

Traumatised Narrators in Hisham Matar's Novels

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Summary

This article concerns the child-protagonist narrators, Suleiman and Nuri, of Hisham Matar's two novels *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* respectively. Noting how their traumatised experiences relate closely to the writer's own Libyan childhood, the discussion focuses on their use of desperate strategies to cope with, or challenge, their predicaments. Matar's personal awareness of lives marked by "shame, pain and fear", and the difficulty of imagining a "better reality", helps to create his awareness of both boys' anguish, especially in relation to their fathers (lost in Suleiman's case; disappeared, like Matar's, in Nuri's). The stages of each narrator's childhood are traced, highlighting how much more self-defeating Nuri's choices ultimately are, despite his life apparently being easier. The greater pessimism of the second novel may reflect a growing awareness in Matar himself of the profound difficulties for Libyans in constructing a new post-Gaddafi vision for themselves.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel handel oor die kinderprotagonisvertellers van Hisham Matar se twee romans *In the Country of Men* en *Anatomy of a Disappearance*: onderskeidelik Suleiman en Nuri. Deur op te let hoe hulle ervarings aansluiting vind by die skrywer se eie Libiese kinderjare, fokus die bespreking op hul desperate strategieë om hul haglike omstandighede die hoof te bied of uit te daag. Matar se persoonlike bewustheid van lewens wat deur "skaamte, pyn en vrees" gekenmerk is, en die probleem om daarin te slaag om 'n "beter realiteit" te verbeeld, help om sy bewustheid van albei seuns se leed te skeep, veral ten opsigte van hul vaders (verloor (in Suleiman se geval), verdwyn (soos in Matar se geval) in Nuri s'n). Die onderskeie stadiums in elk van die vertellers se kinderjare word nagespoor om te beklemtoon hoeveel meer selfverdelend Nuri se keuses uiteindelik is, al is sy lewe skynbaar makliker. Die groter pessimisme van die tweede roman mag 'n groeiende bewustheid reflekteer in Matar self van die diepgaande probleme vir Libiërs om 'n nuwe, postGadaffi beeld te konstrueer.

In the early days Matar was regarded as a British Libyan or Anglo-Arab writer. However, "[a]fter the Libyan uprising everyone calls [him] the Libyan novelist, who lives in London" (McBain 2011: 3). In an interview on

the subject of Anglo-Arab literature, Fadia Faqir, who describes herself as a “cross-cultural, transnational writer par excellence”, points out that

[v]ery few Arabic books get translated into English and most of them confirm stereotypes about the Arabs.

(Bower 2010: 8)

Matar, on the other hand, tells one of his interviewers, Lina Sergie Attar, that “[he does not] write in Arabic” (Matar in Attar 2011: 4), and that his “Arabic isn’t as good as [his] English” (p. 4). However, although Arabic was in fact “the first language that [he] used to express [his] emotions, [his] desires, [his] needs” (p. 4), he finds that, by writing in English, “the distance has allowed a kind of freedom to write about things that matter to [him], that seem overwhelming at times” (p. 4). Although he explains to another interviewer, Nouri Gana, that his English “tends to be better than [his] Arabic” because “[s]ince [he] was a boy [he] attended English schools” (2007: 3), his practice does not make it a natural one:

“In fact, what interests me about my situation is how unnatural it continues to be It is certainly not an easy thing to write outside one’s language. It is the deepest and most peculiar dimension of exile that I have experienced.”

(Matar in Gana 2007: 3)

Significant also for my enterprise are two of Matar’s other admissions to Gana. The first is:

“I am terribly ignorant with regard to contemporary writing in general. I find I rarely read a book by a living author. But I would love for you to introduce me to the work of contemporary Arab novelists writing in English.”

(Matar in Gana 2007: 3)

This admission frees me to focus on Matar’s two novels without having to enter into comparison with other Anglo-Arab novels by which he may have been influenced. The second admission is that he is

“not interested in political resistance, although I am deeply interested in justice. Justice is educative, justice is apolitical, justice resists nothing for it is a normative state, I may even go so far as saying that justice is, in the Aristotelian sense, aesthetic. Therefore what preoccupies me in my work is the art itself. It is a question of fidelity. I refuse for my work to serve anything or anyone but itself”.

(Matar in Gana 2007: 4)

In another interview, one with Stephen Moss, Matar goes even further, emphasising that he is “not really interested in politics”, seeing himself rather as “a sensualist and an aesthete” (2006: 2). Despite this disclaimer,

Matar's views on Libya reveal an unsurprisingly passionate concern with the consequences of politics, one that I shall be largely concerned with in discussion of his novels. After the fall of Qaddafi, Matar jubilantly declares that the Libyan revolution has "undermined every totalitarian rule and every oppressive individual. It has inspired that most profound ingredient in any uprising – a nation's ability to imagine a better reality" (*The Guardian* 2011: 2). For nearly a century, Matar explains that "our national experience has been marked by shame, pain and fear. Now pride, confidence and hope are our allies" (*The Guardian* 2011: 3). However, he stresses that while

"[w]e have defeated Gaddafi on the battlefield, now we must defeat him in our imagination. Let's keep focused on the true prize: unity, democracy and the rule of law. Let's not seek revenge; that would diminish our future".

(*The Guardian* 2011: 3)

Matar's first novel, *In the Country of Men*, relates closely to the Libya of his childhood in the late seventies. However, in the case of the second novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Matar points out that, although he does not mention the family's country of origin, there are two main clues as to why "they've got to be from Iraq":

"Because there is no other country in the Middle East where a king was shot in 1958 except in Iraq. And the fact that they go to Paris, they don't go to Italy or Britain, which is what Libyans would have done."

(Matar in Attar 2011: 4)

Nevertheless, Matar feels, on the one hand, that "it is more useful for the reader not to know where [the family] are from" (Matar in Attar 2011: 4), and, on the other, that he "[doesn't] mind them being from Libya" (p. 4). In any case, Matar's comments, in all the interviews to which I have had access, show that his overriding concern is with Libya rather than Iraq, and that he has probably used the implicit Iraq context as a personal security safeguard. Furthermore, since the abduction of the father through secret police intervention is the crucial factor in both novels, whether set in Libya or Iraq, I will not devote attention to differences between the two countries' political situations but will rather allow Matar's passionate concern for Libya to suffuse my discussion.

