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Identity and Social Reality in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Book of My Lives*

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Writing for the memorial volume for Christoph Houswitschka is not easy; however, I try to take a step back from my emotion and think about my first encounter with him. I met him for the first time in the seminar room of building U9 (An der Universität 9) at the University of Bamberg. It was the summer semester of 2014, and I attended his seminar on Eastern European writers in English. Attending this seminar changed both my academic as well as personal life. In that seminar, Christoph introduced us to Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon, one of my favourite contemporary authors since then. I wrote a term paper on Aleksandar Hemon for the seminar and subsequently decided to write my Master's thesis with Christoph on Aleksandar Hemon's writing. Our last conversation on Hemon was in January 2022, a few weeks before his sudden death. He came to a guest lecture that I organised within the framework of my own Aleksandar Hemon seminar. After the guest lecture, we discussed Hemon's most recent memoir, *My Parents: An Introduction/This Does Not Belong to You* (2019). So, when thinking of contributing to Christoph's memorial volume, I thought what else would be better than writing an essay on Aleksandar Hemon's first non-fiction, *The Book of My Lives* (2013), which Christoph and I admired and talked about a lot.

The Book of My Lives is Aleksandar Hemon's fifth book, but unlike his previous books, this book is not fiction; instead, it is a collection of essays forming a life narrative of the different lives that Hemon has lived so far: a child in socialist Sarajevo, a refugee in America, a loving husband, a father, and a writer.

At the very outset of the book, Hemon acknowledges the struggle of writing non-fiction by saying, "I write fiction because I cannot not do it, but I have to be pressed into writing non-fiction" (Hemon ix). This sense of forcefully writing non-fiction can be traced in *The Book of My Lives* in the framework of evasiveness that hangs around the essays. Furthermore, this collection of essays does not conform to the conventional way of memoir writing, which reflects the fact that Hemon was pressed into writing it. The essays in the book do not follow a chronology; instead, their temporal and spatial irregularities become the backbone of the collection, which gives Hemon the freedom to move between various settings and timelines. The decision to give a chapter-by-chapter guide of adaptation history of the collected essays at the end of the book with the title "Table of Discontent" uncovers a feeling of pain and dislocation. This is not surprising because of

Hemon's life story as a Bosnian living in the United States and watching the violence of war and destruction of his beloved country from many a mile away.

As social reality plays a huge part in this collection of autobiographical essays, my analysis of *The Book of My Lives* focuses on Hemon's depictions of the different selves, namely his various identities, from a young Yugoslav boy to becoming a refugee to a popularly acclaimed writer in the United States. This essay argues that social reality in Hemon's writing is different from the kind of social reality philosophers or sociologists commonly discuss; social reality appears more as a representation than an interaction between persons and groups.

In general, from a sociological point of view, we represent ourselves to others depending on the situation and our life experiences. The representation of ourselves (I would rather call these social representations 'identity' in many forms) is strongly influenced by our upbringing and instilled beliefs about the world, society, and surroundings. According to Zygmunt Bauman,

[one] thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. (19)

The behavioural styles and patterns Bauman talks about influence our understanding of reality and indirectly influence our identity. Our identity is also influenced by our perceptions of others and others' perceptions of us. In short, our perceptions of reality and our identity are formed by our beliefs and backgrounds. Hemon's way of writing about different life experiences upholds this representational mode of social reality and its function in forming identity.

According to Woodward, for the last few decades, the concept of identity came to matter "both in terms of social and political concerns within the contemporary world and within academic discourses, where identity has been seen as conceptually important in offering explanations of social and cultural changes" (1). Furthermore, Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay point out, "identities are never unified . . . [but] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (4). In reply, Appiah argues that "in constructing an identity, one draws, among other things, on the kinds of person available in one's society" (21). In other words, social reality is relevant to identity, and it determines how a person is going to behave depending on the group that person represents. But of course, there is not just one specific way of behaving that is universally valid for a black person or a white person or a man or a woman or a gay or a straight person or people from other social categories; rather, there are plenty of different ways that people can conduct themselves. However, these notions set by society and social reality provide some models for shaping our life plans. Moreover, according

to Alasdair MacIntyre, it is because we all live out narratives in our lives and “because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others” (qtd. in Appiah 22). Therefore, a narrative unity is important to form a compelling collection of individual stories that sustain as a collective identity in a society. But this does not mean that each individual story has to be identical; rather, it needs to be relatable to the collective memory of the society. Ethnicity and nationality play a vital role in bringing individual stories close to a larger narrative; for Kwame Anthony Appiah, “ethnic and national identities fit a personal narrative into a larger narrative” because “an individual’s life depends deeply on something socially created and transmitted” (23). An individual identity, therefore, consists of narratives created and transmitted from society, which refers to the plural nature of identity.

