

Novel 1

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It is fairly easy to decide whether or not a government is developing totalitarian tendencies. Indeed, from the rise of opposition movements ranging from peaceful and diplomatic to outright violent and rebellious, to having the citizen's own rights and privileges stripped away at a whim of some supreme leader imposed into power, the indications of a dictatorship are both prevalent and apparent. But perhaps the most notable sign of a regime is not physical, but rather mental. Specifically, it is how the society comprised of the everyday citizens becomes fractured between those molded into anger at their government, and those stemmed into fear and submission by their government. Like the communities living under Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, or those under the regime of Mobutu Sese Soko in Zaire, such is the case of living in Libya under the dictatorship of the regime of Muammar Qaddafi.

The interplay of the culture of submission in both the private and public spheres of Libyan society is specifically explored in Libyan writer Hisham Matar's debut novel *In the Country of Men*. Its narrative follows the plight of Suleiman residing in 1979 Tripoli, Libya as he begins to get acquainted with the workings of Qaddafi's regime and the effect it has on his perception of the society he lives in, both immediate and large. This paper explores how that submissive culture stems from fear of the regime and ultimately culminates in a sense of admiration for those that rebel against it. In addition, it touches upon how Suleiman perceives society's public and private domains as well as how their interplay ends up shaping a naïve nine-year old child torn between his father whose concealed anti-Qaddafi activities bring about searches, spying and telephone

wire-tapping by Qaddafi's state police, and his fearful mother full of anxiety and anger that despite her submissive warnings, her husband's activities may end up getting her entire family killed.

There is a sense that the submissive, defeatist culture that Qaddafi's regime easily fostered amongst its citizens lies stems primarily from the feeling of powerlessness, and its recognition, that these same citizens feel in other aspects of their own lives. As a child, Suleiman expectedly lives with the least amount of autonomy over his life in Libya, both in the society and at home. Indeed, the character spends the majority of *In the Country of Men's* two hundred and fifty-page length confined to his house or his street under constant supervision from an adult, usually his mother. And even when he is away from the direct control and influence of his parents, it's because he is under close supervision by his best friend Kareem's father, Ustath Rashid. As Matar's audience, we can easily tell that Suleiman detests the powerlessness he has over his own actions and whereabouts right from the beginning. As early as Chapter 1, we are privy to him "not caring if [he] lost [his mother] or became lost from her in the big city," (Matar 3). But it's powerlessness nonetheless, and Suleiman is ultimately submissive to his mother because of the absolute authority she yields over him.

Indeed, despite the fact that Suleiman's character is introduced to us as somewhat strong and independent, what with him "always stubborn," (Matar 3), and even wandering off on his own in a crowded market square, never throughout the book does he outright disobey the commands or will of his parents. True, he outright questions their actions, but never does he actively challenge it. This is perhaps best exemplified by his sheer distraught and horror whilst witnessing his mother Najwa and his father Faraj's friend Moosa burn all of his father's revolutionary books and journals in Chapter 8. Although he ultimately did save one book from being burned, never throughout the chapter does Suleiman even think about mounting any opposition to his mother and his father's

friend's actions. No, because even he recognizes, on a subconscious level at the very least, his own powerlessness in the matter, resigning to watch the burning from his roof, albeit with clear disdain and disagreement over the event.

Such is the case of the relationship between Suleiman and the adults in the private sphere of his societal life: he ultimately feels powerless against people that unconditionally love him regardless of whatever he does. With this in mind, it is far from hard in seeing that Suleiman, and any Libyan that shares his predicament in their private life for that matter, would feel powerless against a government that unlike his parents, have no qualms about reacting and mistreating him in response to his actions. After all, this is the same government that did not even hesitate in arresting, torturing and publicly executing Ustath Rashid, a member of Libyan society whose age and career as a professor dictates a larger amount of societal power than child Suleiman's elementary position in the community.

Matar's theme of powerlessness is further expanded upon with the character Najwa, perhaps the most fearful and submissive character to Qaddafi's regime in the book. Whilst Suleiman is powerless primarily because he is a child, Najwa is powerless due to the fact that she is a woman living in a deeply patriarchal country. Indeed, the very first aspect that we learn about Suleiman's mother is that she was forced by the male members of her family into an arranged marriage with Faraj at age 14, to abandon her academic pursuits and marry a complete stranger, five years shy of being twice her age, and to spend the rest of her life cooking and cleaning and praying for a husband that ultimately does not respect even respect her concerns for his safety by his decision to rebel against the Qaddafi regime. In fact, the only inkling of joy left in Najwa's life, that does not stem from her alcoholism, lies in her son Suleiman, a child that we definitively know she did not even want to have in the first place.

