

## **Amalgam of History and Self in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men***

**Dr. Harsha Viswanath**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, MSM College, Kayamkulam, Kerala*

### **Abstract**

*Autobiography is the desire for self-representation or self-exploration, to revisit the past, coming to terms with trauma, and articulating what has not been expressed. As a semi-autobiographical fiction *In the Country of Men* depicts the socio-political scenario of Libya by the misuse of power by the dictatorship, which employs an innocent child as the observer of the Libyan atrocities. By focusing on the inner psyche of young Suleiman, the paper attempts to examine how the novel amalgamates history and self of the writer to bring out the collective trauma of Libya.*

**Key Words:** *autobiography, history, power, Gaddafi, torture, memory.*



Literature as an expression of life vitally records the experiences of man, their thoughts anguish and despair. Literature and history inter-twine with each other and reflects the soul of the other that it becomes necessary to have knowledge about the historical background in order to understand the reflections it generates in a literary work. In this broader sense, literature can be considered as a collection of recorded history. In Libya, right after the military coup of 1969 Muammar Al-Gaddafi came into power. The new government organized a single publishing house and the authors were forced to write in favour of the authorities. The writers, who

refused were imprisoned or emigrated and the hostile situation under the dictatorship included the censorship laws and violation of self-expression leading to the emergence of a generation of politically motivated young writers, who began a new wave of Libyan literature, which was characterised by experimentalism, breaking the norms and traditions of classical Libyan literature.

The emerging writers brought new styles to elude censorship thus breaking the societal and religious taboo. Many works of fiction and poetry began challenging the norms and traditions by confronting the real problems of the country like dictatorship, corruption and inequality. Another notable feature that characterised the new wave literature was the hefty use of metaphors and the use of remarkable Libyan historical events, which acted as a key to disclose the Libyan identity that suffered greatly under the brutal policies imposed by the Gaddafi regime. This in turn shaped the writers to concentrate not only on the nationalistic or ideological affairs, but also in presenting their personal, intimate, and in some cases autobiographical experience of the kind of life they were living in Libya. Abdullah al-ghazal, Mohamed al-Asfar, Khaled Darwish, Saleh Gaderboh and Hisham Matar were among these writers.

Hisham Matar, one of the leading creative writers of twentieth century was born in 1970 in New York City where his father, Jaballa Matar was an employee of Libyan delegation. When he was three years old, his family went back to Tripoli, their mother land, where he spent most of his early childhood. But due to the political persecution by the Gaddafi regime, the family was forced to flee to Egypt. It was from there that both Hisham and his brother Ziad attained primary education. Later his father managed to get out of Libya and join them. In Cairo, Hisham's father sincerely continued his political works, writing against the harsh policies of Libyan regime assembling the different factions of the expelled Libyan resistance to conjoin in order to overturn the regime. In 1986, Hisham moved to London, where he received a degree in architecture. In 1990, while Hisham and his brother were in England, their father, a political dissident, was kidnapped by the Egyptian secret police. The family heard nothing about him until 1996, when they received two smuggled letters of him and a tape recording stating that he had been taken by the Egyptian secret police and handed over to the Libyan regime where he was imprisoned in the notorious Abu-Salim prison in Tripoli.

Matar's debut novel *In the Country of Men*, is a harrowing treatment of the lives of dissidents under the Gaddafi regime. Bursting from the trauma of his father's disappearance, this novel attained great popularity and Matar was hailed by the New York Times as "an authentic interpreter and witness, someone who could speak across cultures and make us feel the abundant miseries of the revolt" against an authoritarian regime. The novel delineates the story of Suleiman, a nine year old boy struggling to cop up with the disruption of family life caused by the Gaddafi state police. As its title suggests, the novel describes the predominance of masculinity into which the hero is innocently forced to accept and embrace various faces of power and betrayal. With its powerful language and effective use of austere prose, he brings out the intense fears of protagonist Suleiman.

Autobiographies are often cited as the representations of reality, which act as a lens through which past events are revisited through writing of the present. A writer projects his matured self onto the events of his past, not as how they occurred but as how his memory and his creativity create them. This form of writing provides the writer with an opportunity to explore his own formation, to reconstruct the past, to inspect all the elements that led to the creation of who he is and what has shaped his being. Written with various motives and aims, autobiography – a genre where life, self, and writing converge – renders a literary documentation of the development of human individuality. In a sense, autobiography is not the retelling of a life, but rather a means of rediscovering or recreating it by modelling a self on the writer's own.

