

Conforming to Destructive Values: Capitalism and Consumerism in Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*

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This nuanced and highly original essay reads Rawi Hage's novel *Cockroach* as an indictment of Canadian capitalist excess. Paying close attention to the novel's apocalyptic imagery, it examines the social and environmental costs of an ethos that encourages rapaciousness. This makes perfect sense. After all, who is better placed to proclaim our wastefulness and disrupt our complacency than the six-foot tall cockroach that narrates this novel?

-Dr. Carrie Dawson

Although Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* has many different interpretations, the presentation of capitalistic ideologies that are tied into apocalyptic imagery present a reading of this novel that critiques Canada's stance on environmental issues. Through the prevalence and dictating force of a capitalist and consumer-based society, the unnamed main character of this novel (referred to here as *Cockroach*) becomes a representative of the conforming nature of capitalist values that blanket Canadian society. By being forced to conform to these values, the excessive and over-consumptive lifestyles are forced onto all citizens of Canada. The consequences of these dominant values are understood through the apocalyptic images that run throughout the novel; consequences which include the environmental issue of ozone depletion as well as the social implications of environmental degradation.

To understand the way that Cockroach presents a critique of Canada's relationship with environmentalism, we must begin with an understanding of how Canada's capitalist and consumer values create pressure to conform. Cockroach is representative of individuals and groups who bring new values and traditions to Canada through his position as a recent immigrant. Distanced from the capitalistic and consumerist social structures of Canada, Cockroach does not fully understand taxes, as he thinks Genevieve says "tax prayers" and not "taxpayers" (Hage 60). His ignorance of the tax system, coupled with his unemployment at the beginning of the novel, emphasizes that Cockroach is not a participant in the structures that make Canada a capitalist society. Cockroach acknowledges his societal position, thinking to himself: "maybe I should become a good citizen and contemplate ways to collect my debts and increase my wealth" (65). Despite his consideration that he could grow his own wealth, Cockroach rejects the ideologies of the society. Cockroach rejects these ideologies through constantly cursing the monetary structures because, for the first time in his life, he is "hungry, impoverished, and ha[s] no one" (9). He tells Genevieve that he was never hungry growing up outside of Canada. Now that he is in Canada, he does not have enough to eat and has "to get some money before the end of the month, before [he] starve[s] to death in this shithole of an apartment, in this cold world, in this city with its case of chronic snow" (17). Cockroach is dragged into the capitalist system out of necessity for his own survival and by the Canadian government, for Genevieve reminds him that "I am an employee of the government. People are paying taxes for you to be here", thus society is attempting to "help" establish him as a participating Canadian citizen (208). Thus through Genevieve, who reminds Cockroach "of priests in

the confession booth", Cockroach is being forced to conform to a capitalistic society (77). This society is likened to a system of religious belief and that he will come to describe in terms of a social system that will "subordinate and kill all those who do not conform" (202). As with the conformity demanded by religion, consumerist ideologies also demand complete conformity and devotion.

Cockroach's position of "other" portrays him negatively within society. Even on the most basic level, Cockroach is passed over on the street. His presence is overlooked and unacknowledged by Canadian society, for when on the street he is given "not even a nod in this cold place, not even a timid wave, not a smile from below red, sniffing, blowing noses" (9). Rather than welcoming, Canadian society is portrayed as being: "all these buried heads above necks strangled in synthetic scarves" (9). This society is seen as being harmed by the "synthetic" or the consumeristic items that distances them from human interaction. From the inability to be welcomed into society, Cockroach indicates the unnatural boundaries that are built between humans and boundaries built by consumer goods. It is because Cockroach's exclusion from this consumerist habit that he is not acknowledged by society.

In a contrary and ironic way, Cockroach's attempted suicide suggests both his failure to adhere to these capitalist and consumerist lifestyles and his forced adherence to these systems. As we have already seen, Cockroach identifies the way that Canadian society is being strangled by its consumerist values. The image of the neck and the strangulation of people within these systems runs throughout the novel, as not only are people being choked by their consumer goods, but it is also said that "the humming inside their throats synced to the sound of Mary's old fridge and the cycles of the world" (21). Thus the image

of the throat is representative of the cycles of consumption, as the throat is physically linked to food consumption that is a necessary and constant factor of life. This natural reliance on food becomes a place from which people are drawn into the cycles of consumerism; it is through Cockroach's need to feed himself that he is driven to get a job and to begin participating in these capitalist systems. Since the throat is representative of these consumptive cycles, the images of strangulation indicate the harmful and devastating presence of this system of consumption. As a result it is through strangulation that Cockroach is driven to attempt suicide, for it depicts in a literal way how these capitalist and consumer systems are killing him. Since this imagery speaks to the way consumer values harm an individual, we can understand the way this harm can be extrapolated to larger issues, such as environmental degradation. If these systems have driven Cockroach to believe that "I am doomed", then so too is larger society (9).