What is of major importance in both Matar novels is their concern with the lives of people marked by "shame, pain and fear", in which the very possibility of imagining "a better reality" would have been a fraught, desperate and compromised process. As Ron Charles points out in his *Washington Post* review of *In the Country of Men*, "A Libyan Childhood", while Matar "includes frightening glimpses of the dictatorship's abuses and Libya's brand of Islamic Puritanism", he "focuses primarily on the psychological damage wreaked on his young narrator" (Charles 2007: 1).

Central to the lives of both protagonists, who are also first-person narrators, is their anguish in relation to the loss of a father. Matar's own father, anti-Gaddafi dissident Jaballa Matar, was abducted in Cairo in 1990 and has not been seen since by his family. In an interview with *The Independent*, Matar says: "To this day, every knock on the door could be my father. But the only way in which he visits unannounced is in dreams. I dream of him frequently" (Matar 2006: 5). Thus he is filled with a desire "to know what happened to my father" (p. 7). In an interview by Hari Kunzru, Matar makes the even more telling and deeply ironic revelation that "[t]here are times when my father's absence is as heavy as a child sitting on my chest" (Matar in Kunzru 2011: 3).

Both novels involve a father who is abducted by a dictator's secret police: In the first the father dies in prison, in the second his whereabouts (like Jaballa Matar's) are never discovered. My focus in this discussion is on the various strategies adopted by the two narrators in the face of loss, grief and (in the second case) haunting uncertainty, as well as significant differences between these.

Although both Matar and Suleiman, the latter the narrator of *In the Country of Men*, were born in 1970 and have to live their lives as exiles, Matar insists:

Suleiman and I are different in many ways ... the fact that he's an only child is very important. He's got this internal monologue going on the whole time. I had a brother who was my role model, and I was with him almost all the time Also, Suleiman's emotionally volatile, unpredictable mother plays a big role in his life, whereas my mother and my father were both very stable and reliable.

(Moss 2006: 2-3)

Furthermore, Suleiman's father is active in the Libyan political underground whereas Matar's father worked for the Libyan mission to the UN in New York (where Matar was born) (Moss 2006: 3). What is important, though, is Matar's special concern to "meet the technical challenges of writing in the voice of a nine-year-old. "What does it mean to be nine years old? How do you perceive the world?" (Tarbush 2006: 2). It is also important at this stage to note the point that Matar makes in his interview by Nouri Gana concerning the narrative voice in his first novel (the only one then available for discussion):

"[T]he story is actually told not by a boy of nine but by an exiled young man of twenty-four recalling the past, hoping by some magic that the telling alone would return him to the place and the people he as a boy has left. He is trying to mend the fracture, the point at which his personal narrative had been amputated. This is why the prose shifts between the contemplative, reflective poise of an adult and the bewilderment of a child."

(Matar in Gana 2007: 5)

I would suggest that much the same comment could be made about *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, allowing for differences between the initial and final ages of the two narrators.

In the Stephen Moss interview Matar emphasised that *In the Country of Men* is not about the disappearance of his own father; that book, he said “is still to be written” (2006: 3). *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, published four years later, is that book, and, although once again the protagonist, Nuri, is an only child, this time he shifts from being a 12-year-old to a 14-year-old, thus making him closer to Matar’s own age (p. 20) when his father disappeared from the family home in Cairo. In M. Lynx Qualey’s review of the novel she reports her belief that “there is something exceptionally careful about the way ‘Anatomy’ is written as though the narrator were afraid of turning over too many stones, naming too many names, asking too many questions” (2011: 1). Her belief is probably a consequence of the fact that Matar entirely avoids naming the country from which Nuri and his family originally came.

In his interview with *The Independent*, Matar reveals that he and his family had spent several summers in Switzerland where the “sight of young lovers on park benches around Lake Geneva ... had set my cheeks on fire and tightened my shoulders as I walked quickly ahead, pretending not to notice” (Page 2006: 2). Switzerland becomes an important setting in the second novel, while the age of the protagonist, Nuri, enables Matar to give greater scope to the boy’s sexual inclinations, a task surely well suited to Matar’s declared sensuality. In noting this aspect of the narration, I do not wish to suggest that I fully share Shamir Shackle’s view: “Just as in his first novel, *In the Country of Men*, the young protagonist sees events without understanding them” (Shackle 2009: 1). Even though Nuri does not understand his circumstances fully (least of all the truth about his own supposed mother), I will endeavour to stress how he is observant and perceptive, and thereby able to attain a helpful understanding of complex situations. Unfortunately, however, his ability to enter into intensive self-reflection, except for feelings of guilt, seems limited.

As my concern with self-rescuing or self-preservation strategies in the two novels has much in common with trauma disorder and its underlying theory, I need, as an additional preliminary manoeuvre, to indicate which aspects of the theory I propose to make use of. From my reading of several works on traumatic stress I have accordingly selected ideas, suggestions and illustrative evidence which, in my view, match the fictional experiences of Matar’s protagonists.

Trauma theorists are understandably chiefly concerned with the effect of large-scale events such as the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. When they become involved with the domestic realm, their focus is generally on cases of abuse, rape or incest. Cathy Caruth explains that post-traumatic stress disorder “reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable

reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (Caruth 1996: 58). What causes trauma, in Caruth's view, following Freud's lead, is thus "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (p. 61). Especially relevant for my purposes is Bessel A. van der Kolk's observation that

[c]hildren are particularly vulnerable to the long-term effects of psychological trauma and their effects are most psychologically disruptive when the perpetrator of the trauma is at the same time the adult on whom a child relies for love and protection.

(van der Kolk 1987: 16)

Traumatized children, notes van der Kolk, "have trouble modulating aggression" (1987: 16). Although he is thinking in terms of direct, violent abuse of children by parental figures, his argument that aggression "replaces fear and helplessness with feelings of omnipotence" (p. 17) remains relevant for my purposes.

In Claudia Zayfert and Jason C. DeViva's book on post-traumatic stress, they point out that

[a] range of intense emotions including fear, anger, guilt, shame, and sadness, can be triggered by reminders of the traumatic event even when the survivor is not aware that the reminders are connected to the event.

(Zayfert & DeViva 2011: 30)

Close to van der Kolk's point of view is their observation that "[i]f the survivor feels trapped and does not think she has any other way to maintain a sense of control in her life, aggression may be the only way she can feel powerful" (Zayfert & DeViva 2011: 12). Jasmin Lee Cori's general term for the consequences of traumatic stress, "coping mechanisms" (Cori 2008: 32), also proves useful in my analysis of the novels; so too do her comments on the state of amnesia as a particular coping mechanism (pp. 37-39).

