

## **How to End a War: Remnants of Hope and Terror in Danny Ramadan's *The Foghorn Echoes***

### **Abstract**

In the novel, *The Foghorn Echoes* (2022) by Danny Ramadan, readers are introduced to two young men, Hussam and Wassim, who love each other but whose lives are forever changed by a terrible event. Though this event marks the beginning of their end, they are met with several encounters that continue to separate them, as they grapple with what it means to be queer in Syria and what it means to be refugees elsewhere. Both their stories, told back and forth between the two young men, reveal the cruel optimism that is situated in the relationship between the good life and the queer struggle of romantic life. In other words, their desire for a better life as queer refugees becomes cruel when it becomes an obstacle in and of itself. For Hussam, readers witness this devastating blow as he is haunted by the death of his father and then by his separation from Wassim, as he struggles to build a better life in the nation-state of Canada. Wassim, on the other hand, has become a refugee in his own homeland, in this case, Syria during the Civil War, and he comes to view himself as a problematic object. Through both of their lives, it is revealed that the reality of queer Syrian refugees is inseparable from the complicated and oppressive that mark them such as the war and their forbidden love, whether they remain in the homeland or seek to build a good life somewhere else.

**Key words:** *cruel optimism, good life, queerness, refugeeism, romantic love, war*

## 1. Introduction

“Damascus was a rippled city that ricocheted history back at its people, and every era was marked on its map” (Ramadan 15).

And thus, Hussam and Wassim’s story begins, as they negotiate their adolescence against the backdrop of Syria during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the nation-state known as the United States. All while their romantic and sexual intimacy brings forth another struggle—one just as catastrophic and deleterious—that defines their lives forever. Such a rupture occurs when Hussam’s father catches the two young men kissing on a rooftop, and what happens thereafter changes their lives in a way that cannot be undone. To be more precise, Hussam and Wassim are at once afflicted by the following: “They would forever remember whose foot kicked Hussam’s father, the sound the sole Wassim’s shoe made against the man’s face... Then, as if in slow motion, he slipped off the side of the building” (Ramadan 17). In a few sentences, Danny Ramadan’s novel, *The Foghorn Echoes* captures the event in the two young men’s lives that cannot be erased, anchored by the death of Hussam’s father, and what unfolds is a gripping story about forbidden love in a war-torn country.

Ten years later, their lives are further torn by the Syrian Civil War. What started as a peaceful uprising in response to the regime of Bashar al-Assad turned into a militarized rebellion (van Veen et al. 15). Though the ongoing war is complex, it can be described as emerging from a conflict between pro-government civilians and its opposition “that turned into a violent civil war when the dissidents met heavy repression from the Bashar al-Assad’s regime” (Akhtar and Nageen 7). As the authors explain, the situation is much more multifaceted, involving various other forces, and Hussam and Wassim are two of the millions of Syrians who are affected by the violence. So, in the way that Ramadan describes Damascus, so too are the lives of Hussam and Wassim, who

straddle life under the guise of a war as they struggle with questions about belonging, loss, queerness, refugeeism, and war. For Hussam, it is his life in Vancouver as a queer Syrian refugee, haunted by his father's spectre, that he attempts to overcome as he rebuilds himself. Wassim, however, remains on the other side of the world in Damascus, where he is a refugee in his own homeland during a war that he cannot escape. And, as Damascus ricochets history back to its peoples, this is an examination of Hussam and Wassim's shared but different lives, ushered by Ramadan's descriptive and provocative writing, to reveal the complex and sometimes ineffable struggles that confront queer Syrian refugees in particular.

This paper examines the question of whether or not migration supports a bearable life and the haunting aftereffects and vestiges of a forbidden love in *The Foghorn Echoes*. Reading Ramadan's novel in that context can alert readers to the cruel optimism of a good life and romantic love among queer Syrian refugees, touching on themes of belonging, loss, queerness, refugeeism, and war. I argue that the novel is a significant piece of work that also asks us to consider what it means to confront a queer displacement that is categorically accompanied by erasure, invisibility, and marginality, as Bhagat (2023) suggests. More specifically, *The Foghorn Echoes* demonstrates the difficulty Hussam and Wassim experience in constructing a life beyond the complicated and oppressive histories that mark them in juxtaposition to the love they desire but which they cannot attain because of their inevitable separation, leading to affective injustices and a feeling of dislocation and unbelonging both in Canada and Syria.

