PATRIARCHY, SUBORDINATION, AND RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN HISHAM MATAR’S IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN

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Abstract: This article examines the narrative of resistance to social subordination and the manipulated notions of faithfulness and treason in Hisham Matar’s In the Country of Men (2006) observed through the lens of the child narrator, 9-year-old Suleiman, who grows critical of the patriarchy and power hierarchy of Libyan society’s private and public spheres. In the private sphere, his mother’s retelling of her forced marriage at a young age informs his initial aversion of patriarchy. In the public sphere, the Revolutionary Committee’s policing and suppression of dissent, and the neighbor’s public execution amid a cheering crowd, shed light on the dynamics of subservience and divisiveness. Though the novel takes place in 1979 Libya, it raises questions on the possibility of individual agency and rise of the citizen against a post-colonial Arab despotic regime, where patriarchal authoritarianism, rooted in colonialism, creates a system of dependency and subjugation that undermines citizens’ power and manipulates faith as a medium of submissiveness. This article concludes with some reflections on the outcomes of 2011 Arab uprisings with regards to active citizenship.

Keywords: Matar, individualism, collectivism, authoritarianism, patriarchy, subordination

The Labourer and Artisan, notwithstanding they are Servants to their Masters, are quit by doing what they are bid. But the Tyrant sees those that are about him, begging and suing for his Favour; and they must not only do what he commands, but they must think as he would have them [think] and most often, to satisfy him, even anticipate his thoughts. It is not sufficient to obey him, they must also please him, they must harass, torment, nay kill themselves in his Service; and [. . .] they must leave their own Taste for his, Force their Inclination, and throw off their natural Dispositions. They must carefully observe his Words, his Voice, his Eyes, and even his Nod. They must have neither Eyes, Feet, nor Hands, but what must be ALL upon the watch, to spy out his Will, and discover his Thoughts. Is this to live happily? Does it indeed deserve the Name of Life? (Estienne De La Boëtie, 2012)
In his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (2008), James Scott’s opening citation of Etienne De La Boëtie’s depiction of the servants’ submissiveness to their masters introduces his theory on dominance, resistance, and the power dynamics between the dominant and the dominated who, “out of prudence, fear and the desire to curry favor, [is] shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful” (2). This servants-masters dichotomy echoes the familial and national relationships in Hisham Matar’s (2006) debut novel, *In the Country of Men*, where, as this article aims to analyze, the interplay of collectivism, patriarchy, and loyalty to a higher authority—be it God or the regime—along with the regime’s appropriation of religion to maintain its grip complicate the citizens’ complicity in prolonging injustices and reinforcing power hierarchy. The novel extensively references the analogy of Scheherazade and Shahryar in *One Thousand and One Nights* to examine the implications of choosing to endure “slavery over death” (Matar, 2006: 13), that is, slavery to a forced marriage or dictatorship, and vowing loyalty to survive.

While *In the Country of Men* is set in a 1979 Libya “full of bruise-checkered and urine-stained men, urgent with want and longing for relief” (168) ten years after Muammar Qaddafi topples the monarchy of King Idris and seizes power, the article sets off to demonstrate that the dynamics of dependency and subordination in the citizen-state relations in the novel mirror those in many Arab countries where the shared effects of colonial history have subverted citizens’ voices and facilitated the institution of post-colonial patriarchal authoritarianism. It then examines the effects of the “cultural patterns of domination and subordination” (Scott, 2008: 4) and the narrative of resistance to a collectivist patriarchal system as seen through the lens of a 9-year-old, Suleiman, the witness-narrator in the novel. Innocent, with limited knowledge, he tries to make sense of the populace’s absurd adaptations of the notions of faithfulness and betrayal that render them subservient to authoritarian propaganda. As this article will show, Suleiman’s examination of the prevailing social codes and religious and cultural practices in the inseparable private and public spheres voices the nuances of subordination and informs the possibility of rising against patriarchal and collective hierarchies through an imagined manhood founded on agency, free will, and independence. Although Matar shares in a conversation with Afikra (January 2021) that he had not read Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, this article draws on the many intersections of ideas between Scott’s theory and Matar’s novel to explain oppression and resistance. Finally, the article concludes with a commentary on the outcomes of the citizens’ uprisings in 2011 and their effect on power struggle and place of citizenship ten years later.

