

Construing Harbingers of the Arab Spring as Socio-Political Illness in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*

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Abstract: Deriving hermeneutic impetus from poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, the concepts of illness and health have assumed the status of interdisciplinary discourse, where various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have brought the social role of medicine under critical scrutiny. This has created a trajectory within which the social, cultural, psychological and even political dimensions to illness are theorised. This paper argues that unfavourable socio-political factors are strong enough to induce illness because they depress the psyches of people. The paper champions the medicalisation of society as it seeks to appraise the 'medical pulse' of post-colonial Libya as presented in Hisham Matar's *In The Country of Men*. It also seeks to 'diagnose' the social vision and private anxieties of Hisham Matar for post-colonial Libya.

Keywords: socio-political, psychological, illness, depression, Lybia.

INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2010, what is widely regarded as an act of self-immolation sparked newer defining moments in the history of the Arab world. A twenty-six-year-old Tunisian vegetable seller, Tarek el-Tayeb Mohammed Bouazizi, got his weighing scales confiscated by a police officer on grounds that he sold with an unlicensed vegetable cart. After accepting the 10-dinar fine that Bouazizi tried to pay, she allegedly slapped him, spat in his face, and insulted his deceased father. Bouazizi's humiliation knew no borders.

He immediately approached the provincial headquarters where he hoped to lodge a protest with municipal officials, but they would not grant him audience. In response, he returned to the building where he was confronted by the police woman, drenched himself in fuel, and set himself on fire. His action won the support and favour of the Tunisian population that was already fraught with political discontent and frustration over the prevalent political status quo. In no time, while Bouazizi was yet hospitalised, massive anti-government demonstrations broke out in every corner of Tunisia; ten days later, Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country for safety; and within three years, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Djibouti, Mauritania and Algeria were plunged into violent political protests, riots, demonstrations, and (in some countries where there were forceful change of governments) civil wars.

Although the North African hemisphere has, over the years prior the Arab spring, being depicted as a stable region where the strong presence of Islam has guaranteed the political, social, psychological and

cultural security of individuals, geo-political disequilibrium and discontent have now characterised the region. Religion has played a major role in keeping people within political restraint and created room for more authoritarian rule. With religion closing the door to any further cultural interaction with other sovereign countries that are un-Islamic, prevalent political structures in the Arab world appeared to be normal and acceptable. The abundance of 'traditional' literatures stressed the centrality of Islamic religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, modern North African creative writers have explored literature in mimetic dimensions to re-cast the disillusion and discontent of their nation-states populace with the tyranny of governance that they experience. Outside the traditional themes that characterise North African literature – religious themes, celebrations of local heroes, and the glorification of ancestral pasts, another resounding theme is that of change. A bulk of such creative works is dedicated to an artistic exposition of the prevalent political, economic, and cultural realities of the Arab society and the need for a change in political structures. Writers like Nawal

El Saadawi, Tayib Salih, Tahar Ouetar, and Abd al-Karim Ghallab are known to be audaciously dissident in their works. Nawal El Saadawi, to begin with, is an Egyptian sociologist, physician and a 'western feminist' ('western feminist' because all that feminism represents are considered by the Arab world as impious dissidence). Her works chivalrously expose the political, religious, and psychological realities of women in the Arab world. Most especially, she advocates for a change in the sexualities and legal statuses of women. Her first non-fictional work, *Al-Mar'a wa al-Jins (Woman and Sex)* negotiates the subjects of women, sex, politics and religion. The publication sparked massive public, political, and theological outrage that cost Saadawi her job. Her respective factual and fictional novel – *Woman at Point Zero* [2] explore Saadawi's discontent and razor-edge criticism of the prevalent aggression against female children, female genital mutilation, prostitution, sexual relationships, marriage and divorce, and Islamic fundamentalism. Her works continue to pursue change for the plight of Arab women. The audacity of her works earned her the loss of her job, an arrest, a jail sentence, and ultimately, an exile from Egypt. Sudanese writer, Tayeb Salih, although given to much Islamic constructs for creativity, attempts to forge the possibility of a harmonious social, religious, and political existence. In his masterpiece, *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal (Season of Migration to the North)*, Salih captures the yearnings and transition of individuals into a free world. Presumptuously, there is an inner yearning among Sudanese citizens, and indeed citizens of the entire Arab world for a change in political structures.