## **2. The Burden of Cruel Optimism**

As the novel goes back and forth between the two young men, the predicament of cruel optimism becomes particularly evident, read in almost every sentence and word, jolting readers along the way. According to Berlant, "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you

desire is actually an obstacle to flourishing” (1). Berlant largely borrows from Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s contributions on affect and attachment theory, contending that an attachment to an object of desire is cruel when the optimistic hope of being able to obtain the desire becomes a form of impediment instead. A prominent example of cruel optimism that Berlant provides is that of a “good life,” which for Ahmed “is imagined through the proximity of objects” (90). Though Berlant suggests that individuals have their own articulations and forms of the good life, upward mobility is often described as one of its markers (2), or, said differently, it is a proximity to a good life. The American Dream is one such example, imagined through a promise of upward mobility based on the falsehood of hard work, or the seduction of a nation-state like Canada or the United States as bearers of the good life. The fallacy of a good life, such as the American Dream, is thus described as cruel optimism when the hope for the object of desire renders the desire unattainable.

For Hussam and Wassim, cruel optimism cannot be divorced from the category of refugee, defined as an object of repression who experiences abuse and violence (Fassin 221). In seeking asylum elsewhere, the search for a good life becomes a prominent feature among migrants. To borrow the words of Dawney et al., they “hope for small things to change, and hope for a liveable future” (3) or a desire for what Ahmed refers to as a bearable life. However, migration and mobility have been framed as forms of cruel optimism because, like the American Dream, they do not necessarily bring forth a good life. The feeling of being “out of place” can become a familiar experience as a consequence (Held 1906). The description of Ahmed’s “melancholic migrant” is significant here, which the author describes as a racialized figure whose racialization is used to categorize someone like Hussam, a refugee, as not belonging to the nation-state. Through such exclusion, migrants can encounter a certain degree of desolation, contradicting the happiness that is promised through a good life in a place like Canada.

The novel also exposes the struggle of romantic love between Hussam and Wassim, which adds to their melancholia. As both Ahmed and Berlant suggest, romantic love can also be categorized as a form of cruel optimism. In the case of the two characters, their desire to be in a queer relationship with each other, described as forbidden love in the context of Syria, becomes an obstacle in and of itself. Ahmed's work, *The Promise of Happiness*, is helpful here as it encourages an examination of the good life and the struggle of queerness. It is to ask, as such, whether the notion of fleeing Syria affords Hussam and Wassim a semblance of a good life while being queer. Does migrating to Canada, for instance, offer Hussam an opportunity to be openly queer and to also live a bearable life? The insights from Ahmed and Berlant's works are an overture to this question: it can be difficult to ascertain a bearable life in a capitalist and heteronormative society that privileges non-queer and non-migrant individuals. That is, to be queer or a refugee, and to make life bearable against the iterations of capitalist and heteronormative hegemonies, is contradictory since a good life is characterized by hegemonic forces that exclude marginalized peoples from fully participating in the nation-state.

### **3. Escaping Terror and War**

For Hussam, his life in Vancouver is far from what he had expected after fleeing from Syria. Readers are introduced to him as an adult, almost ten years after the incident in 2003, as the ghost of his father still haunts him. As Ramadan writes, "My father stands in the corner of the club, angry, dark-featured, hard eyes and sharp features pointing at me" (23). Hussam, unable to remove the account of his father's death from his memory, is able to recall the incident vividly. From his father's face covered in blood to Wassim's foot kicking his father, he can imagine it all, remembering every detail from beginning to end like the back of his hand. Even the thud that his

father's body made when it hit the ground, or the wailing sound that Hussam let out right after, are engraved into the crevice of his recollection.

Along with his father's face, the remnants of terror and war that he encountered in Syria cannot be escaped either as Hussam describes a scar on his body: "It's the wicked smile of the Syrian regime agent who placed the edge of the knife on my side and sliced it" (77). In an almost seizing manner, these words are a window to a frightening encounter described in a short but evocative sentence, as the imprint of brutality is archived and contained both on Hussam's body and in his psyche. Though he states that the scar is no longer visible, Hussam is clearly scorched by its memory, as he can still evoke the face of the man who held the knife against his body and pierced it through his skin. Even now, as he undresses in a locker room and examines his naked body through his reflection in a mirror, he remembers everything: how the assailant clenched his teeth when the blade touched Hussam's torso to the wicked grimace on the face of the assailant as he made the incision. So, even as the scar fades, the cruelty of war, as well as its imprint, remains present and ongoing in Hussam's life miles away from Syria. This is where the desire of a good life in Canada, in bits and pieces, can be framed as cruel optimism as his migration to Canada does not necessarily allow him to escape the war.

To recognize the emotional inundation of this affect, the words of the Shire can be evoked to offer resonance: "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" (24). Refugeeism, put differently, is another term for forced migration, and many Syrian refugees fled their homeland due to concerns about their safety and security (Alrababa et al. 8). Indeed, refugees make the decision to leave their homes to escape terror and war. But, as Hussam leaves his homeland, the monstrosity follows him to Canada, nonetheless, maimed by a past that Hussam cannot exonerate himself from. It is placed on his body, etched into memory, and reminded of it over and over again.