The Book of My Lives reverberates the plural nature of identity through Aleksandar Hemon’s personal account of his life within a larger narrative of ethnic and national identities. Hemon starts the collection with “The Lives of Others”, a seven-section chapter exploring identity in numerous forms. He begins the sub-chapter “Who Is That?” by detailing a life-changing event that the birth of his sister brought into his life. The birth of his sister disturbed the general way of four-year-old Hemon’s life: “Thus, my sooty alleged sister’s arrival marked the beginning of a tormentful, lonely period in my early development” (Hemon 4). This is the first time Hemon understands the existence of an Other; young Hemon has realised within a few days that this sooty alleged sister of his is going to stay forever in his life and his house and that he is not going to have his parents only to himself. In realisation of this truth, Hemon writes, “In our house, in my life, in my mother’s life, every day, all the time, forever, she was there—the soot-skinned not-me, the other” (5). To get out of this pain, Hemon tries to ‘exterminate’ her by stifling her, but he cannot do it:

she was my little sister, because I loved her. But the body is always ahead of the thought and I kept up the pressure for another moment, until she started vomiting curdled breast milk. I was terrified with the possibility of losing her: her name was Kristina; I was her big brother; I wanted her to live so I could love her more. (6)

Before anything devastating happens, Aleksandar Hemon’s mother comes to the scene and rescues the baby from her brother, but this incident leaves a lasting influence on his sense of identity. Hemon states,

The recollection of that sororicide attempt is the earliest memory in which I can observe myself from outside: what I see is me and my sister. Never again would I be alone in the world, never again would I have it exclusively for myself. Never again would my selfhood be a sovereign territory devoid of the presence of others. (7)

Hemon keeps exploring different aspects of his identity in the remainder of the chapter: the significance of the *raja*¹, a teenage group culture where neighbourhoods are divided and controlled by youngsters; his parents' and sister's experience of being a refugee in Canada; the vital significance of ethnic identity in Bosnia, where it overshadows every single other aspect of identity.

In the next sub-chapter, Hemon talks about the significance of otherness and loyalty towards the nation as a whole. Each small *raja* has their demarcated territory that protects them from intruders: "The Park was therefore our rightful domain, our sovereign territory, on which no stranger, let alone a member of another *raja*, could trespass—any suspected foreigner was subject to preemptive frisking or punitive attack" (8). This small territorial concept of *raja* among the youngsters of Sarajevo in the 1970s suppresses the ideology of ethnic identity and even questions national identity, where national or ethnic identity remain abstract ideas, and *raja* becomes the most powerful collective identity for them:

My primary loyalty was to my *raja* and any other collective affiliation was entirely abstract and absurd. Yes, we were all Yugoslavs and Pioneers and we all loved socialism, our country, and its greatest son, our marshal Tito, but never would I have gone to war and taken blows for those. Our other identities—say, the ethnicity of any of us—were wholly irrelevant. (9)

What Hemon articulates here can be seen from the perspective of social representation theory. By affirming his allegiance to his *raja*, Hemon is establishing his relationships with the world and others, which, in retrospect, establishes a system of interpretation to understand the idea of loyalty to a collective identity. According to Jodelet, social representation as a cognitive phenomenon helps people to connect with "social affiliation to affective and normative implications, interiorisation of the experiences, practices, behavioural and thought patterns socially instilled or transmitted through the social communication they are bounded to" (30). Besides, social representation allows a constructing of reality that leads to stamping and fortifying groups. In Hemon's case, his *raja* becomes the social reality that he is a part of, and this reality, in turn, forms a part of his collective group identity. Each *raja* has their own head in the group, and other group members obey his instruction, but the *raja* that Hemon belongs to has no particular leader. Everyone has the authority to contribute to the group's decision. Their *raja* breaks after a birthday party joke by Hemon goes wrong. Hemon goes to the