Other works, which could be considered as relatively 'recent', have attempted to tactfully denounce dictatorship through the use of metaphors and complex symbolisms. Examples of such works include, Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, Naguib Mahfouz's *Autumn Quail*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*, amongst others. Many of such novels explore the pent-up emotions of political, economic, and cultural discontent, distrust, and insecurity that brew in the minds of citizens throughout the Arab world prior the Arab Spring. Hamza Danjuma [3] validates the role of literature in the Arab Spring when he argues that:

A number of novels and other works of literature that were written before the current wave of revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East have tackled such themes as dire poverty, shattered dreams, despair, the use of religion as a sanctuary, sexual deprivation, political oppression, torture in prisons, and suppression. All these issues were boiling in the cauldron of a silent society that was waiting for the moment to mobilise and ignite. Those novels and other works of literature

illustrate the catastrophes resulting from dictatorship. Some even prophesied such rebellion and insurrection. The fact that the Arab Spring happened in the streets through insurrections and riots leads some to underestimate the role played by writers in this 'Arab Spring.' This might be related to the lack of emphasis placed on literature produced in the Arab region. But those writers who chose to denounce dictatorship in their works have contributed in one way or another to this larger 'Arab Spring' currently been witnessed (20).

Some other writers resorted to blogs and other social media platforms where they could air their views about the tyranny of their prevailing governments and the need for actions. Many of such writers are usually exiled or 'diasporic' writers. As such, creative works served as building blocks for such revolutionary consciousness amongst the Arab populace. It is in this trajectory that Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* [1] is located.

Set in 1979 post-colonial Libya, the text explores the socio-political realities of the nation. The author recalls his childhood experiences of Libya during the Colonel Muammar el-Quaddafi regime. The socio-political space is relayed to the reader by the nine-year-old Suleiman, who is the only child of his beloved parents and the narrator of the story. He spends most of his time with his mother while his father "was a businessman who travelled the world looking for beautiful things and animals and trees to bring back to our country" (24). Young Suleiman narrates his story from the innocence of his childhood when everything seemed ordered and perfect, through his gradual coming of age when disappearances became palpable and an unusual silence and irrational actions overwhelmed the people around him. He attempts to make sense of the solitary confusion in his world since no one is willing to speak about the trend of events. Najwa his mother, an alcoholic, tells him stories of her regrets in life each time she is drunk. His father, Faraj, absconds from home and leaves his mother heartbroken. His neighbour's father, Ustath Rashid is taken by unknown men and publicly executed. Soon, Suleiman would realise that his father is hounded by the government and that Ustath Rashid was killed by the government too. While in Egypt, he would begin to see very clearly, the picture of authoritarian Libya and its rippling effects on the citizens.

Born in 1970 in New York, Hisham Matar is the only son of his parents, who after his birth, moved to Tripoli and lived there until he was nine. His father's opposing political involvements made the family to move to Cairo in exile. It was in Egypt that Matar lived

out his teenage years. In 1990, his father was kidnapped in Egypt and delivered to the Libyan government where he was kept in Abu Salim prison. Until 2010, Matar's father had not been released even though there are sparse evidences that he may still be alive. Many of the events that surround Matar's father's arrest and disappearance come to play in his debut novel, *In the Country of Men* [1]. The novel x-rays Suleiman's psychological journey through the pains and uncertainties that characterise his father's pro-revolutionary involvements, his arrest and torture at the merciless hands of the prevailing government, and ultimately, his death. *In the Country of Men* [1] has won huge critical acclaim from the West and also numerous awards. One of such awards includes the inaugural Arab American Book Award. The novel was shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards that included the Man Booker Prize and the Guardian First Book Award. The work was included in the New York Times '100 Notable Books of 2007'.

Child Witnessing and the Constructions of Terror: Military Masculinities in Post-Colonial Libya

Discontent and insecurity with a revolution that once brought socio-political salvation to Libyans but soon failed in holding up to its promises, is what characterise the temperament of Matar's *In the Country of Men* [1]. The author's art comes into focus as the reader is led into the experiences of nine-year-old Suleiman. What's more fascinating is young Suleiman's narration of the events that shaped the Colonel Muammar el-Quaddafi dictatorial regime where abnormal silences meant a kind of terror that was almost palpable in the Libyan space. He observes that many things are left unsaid and perhaps, it is quite safe not to conceive the reality of certain things that hung thick in the air. Thus, Suleiman uses complex symbolisms to unveil post-colonial Libyan realities. Suleiman's point of view lends vistas to the proper understanding of the text because his narration is his journey from innocence to self. Such journey is a troubling one where many things do not make sense to him, especially those things that are left unsaid. Suleiman's opening symbolism is his construction of the Libyan intense summer heat as national allegory for the overbearing and terrorising excesses of el-Quaddafi's regime. The first lines of the text depict the prevalent dread in 1979 Libya: "I am recalling now that last summer before I was sent away. It was 1979, and the sun was everywhere. Tripoli lay brilliant and still beneath it. Every person, animal and ant went in desperate search for shade..." (ITCM 1). The harsh Libyan weather is a portrait of the experiences of people under the authoritarian rule of the Guide, a strong reference to Colonel Muammar al-Quaddafi. The Guide's power over citizens is equated with the sun. Of the sun, Suleiman narrates:

Particular in summer, when the sun swelled with heat, the whole world went to sleep: children, adults, even dogs found a patch of shade to slumber in (45).