The touch of the blade, its sharp edges that now contour part of his body, as such is always there, perforating Hussam in an invisible but pronounced manner. It is like the air that we breathe, whose particles are unseen to the naked eye, but we know it is there because we feel it enter and exit our bodies, and, for Hussam, that air suffocates him with every breath he takes from one land to another.

How does this affect his queerness? Hussam's intimate and sexual encounters, which almost seem like attempts on his part to break free from his war-torn life in Syria, are equally weighed down by the past. In the locker room at the gym, for example, when a man in red underwear glances at him, he can register the moment, attending to the interaction with detail, but the face of the man who left the scar on his body is just as prominent, if not more so. And then, as always, his father reappears: "The ghost of my father hides behind the lockers, a black shadow pulsating at the edges with eyes sparking yellow. He moves like electricity across the room" (78). It can be gauged from this description that his father does not only appear as a silhouette, manifesting in one place but as a spirit that transcends itself, materializing in one location and then in another at an inexplicable pace, haunting Hussam from all angles. It seems as though his father is present in the face of every man Hussam encounters, reminding him of Syria wherever he goes as well as his father's rejection of his queerness.

The man in the red underwear, as Hussam learns, is named Robert. When Hussam speaks with him at first, he imagines a life with the stranger in front of him, as he thinks about making coffee for Robert in the morning or watching a romantic comedy together with him. Hussam even thinks, "He looks as though he's about to propose to me, and it's crazy but if he did I'd say yes" (82). This moment reverberates Ahmed's (2010) discussion on "unhappy queers," who envision a good life, relegated to a happiness that is attached to heteronormativity. For instance, Hussam's

imagination posits marriage, commonly defined by heterosexual representations of a good life, as something that would bring him happiness with Robert. Though this attachment is not explicitly stated in the novel, it can be assumed that Hussam's desire, shored up in the fleeting moment he meets Robert, is indicative of the following situation that Ahmed describes here:

There is no doubt that the affective repertoire of happiness gives us images of a certain kind of life, a life that has certain things and does certain things. There is no doubt that it is hard to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledom, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy. (90)

In that manner, an attachment to a problematic object like Robert, although a brief rumination and an imagined one, speaks to the way in which Hussam's view of a good life is embedded in a heteronormative orientation, despite the fact that it never seems to take form.

Even as Robert pushes his face against the mattress, and pins Hussam down when he informs this stranger before him that he is not ready for something intimate and sexual, Hussam thinks about the domesticity that Ahmed attends to in her work. Hussam, faced down and with Robert's weight on top of his body, contemplates suggesting something like the following, although he is unable to express it out loud: "A comedy about straight white people falling in love, or a horror movie, so that I can scream and burrow into his chest like a teenage girl" (Ramadan 87). Here, it is more explicitly stated that Hussam frames the good life in relation to heteronormative standards, confirming what Ahmed and Berlant have theorized. What takes place, however, is far from what Hussam pictures with Robert:

His cock Is a dagger stabbing my insides. My mouth is dry. I want him to stop. I want to scream and push him off me. He's stronger than me, but I'm strong too. I can push him off against the wall and free myself. I can punch him in the face if I have to. I look up, and I see the ghost of my father, his arms crossed. He walks toward me and covers my mouth with his palm. He has a wicked smile on his shattered face, and his fingers smell like poppers. I deserve this pain. I should just let this man do whatever the fuck he wants with my body. I groan with closed lips. (89-90)



In one way, as his interaction with Robert reveals, Hussam's imagination of queerness and a good life is both denied and impeded. What begins as a cordial encounter between the two men turns into something terrible instead, unfortunately. Then, Robert starts to bite Hussam's lips and remove his shirt, ignoring Hussam's suggestion that they talk for a bit instead (85). Soon after, Robert does as he pleases, paying no attention to Hussam's protests when he tells Robert that he is not prepared for anal sex, but his opposition is not heard or taken seriously.

As this encounter unfolds, it also contains Hussam's supposed rationalization of the pain he experiences in his queer intimacies and relations as his punishment for what happened to his father. Hussam is convinced he does not deserve a good life as a result. This, too, makes Hussam an unhappy queer, for he is never free from his father's dissenting and watchful eyes. His father's apparition and haunting disapproval, in that way, gestures queerness as an epithet of an unbearable life. And so, as the story goes on, it becomes evident that Hussam's status as a refugee makes it difficult to forget the past, wrought by warfare and violent ramifications, and the struggle to be queer does not resolve itself either. Thus, the opening chapters of the novel reverberate the following message: the optimism of a good life are made cruel for Hussam because the optimism it claims to beget cannot be isolated and severed from the echoes of the war—both physically and the one in his mind that has him convinced he deserves the pain inflicted upon him.