History is important in demonstrating that the crisis of the Arab citizens’ subordination to their patriarchal despotic regimes preceded the post-colonial period. Sharabi (1992) argues that patriarchy, a deep-rooted trait of Arab societies that
traces back to the early stages of the “universal community (ummah) of Islam” that replaced “tribal kinship,” continued under the political authority of the Ottomans’ “imperial caliphate-sultanate” (51) rule of the Arab world from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. Later, the “paternalism of colonialism” (66) or what became “neopatriarchy,” according to Sharabi, established relations of dependency in colonized societies. Colonized countries such as Libya, Algeria, and Palestine were “reduced to total subordination of the colonial system” (62) that used—and still uses, in the case of Palestine—force to subjugate these populations. As Meijer explains in his article “Active and Passive Citizenship in the Arab World,” the tactics of colonial rule deepened divisiveness among citizens of the colonized states “based on a differentiation of citizen rights in various categories, depending on people’s cultural assimilation, religion, ethnicity, and especially loyalty” (612, emphasis added). Instilling the importance of expressing loyalty to a sovereign ruler which created protégés persisted in post-colonial Arab states, as Matar portrays in his novel.

In the wake of independence from colonial rule and with a heightened Pan-Arabism and wave of nationalism, Arab citizens put their trust in their new leaders. This trust was needed as a consequence of the atrocious memories of colonialism that fueled resentment towards Western societies, “compounded by Western support for the national rights of Jewish settlers in Palestine over those of the indigenous Palestinian population” (Hashemi, 2013). Unfortunately, post-colonial elites quelled opposition, controlled single-party systems, with emphasis “on policing, security, and the management of elections, [and] borrowed directly from the practices of their former colonial masters” (Owen, 2012: 15). In this neocolonialism, Arab citizens became passive under the new “regimes that maintained the social, ethnic and religious divisions colonialism had exacerbated” (Meijer, 2019: 616). These divisions manifested into a hierarchal and highly controlled oppressive regimes in many states, such as Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. With focus on Libya, for the purpose of this article, Qaddafi’s assent to power since 1969 began with a nationalist rhetoric. In 1973, he announced the Cultural Revolution which established the Jamahiriya or Republic and the democratization of Libya. He combined his goal to make political and social changes with reinstating Arab and Islamic values. Within this context, the enemies of the Revolution in the novel would not only be political dissidents and traitors of the country but also unfaithful to Islam, thus entangling religion, as an important identity marker to Arabs, with loyalty in order to dominate and control.

Chief among Arab cultural values is the belief in deferring to an authority as a foundation for social order, which autocratic Arab regimes have abused to force their citizens into obedience in return for security. Shared collective religious and cultural beliefs distinguish the social and political experiences in Arab societies as
a communal space whose members are expected to abide by agreed-upon norms and values to preserve the community’s welfare and maintain order and stability. As Hougua et al. (2018) observe, “the values of individualism/collectivism belong to the invisible mental programming of culture” (47). While Durkheim’s (1970) “L’individualisme et les intellectuels” distinguishes between individualism and egoism as two separate concepts, Arab cultural beliefs have maintained both as synonymous out of moral obligation, demonizing individualism as a selfish behavior motivated by the individual’s self-interest at the expense of the group’s welfare. Gramsci’s (1971) “cultural hegemony” supports the theory that people embrace their values through their cultural beliefs to maintain control. For this purpose, Arab collective societies foster at an early age the teaching that every “behavior is censored by the outside world” (Georgis, 2013: 243). It deems individualist pursuits that defy social norms, such as pre-marital relationships for instance, ََُُِْ، the word for shame in Arabic, that is, morally wrong, for fear of destabilizing “the dominant social institution” of Family in Arab society (Barakat, 1993: 98). Such collective traits, which instill the values of unidirectional respect for sovereignty and dictate familial and national relationships, became a primordial tool that facilitated Arab despotic regimes’ dominance.