¹ The Bosnian word *raja* comes from the Ottoman word *reaya* or *râya*, which originally means all the non-Muslim subjects of the empire. However, like many other words, the meanings of the word have changed, and its current meaning refers to anybody who is considered to be a member of the urban community, or to friends and acquaintances, irrespective of their religious affiliation. In the context of Hemon's use in the book, *raja* is used to denote the young and urban teenage groups who hang out in the street corners and parks and who forms kind of an in group alliance to control and protect neighbourhoods.

birthday party of one of their fellow companions, Almir, with all his *raja*. At the birthday party, everyone dresses well, and Almir wears a fluffy sweater that he has got from Turkey. In response, Hemon tries to make a joke by saying, “So you are a Turk!” (10), without knowing that the word ‘Turk’ is a slang word for the Bosnian Muslim population. Because of this failed joke, the atmosphere of the entire party changes, and everybody goes home before the party is even over. Then, Hemon realises, “What I said othered Almir, it made him feel excluded from the group I was presumably unimpeachably part of, whatever group it was” (11).

In the section on his parents’ immigration to Canada in 1993, Hemon explores the stereotypical immigrants’ attitude towards finding differences between “we being Bosnians or ex-Yugoslavs, they being purely Canadian” (14). However, Hemon argues that this spontaneous process of demarcation between *us* and *them* stems from the immigrants’ abstract awareness of their belonging, and his parents are not an exception either. The immigrants feel dislocated and inferior to the local people who they are living with now, who are already at their homes. Therefore, this constant comparison between *us* and *them* creates a rhetorical balance between the immigrants and the locals. It thus creates a sense of belonging to a place, because “as long as we know who we are and what we are not, we are as good as they are” (16).

In this time of globalisation, concepts such as home and belonging have been much discussed. However, feminist studies debated these concepts well before they became a hot topic in migration and postcolonial studies. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” critique the concept of home. In their essay, Martin and Mohanty argue about two distinct aspects of home, which they label as “modalities”:

being home and not being home. “Being home” refers to the place where one lives within the familiar, safe, protected boundaries; “not being home” is a matter of realising that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. Because the locations acquire meaning and function as sites of personal and historical struggles, they work against the notion of an unproblematic geographic location of home. (196)

Martin and Mohanty’s essay problematises the traditional and patriarchal notion of home by pointing to the fact that the role of community is paramount in understanding concepts like belonging and identity. Rosemarie Buikema, in her article “A Poetics of Home: On Narrative Voice and the Deconstruction of Home in Migrant Literature”, uses Martin and Mohanty’s essay to argue that a feminist reading of home could be applied to other similarly marginalised discourses such as migration literature: “Home . . . is tied up with dominant discourses at the cost of marginalised discourses. The concepts of home and identity are thus strongly

related to discursive space, to the possibility and the ability to share experiences through storytelling" (178).

It can, therefore, be argued that the concept of home is revisited in postcolonial narratives of migration, which ultimately severs any connection that it had with the geographical sense of a homeland. In the context of literature written by migrants or anyone with a migration background, according to Susheila Nasta, storytelling acts as "a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it" (7). Therefore, migrant stories are the texts that redefine the migrant's sense of self and home.

As the title shows, Hemon has lived numerous lives, and the essays frequently grapple with a transitory feeling of home and displacement. In his mid-twenties, there is no place he feels more established at than in Sarajevo, a residential area of a city where he has an individual base that, from hairdressers to local butchers, recognises him, and vice versa. But the sudden refugee status in the United States has, of course, created a sense of being displaced and directs Hemon towards a 'self-othering' process. Hemon writes, "Displacement results in a tenuous relationship with the past, with the self that used to exist and operate in a different place, where the qualities that constituted us were in no need of negotiation" (17). An immigrant tries to find a balance between the past they belong to and the present, which is completely new and changing from time to time, to cope with the new life. Therefore, an immigrant or displaced person "strives for narrative stability—here is my story!—by way of systematic nostalgia" (17). Hemon finishes this chapter by anticipating a plausible answer to the age-old question of defining oneself:

So I say I am complicated. I'd also like to add that I am nothing if not an entanglement of unanswerable questions, a cluster of others.