Before entering into detailed discussion of the protagonists' strategies, some essential distinctions between the two novels need to be noted. Nuri is older than Suleiman, and thus susceptible to sexual arousal and eventually (it would seem) even to intercourse. There is one young mother figure in *The Country of Men*. In the second novel, however, Nuri's supposed mother dies. Mona is for him a temporary surrogate mother, but his real mother, the servant, Naima, is only too ready to serve him. Suleiman's father is kidnapped but released after brutal tortures. Sadly he is arrested and jailed again, though when released for the second time, he dies soon afterwards. So there is no tension and anxiety about his fate. Nuri's father, on the other hand, disappears, but is not heard from again. Nuri does not know whether he is still alive; hence tension and anxiety remain constant features of his

life. Suleiman misses out on the young stepsister of Nasser (his father's friend) whom he had greatly admired. At the end of the novel she is still in Tripoli and engaged to marry his erstwhile friend, Kareem. Although Nuri had lovers in London, we do not hear of any in Cairo. However, as his father had lovers, and as Nuri ends up merging his identity with that of his father, it is likely that he will do the same. Naima, of course, will keep a close eye on his activities. Suleiman's mother sends him to Cairo, and he never returns, in the course of the novel, to Tripoli. Contrastingly, Nuri lives as a child in Cairo, and returns there as adult. His parents fled from Iraq when the king was shot.

I turn now to separate discussion of the two novels, taking them in order of publication.

In the Country of Men

Suleiman is well aware who his father is, but Faraj (Baba) is mostly away, and when at home, his intimacy with his mother, Najwa (Mama) causes Suleiman much confusion and resentment. Crucial in Matar's portrayal of the child are his ambivalent feelings for his mother. His self-concept seems to oscillate between the kind of elevated status she gives him when she is coping with life, and the neurotic turmoil together with self-pity about the neglect which her frequent alcoholic states cause him. Margaret Scanlan aptly notes that "Najwa's alcoholism, and the lies required to keep it half-concealed, damage Suleiman even before his father's underground political activities are exposed" (2010: 268). When Suleiman thinks of losing her, he feels fear together with excitement as if a part of him actually longed for release from her. Pressed by what Mama tells him in one of her post-alcoholic states, his only recourse is to repeat these stories to her. Sometimes what she reveals when she is "ill" makes him so disturbed that he feels unable to eat. This condition, associated with his very ambivalent feelings towards Mama, seems to mark the onset of traumatic stress.

When Mama was only fourteen, her brother Khaled's report about seeing her in mixed company led to her father and all the other male members of her family deciding on a severe punishment (thirty days isolated in her own room), and soon afterwards on her arranged marriage. As David Dabydeen notes, this male "High Council is as merciless as any of Gaddafi's revolutionary committees" (2006: 1). Suleiman not only feels great anger against both Khaled and his father on this account but sometimes plans repeated revenge, a strategy in which the underlying aggression matches trauma theorists' observations. He would in fact like to have saved her from her family's judgment, and part of his present imagined strategy is to envisage himself as her partner in her room, while letting Baba sleep in his (Suleiman's) room!

Such thinking is fostered by Mama's calling him her prince who would one day "take [her] away on his white horse" (Matar 2006a: 12).¹ The power he likes to exert over his mother is closely related to his wish to protect her from "the world, a world full of men and the greed of men" (3). His intensely ambivalent feelings emerge in another form when she tells him consolingly that they "are two halves of the same soul" (9), but one has to note his reservation: to him such words "felt like a gift I didn't want" (9). Intimacy with his mother, Suleiman reveals, means "anger, pity, even hate, but always love and joy" (21). This extraordinary mixture of antithetical emotions helps us understand just how traumatically fraught and tense Suleiman's self-concept is at this point. As Kamila Shamsie observes in her review of the novel, "Where the Mulberries Grow", Matar "movingly charts the ways in which love endures in situations of great repression, but also shows how repression threatens everything, even love, putting relationships under a strain that can be unendurable" (Shamsie 2006: 2).

Baba and his neighbour, Ustath Rashid, are both involved in political activism against the Gaddafi regime, and Suleiman's most traumatic experiences begin when Rashid's public execution is televised. Baba's frequent absences from home on account of his political activities force Suleiman to become the man of the house, a role which is then intricately related to his confused feelings about his mother. His only activity with Baba has been accompanying him to the mosque on Fridays, and the child actually feels closer to his father when he is away. Yet, there is also a great deal of ambivalence in his attitude towards his father; when he accidentally notices him with his friend, Nasser, in the city centre (although Baba is supposed to be away on a trip), he "wishes he could be following him like Nasser" (6). Distraught one night at finding his parents engaged in intercourse, he regards his disturbing them as a providential act since in his mind his mother seems to be a powerless victim. In line with Suleiman's ambivalence, however, there is also probably a feeling of jealousy at the way Baba seems to possess Mama in the posture of intercourse. After the Revolutionary Committee men's incomplete search of Suleiman's home, he becomes "irrationally angry" to hear his mother "mumbling", anger which doubles when he finds her crying (73). He cannot deal with her fear and desperation as it inevitably heightens his own sense of insecurity and need for reassurance.

Suleiman is so vehemently opposed to the friend Moosa's insistence on Baba's books being burned on the roof to protect him against Revolutionary Committee surveillance that he shifts into a regressive state, holding his stomach and rocking himself. Although I can find no direct parallel to this kind of action in the theorists' accounts, its infantile nature would seem to

1. Subsequent references to *In the Country of Men* (Matar 2006a) are indicated by page number(s) only.

reflect stress disorder. In fact, his aggressive demand for an explanation for the burning, and his accusation that Moosa is crazy, makes it necessary for him to find a way to calm himself down. Of course, Suleiman is most confused when Baba returns and thanks Moosa for the action taken.

The lighting of the bonfire reminds Suleiman of the time he brought Mama up to the roof to show her the model horse he had made in response to being called her prince. Her subsequent gazing at the sea reminds him of how he then responded in terms of a compellingly tactile, oedipal experience:

From within my core, a place mysterious until that moment, I felt that I was melting that I, too, like the sun emptying itself into the sea, was pouring myself into her.

(94)

At such a point his self-concept seems to have become dangerously inseparable from her.