#### **4. Naming the Unnamed**

His father's face emerges throughout Hussam's story, but it is most affective when he wakes up in the middle of the night, shaken by his partner, Ray, who sponsored him to Canada and with whom he has an open relationship, or at least what is described as one. Hussam, unaware of what is happening to him as he is awakened by Ray, claims to hear a noise. It is a noise that for someone like Hussam is etched into his memory:

Sometimes I dream of my father, waiting for me at an imaginary border, a dotted line on a gigantic map. I try to avoid him; I jump across the dotted line back and forth as if it will hide me from him. He appears on all sides of the line, and his hand always holds me by the collar. Sometimes I dream of a rocking sea that I've never seen, or at least can't recall. Sometimes I am a boat, my wet wood pressured by the grip of the sea. The waves slap me, and I mourn my emptiness. I'm a hollow boat without an oar or a soul, and my journey is infinite. I'm a boat that won't sink. I can't sink. I'm a boat forgotten on a rocking sea until my wood is rotten and disintegrated into the salt. (Ramadan 149)

The foghorn—the sound that warns a boat or a ship of hazards—is perhaps the noise that contains the cruellest resonance of them all. It is in this moment, as the sound of the foghorn echoes past continents and oceans, that one can discern how the remnants of unresolved grief and trauma remain a permanent fixture in the life of a refugee.

Accordingly, this is where the interaction between the cruel optimism of a good life and refugeeism is most striking. Hussam's nightmare, lost in the agonizing and distressing violence of history, makes clear an unnamed entitlement to a good life: white privilege. His partner listens, for sure, but he cannot begin to grasp the extremity of the repercussions Hussam carries. For, to be both queer and a refugee, means to be out of category in one place as well as another (Held 1899). One can feel compassion for Hussam, disappointed then when Ray shares this advice as Hussam's eyes begin to water: "I'm sorry you went through, but you're here now. You're safe and sound. You need to stop reliving this and move on" (157). So, as Hussam is imprisoned by the shackles of his past, Ray can only offer a language that is all too revealing: a grammar of privilege, divorced from the aftermath and repercussions of the devastation and decimation that comes with war. Ray does not understand what it feels like to attempt to cross the Mediterranean to Greece and even less so what it feels like to be detained (149). He cannot fathom what it is like to make it past several checkpoints and then fasten a useless vest around one's body to journey through shallow waters. Unlike Hussam, he has not felt the sharpness of a blade run against his torso.

However, as it seems, Ray is an attachment that Hussam holds onto because his life depends on it. Ray can be seen as someone who is not only an object of desire for the content “of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 21), but also “the cluster of things that the object promises” (20). For sure, Ray is able to provide Hussam with economic and financial support, but he is not able to be present for Hussam emotionally, as his curt response demonstrates. Nonetheless, Hussam remains with Ray even when Hussam on his own volition attempts to leave him time and again. Berlant is onto something when writing the following: “cruel optimism’s double bind: even with an image of a better life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working” (263). To provide further context, “[w]here cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place” (Berlant 21). Distraught by the uncertainty he experiences in Canada, as well as wanting to leave behind his life in Syria, Hussam attaches himself to Ray while not immediately realizing or understanding that it leads to his despondency and unhappiness.

The privilege of whiteness is conspicuous not only from this one nightmare and Ray’s response but also from Hussam’s encounters with racial discrimination that Ramadan offers in snippets, having been jokingly asked if he is Aladdin (27) and shortening his name to Sam (25), something more English-sounding, for those who butcher his name otherwise. Later, when Hussam talks to one of his past lovers, Arda, the only other man he has felt a connection to aside from Wassim, he reveals the following: ““I thought I would find comfort here”” (Ramadan 159). He is lonely, he tells him in reference to Canada, and there is a heaviness in his words that cannot be denied, for Hussam’s admission, unravelling towards the latter part of the novel, is both raw and

unquestionable. This is evidenced, as well, by the snippets Ramadan offers about Hussam's struggles in Canada such as being unable to find a job despite having a degree in English literature (83). The nation-state, as Hussam's lived experience illustrates, does not, to borrow the words of Berlant, secure his happiness (126). Instead, Hussam experiences a mismatch between what comprises a good life and the conditions that make it unattainable (Coates 474). However, as Arda reminds him, Hussam has forgotten what it is to live on the other side of the world (Ramadan 160). Thus, and most devastatingly, Hussam's life in seeking asylum and queer liberalism remain sites of ongoing contestation (Raboin 126). And, for sure, the disparate forms of queerness between Hussam and Ray further demonstrate how harrowing it is to be a queer Syrian refugee who runs from home and who is out of place elsewhere.

### **5. Optimism in its Cruellest Form**

Of course, Wassim also follows Hussam wherever he goes, but it is not until much later in the novel that he reveals the weight that he carries from their romantic love: "Being with Wassim had been like holding fire with closed palms. My heart caught fire, too, and after him it blew away like dust. A metal cage had taken its place. I put every man I touched after Wassim in that cage and locked the door" (Ramadan 162). While he makes this confession, he also recognizes that his love for Wassim is like an everlasting burning coal (92), speaking to their complex and tumultuous relationship as their love is both eternal and withering like a flame.

