

Thematic Threads in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *The Return*

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Abstract

Freedom is one's ability to move freely and act independently, but a powerful dictator in a country limits this freedom. He has absolute control over the private and the public sector of life. The suppression of the voice of artists, poets and writers who make people aware of their rights results in the life of exile for these people. Consequently, the growth of the person in exile becomes incomplete as he hangs between his native land and the country of exile; people face mental trauma when they recall the memory of their country which always haunts them. They try to come to terms with this trauma by writing it down on the pages. Such person uses his writing for two purposes: to relieve himself from his trauma and to oppose the state that forced him to spend his life in exile. In this context, the paper will make an attempt to prove how Hisham Matar's novel *In the Country of Men* and memoir *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* construct interplay of variety of themes, such as exile and identity, loyalty and betrayal, justice and injustice, innocence and corruption, and the nature of truth. How Matar amalgamates the fictional and the factual, and the personal and the political in his works shall also be under scrutiny. Through the thematic study of both the works, this paper will bring out how the dictatorship ruined the childhood and the youth of innocent Suleiman and many other people like him. It will

also delve into the questions: how the Libyans learnt to live without their family members who had been abducted by the regime and how the universal experience of suffering under torturous dictatorial regimes handicap people physically and mentally.

Keywords: Dictatorship, Torture, Suffering, Loyalty, Abduction

Dictatorship is one of the forms of government where only one person or a very small group has absolute control or power in state. The term has been derived from the Latin word *dictator* which in the "Roman Republic" was referred to a person or magistrate who was given absolute powers to deal with the crisis that the country was facing (*Britannica*). But the dictator in the works under study is the person who himself has put the country in crisis. Here the reference is being made to Muammar Qaddafi, the dictator of Libya. He had taken power in his hands in 1969 by overthrowing King Idris, but his dictatorship put people only in worse conditions. It took their freedom to speak and move freely. Qaddafi was not only the first person to suppress social and political opinions of the Libyans; the country was previously occupied by the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Ottomans, and the Italians. Qaddafi followed the footsteps of the Italians and executed people in public. It was for the fear of the state only that some people shifted their loyalties towards it. Consequently, they betrayed their friends and family members to save their own lives. But there were some people who remained loyal to their country and opposed the state and had spent their lives in the notorious places like El-Agheila and Abu Salim prison. The worse conditions of these places and of Libya under Muammar Qaddafi's regime has been efficiently depicted by Hisham Matar, a British-Libyan writer, in his novel *In the Country of Men* (2006) and in his memoir *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (2016).

Mario Vargas Llosa writes that themes choose the novelist; he does not choose them. Like “*catoblepas*” which consumes its own self, a novelist “scavenges” his life experiences to get the rough ideas for his stories (*Letters to a Young Novelist* 17). Similarly, Hisham Matar has not chosen those themes deliberately; rather themes emerge from the stories presented in his works. He has used his life experiences as material for his novels.

A theme is an idea that usually recurs in a work of literature. Human relationships, love-hatred, hope-disappointment, faith-betrayal, suffering, suppression of women, surrender to the regime, power, memory, incomplete catharsis, exile, human rights violations and violence are some of the important themes that are prevalent in literature from the ancient to the present times. Many novels and memoirs present complex human relationships and sufferings that result from the political and social ambience of a country. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story* (1990), Hisham Matar’s *In the Country of Men* (2006), and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) and Nadeem Aslam’s *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013) are epitome of such experiences. Memoirs like Wladyslaw Szpilman’s *The Pianist* (1946), Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) and Hisham Matar’s *The Return* (2016) present the human suffering inflicted upon people by different dictators.

