

Emotional impact of  
absence: troubled  
personal  
development in 'in the  
country of ...



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The childhood of Suleiman is portrayed as lacking in many elements that should be fundamental to the healthy maturation of an individual. Hisham Matar's novel *In the Country of Men* explores how the lack of political justice within Libya translates itself into many forms of absence within the lives of the citizens. Perhaps the most obvious element lacking in the life of Suleiman is a sense of freedom, a void that is experienced by every character within his narration. This can be held accountable for the physical absences of Suleiman's father, and in turn the emotional absence of a maternal figure throughout his childhood. Each of these absences irrevocably impacts Suleiman's development in a time of political and domestic instability.

The obvious lack of political freedom and justice within 1979 Libya is shown throughout the novel to be confusing and ultimately destructive to the innocence of nine-year-old Suleiman. Suleiman is repeatedly exposed to the deceit, violence, torture and executions that define his country. It may therefore be assumed that the emotional scars left behind by such experiences undoubtedly impacted the development of his character. Using the sun as a symbol for the Mokhabarat, Matar describes the rule of the government as oppressive and merciless, stating that 'the sun was everywhere', involving 'every person, animal and ant' in a 'desperate search for shade ... those ... grey patches of mercy.' This blistering and brutal nature of the government is later clearly demonstrated in the publicly televised execution of Suleiman's neighbour, Uncle Rashid. After watching the horrifically explicit hanging of the father of his closest friend, Suleiman questions 'what was absent in the Stadium? What didn't intervene to rescue

Ustath Rashid?'. The urgency with which Suleiman questions the justice of this situation highlights the effect that the hanging has upon an emotionally impressionable child; a sickening doubt in what he has so far believed to be right, the autocratic rule of the Mokhabarat. Additionally, in light of this event, how Suleiman views the adults he is dependent on changes, and he is forced to recognise that even they are powerless to halt this evil and are just as vulnerable as he feels himself to be. As Suleiman, Najwa and Moosa witness the execution, Suleiman states of Najwa's face that he ' had never seen it like this before' and later that he ' had never seen [Moosa] cry before', highlighting the gradual loss of a complete, innocent dependence upon the infallibility of the adult world. We may therefore see that this loss, in conjunction with the emotional shock that the hanging causes within Suleiman, culminates in the loss of innocent faith in the justice and freedom that should rule a child's world.

The absence of political freedom within Libya at the time of the narration may be considered the cause of the frequent absences of Baba from the family home, resulting in an emotional estrangement between himself and his son. Suleiman is often left to be ' the man of the house' during Baba's ' business' trips, meaning he is without a consistent male figure to be guided by during his maturation. The emotional hunger of Suleiman to be with his father is shown in his expressed desire to be ' following Baba like a shadow', the privilege rather of Nasser. This contact is denied, and leaves Suleiman to ' watch Kareem nuzzle into his father's side' and ' wish that Baba was more like Ustath Rashid'. This wish is emotionally conflicting, yet poignant in its demonstration of a bewildered child refused a secure relationship with his

father. Furthermore, Suleiman's discovery that Baba lies about certain aspects of his absences causes him to feel 'sick, anxious that [he] had somehow done the wrong thing', highlighting the confusion of a child who knows something is wrong yet is unable to define what it is. Such confusion ultimately increases the distance between Suleiman and his father and results in an even greater emotional disconnection, and the loss of a reliable paternal figure that should be fundamental to the development of a child.

The physical absences of Baba are translated by Matar into the emotional absences of Mama. It may be seen that Mama's 'illness' (drinking) is caused by Baba's 'business' trips (rebellion against the government), with even Suleiman recognising 'she only fell ill when he was away on business'. The worry Mama experiences regarding the safety of Baba and the consequences of his actions are shown to drive her to alcoholism, to a freedom which in so escaping to, she leaves Suleiman behind. Perhaps the most obvious effect Mama's alcoholism has upon Suleiman is his loss of innocence; an initiation into complex issues such as chastity, the imposed purity of women, and the lust of men. Suleiman recounts that when under the influence of alcohol, his mother said words 'that made [his] cheeks blush and [his] heart shudder', they 'pressed down on [his] chest, so heavy that it seemed impossible to carry on living without spilling them.' These reactions indicate Suleiman's knowledge of topics that will tarnish and in time steal his innocence, an innocence his mother should have made it her duty to protect with her presence.

In the Country of Men ultimately demonstrates to its audience the many forms that absence may take, and how these in turn are able to affect the

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emotional state and growth of all those experiencing it. Within the novel, the lack of political freedom is obvious, and can be interpreted as being the root of all other absences within the novel, such as the physical and emotional absences of parental figures in Suleiman's life. These in turn have highly negative effects upon Suleiman's development of character, therefore highlighting certain aspects of childhood which are considered fundamental by Matar to the wholesome growth of a child.