Autobiographical fiction is a literary genre that combines the traditional characteristics of autobiography, which is defined as “a biography written by the subject about himself,” with the imaginative and artistic aspects of fiction (Abrams 22). It thus transcends the borders of two types of literature to form a hybrid genre that is not bound to the conventions of the two original genres, but rather molds its own conventions. In his article, “Time in Autobiography,” Burton Pike echoes J.M Coetzee's statement arguing that “autobiography is not simply an attempt to retell one's past life on a linear scale, but rather in effect a novel written in the present with one's past life as its subject” (337). Thus, the genre of autobiography can no longer be seen as a record or documentation of life but rather as a reinvention of a life lived.

There are various reasons that drive writers to resort to autobiographical fiction in their journey to narrate their life stories. Among the motivations for writing fictional autobiography is the desire for self-representation or self-exploration, revisiting the past, coming to terms with trauma, and articulating what has not been expressed. Out of a multitude of emotions such as confusion, pain, and loss, and sometimes driven by humor or curiosity, a writer is compelled to revisit his/her past and reconstruct it in writing.

Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* examines the nature of the relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist to explore the intertwining identities of the three. In the work, he defines autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Such a definition sheds light on four essential elements in an autobiography - the form of language, the subject treated in the text, the author's situation, and the narrator's position. As a semi-autobiographical fiction *In the Country of Men* traces the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist, Suleiman. The novel simultaneously deals with the multifaceted analysis of the genre ‘autobiographical fiction’, where Matar reflects his own self in artistic creation. It depicts the socio-political scenario of Libya by the misuse of power by the dictatorship, which employs an innocent child as the observer of the Libyan atrocities. By focusing on the inner psyche of young Suleiman, the paper traces how the novel amalgamates history and self of the writer to bring out the collective trauma of Libya.

*In the Country of Men* is a poignant autobiographical fiction about the disillusionment of a boy who grows up under the brutal regime that suppressed the individualism of both its men and women. The novel starts in 1979 in Gaddafi-ruled Tripoli with nine-year-old Suleiman as both its narrator and protagonist. Through the perspective of Suleiman, the reader gets a sense of the tension both at home and within the state itself. Suleiman's father, Farajal-Dewani, or Baba as Suleiman calls him, is a business man who "travelled the world looking for beautiful things and animals and trees to bring back to our country" (*In the Country of Men* 25). Faraj appears to be involved in an underground movement against Gaddafi's regime. When compared to the wide political arena of the country, the young narrator Suleiman's world is limited only to his home, neighborhood boys, and street games. The boy's dwindling sense of innocence mirrors Libya's own political fall into instability and turmoil. When Faraj is abroad, Najwa, his wife, relies on "medicine" for curing her "illness". The young boy notes that, "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).

Suleiman's innocence as a child is depicted in the scene where he stuffs his stomach with mulberries, the fruit he believes is from Heaven, the "angels' gift" that was never intended for this earth (58). This event does not foretell the horrors that await the child. Suleiman is the reader's link to the politics of Libya during that time. Although he is a child, he witnesses what no child should be exposed to. When the events that takes place in the country grow darker, the boy's mind too fills with anxiety and despair. Suleiman recall the horrible situation in which the Revolutionary Committee under the regiment detains one of his neighbors Ustath Rashid,

After a few minutes a car hurtled toward us, billowing dust as if it were the only creature in the world . . . 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. None of us had seen him before. 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. Another one kicked him in the behind. He anticipated it because he jerked forward just before it came. The force of it made him jump, but he didn't make a sound. He wore that strange embarrassed smile of his. Then they grabbed and throw him into the car, slammed the doors shut and sped between us, crushing our goal posts (36).

Several incidents, including the public execution of Ustath Rashid on television, are evidence of the mounting repression practiced by the state against its

own citizens. In an attempt to prevent further damage to the family, Najwa and Moosa – a family friend and brother-like figure to Suleiman’s father – gather Baba’s books and burn them to the ground. In a confused state, unable to understand why his father’s cherished books should be disposed of in such manner, Suleiman saves one book from the fire. After a considerable period of disappearance, a physically and psychologically injured, Faraj is returned home but Suleiman is not allowed into his father’s room. Faraj gradually gets better but is already scarred for life. He denounces his political convictions, or “[has] them denounced in him” (234).

Considering the insecurity in Libya, the family is finally forced to send their son to Cairo. There he stays with Judge Yaseen, a friend of his father. Unable to afford a visit to Cairo after the regime eliminated private saving accounts, Suleiman does not receive a single visit from his family for fifteen years. Growing up in Cairo, Suleiman becomes a pharmacist, “a concocter of remedies” (232). His mother’s “illness” definitely influences him while choosing his profession. In May 1994 Suleiman receives the news of his father’s arrest once more in Libya. Amidst the rumors it is soon revealed that *Democracy Now* – the book Suleiman saves from burning is the reason behind the arrest. Later for a short period of time Suleiman attempts to distance himself from his beloved’s and chooses instead to remain silent in a bid for “immortality, a desire very similar to wanting to be free of the past” (238). Even though an amnesty in commemoration of the revolution in Libya grants Faraj a pardon, he dies very soon. The novel ends with Suleiman’s reunion with his mother, in Alexandria. With a scene that offers endless possibility of reviving the ties; he sees her waiting for him and he utters the word ‘Mama’ over and over again.

