

# Heroism in its variations: character analysis for in the country of men



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Suleiman's innocence is shown to be the cause of his simplistic view of a hero and why he is unable to recognize instances of heroism displayed not only by those around him but also by himself. Hisham Matar's novel *In the Country of Men* explores how the circumstances by which one is surrounded can force extraordinary feats of courage from an individual, and shows that it is these acts that prove heroism can exist within day to day life. Presumably due to the nature of Libya during his upbringing, Suleiman defines a hero as one who is physically brave, not taking into consideration Baba's defense of his political beliefs, Mama's submission to the life she is forced to lead as a woman, or his own strength in caring for his mother in the midst of much conflict.

The actions of Baba and the band of men he leads in rebellion against the government can be seen as highly courageous; they are standing in defense of their beliefs against a powerful opponent. This moral courage is demonstrated throughout the novel, and highlights to the audience the many forms that heroism may take. Although Suleiman's idea of a hero is Baba staggering back to the house, "bleeding beautifully from one eyebrow", Najwa recognizes the emotional courage required by the men to undertake these actions, declaring to Moosa, "only you and my husband and Nasser and Rashid and the naïve students you are dragging with you are the brave ones left in this country". By all definitions, a hero is one who stands against countless opponents at any cost to themselves, a description which undoubtedly applies to Baba, who sacrifices his safety and his relationship with his family to a "greater" cause. Moosa too provides descriptions of these men, describing them as the "few who dared, sacrificed for many"

and those who “ gave their lives for their country”, highlighting to the reader the depth of these men’s commitment to their cause, and the price they were willing to pay. Suleiman, however, is unable to recognize these sacrifices as heroism, clearly in his naivety only willing to apply the term to “ the heroes” within films “ that used to send us ... rejoicing ... that the world worked in ways we expected it to work and didn’t falter”. Thus, in this simplistic definition of a hero, the audience can recognize Suleiman’s inability to recognize the heroes that lived outside his imagination, due to the complex forms their courage takes.

Within Suleiman’s narration, Najwa is another prominent example of a character displaying heroic traits, yet largely unrecognized by Suleiman. Forced by circumstances of culture into marriage and motherhood at an extremely young age, Najwa repeatedly exemplifies courage in her submission to the life dictated to her by men. Matar hints at Najwa’s heroic nature in his connection between her and Scheherazade, the heroine of Suleiman’s favorite story, “ One Thousand and One Nights”. When describing her imprisonment, Najwa reveals to Suleiman that in thinking of the similarities between her and “ that wretched woman”, she “ somehow ... didn’t feel so alone”. This statement highlights the heroism of all women in their submission to men, and hints that Mama’s story in its similarities to “ A Thousand and One Nights” is worthy of making her into a heroine. In accepting the life she must serve, in demonstrating loyalty to her husband, and taking part in a marriage “ she had resisted so violently”, Najwa displays unwavering courage, a courage bordering on the heroic and therefore proving heroism does live beyond the covers of books.

Suleiman is yet another character within Matar's story that continually demonstrates strength of character in dealing with overwhelming adversity. Forced to care for his mother when his father leaves on "business" and she is under the influence of alcohol, Suleiman never "leaves her side" in a desire to protect and shield her. This is despite the undeniably negative influence this act entails, Najwa's imparting information to Suleiman that "pressed down on [his] chest, so heavy that it seemed impossible to carry on living with them", demonstrating the selflessness of Suleiman that undoubtedly could be termed "heroism", Suleiman never considers "look[ing] away" or "relax[ing] the grip of his gaze" from Najwa, who, in recognizing this courage displayed by her son, declares he is her "prince" who will become a "man" and "take [her] away on [his] white horse". This recognition of the heroic traits within Suleiman's nature demonstrates to the audience the existence of yet another character who may be termed a hero, not for any physical bravery but rather a mental courage so strong that nothing can break it.

In the Country of Men ultimately highlights to its audience the numerous forms heroism may take. Any character, be that character man, woman or child, may have the ability to demonstrate this courage. Standing for one's beliefs against overwhelming odds, submitting to situations one has no power to change, or protecting those you love from evil, an all be classed as an ultimate act of heroism.