Even the title of Matar's novel, *In the Country of Men*, alludes to the object-like status of women in Libya, a societal feature that originates well before the rise of Muammar Qaddafi as the nation's "guide." Just by hearing Najwa's mother comment in Chapter 2 that "If, God forbid, you didn't turn out virtuous and true, your father was prepared to take your life," (Matar 14), readers previously unfamiliar with the powerless role that women have in the private spheres of society become aware of this reality. Despite constant telling her husband to "Walk by the wall, feed your family, let them alone, look the other way [...]," (Matar 95), Faraj does not even consider taking his wife's concerns into consideration before joining up with various anti-Qaddafi resistance movements. Other characters commonly refer to her as *Um Suleiman* rather than her own personal name, further symbolizing the fact that what little status she has in her society is tied to either the husband she was forced to marry, or the child she did not originally want. With such powerlessness over the control of her own life, what chance does Najwa, or the millions of Libyan women in the same predicaments as Najwa, have against an entire government? Indeed, the only logical move in the face of such a totalitarian government is to mind your business and "walk by the wall."

Suleiman and his mother symbolize often the most defenseless members of any society, the women and children. From Ustath Rashid's arrest, public torture and subsequent execution, to having their car stalked by members of the Revolutionary Committee, to having their home invaded and searched, to having Suleiman's father and Najwa's husband Faraj damaged, both physically and psychologically, Matar uses these events to highlight that under a regime, people like Suleiman and his mother have every logical right to be fearful. But ultimately however, in Suleiman's case at the very least, Matar shows that these same fearful and powerless people admire those willing to stand up when they themselves are not willing to. It must be remembered that even though Matar made it perfectly clear that Suleiman and his mother were fearful of Qaddafi's

regime, Suleiman also somewhat admired the resistance movements. After all, throughout *In the Country of Men* Suleiman continued to adore Ustath Rashid, Moosa and his father, even once their anti-Qaddafi activities became perfectly clear to him.

As he himself puts it at the beginning of Chapter 6, Suleiman imagined his father returning from his disappearance “leaning with one arm against the door, sweating, bleeding beautifully exactly like the heroes [Suleiman] saw in films.” (Matar 60). In Chapter 15, we read that in Suleiman’s point of view, the context surrounding his mother’s actions and the visit to Ustath Jafer, a government official, “was like an inauguration into the dark art of submission.” (Matar 159). Together, these two quotes showcase how Suleiman loved people like his father, Ustath Rashid and Moosa, and continued to love them, because they were the very few adults in his life willing to stand up and revolt whilst like his mother, he himself sank into a submissive a culture described as “dark,” in his own words.

The intrusion of the public sphere of society into Suleiman’s private life further enforces the adherence to this “dark art of submission.” Whether it be the arrest of Ustath Rashid, or the raid of his house, or the capture and torture of his father, the intrusion of outside Libya and the Qaddafi regime into Suleiman’s private sphere of society is devoid of any good news. This reality combined with the fear he holds for the regime is what eventually causes him not only to betray his friends, but also his very ideals established early on in the novel. As exhibited in Chapter 9 when Suleiman tells his best friend Kareem that “everybody knows [Ustath Rashid] is a traitor,” (Matar 107), and the subsequent guilt that he feels in Chapter 10, we begin to understand that Suleiman’s perception of both the public and private domains of society is changing because of the interplay of the regime’s public activities in his own private, personal life.

Indeed, Suleiman's own definitions of what it means to be a traitor and what it means to be a hero changes. His betrayal of not only his friend Kareem, by telling the other neighborhood boys Kareem's intimate secrets, but also own his father, by subsequently helping the security services who have taken his father away in the hopes that somehow his collaboration will help his father's case, highlight how the role reversal of a hero and a traitor in Suleiman's world. Unlike the earlier chapters of *In the Country of Men* where Suleiman sees a hero in anti-Qaddafi father, now he views Ustath Rashid, his father's close friend with similar political aligning, as a traitor. There is a somewhat brainwashing here as Suleiman's personal experience with the regime causes him to think just as the regime would. In a way, these betrayals highlight the fact that no one escapes the contamination of a dictatorship, as even the pure naiveté and innocence on a nine-year old boy is broken down and replaced with more conformist ideals. Indeed, even though Suleiman privately feels guilt, as he does at the beginning of Chapter 10 as he personally questions himself (Matar 110) as Matar's narrative continues to progress, readers slowly realize that the Suleiman they have acquainted themselves with in the first half of *In the Country of Men* is gone and replaced with somebody more obedient to Qaddafi and his regime.

The dilemma that nine-year old Suleiman faces in Matar's novel is nothing short of an indication of the personal hardships encountered when living under a dictatorial regime. If not anything else, *In the Country of Men* is an exploratory novel of how the interplay of the culture submission in both the public and private spheres of Libyan society under the Qaddafi regime stems from fear and powerlessness, and can furthermore end up influencing the values and ideals of the younger generations, for better or for worse.

Works Cited

1. Matar, Hisham. *In the Country of Men*. New York, New York: The Dial Press, March 2008.