With the sun (the Guide) towering over the lives of Libyan citizens, every form of resistance goes into hiding. It is important to note that the narrator uses powerful metaphors to tell his story. While the sun symbolises the Guide, 'children' represents those citizens who are 'innocent' of the excesses of the Revolutionary regime. Although they witness the prevalent socio-economic circumstances that press down on the Libyan populace, they are indifferent as long as they are able to meet their basic necessities of life. The 'adults' are those who know the politics of dictatorship and are fed up with the repression it brings. Ustath Rashid, his university students, Faraj, and Moosa belong to this group. They are the 'adults', the intellectually grown-ups of the Libyan society who understand the politics of resistance. In authoritarian Libya, citizens are closed in by numerous private investigations. There is no space for freedoms of private and political associations. Citizens in this society are hounded by personal and political insecurity. Such political situations are strong enough to induce illness in the lives of citizens [4]. Once, Sharief, a member of the Guide's secret intelligence who is asked to keep watch over Faraj's (Suleiman's father) tries to unravel the political associates of Faraj. To do this, he approaches Suleiman and attempts to glean some names of his father's close associates who, in Sharief's own words would "vouch for him". The innocent Suleiman almost falls prey to his antics. Young Suleiman goes blank as he cannot remember any name. He rather wants to vouch for his father, but Sharief would have none of it. Instead he replies, "We need men, adults" (132). While Suleiman is tempted to believe in the literary meaning of the expression, a critical consideration of the expression reveals that 'men' and 'adults' refer to those who have the courage to stand up against the regime of the Guide; 'men' and 'adults' are a picture of members of the Revolutionary resistance group. Of the 'adults' academic protests against 'the sun', Um Suleiman angrily comments that they (the university students) would soon flit away like clouds:

'Clouds,' she said. 'Only clouds. They gather then flit away. What are you people thinking: a few students colonising the university will make a military dictatorship roll over? For God's sake, if it were that easy I would have done it myself. You saw what happened three years ago when those students dared to speak. They hanged them by their necks. And now we are condemned to witness the whole thing again. The foolish dreamers! And it's foolish and irresponsible to encourage them.'

'It's our obligation to call injustice by its name.'

'Go call it by its name in your country. Here it's either silence or exile, walk by the wall or leave. Go be a hero elsewhere.' (53)

True to her words, Ustath Rashid is soon publicly tried and executed in the most gruesome manner. The 'dogs' symbolise the Libyan military. Rather than being an institution that is charged with the defence of the state, the military also 'go to sleep' when the sun (the Guide) 'swells with heat'. The 'dogs'' 'going to sleep' symbolises the incapacitation which the Libyan military suffered during the el-Quadaffi regime. The Libyan leader was notorious for his involvement in and sponsorship of world terrorism. Brenda Lange (2005) [5] comments of his regime style:

During the height of his involvement with worldwide terrorism, in the 1970s and 1980s, Qaddafi provided twenty training camps for terrorist groups, and six months of basic training and special training in sabotage. Seven thousand terrorists received training in Libya, taught by experts from East Germany and Cuba and reportedly, some former CIA agents. According to a 1985 report, in the previous decade, Libya was involved in 200 terrorist operations worldwide.

These incidents injured more than 500 people and killed more than 100, at a cost to Qaddafi of \$100 million a year. He did not call these trained murderers terrorists, however, but preferred the term "resistance leaders" or "freedom fighters." He said, "We are the mecca of freedom fighters and their natural ally. We are the first to welcome them, from Ireland to the Philippines." (79)

Colonel Muammer el-Quadaffi carried out this mission using his specially trained fighters, while the national military remained incapacitated. He made sure of this military incapacitation as a measure to check and forestall any attempted treason that might arise in the future to dislodge his government.

While there are no mentions or appearance of the Libyan national military in the work, the reader is brought to terms with symbols that are military in nature. The heat of the sun is militant in nature, powerful enough to bring Suleiman within a close brush with death, on one instance. On his experience, he narrates: "My feet were burning... I touched the top of my head, and it was as hot as a car's bonnet at midday" (48). When members of the Guide's Revolutionary Committee come to Suleiman's house with a warrant to search the house for clues of Faraj's involvements with

the traitors who criticise the Guide and his regime, Moosa, a family friend and secret member of the resistance tries to distract them from searching the house by asking Suleiman's mother to serve them tea. When Um Suleiman protests, he advises her: "they can put him behind the sun. Better try to win them over. Besides, it might distract them from searching the house" (66). The citizens of Libya are given to talk and convey their points in metaphors and similes. It is no news that many people vanish behind the sun, people who make the least attempt to speak or act up against the regime. When the men from the Revolutionary Committee storm his house, Suleiman quickly recognises them as "the same ones who beat Ustath Rashid and made him vanish. 'Vanished like a grain of salt in water,' was how Auntie Salma put it when, after running between police stations and Revolutionary Committee offices, she returned slapping one hand over the other and murmuring, 'Vanished like a grain of salt in water.'" (62). A politically sovereign society that is governed by the terror of the prevalent government cannot provide a healthy environment for the well-being of its citizens. Terror has a way inducing illness, physical or psychological.