Although Wasim is unlike any of the other men that Hussam has met whose names dissolve as soon as they touch the tip of his tongue, it is their separation that burdens Hussam the most. This recognition is imbued with a feeling of regret as Hussam blames himself for becoming detached from Wassim in order to flee Syria. When it comes to this remorse, it is only almost toward the end of the novel that Hussam divulges what he has carried for so long. All those years

ago, on a rubber boat that would be the beginning of his eventual journey to Canada, he had done something that consumes him to this day:

The smuggler pointed his gun at me, ushering me to the side of the boat. I stood and looked at the sea. I dug my nails into the bag I had beside me. It felt alive between my hands, like the back of a person who ached under my forceful grip. ‘Goodbye,’ I whispered as I pushed it off the boat. It plunged deep into the water before surfacing again, waving at me to the gentler rhythm of the sea. A departing ex-lover. A clinging past. The sea slowly lured it away toward darker horizons. (212)

What he reveals shortly thereafter is what unsettles Hussam the most: “‘I pushed Wassim’” (217).

The luggage that he thought he had pushed overboard was in fact the man he loved the most in this world, and, like his father slipping and making a thud against the ground, Hussam’s body, he believed, had drowned in the water.

There are no words that can be written to narrate Hussam’s pain and sorrow here. Only Ramadan’s words can discern the regret that takes form here, as only he can write what Hussam carries as a burden: “My father’s blood stained my hand, and the salty waters of the sea sashed against my wounds. And Wassim. What I did to Wassim sends shivers through my body. There is no redemption for this, no happy ending. This is rooted in my skin like birthmarks” (157). This, without doubt, is the heartache that Hussam lives with despite the desire for a good life and the promise of happiness that a nation-state like Canada purports. Nothing, absolutely nothing can mend the unresolved grief that Hussam lives with, enveloping his every move and turn, and it is for this reason that his love for Wassim is what is perhaps the most agonizing and cruel object of them all.

In that way, the nation-state presents itself as a reminder of the cost of optimism that Hussam accepts. As Ramadan writes, “Leave everyone behind, I told myself. Leave them all to rot in that war and go find a place for yourself far away” (151). He let his father go, he sold the gold necklace his mother had given him, he parted ways with Syria, and, above all else, he left Wassim

stranded and potentially drowning in the middle of nowhere. Canada, as such, is a representation of everything he left behind in order to find a good life and to imagine his queerness outside of a forbidden love, all, of course, at the devastating blow of letting go of everyone who once loved him.

## **6. Promises One Cannot Keep**

“I’ll take care of you, I’ll take care of this” (Ramadan 19) are the words that Wassim whispers to Hussam when their lives are forever changed by the death of Hussam’s father. This sentence also holds a promise that Wassim cannot keep, and like Hussam’s belief that he could not save his father or Wassim, this vow, for Wassim, is the cruellest thing of them all. When following Wassim’s journey from the unexpected event at the beginning and then throughout the rest of the novel, readers are made aware that he is defeated by his inability to protect Hussam.

When they are caught by Wassim’s father while sleeping in the same bed together, as Hussam falls asleep with his head on Wassim’s chest (131), Hussam is kicked out of the house and so the broken promise surfaces almost immediately in their relationship. As Ramadan details, Hussam sleeps in the cold streets for two days and returns with a black eye, bruised by muggers, begging Wassim’s father to forgive him for what he had done. Wassim stands there, as he watches his father give Hussam some money, asking him to never return to their home. The promise of “I’ll take care of you,” of a good life and of romantic love, becomes distant and forgotten.

Wassim, not to be left without any consequences of his own, is subject to an arranged marriage with a young woman. On their wedding night, Wassim and his wife are intimate with each other, their “bodies merging and breaking, while we whispered sighs and hushed aches to each other” (136), but it is still Hussam who appears in front of him, at least in his imagination. When his newlywed wife Rima tells him that she loves him, Wassim can only think about one thing: “Hussam said that to me every night before bed. The thought of him felt like a stab” (136).

The metaphor in the latter sentence is accompanied by the guilt that Wassim feels both from letting Hussam go and then for allowing himself to be intimate with a woman whom he barely knows at all.

Similar to Hussam, it is Wassim's desire and longing to be with his first love that hinders him the most. He runs into Hussam months after the wedding and after he has consummated his marriage, with him and Rima now expecting the birth of their child while Hussam pursues his studies. As he stands before Hussam, noticing the space between them, Wassim wants to tell him he misses him and that he will always be his (140). But, as he reveals in the same moment, "I'd never felt this far away from him in my life, and he was close I could touch his cheeks" (141).