Further developments in the novel reveal Matar's sense that the entire society is built on various forms of betrayal (even Mama's marriage was the consequence of betrayal by her brother). Suleiman is greatly disturbed by Ustath Rashid's arrest. When another neighbour, Um Masoud, whose husband is on the side of the Revolutionary Committee, comes to warn Mama against traitors, Mama requests her son not to be so close to Kareem any more. This leads in turn to Suleiman's insulting and fighting Kareem, and the apparent end of their friendship. Although Suleiman later feels that he has betrayed Kareem, and thus made himself a traitor, he cannot explain why the betrayal has occurred. His aggressive behaviour fits in with what the theorists reveal as a consequence of trauma. What does not fit so easily into the theorists' accounts, though, is Suleiman's conscious attempts to try to explain his aggression.

Significantly, Matar devotes two entire pages to this process of self-accusation (111-112), an intensely sympathetic treatment which makes it impossible to regard Suleiman as depraved. This aspect also challenges Lorraine Adams's expressed belief in her review of the novel, that "any despotic system is like any boy's inner life" (2007: 1), and the anonymous Complete Reviewer's claim that most of the book (focusing on the nine-year-old Suleiman) "admit[s] almost no mature analysis of the events" (2009: 6). Suleiman's entry into treacherous behaviour seems to be the consequence of his deep insecurity and anxiety about his mother, and to some extent also, his father, a development which is intensified when he tries to gain favour with Sharief, the Revolutionary Committee officer who keeps daily watch on the household. In her review of the novel, Poornima Apte notes the irony of Suleiman's explanation why he is attracted to Sharief in the first place: "Unlike Mama and Moosa, he didn't treat me like a child. For a nine-year-old ... nothing could be more tempting" (2007: 1; novel 131). Trauma theorists, however, would most likely interpret

Suleiman's collaboration with Sharief as a way of achieving some form of power which would enable him to resist the overwhelming force of trauma. The apparent advantages of Suleiman's collaboration with Sharief, however, soon involve grave consequences for himself and others.

For Suleiman, Moosa – the regular family visitor and almost a father surrogate during Baba's frequent long absences – does not appear to be a threat, although Mama rejects his idealism and gets angry about his failure to prevent Suleiman from witnessing the burning of Father's books. Moosa had in fact told Suleiman how special his friendship with Father was, and the child greatly enjoys Moosa's compelling way of reading, especially of poetry. Nasser, on the other hand, who is only an occasional visitor, and whom Suleiman had initially disliked, is more easily put into the bracket of a person whom the secret police need to track down. Although Suleiman had begun to feel some affection for Nasser, it was not enough to sway him against yielding to the secret police request for Nasser's address.

As if he had foreknowledge of the consequences of his betrayals, Suleiman's inner disturbance in becoming a Sharief collaborator is revealed by his feeling, in terms of images used by his Qur'an teacher, Sheikh Mustafa, that the "flames of Hell Eternal" are now "licking the sides of the Bridge to Paradise" (129-130), another example of Matar's effective use of tactile imagery. Suleiman's accidental hitting of the handicapped boy, Adnan, in the neighbourhood group, intensifies the enmity between himself and the others, and his rescue from them by Sharief creates a further barrier. Unable to offer Sharief the list of Baba's friends, Suleiman decides, after the accident, to offer instead the one book, *Democracy Now*, which he had secretly rescued, thereby heightening its symbolic resonance. So traumatised is Suleiman at this point that he finds his "self-pity had soured into self-loathing" (166), surely a kind of self-directed aggression. Unfortunately for Suleiman, by this time Sharief is no longer waiting outside in his car. In fact it is likely that he has left to provide an escort for the ambulance carrying the injured Adnan. After the climax of his hostility with the other boys, Suleiman is glad to have Mama next to him telling him her stories; he wants nothing to disturb them, and feels (in a resonant oxymoron) "darkly content" (169). Intimacy with Mama thus becomes a form of protection from traumatised feelings, though it is bizarrely ironic that the person who becomes his shelter is in fact deeply implicated in the cause of the trauma. Baba's return home intensifies Suleiman's state of trauma. Baba is horribly disfigured after being interrogated with torture and is initially not even allowed to see him. Confronted by the closed bedroom door, he thinks both parents are dead, and curiously feels a "flutter of excitement" (198), presumably through partial relief from tension and anxiety. Having gained full awareness of Baba's state from outside, Suleiman finally forces his way into the bedroom, where, pent-up with affectionate concern, he would have liked to kiss his father's hand 1001 times.

Suleiman's extremely disturbed feelings about his parents at this time is brought out vividly when, after a bad dream, he goes and lies on top of Mama (at this time on her own on the sofa), thus in effect usurping the position in which he had previously seen his father. She takes him back to his room immediately, and the incident seems to be the cause of his being sent to stay with Moosa and his family in Cairo. An alternative and more positive assessment of this action, however, is offered by Poornima Apte in her review: "[I]t is the mother who exercises her limited influence and manages to rescue them from the brink of death and who also ensures a better life for the young boy" (2007: 1). Soon after the sofa episode Suleiman again comes upon his parents having intercourse, although this time his mother seems to be participating fully in what Suleiman interprets as an experience of pain, one that, in his agitation, he is ironically ready to share. In relation to Mama herself it is possible that, because Baba is no longer politically active, as the writer of the "Complete Review" suggests, she is now able to enjoy sex (Anonymous 2009: 6).

Suleiman's ambivalent states of mind towards his mother suggest an unconscious wish for escape from the anxiety she causes him, and the way in which her alcoholic states cause her to create a virtual second absence in his life. At times he even experiences a degree of alienation from her. The prolonged traumatic effect of Ustath Rashid's execution and Baba's torture also helps to explain Suleiman's fluctuation at this stage between egocentrism and decentredness. His extreme sympathy for Mama leaves him little capacity for sympathy for others except for Papa after his detention and torture, and in retrospect for Ustath Rashid. More disturbing still is the tendency apparent in his destructively aggressive treatment of the beggar, Bahloul, a response appropriately described by the reviewer, Oscar Turner, as "befuddled sadism" (2006: 2), though I do not share his application of this judgment also to the hitting of Adnan. Where the novel tends to differ from the exposition of traumatic states by theorists, however, is in Matar's revelation about Suleiman's capacity for self-evaluation and self-criticism, a capacity which enables him to have a feeling of inferiority in relation to Kareem at the end of the novel, and, on the other hand, to make the best use of the advantages presented to him by his new life in Cairo.