Another symbol that shapes the temperament of the text is the construction of military masculinities. Suleiman observes that in his society, men reign supreme over women. Women are 'othered'. They have no power over their bodies, their lives and their choices. Their lives are simply lived for the men – husbands and sons. It is important to acknowledge that there is a strong lure over the reader to regard Matar's exploration of the disdaining place of women in the Arab social strata as his social commitment to the emancipation of the women in the Arab cultural space. Conversely, this is not the case. The text is no place for a discourse of the rights and privileges of Arab women. Rather, the presentation of women in supreme submission to men is also a national allegory for the hopeless surrender of Libyan citizens to the terror of dictatorship. In order to get a proper perspective and make sense of this submission, the reader must understand that *In the Country of Men*, [1] and indeed other works of art written in/about Libya was highly censored by the el-Quadaffi's intelligence agency. Any trace of resistance found in a text was branded as treason and earned its writer a punishment by death. This is, perhaps a strong reason, why there not many works of art that speak openly against the Libyan dictator. Owing to such horrific realities, Libyan writers have become consciously guided in their art; and when some writers are bold enough to speak against the government, they do so using very complex abstractions in their works. On the effects and the terror of the dictatorship on Libyan writers and Libyan writing, Matar responds to a question from Tomson – a caller from Norway who participated in the BBC World Book Club [6]

discussion with Hisham Matar about his debut novel. Tomson's question is as follows:

The question I would like to ask Mr. Matar is, how has his life abroad been the reason why he has been able to write such an open story about the Libyan society and Libyan culture because I was looking for other writers in Libya of the same calibre and I didn't find any.

Hisham Matar responds:

Yes, thank you for the question and comment. Yes, undoubtedly, there is a logistical advantage of being outside of Libya when you want to write about Libya. But I think also, somehow my exile has given me a kind of distance that paradoxically allows me to be braver, allows me to write about the things that are very close, things that are sometimes difficult to approach. It is impossible to diagnose why I write what I write, or how I came to write what I write. But what I can say about your comment regarding Libyan writers is that it is actually quite astonishing that there should be any Libyan writing, given what the dictatorship has done to Libyan writers – how it systematically, over a period of forty years, attacked them, restricted them, monitored them, censored them. I think it's a sign of resilience really, that there are still many Libyan writers working. Libyan writing seems to find its home in the short story. It seems to be the sort of format that it goes to, and one of the negative effects of the influence of the regime hasn't been all the things that I have said: which are very direct ways of influencing Libyan writing. It has also been in other more abstract ways and how it influenced what has been produced because writers retreated into highly symbolic and highly kind of abstract texts where you had to get a code book to know exactly what is going on, and that hasn't been good for Libyan writing. But it has also instigated kind of a tradition of discipline in restraining yourself from saying the things that you want to say and saying them in a different way.

The life of Najwa, Suleiman's mother, is a brilliant example of a representation of women who are robbed of their own choices and lives, women who are a prototype of the 'surrendered' Libyan masses. A consideration of her choices –her marriage to Faraj, her dependence of alcohol, and her many 're-telling' of her personal ordeals, streams in vistas of critical imagination about the symbolic subservience of the Libyan masses to prevalent military masculinities.

Through Suleiman's eyes, the reader is able to come to terms with the significance of Najwa's person. At fourteen, she is seen by her Uncle Khaled, who studies in America, drinking coffee with two boys in an Italian Coffee house. He quickly rushes home to report to Najwa's father and, in response; a marriage is hurriedly arranged for her. It is within this frame that the reader begins to sense the subtle spread of betrayal in the text. Of her brother's reaction when he first encounters Najwa and her friend in a coffee house, Najwa comments:

The coward Thinking himself the enlightened American. He was nice. Cordial. Said hello as if he admired his little sister and her friend. The foolish girl I was; I even thought, with his liberal ideas, he was proud of my little rebellion. He paid for our cappuccinos, said hello to my friends. When he left I cried with happiness and told Jihan how much I loved my brother (147).

There have been several readings of Najwa as Matar's gentle criticism of Islamic social prescription for women. One of such reading which is worthy of mention is Magaret Scanlan's. In her article entitled "Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11", she argues that Matar, somehow "...criticises Islamic cultural practices..." and that "...Najwa protests its harsh prescriptions for female chastity without ascribing them directly to religion" (2010: 268)^[7]. Another caller from Damascus, who participated in the BBC World Book Club Discussion^[6] with Hisham Matar, indicted the author for his portrait of Najwa. In her question, she asks:

Given that Suleiman's mother is the only prominent female character in the novel, doesn't making her the victim of abuse under the childhood marriage just fulfil the standard western stereotypes of the oppressed Arab woman?

