; one impact is Arab diasporic literature, namely Lebanese literature. Likewise, Lebanese-Australian writers are subjects caught in the liminal space, making their writings a revelatory instance of borderless literature on the move. This space allows them to subvert ideas of fixed and homogenous identities and cultures. It is in this context that El-Zein engages with the issue of negotiating the diasporic identity across borders.

Conclusion

This paper delves into how El-Zein stands as a prototype of the postmodern hybrid and diasporic subject. Being so, he inhabits a third space wherein his identity is endlessly negotiated. As a transnational subject moving across different geographies, El-Zein develops multiple identifications. This state is strikingly the outcome of experiencing multi-placedness, resulting in turn in different interactions and encounters. *Leave to Remain* is an interpretation of a subject with many affiliations. In this respect, one could claim that the birth of the postmodern subject presents a way of seeing beyond the unified subject whose identity is fixed, firm, and stable. On the other hand, the postmodern diasporic subject gives rise to de-centered identities which are always in a state of becoming. These diasporic subjects develop a globalizing consciousness that grants them the power to destabilize the thinking structure about nation, place, and identity. In a globalized world of massive movements, it has become mandatory for migrants to move beyond singular conceptions of belonging and identity. El-Zein’s getaway from war-torn Lebanon and search for opportunities elsewhere make him engage in a process of redefining notions of identity and place.

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