Dictatorship suppresses the opposition through tortures and by taking away its freedom. It is not only a state that is ruled by a dictator but at times some families are also ruled by dictatorial heads who make others suffer. The novel is full of incidents where torture is being inflicted upon the innocent people. First, there is a domestic

torture that Najwa faced in her childhood when she was seen with a boy. She was locked in a room and beaten badly. She was even refused education and was married at the age of fourteen. On the very first night of her marriage, she felt as if she had been raped by a stranger. In the novel, readers are introduced to the feminist perspective through Najwa’s character. Although she was punished for her actions, yet she tries to resist her marriage by getting drunk and remaining away from her husband. The condition of women in Libya was quite different from the whole world. In other progressive countries like France and America, women became versatile in every profession. But women in Libya faced suppression only. Through the story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, different facets of Najwa’s personality come out, who hates its protagonist Scheherazade. Najwa considers her a coward for choosing slavery over death. The irony here is that Najwa herself submits to the regime in order to save her husband. David Dabydeen’s viewpoint is quite accurate here, who in the review of the novel says that Najwa’s biography is intertwined with the allusions to Scheherazade’s situation under the tyranny of King Shahryar. This classical tale puts light on the “modern Arab life” (*Independent*). It is not Najwa but her parents who win at the end and are successful in their efforts to prove her virgin. She feels betrayed by her husband when he is arrested by the regime, leaving Najwa and Suleiman directionless. A woman’s fate in a patriarchal society is manifested through the betrayals Najwa has faced. In public life, there is a torture that stems out from the opposition of the Qaddafi’s regime. Ustath Rashid is a suitable example, who is taken from his house in front of his family by the members of the Revolutionary

Committee. His wife stands behind like “an invisible string” attached to her husband (*In the Country of Men* 186). Ustath is interrogated at the National Basketball Stadium and people cheer his interrogation with the words like “*Hang the traitor*” (86). He pleads like a guilty child before the committee for mercy but is not successful. Finally, he is hanged after a lot of torture and harassment. Faraj’s deteriorated condition after he is captured by the Revolutionary Committee is another example of torture. He could not stand on his own and his appearance is so bad that Suleiman fails to recognize him.

The novel presents the life in Libya under Qaddafi’s regime from the perspective of a nine-year old boy Suleiman. Unaware of the political ambience around him, he was entrapped by the agents of the dictator and thus, had to submit to the regime.

Love has various facets in the novel, i.e., children-parents’ love, husband-wife’s love, love in friendship, love for one’s country and one’s love for freedom in his homeland. Suleiman’s love for his father Faraj and mother Najwa is pure. He always wanted to protect his parents and was the sole listener of his mother’s problems that she faced before and after marriage. In his father’s absence, only he was the responsible person and the head of the house as his mother usually got drunk. He was so devoted to his mother that as a child, he could hardly take his eyes off in order to save her from the perils that might approach her any time. Such responsibility of a child can be seen in Nadine Gordimer’s novel *My Son’s Story*. In this novel, Will remains at home with his mother until she gets arrested whereas his father was busy in his extramarital and political affairs. In both the novels [*My Son’s Story* and *In the Country of Men*], the sons are

trusted with their parents’ secrets. In Gordimer’s novel, the son has kept his father’s secret of having an extramarital affair and in Matar’s novel; the son is trusted with mother’s secret of being an alcoholic. Najwa manifests her love for Faraj when she approaches the agents of regime to save her husband. She swallows her pride for him. Ustath Rashid’s love for Faraj can be seen when Ustath did not reveal his name as his accomplice to the men of the Revolutionary Committee. Faraj and Ustath’s love for Libya is intense as they try to oppose the dictatorship by hiding their identity. They also make people aware of the regime’s deeds through pamphlets. Najwa loves to be free but her freedom was taken away by her parents and husband. In this way, every character in the novel has the feeling of love, either for his country or for his family.

Some characters manifest their love for power which is also an important theme in the novel. Suleiman reflects his lust for power when he plays “My Land, Your Land” with Kareem and seizes Kareem’s property (*In the Country of Men* 106). This incident presents the basic level of children’s political knowledge. They try to imitate in their games the ways of state in which it organises the repression of citizens. The game also signifies the savage attitude of Qaddafi’s regime. Like the “Big Brother” of George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty Four: A Novel*, Muammar Qaddafi, the dictator of Libya, wanted to control every aspect of citizens’ lives (167). He could not bear his criticism, thus wanted to finish his opponents. Consequently, he created the Revolutionary Committees that abducted the dissidents and interrogated them. The dissidents were extremely tortured during the interrogation and it was telecasted on television as well. This

happens with Ustath Rashid in the novel.