Matar reveals Suleiman's capacity for self-evaluation and self-criticism which causes him to have a feeling of inferiority in relation to Kareem at the end of the novel, and, on the other hand, to take advantage of the opportunities presented by his new life in Cairo (as a kind of ward of Nasser's father, Judge Yaseen). Nevertheless his quest for survival is increasingly dictated by his deep level of insecurity. Suleiman leaves Tripoli before there is any possibility of a love relationship. His mother's love for him, which causes her to send him away, and which therefore at first gives him some freedom from his persistent anxiety about her, offers some potential for renewal and fulfilment.

When Libyan national currency is redesigned, one of Gaddafi's cunning manoeuvres, Suleiman's parents are so financially reduced that they cannot afford to visit him, even though it is then permissible, and Baba is forced to take a job as a factory machine operator. Fifteen years after Suleiman's departure Baba is arrested on a charge of embezzlement, although the real cause was his reading the book saved by Suleiman to his fellow workers. When Suleiman realises through a phone call that his mother is once more very depressed, and that her alcohol addiction has revived, he seems to experience a kind of revival of traumatic stress, spurring him to hang up and erase all the messages she subsequently leaves without listening to them. However, he then has to contend with a surprising but friendly letter from Kareem showing great concern about Mama's depression, and revealing how much she misses Suleiman. Even after Baba's amnesty release enables Mama to become her sober self again, Suleiman remains alienated from her, and observes how "a peculiar aloofness enter[s] [his] voice" (239) when he speaks to her on the phone. It is as if his only remaining self-rescuing or stabilising strategy were to keep emotionally distant from his mother as a form of security.

Lifting of the ban on Libyans travelling abroad makes Suleiman feel, with characteristic ambivalence, "at once jubilant and nervous" (239) at the thought of a visit. Baba, however, dies soon after his release. To complicate matters further for Suleiman, when he phones Mama on the day when mourning for his father ceases, he discovers that Kareem is to marry Nasser's stepsister, Siham, to whom he had been greatly attracted as a child. Ironically, however, even at the time he had thought: "How could I ever marry her now when I had betrayed her brother?" (154). So it begins to seem as if Kareem, about whom he already feels considerable guilt, is the worthier and more acceptable version of himself: the one who was available to take care of Mama at her time of need, and who has entered into the love relationship that he might have had. Thus, despite Suleiman's relative worldly success in Egypt as a pharmacist, he finds that it "has not replaced Libya", and he experiences a sense of "void" and "emptiness" there as if nothing could ever compensate for the maternal bond, however much pain it caused him. This state seems closely related to what the theorists refer to as emotional numbing or dissociation, and what Cori refers to as a "coping mechanism" whereby one cuts oneself off from feelings that are too painful or frightening to handle.

Unsurprisingly, when Mama does come to visit Suleiman in Alexandria, he is full of tangled feelings and has to keep reminding himself that he is a man. So tense is he that he cannot at first make a sound when, having spotted her in the crowd, he thinks of calling her. When he does succeed in making an utterance, however, it is to repeat "Mama" over and over till she sees him. The chance of actual renewed contact thus seems to have given

him a spontaneous release from his long-term calculated strategies, and the possibility of a more satisfactory, less ambivalent relationship with her.

The anonymous writer of “The Complete Reviewer’s Review” on the novel finds the last few chapters (some fifteen pages in all) disappointing, claiming that the shift from the nine-year-old’s point of view “both spoils the earlier approach, and undermines it” (2009: 6). The novel is therefore regarded as a “worthy failure” (p. 7). This verdict seems to have missed what Matar clarifies about the narrative voice in his interview with Nouri Gana: the hovering presence of the adult Suleiman throughout the text, and the way in which the final chapters are saturated with the vestiges and traces of the child Suleiman’s feelings. I also do not find myself willing to endorse David Dabydeen’s contrasting but somewhat sentimentalising view that “memories of love will survive the country of men” (2006: 1). In no way does Matar suggest that somehow Suleiman and Mama will now share an idyllic relationship. As he waits for her Suleiman thinks of himself as a “faithful dog still waiting, confident that his owner will come to reclaim him” (244), and finds himself accepting somewhat ruefully that “she’ll have to stay for at least a month. One month!” (244). Nor do the final lines convey any hint of an idealised future: “When I reach her she kisses my hands, my forehead, my cheeks, combs my hair with her fingers, straightens my collar” (245).

Anatomy of a Disappearance

In the days when his supposed mother is still alive, Nuri’s father seems to him a rather enigmatic man whose mind seems elsewhere, and his mother has to keep monitoring the situation when they are all together. When he is with them both, Nuri “felt somehow that he was more adult than his father” (Matar 2011a: 13).² Bizarre as the observation seems at the time, it may be an ironic warning of Nuri’s ultimate strategy in which, through his lifestyle and concerns, he virtually replaces his father. The father’s delight in recalling the past as a “proud servant of the king” (270) makes it likely that, when he seems preoccupied, he is filled with longing for that past, together with abhorrence of his present situation.

An only son, Nuri is greatly puzzled by his supposed mother. He wakes up sometimes at night and finds her studying his face. Although she seems to grow increasingly unhappy, he never thinks of asking what the cause is. He also wonders why she looks better in photos before his birth. Her death when he is only twelve seems to be the result of acute depression, but the strange looks of his father’s friend, Taleb, when Naima, the servant, is

2. Subsequent references to *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (Matar 2011a) are indicated by page number(s) only.

mentioned, do not provoke him to any conclusions. Taleb's unexplained comment that it is "sometimes better not to know" (58) serves to create a sense of impenetrable mystery about the mother. Nuri's recollection of his mother saying to the father, "It's what you have always wanted" (59), only deepens the mystery.

Nuri felt that Naima knew him better than anyone else, and that she "welcomed his attachment" (34). He is indeed the equivalent of her "prince". In the past Naima's mother had told Father that Naima loved Nuri like a son, yet it never occurs to the boy that Naima might in fact be his real mother. In these circumstances, with the person he regarded as his mother dead, and a servant who treats him with special motherly care, Nuri is clearly vulnerable to a new and rivetting influence which will not only help to satisfy his boyish passions and interest, but will also offer him compensatory escape from grief and perplexity.