I'd like to say it might be too early to tell. (24)

Most of the chapters in *The Book of My Lives* do not adhere to a single theme; however, they keep revealing different aspects of Hemon's identity. In "Family Dining", *borscht* in Chicago takes Hemon back in time and space to the family dinners in Sarajevo. Fiction becomes reality in "The Kauders Case", when Hemon's fictional character, Alphonse Kauders, turns out to be a criticism of Tito. In this essay, Hemon talks about himself and his friends getting into trouble because of their discussion of abolishing "the Tito cult and the related state rituals" at a friend's birthday party (48). The State Security office "interrogated [him] for thirteen hours straight, in the course of which [he] discovered that all the other people who attended the party had visited or were going to visit the warm State Security offices" (49). In another essay, Hemon talks about the mountain lodge where he spent most of his summer vacations and talks about the 1991 Croatian War:

My monastic mountain living was now about rudimentary thought protection, for once war got inside my mind, I feared, it would burn and pillage it. I read *The Magic Mountain* and Kafka's letters; I wrote stuff full of madness, death, and whimsical wordplay; I listened to Miles Davis, who died that fall, while staring at the embers in our fireplace. On my hikes I conducted imaginary conversations with imaginary partners, not unlike the ones between Castorp and Settembrini in Mann's novel. I chopped a lot of wood to ease my rising anxiety. Occasionally, I climbed a steep mountain face without any gear or protection. It was a kind of suicidal self-soothing challenge: if I made it all the way to the top without falling, I thought, I could survive the war. One of the daily rituals was watching the nightly news broadcast at 7:30, and the news was never good, always worse. (70)

Watching the siege of Sarajevo on television news in Chicago brings back Hemon's memory of the Croatian war. "The Lives of a Flaneur" describes Hemon's experience volunteering at the International Human Rights Law Institute of DePaul University. Hemon volunteered in a project to identify the destroyed and damaged structures in Sarajevo caused by the Bosnian war. This story explores how emotionally difficult and challenging this work was for him. Many of the buildings in the photographs Hemon must analyse are without any roof, entirely damaged by fire, hole-ridden, and with blown away windows. Every now and then, Hemon finds pictures with people in them; however, he always feels like sorting out corpses in those photos. He cannot resist recalling his memories of those buildings or places; those places are so well-known to him that he considers those photographs unreal. There is, for instance, a photograph of an intersection between Danijela Ozme and Kralja Tomislava; right on the other side of this intersection, he used to wait for his secondary school girlfriend, Renata. The building next to it used to have a grocery shop where he would buy some sweets while waiting for his girlfriend. That building he knew everything about was a substantial part of his life. But the building or the abandoned street are no longer a part of his present life in Chicago until he sees a picture of them. "In the photograph, the building was hollow, disemboweled by a shell, which had evidently fallen through the roof and dropped down a few floors. The supermarket now existed only in the flooded storage space of my memory" (150). This instance of Hemon talking about a photograph of a building from Sarajevo echoes Benedict Anderson's assumption that identity "cannot be 'remembered'" but needs to be "narrated" (204). By narrating his attachment to the photographs and his memories of the places represented in these pictures, Hemon accentuates his Bosnian-American identity.

Aleksandar Hemon has given Sarajevo a life that has nothing to do with what media images represent. In popular media, the siege of Sarajevo by the Serbian army is commonly represented as another news of a war and atrocities that happened in the Balkans. However, Hemon's description of the city depicts more than just atrocities by the Serbian army. Instead, his portrayal of a sieged city is

populated with individuals who are not just victims of the occupiers' army but individuals with plans and ideas for life.

Hemon's attention to detail, along with his passion for the absurd, can be traced in the chapter "If God Existed, He'd Be A Solid Mid-Fielder". In this chapter, Hemon shares his experience of playing football with other migrants in Chicago. The chapter is full of insightful descriptions of the fellow migrants with whom he is playing football regularly on the weekends.

Meanwhile, on the bike path, Lalas (nicknamed after the American soccer player) stands beside his wife, who is in a wheelchair. She has a horrific case of fast-advancing MS and cannot move fast enough to get out of the rain. They stand together, waiting for the calamity to end: Lalas in his Uptown United T-shirt, his wife under a piece of cardboard slowly and irreversibly dissolving in the rain. The Tibetan goalie and his Tibetan friends, whom I'd never seen before and never would after that day, are playing a game on the field, which is now completely covered with water, as if running in slow motion on the surface of a placid river. The ground is giving off vapor, the mist touching their ankles, and at moments it seems that they're levitating above the flood. Lalas and his wife are perfectly calm watching them, as if nothing could ever harm them. (She has passed away since that day, somebody rest her soul.) They see one of the Tibetans scoring a goal, the rain-heavy ball sliding between the hands of the goalie, who lands in a puddle. He is untroubled, smiling, and from where I sit, he could well be the Dalai Lama himself. (170)

This attitude of minute observation is evident in other essays in the book, too. For example, while writing about the days just before he leaves Bosnia for the United States, Hemon feels that the Sarajevo city dwellers sense that war is coming; to get away from this uneasy feeling they start to party every night, hang out with friends and family more than before. Hemon even writes an editorial contending that "it was everybody's urgent duty to dance more if we wanted to stop the on-coming catastrophe" (64).