There is no doubt if one loves his family, friends or country, he is also loyal towards them. To be loyal is quite difficult and Faraj rejected this title by submitting to Qaddafi's regime. Ustath Rashid, on the other hand, was loyal as he does not tell names of his accomplices to the men of the Revolutionary Committee. Suleiman is loyal to his father as he rescues his book *Democracy Now* from burning. He is loyal to his mother as well and does not tell her secret of being an alcoholic to anyone. Loyalty and betrayal are interconnected; it is because of the fear of the dictatorship that characters betray one another in the novel. Ustath Rashid is arrested because someone has betrayed him. Faraj betrays Ustath by surrendering to Qaddafi's regime. Najwa's act of saving her husband from the clutches of the regime is betrayal of the ideas for which Ustath and Nasser had sacrificed their lives. Suleiman betrays his friend Kareem when he tells his secrets to other boys. He is ashamed of his betrayal and does not even go to meet Kareem as he is leaving the country with his mother after his father Ustath Rashid's death. Suleiman betrays his family as well by telling some important secrets of his father to the men of the Revolutionary Committee. He thinks that this would help his family but the result is chaos. Suleiman is confused by the incidents that are happening around him. Towards the end of the novel, Suleiman feels betrayed by his parents when they send him away to Egypt without providing any reason. Throughout the story, his parents avoid telling him the truth about the political ambience of Libya and his father's involvement in it. Betrayal is witnessed throughout the study of the novel either for the selfish reasons or for the wellbeing of one's family.

The submission to the regime contributes to the progression of the novel. In the story, Faraj submits to the regime and his relationship with Najwa takes a new turn and they become a loving couple. But after Faraj's surrender, Suleiman's life changes. In order to save him from the clutches of regime, Suleiman's parents send him to Cairo. His family submits to the regime in order to save their lives. The state did not leave any difference between the public and the private life. It could easily enter in the households and the same happens in Suleiman's household when Faraj's photograph is replaced by a huge photograph of the dictator Muammar Qaddafi, who becomes the central figure in the house. Another way of keeping an eye on the activities of the natives was through eavesdropping on phone. Incomplete catharsis is another important theme in the novel. Suleiman's catharsis for his father's death is incomplete as he was not with him during his last time and for his last rites. His absence during the last rites of his father continues to haunt Suleiman and his life of exile has also impacted his psyche. Memory is another important theme of the novel. Suleiman's memory and his way of recounting the events through the medium of stream of consciousness make the novel memorable. He goes back into his memory to describe the important events that happened in his family and the country he was living in.

The novel deals at length with the violation of human rights. People were refused their basic human rights during Qaddafi's regime. The opposition was executed publicly and the dissidents' families were followed by the men of the Revolutionary Committee. This happens with Suleiman and Najwa. Students were hanged in

the public for opposing the dictator. People could not talk freely on phone and the practice of eavesdropping led to the arrests of many dissidents. In this way, the regime controlled the lives of Libyan people. Some of the above mentioned important themes in the novel bring out the mental and physical torture that characters go through.

After discussing the important themes in the novel *In the Country of Men*, now the paper shall make an attempt to discuss themes in the memoir *The Return*. These include: human rights violation, disappearance, exile, identity crisis, memory, incomplete catharsis, search for father, and consolation through art. It is mentioned earlier that Matar has amalgamated the personal and the political in his works and it becomes clearer through the reading of his memoir *The Return*. The communication of harrowing experiences into a personal narrative is a double torture and Matar has faced this torture by writing about his father's disappearance in his memoir. He falls under the category of such persons who grapples with the question what a person does when he cannot "leave and cannot return" (*The Return* 2). His father's abduction by Muammar Qaddafi's regime and the dictator's refusal to provide any information of his father's being alive made Matar write about dictator's atrocities in his books. The dictator tried to silence him by banning his books in Libya but the matter gained international attention. The publication of his memoir unveiled the misdeeds of the dictator. The memoir represents the history and politics of Libya as experienced by those who have been the testimonies to his father's disappearance and the human rights violation in Libya.