In In the Country of Men, Suleiman’s household and neighborhood constitute a microcosm that mirrors the interplay of subordination and authority in Libya’s familial and national spaces. Najwa, Suleiman’s mother, exemplifies the passive, ambivalent subordinate in the way in which her “vulnerability has rarely permitted [her] the luxury of confrontation” (136) in the familial and political spheres. In her personal life, her discontent is a mere verbal resentment that enunciates helplessness and victimization, as she confides in Suleiman, during her many alcohol-fueled revelations, the reason for her forced marriage. Indignant at being the object of oppression in the world of men, Najwa seeps into her son her hatred for the family elders, “the High Council” (12). Her father “passed the judgment” of her marriage at the age of 14 to a man nine years her senior after she was spotted by her brother holding the hand of a boy in a café. Her husband or “executioner” is “the stranger armed with the marriage contract signed by [her] father, [who] was going to carry out the punishment” (13). Her disdain for patriarchy mirrors her condemnation of Scheherazade’s passiveness and acceptance of “slavery over death” (13) for inventing daily tales to distract Shahryar and avoid his wrath. Though she equates fear to slavery, she ironically holds conflicting views with regards to political activism. She advises friends and family to “walk by the wall” (52, 95) and derides college students’ uprising, exclaiming to Moosa, an Egyptian family friend and dissident, “What are you people thinking: a few students colonizing the university will make a military dictatorship roll over?” (52). While “her evocation of ‘imprisonment’ and the ‘Council’” in reference to the males in her family affirms
her conflation of “patriarchy and authoritarianism and, by extension, private and public abuses of power in the family and the national arena,” as Levy (2019) observes, religion reinforces her familial and political submissiveness. Religion, the powerless’s sole resort at moments of helplessness, subdues her resentment and consoles her as she reminds herself that she was her husband’s “right, his wife under God” (13). Similarly, her apprehensive response to endure injustice “until God rescues us” (52) ascertains faith as a reinforcing medium of the regime’s despotic control. By contrast, not all characters share Najwa’s view of religion: the citizens’ complex understanding of religion aligns with their passive and active stances. Moosa negotiates his relationship with Islam by invoking his duty as a Muslim to command right when it is not being observed and forbid wrong when it is being committed, or al-amr bi’l-ma’rūf wa ‘l-nahī ‘an al-munkar: he reminds her that “It’s our obligation to call injustice by its name” (52). Listening to Moosa’s closing response to this exchange, “Indeed, God never forgets the faithful” (53), Suleiman notes Moosa’s cynical criticism of his mother’s unquestioning interpretation of faith in God as a path to passivity and subservience to the regime.

While Najwa’s double standards suggest that dissidence is unpatriotic and unfaithful, her passive, submissive attitude, even if out of fear, places her among the conforming cronies who perpetuate the Guide’s image as an extension of God on earth, and thus the guarantor of the citizens’ stability, prosperity, and safety. Her neighbor, Um Masoud, whose “powerful and well-connected” (107) husband, Ustath Jafer, works for Qaddafi and whose help Najwa seeks to free her detained husband, asserts the same narrative that elevates the Guide to a protector-like persona. She shows Najwa “all of this good fortune [they] are in” for which “it wouldn’t be right to bite the hand that feeds you” (161). Understood is the importance of loyalty to the “hand that feeds you” where “complicity becomes a matter of familial protection and, by extension, of self-preservation” in an oppressive ambiance (Levy, 2019). Accompanying his mother during this visit, Suleiman observes Um Masoud’s confidence and dominion over his subservient, obsequious mother who says “May God nurture the goodwill and keep the envious at bay,” to which Um Masoud responds asserting “From your mouth to God’s ears” (161). Through Najwa’s acquiescence, the nuances of this dialogue reaffirm society’s mechanism of interweaving God with the promise of prosperity to those showing allegiance to the ruler.

