

Libya a significant backdrop for suleiman's story



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Set against the political turmoil of Libya in the summer of 1979, Hisham Matar's novel "In the Country of Men" contains characters who are defined by their relationship with Libya and its culture. Although Suleiman's story is for the most part confined within the setting of his home, Libyan culture and politics nonetheless pervade the atmosphere of the house and indirectly influence all that impacts upon nine-year-old Suleiman. The lack of freedom within Libya translates itself into the physical absences of Suleiman's father which in turn may be held accountable for the emotional absence of a maternal figure throughout his childhood. The reader may therefore see the extent to which Suleiman's story is influenced by his connection with Libya.

Suleiman is repeatedly exposed to the deceit, violence, torture and executions that define his country and it may therefore be assumed that the emotional scars left by such experiences influence greatly the manner in which he recounts his story. Using the sun as a symbol for the Mokhabarat, Matar describes the rule of the government as oppressive and merciless. He states 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 public and televised execution of Ustath Rashid, Suleiman's neighbour and his father's friend. After watching the horrifically explicit hanging of the father of his best friend, Suleiman demands "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 integrity of the Libyan government. The shock and recoil that Suleiman experiences is later echoed by his observation that 'nationalism is as thin as a thread'. The reader is shown that the patriotism which burns within one, such as the "fervour that had once caused [Suleiman] to cry" after a Libyan lost a chess match to a Korean, is easily extinguished, but an "emptiness" is left. Thus, the reader may see how although Suleiman later easily transitioned into living in and becoming part of Egypt, Libya had an irreplaceable influence upon his childhood.

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, a key event throughout Suleiman's story. 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 throughout his maturation. This absence is due to Baba's involvement in a planned revolt against "the Guide", leading him to spend time at Martyr's Square, meaning Suleiman is left "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 due to the political situation of his country. The emotional effect upon a child of living in such a situation of uncertainty is further highlighted by Matar through his description of Suleiman feeling "sick [and] anxious that [he] had somehow done the wrong thing" upon his discovery that Baba lies about the destination and purpose of his trips. Thus, the reader sees how lies and secrets are often a part of a child's life living

within such a regime, and how the lack of freedom may impact upon the emotional well-being of a child.

These enforced physical absences of Baba's due to the political situation of Libya are then translated by Matar into the emotional absences of Najwa, Suleiman's "Mama". It may be seen that Najwa's "illness" (drinking) is caused by Baba's "business" trips, with even Suleiman recognising that "she only fell ill when he was away on business". The worry Najwa experiences regarding the safety of Baba and the consequences of his actions are shown to drive her to alcoholism, to a freedom which in escaping to, she leaves Suleiman behind. This lack of a stable maternal figure within a nine-year-old's childhood, indirectly caused by the political situation, is subsequently shown within the novel to have highly negative effects upon the emotional stability of the child. Perhaps the most obviously negative effect Mama's alcoholism has upon Suleiman is his loss of innocence; an initiation into complex issues such as chastity, the enforced purity of women, and the lust of men; all issues highly important within Libyan culture.

Suleiman remembers that at such times, his mother said words "that made [his] cheeks blush and [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 away his innocence, a knowledge indirectly given to him by the political situation of the country.

"In the Country of Men" explores themes of loyalty and betrayal, particularly in regard to one's country. Libya is shown to be a prominent influence in the childhood of Suleiman, both directly and indirectly. The absence of political freedom within Libya translates itself in the novel into the physical absences

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of Suleiman's father, resulting in the emotional absences of his mother.

Thus, the reader may see how the political sate of the nation pervades every corner of Suleiman's home, influencing all aspects of his life and thus proving to be far more than merely an incidental backdrop for his story.