The words that are exchanged between the two past lovers also alarm Wassim. Hussam, befittingly, expresses that he is trying to avoid Wassim (141). What stings Wassim, even more, is what Hussam expresses next: "I want nothing to do with you anymore" (141). He is pierced by this exchange in such a manner that Wassim experiences an attack that same night and is taken to a hospital, where "they inserted a tube down [his] throat and into [his] lungs" (142). So much is the weight of his encounter with Hussam that Wassim's entire body fails him, having to be resuscitated from breaking down altogether. Perhaps this is what Gallegos considers affective injustice: "actions, practices, and circumstances [that] bring about harms and disadvantages specifically to relation to emotions, moods, feelings, affective dispositions, and other 'valanced' states" (185). For Wassim, the sadness he carries shapes his emotional life in deleterious ways. He is unable to breathe, for example. The thought of Hussam overtakes his body and his psyche, and it renders him momentarily lifeless.

He, too, views himself as an object of blame as the search for a good life and romantic love with Hussam continues to be perilous. For example, he later sees Hussam at a protest and tries to

convince him to leave; instead, Hussam is arrested. As this happens, Wassim thinks of himself as a curse in Hussam's life (Ramadan 146). Before Hussam is arrested, Wassim tells him he still loves him and that he wants to spend the rest of his life with him, willing to leave behind his wife and soon-to-be-born child, but the outcome is nonetheless cruel. Here, Wassim's account cannot be read without feeling sympathy for him. In his attempts to express his love for Hussam, his imagination of a better life remains an empty promise. It is an emptiness that weighs him down such that he is always in a state of despair and sorrow defined by his inability to move past the regret he holds onto and the separation that exists between the two men.

And for Wassim that distance is one he seeks to close, at least when Hussam is still somewhere close to him. Once, he stands outside a refugee camp and tries to find Hussam there. His search can be described in the following: "A small river split the city into two, and I walked it up and down searching for Hussam's face in the crowds" (224). He is unsuccessful, however. The next day, Wassim learns from a fixer from a journalist that Hussam is in Istanbul, who also informs him "that Hussam still had the marks of the Syrian government police on his body" (225). Hearing this news, Wassim travels to Istanbul, but he is again at a loss, until in the early hours of the next morning, he finds himself next to Hussam. As the two men sit next to each other, Wassim learns that his father bailed Hussam out of jail and warned him to never return to Syria.

He confesses that he loves Hussam, but the former does not budge. Wassim tries to express his love again, but Hussam pushes him away, asking him to leave instead and make his way back to Syria. Wassim, of course, refuses and he is eventually able to convince Hussam to take a boat from Izmir in hopes of making it to Europe. It is Wassim who tells Hussam, "'I'll find a job, and you'll decorate our little apartment. We will have our happy ever after, I promise you'" (229). Who can condemn Wassim for such a desire? For sure, Ahmed and Berlant might suggest it is a



fantasy of a good life iterated by heteronormativity, but the tragedy that befalls the two men makes it difficult to criticize Wassim's imagined life.

Even when there are obstacles that confront them, Wassim's love for Hussam remains constant, registered in his body. Nowhere is this more resounding than when Wassim expresses the following as he details how he feels when he is intimate with his wife: "My father could have removed the earth and the sky, but he couldn't remove the smell of Hussam from my skin" (134). It is ultimately his attachment to Hussam that leads him to propose that they both flee Syria, believing a good life for two queer men is possible elsewhere. This decision, pinned with an emotional appeal and as is already situated from Hussam's story, does not bode well for Wassim.

Surely, anyone who plunges into the novel hopes that Hussam and Wassim can make it work. There must be optimism that the two young men can finally leave behind their lives in Syria and start anew. At least for a hopeful person, there is a belief that the two can reconcile, or that they can repair their relationship such to move forward without the past coming back to haunt them. Perhaps this is an optimism which is "a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself as ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (Berlant 14). The optimism is terse, however. Their reunion is short-lived, as readers might even be left to tears, relegated to an unhopeful outcome, but what hurts, even more, is Wassim's ascription of deserving this unfortunate fate:

I deserved it. I deserved his hands pressing against my chest. I deserved the imbalance as I lost my footing and fell back into the water, surrounded by the bags and baskets of others. I'd known it since the day his father fell off the rooftop that I would be punished for it. I knew that it was my true sentence for killing his father all those years before. (230-231)

Who can read Wassim's surrender without a pang of emotions overcoming them? As he screams to the people in the boat, his howls can be heard against the waves. When salt water enters his mouth, the desperate plea for help being washed away can be felt. And, most of all, when he

surrenders to the waves, his love for Hussam is indeed partitioned by cruel optimism, but it can never be drowned away. This event is the final blow in the romantic love he desires, but which ultimately remains a permanent fixture in his queer struggle.