While Cockroach's attempted suicide points to his entrapment, it is ironic that in an attempt to escape from these cycles Cockroach decides to take a path that represents the cycles he so despises. Cockroach strangles himself as a means to liberate himself from the hardships of capitalist society. His attempted suicide through strangling only further places him within the images that represent these values. However this method of death is decided on because he is unable to afford a gun; he says to Genevieve "I did not know where to get one in this land. And I did not have any money!" (78). To this she insists he must "get a job. Then you could afford one" (79). This interaction solidifies Cockroach's incapability of escaping consumerism, for even in his attempt to escape it he must contribute financially to these systems; he must be part of the system in order to escape it. This conundrum implies that it is impossible to be

understood as a citizen of Canada without becoming part of the contributing capitalist system that dominates and strangles all of its residents. Without contributing to these systems, Cockroach is unable in any way to assert himself as an individual; he cannot even in his death assert himself outside of this system.

Cockroach's entrapment within these systems represents a similar trap that exists with respect to environmental issues. The overconsumption of first world countries such as Canada causes environmental degradation, and as a result of this degradation many poor countries and their populations suffer. Increasingly, the concept of environmental refugees is discussed, for example, Majeed says, "We come to these countries for refuge and to find better lives, but it is these countries that made us leave our homes in the first place" (223). Majeed's statement relates to the people who flee the devastating effects of global warming and other effects of environmental degradation. This statement critiques capitalism and represents the way that overconsumption in places such as Canada causes environmental damage around the world, such as rising sea-levels, rapidly increasing temperature, and inequitable distribution of resources. These environmental issues are hardships on the people affected by them and increasingly drive people to find refuge in countries such as Canada, whose values initially caused their hardships. In this terribly ironic cycle, first world countries are driving people to join their capitalist and consumer based societies. As a result, "the poor are forced to compromise" (140). Subsequently we understand Cockroach's desire to start a toilet paper revolution, in which he would "share it and cut it and divide it among the nation's poor, fair and square" (140). This revolution is a desire not only for an equitable

distribution of wealth but also an equitable distribution of the hardships inflicted as a result of environmental degradation.

Majeed continues in his commentary on first world countries that drive out and then collect refugees by explaining that “they do not want democracy. They want only dictators. It is easier for them to deal with dictators” (224). With democracy comes the idea of more equitable distribution within these countries and thus the possibility of more equitable distribution of the hardships of environmental degradation. Without these ideas of equality, first world countries such as Canada are not obliged to acknowledge or deal with the consequences of their consumptive society. Therefore, instead of dealing with these realities, Majeed says that “they will put back somebody else who is a dictator. Maybe not a religious one, but it will be the same” (224). Through this statement we can understand that what is put back in these countries could be the implementation of consumerist values, values that would distract from the realities of the environmental degradation to which these other countries are subjected. As a result of the idea that consumerism is an escape from hardships, we understand that to escape these cycles of capitalism it is necessary to be first established within its systems. The link between escape and entrenchment in consumerist systems is seen when Cockroach is told by a Jehovah’s Witness: “give me those coins and pray, because then, and only then, you will have the chance to be beamed up by Jesus our saviour” and be saved from the fiery death the hole in the ozone will lead to (8).

Environmentalism is presented largely through the use of religious connotations, for it is the Jehovah’s witnesses who “slapped [Cockroach] with an apocalyptic prophecy: Are you aware of the hole in the ozone above

us?" (7). Furthermore, the Jehovah's Witnesses tell him that in order to escape this environmental degradation one must pay a literal price. In this instance we see the way in which capitalism has become dominant over the means of people's salvation, for the only way that is offered for there to be protection from the environmental degradation of the ozone layer is through the monetary system. Cockroach is told by the Jehovah's Witness that as a result of the ozone depletion: "soon we shall all fry. Only the cockroaches shall survive to rule the earth. But do not despair, young man, because you will redeem yourself today if you buy this magazine" (7). Thus the only option that is presented for solution to this issue is continued participation in the capitalist structure, articulating the viewpoint of many people, that environmental issues will be solved through human investment and innovation. This novel presents to its audience an adherence to Prometheanism, a view that has unlimited faith in the human ability to overcome the obstacles of the environment through technological innovation.