While choosing Suleiman, a nine year old boy as the narrator of the novel to tell the story of a Libyan childhood, Matar sheds light on the factors that lead him to shape his artistic maturity. Like Suleiman, there are several elements that contributed to Matar’s formation as an artist, such as familial bonding, the recurring sense of guilt, the absence of a sense of closure, and finally the exile. One of the heavy burdens that the author has carried around for years is the indefiniteness of his father’s situation. This lack of a sense of finality is one of the powerful influences on Matar, and is among the main reasons for his becoming a writer. Everyone’s life consists of significant periods that involve events which are not yet completed. Here, Matar’s unfinished story – the absence of closure – is his attempt to attain that closure.

The process of writing in itself is not an evidence of an event’s completion but rather the expression of an ongoing process to understand both present and past. Although Matar has emphasized that the novel is not an autobiographical narrative, it is pervaded by a sense of ambiguous loss and exile and it raises certain questions about nationalism which Suleiman believes is “as thin as a thread” (231). Reinventing the self in writing is a means of reconciling with the past and adapting to the present. It is also a method of coping with trauma, and often invokes the need for altering the past, by leaving the fragments of the writer’s truth to oblivion. Imaginative reconstruction then becomes a factor in writing autobiographical novels

and the writer relies on memory to recreate his childhood. Thus the world created is both the author's own and yet dissimilar to it. In relying on memory, a writer asserts his recourse to fiction. The nature of truth in a work of fiction must not stand for a historical truth that should be verified in terms of authenticity and validity. Each individual, including both reader and writer, constructs their own conception of truth based on the experiences and states of being they bring to the text.

While writing an autobiography, the self, acts as an intersecting point where the author, the narrator, and the protagonist converges into one. Therefore, it is essential to understand each figure individually and independently in order to comprehend how they overlapped each other. Since the author is the producer of a discourse, he is capable of transcending the narrators and protagonists that he creates. It is the author, who creates the hero or the protagonist and hence has the supremacy over him. In this sense, Suleiman can be regarded as merely a representative of a fictionalized segment of Matar's childhood rather than strictly associated with him.

The novel is a representation of the collective Libyan childhood during the late 1970s. Through poetic prose, Matar has not only given his readers a personal account of one childhood, but an insight into what it meant to be a child in Libya, and, in the process, revealed all the factors that shaped his own being and led to his formation as an artist. The trauma of his father's abduction has brought out the artist in Matar: "I sometimes wonder if I would have become a writer if what happened to my father hadn't happened" (Derbyshire web). The novel also transcends the geographical borders of Libya and the temporal boundaries of the year 1979 as the story could apply to the trying hardships faced by civilians under the rule of any harsh dictatorship.

In this novel, Matar constructs a hybrid world sustained by the interaction of life, history and fiction. Even though the author ensures the fictionality of the novel by affixing the conditions such as "obvious practice of non-identity" and "affirmation of fictitiousness" (*On Autobiography* 14-15), it no longer eliminates the similarities found between lives of author and narrator and the "events" (*Archeology of Knowledge*) that occurred in Libya. In fact it is quiet, evident that the fictional narrative *In the Country of Men* contains autobiographical elements and, even more importantly, the atrocities and history of the dictator regime of Gaddafi's era reflecting the collective suffering of Libya.

## **References**

1. Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms: Seventh edition*. Singapore: Harcourt College Publishers, 1999. Print.
2. Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. M. Holquist (ed.) translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1990.

3. Derbyshire, Jonathan. "The Books Interview: Hisham Matar." *New Statesman*. 25 Jan. 2010. Accessed 14 July 2019
4. Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. UK: Routledge, 2015. Print.
5. Golino, F. "Patterns of Libyan National Identity." *Middle East Journal*, 24, 3 (1970): 338-352. Print.
6. Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Trans. Katherine Leary, ed. Paul John Eakin. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Print.
7. Matar, Hisham. *In the Country of Men*. London: Penguin B, 2007. Print.
8. Melville Logan, Peter ed. *The Encyclopaedia of the Novel*. United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell, 2007. Web.
9. Moore-Gilbert, B. *Postcolonial theory: Contexts, practices, politics*. London: Verso, 1997. Print.
10. Pike, Burton. "Time in Autobiography" *Comparative Literature* 28.4(1976): 326-42.