## **7. Refugee on the Run**

Along with his unyielding love for Hussam, Wassim's story is also wanting in other ways, as the word cruel becomes a familiar visitor, as the war becomes a central part of his story. It is the way in which the Syrian war permeates in everyday life that Ramadan exposes through Wassim's voice: "It's in my morning commute and in my evening stroll. It's in the food I eat and the coffee I drink. War has infused every aspect of my life. The conversations with friends, the place I call home. It's in the jets dotting the night sky and the call for prayer interrupted by an explosion" (264). Indeed, the war is everywhere.

As Hussam navigates his life in Canada, Wassim's sense of belonging is restrained by a similar cruel optimism as a refugee, although in a different context and perhaps one that is even more stifling. He is a refugee in his own land who sleeps on a dirty mattress in an abandoned house. The question of returning to his home is unthinkable because his queerness is framed as a sin, and he is ostracized by his father for his queer sexual orientation. Clearly, Hussam's father did not approve of queerness either, but Hussam's life in Canada takes place in relation to his sexual encounters and hookups while also being openly queer. On the other hand, Wassim's category of refugee exists in his own homeland, where his refugeeism is more prominent as he lives in an abandoned house and readers follow his excursions on the streets. This speaks to how the immediate proximity to war, at least geographically, makes his refugeeism categorically more pressing in terms of the events that unfold in his life.

Most of Wassim's narrative about displacement and loss is revealed through his conversations with a ghost, Kalila, who lives in the house and whom he befriends. When he first arrives at the house and meets Kalila, having run away from his home, his father, his wife, and his son, he describes himself as being unkempt. In fact, we are also informed by him that he smells like a carcass and that a bruise has developed such that it runs across the left side of his body (40). It does not help that there is no warm water in the house either, but he takes a shower anyway and then dries himself with his dirty clothes.

This is what Wassim's life has become, desolate and dishevelled, and it is also through the particular where he meets Kalila becomes a symbolic figure in his world. At first, she does not speak with him, but he slowly draws her in, and they form a bond that is indisputable. For Hassim, Kalila is not only a companion, but she also becomes somewhat of a saviour. When a group of pro-regime protesters chase after him, it is Kalila who rescues him, telling him when to run and when to jump over a fence (65). When he thinks to himself, "This city's people hate me. They chewed me up and spat out my bones" (65), it is Kalila who reminds him that he will always be safe in her house (66).

Although he finds solace in his conversations with Kalila, the good life and queerness are two things he can no longer conjure and imagine. Though he sought to escape the war with Hussam, going as far as risking their lives to do so, he inevitably becomes left behind and trapped in Syria. His arranged marriage can be viewed as a symbol of this confinement, and it is this predicament that makes him run away from home. His fate is thus one of an unhomely state, drawing here from Bhabha's work. This is not necessarily a disposition of being without a home, but it is a result of subjugation: "To 'un'-speak is both to release from erasure and repression, and

to reconstruct, reinscribe the elements of the known” (146). Thus, unhomeliness can be understood as a site where the instability of identity is inexorable.

Later on, when he meets someone he knows, Jamal, it is assumed that Wassim has been in Canada with Hussam all this time. Jamal, feeling sorry for Wassim, describes him as someone who has been “rejected by the world around them” and “you are who you are” (177). Jamal does not express these remarks in a demeaning way, but his comments do speak to the displacement that someone feels as a queer person, especially when their sexuality is denied and suppressed. Therefore, one can also think about Wassim’s queer struggle as another war that never comes to an end. Though there comes a time when the sound of bombs is no longer frequent or the terror of military threat ends, the repression of his queerness does not afford him the same silence.

Indeed, Wassim’s life can be characterized as melancholic, for sure. Listen here to the words of Ahmed: “The melancholic is hence a subject not only of loss but of desire, where the desire can be for the loss of what is desired” (140). What is most melancholic is that he considers himself a “catalyst of all the pain” (171) in the lives of people around him. He considers himself, in other words, the reason for their sorrow and suffering, as well as that of his own. As a result, Wassim relegates himself of his existence and presence in the lives of others, to a problematic object, marked by the idea that he is the cause of their demise. Alas, most tragically, Wassim loses his desire for love or his once optimism in love, as it is mostly cruel and at times unbearably unfortunate for him.

Aside from intimate and romantic love, the loss that he has confronted also makes it difficult for him to build connections with other people. For instance, he runs from a guard who offers him coffee when he remembers that he is a curse to everyone he meets (Ramadan 172).

Indeed, “melancholic subjects expect to be hurt and are unable to love, to form new attachments” (Ahmed 141), and in the case of Wassim, he expects he will hurt others instead.