As submitted in the foregoing, Matar's creation of Najwa does not align with the picture of an oppressed Arab; neither does it tally with Scanlan's [6] view of Matar's gentle criticism of Islamic harsh prescriptions for women. On the contrary, Najwa is a portrait of the Libyan populace, an allegory of the various conflicting psychological distresses which the Libyan populace experienced under the regime of el-Quadaffi. In the BBC World Book Club [7] interview, Matar comments of the significance of Najwa in the text. He says:

She's [Najwa] in many ways the most grown up person in the book – in the sense that if 'grown up' means that you think about the

future, you know; and she's always thinking about the future... One of the unusual characteristics of the Qaddafi reality has been how unpredictable it is; how incredibly agile the ideology is and moves from left to right – in one decade we're told to look towards school but the other decade, we're told to look towards Dubai. And it's that sort of nonsensical swings from the authorities. And that no one ever feels an obligation to explain themselves has inflicted an atmosphere of, sort of madness, in many ways more oppressive and more troubling than even the torture and the assassination and so on... I think, on some level, what I was trying to do is: I was trying to tell the same story through different perspectives. I was trying to show how the political reality in Libya is, because that's the temptation for a writer from Libya – you tell Libyan history of the last fifty years through twelve people. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in the small details of how people love differently under the situation – how does somebody pick up their cup of coffee, how do they listen to music, how do they dress, how do they shave... Attending to these details seems to me an act of resistance, an act of claiming back the private moment, that private moment that the dictatorship is always forever wanting to intrude into. And so, I wanted to show through the mother, how her interpretation of events, her responses to them was deeply different from the father's interpretation of events.

The author attempts to examine, through child witnessing, the effects which the dictatorship commands in the lives of ordinary Libyan citizens typified in Suleiman's careful observation of the happenings in his home. It is more interesting that Matar combines the exploration the psychological distress which Islamic marriage wields in the lives of women with the agile intrusion of dictatorship in the private psyches of such women. Marriage is heavily patriarchal in Islamic North Africa and women are usually not allowed the luxury of choosing whom they should marry. More so, Islam teaches the supreme submission of women to their husbands as a proof of virtue. Women are to submit to their husbands and make sure that their families are well nurtured. As first glance, the woman whose marriage was decided not by her lives with a psychological blow as she strives to look after her husband, her children, and her home. She has to cope with the masculine superiority which her husband and other men wield over her in the home and outside. Najwa is a perfect instance. Outside her home, there is another masculinity which terrorises her even more. It is the dictatorship of the Guide. It is a

masculinity that is military in nature, a masculinity that brutally violates the dignity of her choices, desires, and dreams. Of course, following a more critical trajectory, Najwa typifies disillusioned citizens and the conflicting distresses which they encounter under such tough political space.

There are, indeed, several other terrorising distresses which the dictatorship brought. The first of such psychological distress was betrayal. The regime of the Guide which was once considered by the Libyan populace as the custodian of socio-political salvation turned around to be worse than the former regime. The life experiences of Najwa provide a level platform for the unveiling of such events. Najwa's trust and pride in the liberal ideas she once thought her brother had is the picture of the trust and the pride Libyans once had in the regime of el-Qaddafi after he had successfully ousted the incumbent King Idris. Uncle Khaled symbolises the promising future picture which Libyans once had in the el-Qaddafi government. Of Uncle Khaled, Najwa tells Suleiman, "...it was all because of Khaled, that stupid uncle of yours. He was the one who gave me up, betrayed me; the dagger was his" (144-5). On getting home, Najwa discovers that her fate has already been decided by those she branded as the "high Council" (12) without a chance to hear her defence. Her wedding is rushed "...through as if I were a harlot, as if I was pregnant and had to be married off before it showed. Part of the punishment was not to allow me even to see a photograph of my future husband" (12). Although Najwa's lament and regret is the betrayal she suffered at the hands of her brother, one whom she once trusted, the lament of betrayal heavily shapes the text. The masses feel betrayed by their government into a totalitarian regime where absolute silence and supreme obedience is demanded. As with Najwa's life, Suleiman narrates that "the only things that mattered were in the past" (11).

Through the careful witnessing of Suleiman, the reader is able to come to terms with the dynamics of power play which characterised 1979 Libya. Suleiman observes that the Guide's regime commands people's obedience through the dynamics of terror and unanswered questions. Although Suleiman is previously unaware that Ustath Rashid is involved in the dissidence against the Guide's regime, he comes to terms with the horrors of speaking up against the regime after he watches the public interrogation and execution of Rashid. Gradually, the political landscape of Libya begins to make sense to him. He begins to understand why his father has been absent and the effect it has on his mother. As such, he is spurred to look after his mother while his father is absent. His careful observation of his mother helps the reader to understand the effect the dictatorship has on her.