Disappearances, kidnappings, massacres, arrests,

blindfolding, public executions, handcuffing and censorship on art, literature, media and judiciary form the discussion on human rights in the memoir. The dissidents were targeted and were abducted from their houses. The same happened with Hisham Matar's father Jaballa Matar who was a prominent leader of the opposition. The Egyptian police arrested him to deliver to Qaddafi in 1990. There was no news from his side except two letters that he managed to send out of the infamous Abu Salim. The savage treatment in the prison caused physical and mental disabilities to the prisoners. The instances of the inhuman practices include the handcuffs with the plastic wire that caused pain in the head and loud speakers in each cell that played Qaddafi's speeches from the morning to the midnight. The captives were tortured physically and mentally for unlimited times. They were even refused medical care and were brutally treated when found with a book or letter. This happened with Jaballa who fell into a "bottomless abyss" when the regime found about the letters he had sent to his family (*The Return* 175). The prisoners suffered to this extent that they did not get proper food and water. Their suffering does not end here. On 29th June, 1996, a massacre took place in Abu Salim. This massacre reminds one of the Holocausts during the Second World War. There was a loud explosion and 1270 prisoners were shot dead with pistols and machine guns. The dead were not even provided a respectable funeral. The poets and writers were also not tolerated and had been arrested by the regime. The Italians, during their seizure of Libya, hanged people in public and a half century later, Qaddafi did the same by hanging the students in public. The memoir is a witness to how the prisoners became unrecognizable for their families when

they came out of the abyss and extreme suffering.

Jaballa Matar, Hisham's father, was an important leader of the opposition and thus, was abducted. The subject of his disappearance plays a major role in the formation of the memoir. He was kidnapped from Egypt in 1990 and it was only through his letters that the family came to know about his abduction. He was kept in the infamous Abu Salim that was called "The Last Stop", a metaphor for a place from where no one had come alive (*The Return* 10). Unsure about her husband's fate, Matar's mother addressed him as "Absent-Present" (39). The dissidents including Jaballa were threat to the regime. Consequently, they were abducted under mysterious circumstances.

Disappearance of the dissidents further lead to the life of exile for their families. The political conditions of Libya were responsible for Matar's life of exile. He, along with his family had spent their exile in the cities like Manhattan, Nairobi, Cairo, Rome, London and Paris. During these years, he faced identity crisis and felt that a part of him had stopped developing since the family left Libya. Joseph Brodsky in his essay "The Condition We Call Exile" talks about "*Gastarbeiter*" and a writer in exile. The common thing between both of them is that they both run towards a better condition from the worse (1). Matar also ran away from the political ambience of Libya that had taken his father's life. The family had left Libya in 1979 and exile changed their whole life.

Identity crisis that Matar and his family face results from exile. Matar and his brother developed this sense of crisis when they joined schools in Europe under false identities. Their father could not travel with his real passport as the regime always had its eyes

on him. Matar's growth is incomplete as he was distanced from his family's name, home, music and language. The confiscation of identity and the things of "personal value" was a traumatic thing for Matar (*The Return* 21). Changez of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, who was from Pakistan, also faced the identity crisis in America, especially after the 9/11 attacks.