The war breaks out when Hemon is visiting Chicago, where he is sheltered yet feels guilty about being unable to save his city from destruction, watching news footage of snipers and bomb blasts. In the chapter "The Book of My Life", Hemon talks about the disintegrating neighbourhoods of Sarajevo that he knows or the people he knows, dying at the hands of Serbian soldiers, and as unthinkable as it appears, he talks about a literature professor, Professor Nikola Koljevic, whom he once considered a friendly and light-hearted mentor, who is presently one of the "highest-positioned members of the Serbian Democratic Party" (127) monitoring the genocide. Perhaps this is the most disturbing chapter of *The Book of My Lives*. When Radovan Karadzic starts whipping up partisan disdain and setting up the obliteration of Sarajevo, Professor Koljevic supports Karadzic and attends public conferences with him. Hemon does not exaggerate the loathsome irony of the connoisseur turning warmonger. Instead, he showcases the disjunction and

writes: “He had to shoot twice, his long piano-player finger apparently having trembled on the unwieldy trigger” (127).

This is typical of Hemon, a specialist in subversive depreciation. His perfectly assembled description of events is regularly digressive; however, the narrative perpetually returns to the main point of the essay, which is generally not what a reader anticipates. Hemon also believes that life does not follow a single straight line and does not continue in straight narrative lines either. This understanding of life is strongly confirmed in the final chapter of the book, “The Aquarium”. This essay details a heart-breaking story of the death of Hemon’s infant daughter, Isabel, because of a brain tumour. The heart-wrenching story touches upon parents’ pain and suffering in losing a child. Although one expects Hemon to be sentimental, his acute ability to tell stories keeps him and the reader at bay. This chapter has a narrative that moves back and forth between the hospital and Hemon’s home, depicting plainly the struggle of himself and his wife, Teri, to live their everyday lives. They have to ensure their older daughter Ella has a normal life, given that her younger sister, Isabel, is in the hospital and her parents are mostly away at the hospital with her. Hemon talks about Ella talking about an imaginary brother, who later appears to be only an inflatable blue space alien balloon. The chapter ends with Hemon talking about Ella’s imaginary brother, whom she named Mingus, as a tool for Ella to cope with the tragedy of losing her sister. Hemon concludes the chapter by stating the following:

Mingus is still good and well, going steadily about his alternative-existence business. Although he stays with us a lot, he lives around the corner yet again, with his parents and a variable number of siblings, most recently two brothers, Jackson and Cliff, and a sister, Piccadilly. He has had his own children—three sons, at one point, one of whom was called Andy. When we went skiing, Mingus preferred snowboarding. When we went to London for Christmas, Mingus went to Nebraska. He plays chess (“chest” in Ella’s parlance) pretty well, it seems. Sometimes he yells at Ella (“Shut up, Mingus!” she yells back); other times he loses his own voice, but then speaks in Isabel’s. He is also a good magician. With his magic wand, Ella says, he can make Isabel reappear. (239-40)

This quote specifically and the essay in general show the interplay between hope and despair in times of painful events. Elaine Scarry remarks that the banality of painful events is that words fail to articulate the severity of the situations or even represent the pain itself accurately. She argues that “whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). But in Hemon’s case, pain becomes the source of his inspiration, and words become his only tool in articulating his sufferings.

The Book of My Lives is, therefore, a love song to two unique cities; it is a heartfelt eulogy to the obligations of the family; it is of Hemon’s mixed feeling about playing football with fellow migrants; and finally, it is a book that represents Hemon’s

depiction of his different selves. In the end, by strolling around in the streets of his new city, playing soccer and chess with international oddballs, falling in love, marrying and having kids, Hemon finds in the United States what he got from Sarajevo: a geology of the spirit. *The Book of My Lives*, therefore, amazingly delineates Hemon's constant endeavour to modelling and remodelling himself. In short, *The Book of My Lives* records Aleksandar Hemon's struggle of making and remaking of identity in Sarajevo and Chicago.

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