There are several other constructions that bring alive the troupe of terror in the text. The first is the presence of the Revolutionary Committee men. Suleiman's first encounter with them is when they come to take Ustath Rashid away while he played outside with Kareem, Ustath's son. He describes his first terror-experience:

The car pulled over in front of Kareem's house. Kareem froze, as if his heart had dropped into his shoes. Four men got out, leaving the doors open. The car was like a giant dead moth in the sun. Three of the men ran inside the house, the fourth, who was the driver and seemed to be their leader, waited on the pavement... He had a horrible face, pockmarked like pumice stone. His men reappeared, holding Ustath Rashid between them. He didn't struggle. Auntie Salma trailed behind as if an invisible string connected her to her husband. The man with the pockmarked face slapped Ustath Rashid, suddenly and ferociously. It sounded like fabric tearing, it stopped Auntie Salma. Another one kicked Ustath Rashid in the behind. He anticipated it because he jerked forward just before it came. Ustath Rashid looked towards us, and when his eyes met Kareem's, his face changed. He looked like he was about to cry or vomit... They [the men] grabbed Ustath Rashid, threw him into the car, slammed the doors shut and sped between us, crushing our goal posts. I couldn't see Ustath Rashid's head between the two men sitting on either side of him in the back seat; he must have been coughing still (36).

Suleiman's encounter with the men of the Revolutionary Committee takes a toll on him as he begins to consider that perhaps, Ustath Rashid is indeed a traitor. The following day after his arrest, rumours mill around that Rashid is a traitor. Everyone knows just what awaits 'traitors' and those who aid dissenting activities. As such, there is a conscious and swift betrayal of trust once held among friends and loved ones. No one wishes to associate with anyone who is being investigated or who has been arrested by the authorities. After Ustath Rashid is taken by the men of the Revolutionary Committee, Suleiman is prohibited by his mother from seeing Kareem because, there is "no need...to be close to that boy...it just isn't good...to be so close to all of his sadness" (40). His second encounter with the men of the Revolutionary Committee occurs after Ustath Rashid's arrest, when the state secret police begin to investigate the political ideologies and commitments of Faraj, Suleiman's father. The narrator is embittered by the sudden absence of his father from home. Suleiman notices that each

time his father is away from home his mother becomes ill and disoriented. He is also in the dark as to why his father is always absent from home. It is on one of such occasion when he accompanies his mother to go shopping that he encounters the men from the Revolutionary Committee:

Stopping at the next traffic light, she whispered a prayer to herself. A car stopped so close beside us I could have touched the driver's cheek. Four men dressed in dark safari suits sat looking at us. At first I didn't recognise them, then I remembered. I remembered so suddenly I felt my heart jump. They were the same Revolutionary Committee men who had come a week before and taken Ustath Rashid (7).

Revolutionary violence operates on systematic ideology, one where the privacy of family space is ruthlessly violated. There are no safe havens under such dictatorships; there are no private moments for individuals and as a result, people feel that their temperaments are under constant siege. Suleiman and his mother are tightly located under such reality. The men from the Revolutionary Committee, the sudden absence of his father from home since Ustath Rashid was taken, seem to be everywhere they go. Then on his third encounter with the men from the Revolutionary Committee, Suleiman is so scared that he pees in distress at the sight of the men and at the sound of the high-pitched argument.

Intimidation and torture are the attendant realities that surround the men from the Revolutionary Committee. Individuals who are taken by the men are tortured and publicly tried and executed. Usually, people who are arrested by the state secret police hardly get out alive and when they manage to, they suffer intense physical and psychological battering. Matar's portrait of Libya reflects a kind of society where people dread to have the secret police call at their houses because there is no room for a fair hearing and there is no respect for the lives of those who are arrested. When Ustath Rashid is taken by the secret police everyone knows that he would not come out alive. The same circumstance surrounds the arrest and disappearance of Nasser. One remarkable way by which the el-Gaddafi regime was able to intrude into the private spaces of people and reign supreme with terror was through televised public trials and consequent execution of dissenters. The broadcast of Ustath Rashid's trial and execution shakes young Suleiman with untold terror. He is crippled the more with terror when he realises that the spectators at the stadium where Ustath Rashid is hanged are frenzied with joy at the execution. As Suleiman carefully observes the happenings in his society, he comes to terms with the harsh dystopian realities of his

society. He learns that the terror of the dictatorship is gradually tearing his world apart as all the people whom he grows to love and associate with are under intense pressure from the Guide who, although absent, appears to be everywhere.

Child Witnessing and the Construction of Trauma: Psychosomatic Effects of Absence

Given that the story is told through nine-year-old Suleiman is no accident. Child witnessing in *In The Country of Men* [1] does not just attempt to unveil an objective observation and narration of the 1979 Libyan socio-political realities. Rather, child witnessing is an allegory for exiled Libyans as they witness the horrific realities prevalent in their home states. Such citizens, having been exiled, do not participate in the prevalent realities of the country but feel the psychological effects which the dictatorship wields in the lives of their loved ones. It is important to note that as a child, Suleiman is somehow cut off from the happenings in the lives of the adults – his parents and the friends of his parents. There are so many things which go unexplained, so many actions, of which, he is unable to discern their instigating motives. He seems far away from the adults that surround him. It is within the same broad spectrum that exiles are located. Many exiled Libyans are distanced from their loved ones and from the socio-political realities of their homelands. They are only able to observe the political trends from a distance and this could be very traumatic for them, given that they feel impotent in the face of such experiences. Suleiman observes that his mother (Najwa) is so angry with the dissenting activities of Faraj (Suleiman's father), Ustath Rashid, and the university students. She knows that their endeavours would, in a matter of time, cause them to flit away like clouds. Given her inability to stop the men from their 'reasonable' activities, she swears to protect her son from the danger of their folly. In her words:

Don't patronise me. You are all fools, including Rashid and Faraj. But no, I must be a good wife, loyal and unquestioning, supporting my man regardless. I'll support nothing that puts my son in danger. Faraj can fly after his dreams all he wants, but not me, I won't follow. I will get my son out of this place if it takes the last of me (97).

Thus is the instigation to send Suleiman away from the harsh socio-political realities of 1979 Libya. Although quite painful for the young narrator and his parents, it seems to be the best for Suleiman at the time when children were recruited into the Libyan armed forces at the age of fourteen. While in Egypt, Suleiman integrates very fast into his new society that he is astonished at "...how free I came to feel from Libya" (230).

Although free from the muzzling Libyan socio-political realities, Suleiman finds himself yearning "for them, my room, my workshop on the roof, the sea, Kareem" (230-1). He becomes traumatised by a longing for the people he has grown up to love and cherish. Only emotional attachments of fear and trauma serve as the link between exiled citizens and their loved ones who are yet within the ambits of dictatorships. Towards the close of the novel, Suleiman's narration shifts from child witnessing to an adult narration of a twenty-four-year old. At this point in the story, the use of child witnessing as an allegory for exiled Libyans is broken as Suleiman has become exiled himself. Of his commitment to nationalism and his traumatic experience in exile, he narrates thus:

Nationalism is as thin as a thread, perhaps that's why many feel it must be anxiously guarded...I suffer an absence, an ever-present absence, like an orphan not entirely certain of what he has missed or gained through his unchosen loss. I am both repulsed and surprised, for example, by my exaggerated sentiment when parting with people I am not intimate with, promising impossible reunions. Egypt has not replaced Libya. Instead, there is a void, this emptiness I am trying to get at like someone frightened of the dark, searching for a match to strike. I see it in others, this emptiness. My expression shifts constantly, like that of the prostitute who waits in your car while you run across a busy road to buy a new pack of cigarettes for the night (232).

The exiled are usually traumatised by an absence from their homelands and the absence of their loved ones. Almost throughout the story, in the child witnessing of Suleiman, there is a predominant trope of absence. Suleiman laments the continual absence of his father – "I felt my cheeks burn with anger: where is Baba? He should be here because when he's home everything is normal, she is never ill and I am never woken up like this to find everything changed" (10). His father's absence robs Suleiman of the security of love and security. It is the same with Kareem, Ustath Rashid's son. After his father is taken by the men of the Revolutionary Committee, Suleiman notices that "he became quieter – he was always quiet, but not this quiet – and refused to join in any of the games we played" (40-1).

The lives of Libyans who are not exiled are not left out of the picture. As established in the preceding sub-heading, the life of Najwa is an allegory for Libyans who are not given to dissenting activities. However, in this case, such citizens are being traumatised by the helplessness that comes from being

unable to identify with and protect their loved ones from the men of the Revolutionary activities. Many of such persons suffer the pain of absence and silence from their loved ones. In the face of such psychological distress, they result to behaviours that can be considered as 'deviant'. Suleiman notices that with the increasing absence of his father from home, his mother succumbs to first, irrational behaviours, betrayal, and then, dissociation. He describes her as being ill:

Baba never found out about Mama's illness; she only fell ill when he was away on business. It was as if, when the world was empty of him, she and I remained as stupid reminders, empty pages that had to be filled with the memory of how they had come to be married (1).

The disappearance of a loved one puts his family into tough distressed roles. The missing person's family begin to fluctuate between hope and despair. The absence of Suleiman's father forces Najwa into a drinking spree perhaps, to help her forget the ordeal that is to come when the men from the Revolutionary Committee would finally get hold of her husband. She slumps into withdrawal and neglect. On many occasions, Suleiman notices that his mother neglected the duties she gleefully did when Baba was home. This is because she takes to drinking and neglects Suleiman. Unfavourable socio-political realities are potent enough to weigh heavily upon the minds of individuals. Usually, the effect is felt directly on the psyche before it induces physical illness on the individual [8]. Libyan citizens, owing to their harsh socio-political climate suffer a kind of withdrawal and resignation which can be considered as a psychosomatic effect of the dictatorship upon their psyches [9]. Gradually, Najwa recedes into the loneliness of a depressed world. After her husband is released from his first imprisonment, Suleiman notices that his mother "...took a big breathe and, looking up into the ceiling, said, 'We survived the madness'... 'what's the matter? Calm down. Breathe. Look at me, look at me. That's it. Keep your eyes here. It's over. You're OK now. Breathe, habibi, breathe'" (199-200). Najwa's fluctuating mind comes at ease as she realises that her husband is back and away from the ferocious net of the Guide's men. Her husband's release is a reality that spells the dawn of a new beginning, a beginning with a fresh future and fresh anticipation. She quits drinking and the neglect she suffered in the absence of her husband vanishes as she bounces back to her marital roles with a renewed vigour. Much later, after Faraj recovers fully, Suleiman would say of his mother:

She never fell ill. She never came to my bed to whisper her secret stories of the past. She seemed quite happy with Baba. Some mornings

I even heard them giggle together, but when they saw me they stopped. Their new life together, where Baba never went away and Mama was never ill, distanced me from them, and I began for the first time ever, to long for the summer to end and for school to begin. One night I was awakened by the sound of strange moan. I went to their room and saw Baba on top of her again. But this time it was different. Mama didn't lie beneath helpless, her face turned away, with one hand secretly beside her and open towards the sky. Her eyes were glued to his and her legs curled round him, and the moan wasn't his alone; they both shared the pain, it seemed (221).

Things between Najwa and Faraj do not just return to normal, rather a new kind of love envelopes them. It is the first time they both have a meaningful family intimacy since the inauguration of their forced marriage and his dissenting commitments. A sense of domestic freedom seems to fill the house and Najwa's mind is eased from the pressures and tensions of insecurity can bring. This underscores how unfavourable socio-political environments can weigh down heavily on the human psyche and induce emotional illness.

However, Najwa's bright hopes are short-lived. Very soon, her husband would be arrested again because this time, he reads out a passage from the book *Democracy Now* to his fellow workers. Fury consumes Suleiman's mother. Suleiman reports that:

There was indeed an element of intrigue and madness in the way Father had behaved. He, more than most, must have known that 'walls have ears', that informing on your fellow citizens is Libya's national sport, that the Medici were breathing down all necks. Had he, at the young age of forty-eight gone senile? Had he managed to delude himself that he could still change things? Had he come to prefer death over slavery, unlike my Scherazade, refusing to live under the sword? (236)

Of course, there is evidence why Suleiman's father betrays himself into the hands of the government. Owing to the facts that Faraj is given to dreaming of a democratically free Libya; that his dissident activities have earned the lives of Ustath Rashid, Nasser, and some university students; and the reality that the government systematically rips his family of all financial assets, life becomes an unbearable torture. For Faraj, it is better to die for something than live for nothing. The dictatorship is taken away so much from him already – his beloved friend and ally, Ustath Rashid

is dead, Nasser is arrested by the Revolutionary Committee, his son is away in exile, and Moosa is deported back to Egypt. The arrest and torture at the hands of the secret police lose their terror in his eyes as he goes on read a portion of the *Democracy Now* to his colleagues at work.

Faraj dies of a heart attack one month after his release from prison. More heavily on Suleiman's mother is the weight of losing her husband a few months after his second release from prison. With Suleiman away in exile and her husband dead, the loneliness of absence leads her into amnesia. She hardly remembers anyone again. Kareem reports to Suleiman thus on the state of her health:

Your mother is unwell. She has not left your house for weeks. I visit her – don't worry, what's missing from her life is only to see you, I am making sure she needs for nothing. Stacked on her bedside table are sealed envelopes addressed to you. At first she would hide them from me, but lately she has been so unwell. Sometimes, she can't even recognise me, thinks I am you. I took the opportunity and copied your address. I hope this reaches you. I hope that it finds you well, I hope you still recognise me. In this country we don't understand the illnesses of the heart. What I tell her, no matter how sweet, I am sure tastes as bland as cotton wool. She needs you. Call her soon.
Your friend and brother,
Kareem (238)

CONCLUSION

In the Country of Men [1] is an intensely political novel which tries to capture and challenge the socio-political atmosphere of el-Quadaffi-ruled post-colonial Libya and indeed, the rest of the Arab-African Countries. The trope of geo-political disequilibrium heavily shapes the text. Through child witnessing, Matar has been able to capture the socio-political pulse of North African societies and the attendant political discontent, distrust, and disillusion with given dictatorshiprealities obtainable in such countries.

Geo-politically sick societies have a way of weighing down heavily upon the psyches of individuals. As individuals denounce prevalent political realities in their countries and long for a better society, they unconsciously enter into a traumatised negotiation of their futures and their humanities. When these negotiations fail to achieve their desired goals, there arises an internal psychological crisis in the consciousnesses of people as they unsuccessfully strive to strike a balance between prevalent socio-political realities and the longing for a wholesome political atmosphere. Such

psychical crises would force individual to enter into roles that socially unacceptable. Furthermore, where there is a more powerful psychological crisis that is aided by a total helplessness of the individual, the physical health and life of the victim are exposed to a greater risk of death.

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