The strategy which helps Nuri develop an apparently resilient identity in the face of his adverse circumstances takes the form of his response to the young, indeed girlish, and extremely attractive woman, Mona, whom he and his father encounter while on holiday in Alexandria after the mother's death. As Tim Adams says in his review of the novel, "Mona instantly becomes both a mother substitute and an adolescent sexual torment" (2011: 1). His vulnerability to Mona's charms may well indicate a fairly subdued level of trauma resulting from his mother's death. So confident is he, and so mesmerised by her, that he goes into her hotel room and opens the bathroom door to view her in the shower, a sight that fills him with feverish excitement. It is interesting that in Matar's recollections of his earlier youth in Libya he mentions a girl he had "just fallen hopelessly in love with", and how by "[p]iling up stones beneath her bathroom window", "he got to see her naked under the shower" (2006b: 4). Nuri, having been induced by Mona to dance, subsequently spends every possible moment with her, and reaches a stage where "within the strength of [his] adoration, [he] felt invincible" (24). Indeed, eventually he begins to feel that his father has scarcely any more right to Mona than himself.

The tenor of the competition becomes decidedly more complicated when Father marries Mona. During their trip with Nuri down the Nile, when he hears the happy voices of the new couple in the adjacent cabin, he feels that they are deliberately tormenting him. This sense of torment may well be a prelude to the more serious level of trauma that is aroused by Father's disappearance. Father, in turn, is highly disturbed when he comes upon Nuri brushing Mona's hair, and accordingly devises a plan for the boy to study in England.

When Father takes Nuri to start his education at Dalewick boarding school, and they visit the National Gallery in London, one notes the inadequacy of Nuri's present means of coping with life. His response to Father's unexpected comment that Nuri's mother would have liked a particular

Turner painting, reveals just how intensely involved the child still is with his mother, and with an urge to know how she might have changed after his birth. Soon afterwards the narrator, breaking in on Nuri's account as reflector-focaliser, contrasts his immediate, severe longing for Mona with his present adult longing for the disappeared father. The boy Nuri's generous wish, when Father visits him again for his birthday and takes him to a restaurant in London, wanting "everything good in the world for him; every dream he had, all of his secret plans, to come true" (81), suggests a more profound, underlying identity that will become prominent when Father is abducted. Especially relevant also to the culmination of the novel is Nuri's further unspoken wish at the restaurant to be Father. However, at no point in this encounter is there any hint that he feels more adult than his father; that kind of awareness seems to have been a consequence of the way his supposed mother handled situations involving the three of them.

All too soon, however, in the immediate circumstances as the holidays approach, Nuri anticipates being alone with Mona for a few days in Switzerland before Father arrives. In fact, when she phones before his flight, his longing is "a stone in his mouth" (93), an ironic contrast to his wish, after their initial encounter, that he could "fold into her ribs, be a stone in her mouth" (13). In one way Matar's use of the same surprising, tactile image in both situations plunges the reader forcefully into sharing Nuri's adolescent passion, though one cannot help being startled when, on arrival in Geneva, he is so daring as even to suggest sharing the marital suite temporarily with her. In another way, however, the force of these images helps create a disturbing sense of Nuri's being in a precarious emotional state, verging on trauma.

Nuri, though aware that his father is involved in secret work, reveals that he "never ever heard him talk about [it]" (10). In fact, the only time Father ever comes close to an explicit reference to the danger for him and his family is at the London restaurant birthday lunch when he warns Nuri never to leave his food unattended in order to go elsewhere, as for a toilet visit. Although there is no activity in Nuri's case corresponding to Suleiman's involvement with Sharief, and no equivalent for Ustath Rashid either, the Genevan stage of Nuri's relationship with Mona reveals a form of self-betrayal or treachery. He now recognises the persistence of "deliberate and shameful self-delusion" (96) in his relationship with Mona, but he rescues himself from full moral blame by noting how she always found a way to encourage him. This ambivalence, together with Nuri's underlying, and only temporarily overshadowed, attachment to his father, is to reach an extreme form after Father's disappearance when Nuri and Mona return to Cairo.

The situation for Nuri in relation to his father's close friends is also very different from that of Suleiman. Taleb, the one with whom Nuri has closer contact, is able to give him a certain amount of sympathy after his mother's death, and to hint through glances rather than verbal cues, that the parents'

year-long stay in Paris, the period of Nuri's birth and infancy, involves a painful secret. This information, merging with his delusory state over Mona, exposes him to the likelihood of traumatic pain after the discovery of Father's disappearance. When Nuri returns to school, Taleb phones and visits him regularly. Although he is clearly solicitous about the boy, his justifiable purpose also seems to include checking on any possible strange visitors and to offer a plea for Nuri's sustained contact with Naima.

When Mona comes upon the newspaper report about lovers separated by force in the night (the lovers being Father and a woman called Béatrice Benameur), Nuri's self-enhancing strategy of seeing himself as a quasi-lover for Mona is thrown into disarray. At first, through perceptive and challenging private responses to the news report, Nuri tries to persuade himself that his father and the woman could not actually have been lovers. Later, however, when he can no longer sustain his resistance to the thought of his father having a lover, he imagines the kidnapping situation with sympathy for both victims. Similarly, although he initially intends to take revenge on Béatrice, later on, as the apparent consequence of a rediscovered closeness to his father, he becomes quite friendly with her. What seems fundamental in his sense of identity at this stage is that his ignorance about the actual life of his father was "like a mask that suffocated him" (101), an image which seems to spell the effect of trauma. So intense is this feeling that he finds himself at certain moments unable to bear Mona's presence, a further suggestion of difficulty in sustaining self-control. At other moments, as when Mona starts giving the Swiss police officer instructions for his search, Nuri supports her but, in this case, the element of competition is removed since they both have the same aim, that of finding Father.

It is also significant that, after landing in Cairo, Nuri, feeling "deeply disoriented" (129) as never before, finds that his need for his (supposed) mother is "sudden, bottomless and unendurable" (129), suggesting the related need to purge the strategies he has been using to achieve satisfaction. Rivalry with Mona now takes on a new dimension in which Nuri becomes involved in an attempt to restore his father to his rightful place in his emotions as a way of actually bringing him back in the flesh. This need becomes all the more acute as "a great emptiness begins to fill the place of [his] father", so much so that "it became unbearable to hear his name" (136). This response seems related to what trauma theorist Cori refers to as amnesia, a wish to blot out any awareness of the anguishing experience. The call of Taleb, his father's old friend, for him to be brave like his father, then acts as a kind of reinforcement of his wish to reinstate his father.