A person in exile tries to assert his identity by writing about the atrocities and the experiences he has gone through. He revisits his memory for this purpose. Writing personal narratives for the author as a survivor is a kind of emotional struggle. Geography, history and politics constitute a major part of Matar's writings. In the memoir, he revisits his memory to tell about his childhood and his parents. He describes his father Jaballa Matar as someone who helped everyone and was an author as well. Matar recalls the time when his father told Ziad and him about the period when Qaddafi had taken control of Libya. Further, Matar recalls his father's abduction and the time afterwards when each friend from the family refused to help them. He looks back on the day of massacre in Abu Salim prison in 1996 when he could not get out of his bed. He shivered on the thought that his father might have been among those prisoners who lost their lives in the massacre. Matar used to visit the National Gallery to see the paintings. Unintentionally, on the day of massacre he shifted to Édouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*, a painting of political execution. Uncle Mahmoud, even after spending twenty-one years in the notorious Abu Salim, still has a sharp memory. He tells Matar about the day he was kidnapped and how the dissidents were treated in the prison. Matar recalls the day when he met Seif el-Islam, son

of the man who had kidnapped his father. That time was torturous for Matar but Seif did not tell him anything about his father. Matar successfully describes the time from his memory when he visited Libya and had met his uncles and their families.

Although Matar tries to compensate his loss by meeting his uncles but he suffers from incomplete catharsis. Aristotle writes that the incidents in a tragedy give birth to the feelings of “pity and fear” (*Poetics* 8). The catharsis and purification of these emotions is necessary to relieve the author and audience from the burden of tragedy. Many authors achieve the cathartic effect of the tragedies of their lives by writing them down on the pages in the form of a story or memoir. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith in their book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* consider writing of memoir as author’s effort to gain some audience who helped him to unburden himself from his past. Matar relieves himself from his grief by writing memoir. His catharsis is incomplete as he does not know what actually has happened to his father. But he has found solace in writing like his father who created and recited poems at night in Abu Salim.

Matar has actually taken the help of writing to search his father and to bring into the notice of international high authorities the matter of his father’s abduction by the dictator of Libya. To know the facts behind his father’s disappearance, Matar started a campaign in which he appealed various diplomats, poets, writers, journalists, and human rights activists to help him to find his father’s whereabouts. The Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu addressed a statement to Muammar Qaddafi about Jaballa Matar. Kamila Shamsie wrote

an article to help Matar. Matar and Ziad met Qaddafi’s son to know about their father’s fate. Instead of helping them, he tried to buy them off but was not successful. Matar gave interviews to many channels and his campaign to find his father gained international attention but the results were not fruitful.

Matar did not leave any stone unturned to search his father, but findings were not positive. Then he had turned to art and achieved the consolation for his father’s death through it. The year he lost his father, his fascination for the pictures changed. Spending time before the paintings overwhelmed him. He felt himself surrounded by the sounds and images of his father’s final moments when he was looking at Titian’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*. He shifted to Édouard Manet’s painting *The Execution of Maximilian* on the day of massacre in Abu Salim prison. For Matar, this picture of political execution evokes the indeterminate fate of his father and other prisoners who lost their lives in Abu Salim. He was disheartened about the fact that he was unknowingly guided to this painting on the same day on which the massacre happened. This had changed his relationship with all works of Manet. Titian and Manet’s paintings give insight into Matar’s grief and quest for his father.

The above written study of the themes of Hisham Matar’s novel *In the Country of Men* and memoir *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* has proved that the dictatorship in Libya ruined the childhood and youth of many children like Suleiman. The most important incident of Matar’s life is his father’s abduction and uncertainty of his fate. So, he has dealt with this incident directly in his memoir and indirectly in his novel through his persona Suleiman.

The themes that came out of his works clearly highlight what it means to be a human under the savage and torturous rule of the dictator like Muammar Qaddafi. Further, the study of both the works suggests that *In the Country of Men* is an autobiographical novel. Though Matar has clearly refused this fact, yet the novel clearly presents some important aspects of his life through Suleiman's character and political ambience of Libya. There is difference between Suleiman's grief of his father's death and Matar's grief of his father's disappearance. The former knows that his father is no more but the latter does not know whether to count his father among the living or the dead. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus had found the truth about his father's death towards the end but Matar fails to get any information regarding his father's disappearance and death. As compared to Sophocles' work, there is deferral of closure in Matar's *The Return*. Oedipus found the closure but it became impossible for Matar. In fact, his *The Return* is a search for this closure. Consequently, literature has helped Hisham Matar to give a way to his pent up feelings.

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