It is Kalila who encourages Wassim to think again and to form attachments such that he does not run from people. She tells him, ““Stop drowning into people” (202). It is the presence of her ghost, taking notice of Wassim’s life as a refugee on the run, who reminds him to slow down. It is Kalila who informs him that he does not have to be shrouded by a world that does not accept who he happens to be. She is not interested, as she once says, in living in “a world where people are ashamed of who they love” (243). As she says this, she slowly starts to disappear, bidding Wassim farewell, and it is in this departure that we finally notice some hope in Wassim’s life.

## **8. Conclusion**

From one chapter to another, readers are made witness to the ways in which barriers and difficulties, sometimes ones that are ineffable and horrendous, are confronted by Hussam and Wassim at every turn, with each sentence and word containing more emotion than a page can hold such that no one can deny the evocative pull of Ramadan’s writing. Through the two men’s portrayals, one can realize that to end a war, whether to escape the violence in a nation-state or to forget it altogether, seems almost impossible. The carnage, as Mishra Tarc suggests, is affixed to the imaginary life even when a war is over. So, when the decimation and destruction come to an end, the pain and terror of war are loaded and trafficked elsewhere, lodged into one’s body and into their psyche. For Hussam, we can recognize the cruel optimism he confronts, making his way all the way to Canada where life, although far away from the Civil War in Syria, remains precarious and uncertain. Living in Vancouver, he finds himself incessantly haunted by the ghost of his father, and, most of all, he is unable to attain a queer good life. Wassim, on the other hand, who remains

in Damascus, is unwanted for being both queer and a refugee in his own homeland. He is similarly wounded by the promise of happiness that he presupposes with Hussam.

Both of their narratives also reveal romantic love as a form of cruel optimism, as they are met with an inexorable event that changes their lives forever, followed by even more tumultuous encounters that keep them apart from one another. Their desire for each, as such, becomes cruel and insidious in a way, separated and distanced by miles and time zones, yet intricately connected to each other forever. Through Hussam and Wassim's story, Ramadan compels readers to recognize that the cruellest optimism of them all is the promise we make to the people we love, and the ways in which we break those promises. For queer refugees, more specifically, it is even more difficult to build a life that is exonerated from a complicated and oppressive history—one that denies Hussam and Wassim's belonging and connectedness both in Canada and Syria. Yet, as the novel comes to an end, there is something hopeful even in the most catastrophic moments of one's life as Hussam and Wassim ultimately begin to confront their unresolved grief and trauma. And it is the way these two young men, connected by their ability to be vulnerable about their love for each other, that makes *The Foghorn Echoes* a masterpiece that must be read over and over again.

## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. "The Happiness Turn." *New Formations*, vol. 63, 2007, pp. 7-14.
- Arababa, Ala, et al. "The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions." *British Journal of Political Science*, 2023, pp. 1-24.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Akhtar, Nasreen, and Hala Nageen. "The Syrian Conflict: An Inside-Out and Outside-In Approach." *International Journal on World Peace*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2019, pp. 7-34.
- Bhabha, Homi. "The World and the Home." *Social Text*, vol. 31/32, 1992, pp. 141-153.
- Bhagat, Ali. "Queer Global Displacement: Social Reproduction, Refugee Survival, and Organised Abandonment in Nairobi, Cape Town, and Paris." *Antipode*, pp. 1-21.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism: Optimism and Its Objects." *Differences*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2006, pp. 20-36.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss, and the Senses." *New Formations*, vol. 63, 2007, pp. 33-51.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Coates, Jamie. "The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: Aspiration, Belonging, and the "Good Life" among Transnational Chinese Migrants in Tokyo." *Positions*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2019, pp. 469-497.
- Dawney, Leila, et al. "Introduction: Problems of hope." *Problems of Hope*. Edited by Leila Dawney, Claire Blencowe, and Patrick Bresnihan. ARN Press, 2017, pp. 1-8.
- Fassin, Didier. "Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries. The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 40, 2011, pp. 213-226.

- Gallegos, Francisco. "Affective injustice and fundamental affective goods." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 185-201, 2021.
- Held, Nina. "'As queer refugees, we are out of category, we do not belong to one, or the other': LGBTIQ+ refugees' experiences in 'ambivalent' queer spaces." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, pp. 1-21, 2022.
- Mishra Tarc, Aparna. "A Child is Dreaming." *The Museum of Dreams*, February 2017, <https://www.museumofdreams.org/a-child-is-dreaming>
- Raboin, Thibaut. *Discourses on LGBT Asylum in the UK: Constructing a Queer Haven*. Manchester University Press, 2016.
- Ramadan, Danny. *The Foghorn Echoes*. Viking, 2022.
- Shire, Warsan. *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head: Poems*. Penguin, 2022.
- van Veen, Erwin, et al. "Tracing the evolution of the Syrian civil war (2011-2020)." Clingendael Institute, 2021. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/eu-relevance-in-the-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars/2-tracing-the-evolution-of-the-syrian-civil-war-2011-2020/>.