To complicate the situation still further, Mona's tendency to encourage Nuri's self-delusion has not waned. Thus she is almost ready to goad him into sustained fascination: "You are a strange boy. If I let you, you would spend a lifetime watching me" (139). So far is she prepared to go in her manipulation that, after saying this one evening, she calls him into her room,

and after getting him to change into pyjamas and tell her a story, she kisses him, turns off the light, and pulls him to her chest. Although there is a moment of resistance, he falls asleep in her arms, only to awake and find himself engaging in what one assumes must be sex with her. Afterwards he is torn by contradictory identity strategies: desire for death, the vengeful thought of strangling her, and a partly opposing wish to kiss her. The conflicting emotions giving rise to these desires correspond closely to theorists' representations of traumatic stress disorder. The kind of kiss he has in mind, "so hard as to suck the breath out of her" (142), offers another illustration of Matar's capacity for creating intense awareness via tactile imagery, while emphasising, in this case, the underlying vengeful motive.

After Nuri's intimate night with Mona, Naima, of course, has noticed that only one bed has been slept on, and her explicit comment to both Mona and Nuri that "[i]t's wrong" (143) acts, in my view, as a kind of prelude to the ultimate strategy (or set of strategies) which Nuri adopts in the novel. Her kissing his hand several times in the car on the way to the airport when he returns to Daleswick, and her ardent request never to forget her, amplifies her burgeoning role for him. He is indeed soon to discover, and ironically from Mona herself, that Naima is his real mother. When he calls from the school, she cries and promises to wait every Sunday at a particular time for further calls. Although his failure to reply leads her to promise not to cry on the next occasion, he seems unaffected. However, his curt concluding statement, "I did not call after that" (162), can only be a deliberate effort to suppress deeper feelings.

The actual transition phase from Mona to Naima is nevertheless slow and complicated. Mona visits the school occasionally from her new residence in London, but Nuri informs us that for him, "a gate had shut" (164), a decision that is surely at least partly vengeful. Although he arranges to visit her in London for a weekend, the presence there of a boyfriend, Toby, dismays him so much that he leaves and decides to stay at a hotel instead. While knowing that he has no booking, he is comforted by imagining that his father is beside him "just out of view" (168), thereby anticipating his ultimate desperate strategy of merging into his father's identity.

The novel then moves swiftly on to Nuri's period at university in London where he has a small circle of friends but takes care "not to express any strong or unyielding opinions" (174), a self-protective strategy which, like Suleiman's feeling of emptiness, may be closely related to Cori's concept of a "coping mechanism". Although Nuri has an occasional lover, guilt over the sexual episode with Mona becomes worse (174). What seems to be happening is a kind of phasing out of elements of his personality, accompanied by an increasing resistance to any form of contact with Mona.

Frequent, and disturbing, dreams of Father, however, lead to Nuri's determination to track down Béatrice Benameur. This seems to be part of his thought of developing an alternative identity for himself, "more proactive,

more courageous and more capable" (186). This may well offer a link to the way Nuri later takes on what he regards as his father's identity, a process related to what both Cori and van der Kolk refer to as a kind of "dissociative" identity. The only sign of reflection that occurs at this stage is in fact evasive and emotionally stultifying: he "wanted this world to still. I wanted to fix it, and be fixed within it" (186).

Through his father's lawyer, Hass (who turns out to be Béatrice's cousin), Nuri eventually succeeds in his quest, and is allowed by Béatrice to see her bedroom where the kidnapping took place. This visit to a woman's bedroom might be regarded as a further act of closure in relation to Mona. Not that any kind of liaison with Béatrice is involved, rather that friendship with her offers him a form of contact with his father, and perhaps a sense of absolution from his guilt. Mona's hostile and cynical attitude to Béatrice, understandable though it is, further reinforces Nuri's disposition to befriend his father's mistress.

In any case, Nuri has to return to Cairo where his attempt to defend his father's long-standing love relationship with Béatrice leads Mona to the revelation that Naima is his real mother. Nuri tries to deny this truth, and he not only hates Mona for revealing it but feels "desperately hollow" (204). Despite minimal subsequent reflection, he decides, after gazing disconsolately up at Mona's lit windows one rainy night, that "possessing her" (205) would not help him, and that his only course of action must be to leave London.

Nevertheless, Nuri's eventual recollections show what sense they make of his past. His question about his mother's change after his birth is now effectively, if only implicitly, answered. Still not officially acknowledged as Nuri's mother, Naima focuses on serving him; she insists on cleaning the flat herself, and on washing his clothes by hand. He, in turn, takes over his father's study and sleeps in his bedroom. Becoming more and more resistant to Mona's calls from London, he manages ultimately to cut her out of his life, and thus allow himself gradually to ensure a kind of pathological fixing of his world. Nuri's final set of strategies in the novel helps to offer a misguided means of assuaging his sense of loss since, in a way, he makes himself the replacement for Father; absolves his guilt by cutting ties with Mona; and allows himself to benefit from a devoted mother figure. On the other hand, the less affirmative side of Nuri's new perspective is, as Hermione Lee points out in her review, that "we understand that it is not only the father who has disappeared, but the son too, a life lost inside loss" (2011: 3).

Comparison and Conclusions

The beginning of *In the Country of Men* reveals Suleiman's very ambivalent feelings towards both his parents, but a more intense involvement with his mother, even at one stage feeling that he is becoming absorbed into her. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri's feelings towards his mother involve more puzzlement than ambivalence, and continue after her death. However, his sexual attraction to Mona provides a major distraction for him at that time, and, allowing for the difference in age, there is some correspondence in this case to Suleiman's maternal involvement.

Suleiman's ambivalence towards his mother, consequence mainly of her bizarre behaviour when under the influence of alcohol, persists although, once he is in Cairo, he eventually tries to sever contact. However, the radical swerve in his response when she finally arrives in Cairo after Baba's death, suggests that they are likely to resume a version of the more harmonious aspects of their former relationship as she will not have feelings of anxiety and tension over Baba. There is no character in *In the Country of Men* that corresponds to Naima, but it is clear that Matar wished, in the case of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, to magnify the protagonist's involvement with women.

Suleiman's mother manipulates him as a source of comfort and security in her lonely bitterness. Mona, on the other hand, exploits Nuri largely for egoistic satisfaction though she is initially simply intrigued by his engrossment with her. Suleiman has a proto-erotic kind of response to his mother, relishing the soothing opportunities for intimacy, and even daring to simulate a conventional male sexual posture. His action probably has more to do with trying to assume the role of a husband substitute than trying to mime copulation. There are also intense moments when he feels that his identity has become fused with hers, suggesting that his greatest danger would have been to lose his individuality. His Cairo life and increasing resistance to contact, however, seem to have saved him from that danger.