While the solutions to environmental degradation are presented in Promethean terms, we as readers can understand through the eyes of Cockroach the ways in which this faith in human ability led to the degradation in the first place. This degradation is caused by capitalist society's ability to drag individual in a relentless and suffocating way. Cockroach is told by his hallucination of the giant cockroach that "the world ended for you a long time ago. You never participated in it. Look at you, always escaping, slipping, and feeling trapped in everything you do" (201). In some respects, Cockroach can be seen as escaping both the social duties of a capitalist society and the apocalyptic future that the environment will face because he represents destructive over-consumption. However, it is

also pointed out that Cockroach is already living in an apocalyptic world; he is “the scum of the earth in this capitalist endeavour” and thus he is presented in the image of the cockroach - the species that will “survive to rule the earth” (123, 7). Cockroach additionally argues that “It is not escape,” for he says: “I refuse to be a subordinate. It is my voluntary decision” (201). Because of Cockroach’s refusal to conform to the consumerist value systems, he is presented as a critique of the Promethean belief in human capacity. In the scene in which he claims that “a representative of the future ruling race is actually here to escort me” to the apocalypse, it becomes clear that the future ruling class is still the human (201). In reality, it is the human race that is becoming the cockroach, for it is the human race that has to live in this apocalyptic land they have created for themselves (201).

Through understanding the human in terms of the cockroach, humans become the invasive species on the earth. All people become corrupted by consumerism and will destroy the world for their own needs, as “in the end, they will get bigger spoons and dig up the earth for their father’s and mothers’ inheritances [...] those Buddhists will eventually float down, take off their colourful, exotic costumes, and wear their fathers’ three-piece suits” (21). Even those people who push against the typical consumerist ideals that blanket countries such as Canada will conform to the destructive nature of these ideals. Since Cockroach changes back and forth between a cockroach and a human, he represents the way in which people experience these changes of values. While Cockroach disagrees and resists these systems, he often has no choice but to participate in them. In another way, this fluidity between human and cockroach represents humanity’s attempts to hide its reality as infestation on the Earth: Cockroach says

that people “despise this world and therefore they are engaged in a constant act of covering themselves up - covering up their faces, their feet, their nails, their breath, their decaying bodies” (185). Cockroach stands outside of these value systems and can see people clearly, despite at times being sucked into these human traits of consumption - thus the reason why he is a cockroach when he steals things. Cockroach can see himself as a cockroach because, unlike everyone else, he is not trying to cover up his reality. Society is obsessed with its own perfection, and thus the citizens will watch the hardships of others, like how the couple watches Cockroach through the window of the restaurant. Cockroach claims to Genevieve that discussing these issues and acknowledging them from a distance “is exciting” for general society (140). But Canadian society does not want to acknowledge their similar position; rather they use consumerism to hide themselves. It is because of this that “the rich hate the poor, and they especially hate those whose odour surfaces like a cloud to overshadow the smell of cigarettes and hot plates or to overwhelm the travelling scent of an expensive perfume” (85). The poor remind society of its corporeal being on the earth, an idea that a consumerist society wishes to forget in favour of continual and unlimited consumption of the earth. The poor are rejected by society and they are seen as cockroaches, for it is people like Cockroach who present the idea that humans are immortal and society is finite. From this portrayal of the purposefully blind humanity, Hage is able to portray the way in which the Promethean viewpoint will not save the earth, for it only leads to false understanding of one’s position within the world and further degradation of the environment.

From amidst the multiple layers interpretations of this novel, there is a reading that comments on Canada’s

blind-eye approach to environmental issues. *Cockroach* provides an outsider's view that displays the pressures that are placed on others to conform to capitalist value systems. The subsequent limitation of all other ways of life suggests that, in the eyes of Canada and other first world countries, all issues can be solved through the consumerist cycles that drive their societies. *Cockroach's* attempted suicide clarifies that the only way to escape from these dominant systems is to be first part of the system. This conundrum suggests that without participation within capitalist ideology one is not in a position to live one's life, and further, is not in a position to be able to end that life. The endless and contrary cycle of overconsumption strangles society. This image of consumption as a factor that is killing society, leads us to see the effect that these systems have on the environment, for overconsumption is not only killing its participants but also the earth itself. Through this negative depiction of capitalist societies, this reading of *Cockroach* points to the way in which prometheanism dominates as the only "correct" way to view environmental issues. It is taken as fact that humanity is able to fix all solutions through its continued reliance on consumerism. However it is clear through the establishment of humanity as the cockroach that human society will not overcome these degradations through consumption, but rather ironically this consumption is what will lead to an apocalyptic end to the human society that we have all so carefully constructed.

Work Cited

Hage, Rawi. *Cockroach*. Toronto: Anansi Press, 2008.