In Nuri's case there is no equivalent response in relation to the woman he has grown up to regard as mother. On the other hand, he has a special but not ambivalent attachment to Naima without awareness of her actual status. In contrast, his immediate responses to Mona are intensely erotic and, even when he has begun to feel alienated from her, he cannot resist a sexual mode of contact. Her entry into his life brings a dangerously competitive dimension into the relationship with Father that disrupts the kind of maternal solicitude from Mona that Father had intended through his marriage. The competitiveness, along with other factors, most prominently Father's disappearance, seem ultimately to trigger Nuri's unwitting assumption of Father's identity.

Suleiman has a strange relationship with his father, actually feeling closer to him when he is away. So worried is Suleiman that his father may suffer

Ustath Rashid's fate and thereby undermine the family's security, that his misguided actions bring him ironically very close to betraying his father. However, his father's return after torture seems to stir in the child a greater desire for ordinary, everyday contact.

Suleiman's fearfulness emerges most markedly in his relationship with Kareem whose friendship he is prepared to sacrifice when his father is denounced and executed. No such security issue is present in relation to Nuri's school friend, Alexei; the closest he comes to any form of undermining or disturbing of the friendship is when he decides not to inform Alexei about his father's kidnapping. Also, whereas Suleiman's relationship with his entire set of neighbourhood friends is seriously damaged by his turning against Kareem, there is no corresponding group or context in Nuri's case. Furthermore, Nuri's situation, in relation to his father's friends, Taleb and Hydar, is totally different from Suleiman's because the boy is unaware even of his father's possible political intrigues.

Suleiman begins to enter into betrayal activities (against Nasser and Kareem, and even potentially against his father) as an only partially realised measure to protect his mother. He is nevertheless greatly affected by guilt, and there are immediate adverse consequences for him with regard to his peer relationships. In Nuri's case there is no activity that corresponds directly to Suleiman's betrayals. However, he becomes immersed in self-betrayal through allowing himself to persist in his self-delusion regarding Mona.

After Baba's return from interrogation and torture, Suleiman is torn between his affection for his father and anxiety about the implications of his parents' intercourse which he does not understand. On the other hand, a more hopeful strategy emerges through his capacity for self-evaluation and self-criticism. Nuri is faced with the more drastic combined revelation of his father's kidnapping and his having been found in another woman's bed. This seems to undermine his attraction to Mona, presumably because the element of competition is removed, and also because suspense and tension, related to his more profound paternal concern, begin to dominate his consciousness. Although his need for his mother now becomes extreme, he still has to contend with Mona's persistent erotic manipulations and consequent long-term guilt.

While the adult Suleiman attains some freedom through his new life in Cairo, Father's second arrest causes renewed depression in his mother, and Suleiman relies on aloofness to blot it out. He experiences great frustration and disappointment when comparing himself to Kareem whose life seems to be what he himself should have achieved. Spontaneous release from all his strategies, even if only temporary, seems to occur only at the very end of the novel when he welcomes his mother. Though we have no reason to expect that they will have an idyllic existence together in Cairo, it is likely to be reasonably harmonious as Mama will be free from tension and anxiety over Baba. In Nuri's case, Naima begins to assert a measure of control over his

life, making it clear how much she disapproves of Mona and Nuri sleeping in the same bed. Her affectionate treatment on the way to the airport (when he returns to school) suggests how much closer their relationship will become. As the maternal mystery is now solved, Nuri later thinks he can find an alternative, more positive identity for himself, different from his university low-key style. However, the way in which he comes to accept Béatrice as his father's long-standing lover, his virtual abandonment of Mona, and readiness to benefit from Naima's eager service, leads him to increasingly lose contact with that alternative, and to merge with his father's identity.

What emerges from these findings is that the novels in fact have major similarities and major differences. Certainly Matar's twin focus throughout both novels is: (1) a child's perspective; and (2) the abduction of the father. However, in two ways Matar seems to have deliberately made Nuri's life seem easier (at least on the surface) than Suleiman's:

- (1) Nuri's supposed mother dies, so he is spared persistent anguish about her. His mother is also not subject to her male relatives' use of severe punishment and forced marriage.
- (2) Nuri does not live in Tripoli, so he is spared any direct involvement with the fate of political activists such as Ustad Rashid in Suleiman's case.

By doing so, Matar achieves a contrasting effect, highlighting the persistent but more gradually intensified ordeal of a son whose father has been kidnapped and not heard from ever again. Suleiman's adult life is considerable empty but, although there is a similar earlier possibility in relation to his supposed mother, he does not forfeit his identity as Nuri does in order to suppress his loss, perhaps the most extreme of possible self-preservation strategies.

In terms of the different stages and types of trauma the two protagonists endure, Nuri is shown ultimately to be far more seriously affected than Suleiman. Although Nuri feels guilt in relation to Mona, he does not seem to have the ability to confront himself in the sustained and intensely self-accusatory way that Suleiman does. This process may well act as a counter-active force to Suleiman's traumatised feelings since so much conscious effort is involved. Moreover, there is no corresponding response on Nuri's part to Suleiman's acts of aggression against his friends. Although these have a damaging effect on his friendships, he later becomes fully aware of what he has forfeited especially in relation to Kareem, and therefore has a clear and conscious means of self-estimation. Nuri, on the other hand, becomes increasingly caught up in the delusory belief that he is creating a more courageous and capable identity for himself whereas he is in fact

gradually absorbing himself irreversibly into a version of his father's identity.

In relating Matar's personal situation and Libya's post-Gaddafi situation to the two novels it could be that they offered him a way of working through identity strategies that he himself formed or attempted and found release from, more particularly from Nuri's self-destructive pursuit. Furthermore, Matar's expressed lack of interest in politics, apart from an understandable wish to avoid secret police surveillance, may help to explain the strategic avoidance of any direct contact with Libyan matters in the second novel. On the other hand, taking into account Matar's expressed hopes for his country, and the kind of focus he recommends for the future, both novels may well act as a literary warning of the dangerously dehumanising choices possible for the victims of Gaddafi's long reign of terror, and as a way of kindling "pride, confidence and hope" instead.

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