As faith complicates dutifulness to a higher authority, the novel traces the development of the child whose eyes open to the reality of subordination to a regime that legitimizes itself through religion. In his conversation with Afikra (January 2021), Matar shares the challenge he faced for choosing a child protagonist, noting “Once you create limitations, how deep can you go with that? [. . .] What can you reveal with a protagonist that seems to know less than you [the adult].” In this sense, it
would be logical to presume that the adults’ thoughts and behaviors shape and predispose the child to embrace their beliefs. Indeed, at moments, this holds true when he echoes them in referencing his Islamic upbringing to explain his surroundings. Being a single child, he surmises, is because “both the mother and the father were objecting to God’s will” (23). His eagerness to be one of “the faithful,” a term that designates the body of believers in Islam, builds on “the responsive, interpretive relationship [the novel’s] characters, as readers and adherents of the Qur’an to varying degrees, have with the religious book. [. . .] The novel then explores how such narratives affect the characters’ sense of their own imagined agency” (Hashem, 2014: 43). Recalling Moosa’s “God never forgets the faithful” bewilders the child and throws him into a series of questions: “Who are the faithful?” [. . .] How do you become one of the faithful? I bet their feet won’t burn on the Bridge to Paradise” (54). Later, the judge’s televised, opening message to the broadcast public trial of Ustath Rashid, a dissident professor and a close friend of Faraj, Suleiman’s father, offers a response to the child’s questions. By entangling patriotism, loyalty, and faith as indispensable requirements for good citizenship, the judge conjures up the image of Qaddafi as a prophet-like figure and the savior of all Libyans:

because it was in the desert where our Leader was born, in the desert where God spoke to Moses, in the desert where the prophet Elijah heard the still voice of God ordering him to face the tyranny of an oppressive ruler, in the desert where Christ prepared himself through fasting and prayer for a mission that was to shape Western history, in the solitude of the desert where the Prophet Muhammad contemplated the order of creation and the sad state of his own people, [. . .] and it was also in the desert where our Leader, the Guide, the Savior of the Nation, our Great Teacher and Benefactor, the Father of the Great el-Fateh of September Revolution, Muammar el-Qaddafi, was born, lived, dreamed and reflected. (183)

In addition to the apparent complicity in the regime’s abusive mechanism “to shore up its legitimacy through allusions to Qur’anic narratives” (Hashem, 2014: 45), this message reminds the populace, now fearful of Qaddafi, that those loyal to the regime are faithful Muslims on the path to Paradise. Notably, attentive to the speech and hearing the judge mention prophet Muhammad’s name, Suleiman follows the Muslim tradition by replying “Peace and blessings be upon him” though he observes that “Mama and Moosa didn’t” (183), a signal of their disapproval of the regime’s manipulation of religion. Qaddafi’s cronies acquire by extension this elevated position: in one instance, Suleiman sees prophet Moses in Sharief, the Revolutionary Committee Officer who keeps Suleiman’s family under daily surveillance, who “rush[es] to [his] rescue [. . .] split[ting] the sea” (167) during an
altercation with a neighbor. Suleiman adopts society’s systematic practice of conflating faith and control. When Ustath Jafer, the intelligence agent neighbor, dismisses Najwa’s concerns about her absent, detained husband with “God is great. Capable of all things,” Suleiman feels “a strange urge to hug him” (163), finding solace in the words of a well-connected man who epitomizes power and faith and invokes God’s authority. Reversibly, when Sharief unexpectedly appears before him, the child immediately recalls Sheikh Mustafa’s teachings on “the flames of Hell Eternal licking the sides of the Bridge to Paradise, how they will seem like a familiar voice to the unfaithful” (129), suggesting Suleiman’s association of eternal punishment with betraying the Revolution.

Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses, Suleiman negotiates his faith as a means to agency and defines faithfulness on his own terms: if one ought to be faithful, one must act bravely out of individual will. Recalling the scene of his parents’ lovemaking, Suleiman wonders if “Providence [. . .] woke him” at the right time to rescue his mother who was laying “beneath him, unmoving, looking away” (86). He ponders his own “failure for lacking the courage—or whatever it is that enables people to act quickly, decisively and without doubt—to rise to the occasion, to prove [himself] one of the faithful” (87). By combining faithfulness with measuring up to bravely face a challenge, Suleiman expresses an eagerness to be an individual who forms his own interpretation of loyalty; in this case, rescuing his mother affirms his faith.

Analogous to the loyalty-faith dialectic that informs Suleiman’s ideas on bravery and individualism, treason serves as another malleable concept where citizens are led to believe that disloyalty to the regime is synonymous to the betrayal of the Revolution and should thus “walk beside the wall” (39) in this ambiance of intimidation orchestrated by the Mukhabarat or Intelligence watchful eyes. The narrative employs the cycle of betrayal as the center of many relationships. The main event of Ustath Rashid’s arrest, which triggers his mother’s and the neighbors’ fear of being accused of treason by association, encapsulates Suleiman’s attempt to make sense of the rumors that dub the respectable professor a traitor. Confused, he raises a series of questions that echo the adults’ ambivalence: “How can any one of us prove that he or she is not, and never was, a traitor? How can you prove something that hasn’t happened?” (61), “I wonder what Ustath Rashid did? Do you think he’s a traitor, do you think Um Masoud is right? [. . .] I’ve been thinking about it and I think it’s true: there is no smoke without fire” (133). In this repressed atmosphere of space confinement, Suleiman fathoms the graveness of people’s talk about an individual’s reputation and thus the importance of remaining innominate. Worried to find his name in the dedication of his father’s controversial book, Democracy Now, which reads “To my eternal friend and comrade, Faraj Bu Suleiman el-Dewani,” Suleiman objects “I didn’t like seeing my name there. Why wasn’t he content with just Faraj el-Dewani?” (104).
Similarly, during Ustath Rashid’s broadcast interrogation, Suleiman’s uneasiness upon hearing his father’s name mentioned as “Bu Suleiman” makes him feel “implicated, dragged by [his] name into something [he] knew nothing about” (114). In a sense, the exposure of one’s name singles out traitors, whereas those who “walk beside the wall” are marginalized but secure. Not surprisingly, the child’s first time to utter the term “traitor” in his unfinished “Everybody knows your father is a tr—” (107) is to his childhood friend, Kareem, Rashid’s son, as an innate reiteration of circulating rumors about the dissident professor and on the basis that “there is no smoke without fire” (48, 133), the Arabic saying that he often hears adults repeat. The moment Suleiman frees himself from the absurdity of rumors, he delves into a monologue questioning the populace’s unsound understanding of betrayal. Not only does guilt make him realize that he is the one who betrayed Kareem for irrationally repeating the neighbors’ false accusations, but he also surmises that Kareem’s father epitomizes heroism for denying Faraj’s involvement, despite the pressure of interrogation. “Ustath Rashid said, ‘No,’ when Baba’s name was mentioned. I knew this was the opposite of betrayal” (115), Suleiman concludes. The simple endeavor to reason against hegemonic misconceptions and find answers to his own questions on treason reduces the adults who to him become clearly implicated in condoning corruption and injustices.

Unlike a typical 9-year-old, Suleiman expresses an affinity for individual strength that defies the powerful. While his mother despises Scheherazade’s submissiveness, he admires her tactful skills in “[keeping] her nerve” (66) to survive, despite the fear of her imminent death. Similar to Scheherazade, he esteems Moosa’s courage and prudence in welcoming the intelligence agents’ during their visit to his house, surmising “[i]t’s one thing not to fear death, another to sing under its sword,” unlike his terrified mom who “was soundlessly mouthing words to God” (66–67). Moosa’s adherence to activism “that takes place ‘offstage’,” to borrow Scott’s term (2008: 4), illustrates, in Suleiman’s eyes, a disparate individualism in outwitting the hegemonic power of the dominant to preserve one’s well-being all the while pursuing his political actions, contrary to the cowardly subservient and passive collective who propagate a false definition of treason founded on rumors because “people are talking” (107) and “there is no smoke without fire” (48). Interestingly and analogous to Moosa, Matar confesses to his own prudence mixed with fear while writing the novel as a double construct of control to be able to expose the truth about Qaddafi’s brutality without sacrificing “the integrity of the work.” When asked about “breaking the wall of fear” in his interview with Lina Attar (2011), Matar states:

Yes, I was afraid. Again, when I was writing, I wasn’t afraid. In the act of writing, I had to make sure I don’t go one way or the other, not for me but for the integrity of the work. The dangers were, because of my feelings about the dictatorship,
that I put in a lot of the awful things, and make it a document. That would have killed the book. The other temptation was to take out too much, because it was too dangerous: not only for me but also for others, that’s what really made me worry. And I remember one moment when I was fairly far into the book and I suddenly panicked.

While the reader is inclined to assume that the adults’ behaviors and ways of thinking would mold Suleiman’s future, Suleiman emerges as a keen, though naïve at times, observer, possibly because he does not quite fathom the power laden dynamics due to his age. Watching the gruesome, broadcast public hanging of Ustath Rashid surely encapsulates his largest loss of innocence. Meanwhile, what most importantly strikes him is the spectators’ “public performance,” as accomplices in the perpetration of injustices, providing “convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values” (Scott, 2008: 2–4). Supportive of the regime’s manipulated notion of treason, the spectators celebrate Rashid’s torture and humiliation, cheering “Hang the traitor! Hang the traitor!” while women ululated, joyous for his execution, giving proof of “the sort of power being exercised [that] stretches the ordinary meaning of power almost beyond recognition” where “the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask” (Scott, 2008: 1–3). The shocking, exaggerated celebration of a fellow citizen’s execution who has caused them no harm, an unfathomable behavior to Suleiman, becomes an evidence of the disparity of citizen-ruler power, fueling the populace to thicken their mask and empowering the regime all the more. In the child-observer’s eyes, this important display of the oppressed-oppressor dynamics first reduces the spectators to “children satisfied with a swing they just made [where] everybody seemed happy” (187–188), but soon swerves to his questioning of the existence of divine power, and the preconceived relation between faithfulness, rewards, and punishment:

How could it be so easy? What was absent in the stadium? What didn’t intervene to rescue Ustath Rashid? […] perhaps it wasn’t God but they who had invented hope and the promise that just at the point when the hero had the rope around his neck, suddenly, and with the Majesty of God, a shot would come from nowhere and break the rope. […] Where were the heroes, the bullets, the scurrying mob, the happy endings, […] rejoicing that our man had won, that God was with him, that God didn’t leave him alone in his hour of need, that the world worked in the ways we expected it to word and didn’t falter? Something was absent in the stadium, something that could no longer be relied on. (197–198, emphasis added)

In disputing God’s existence who allows for such an unjust punishment to happen to an undeserving good person and in condemning the passive reliance on
either an ubiquitous, just God who would intervene to rescue the oppressed, or on heroes who should avenge their fellow oppressed citizens, Suleiman frees himself of the constraints of religious, communal, and political hegemonies and ponders individual agency.

Aversion to power hierarchy and its ensuing apprehension in both private and public spaces inspire in Suleiman an imagined manhood that counters the conceived emasculation of repressed voices embodied in his father’s absence. This absence permits him to be the “man of the house,” envisioning himself a hero, a prince who rescues his powerless mother and takes her away on a white horse (12). Also, his mother’s frequent retelling of her forced marriage nurtures a disdain for his father, “the man who was her punishment and the boy who sealed her fate” (144), seen now as a suppression of free will and independence. In his version of manhood, Suleiman aspires to “become a man without becoming [his] father,” free of “all the things normally associated with manhood and its license” (148–149). Congruent with Scott’s (2008) theory where “an individual who is affronted may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation” (9), Suleiman, now loathing patriarchy, “fantasize[s] revenge” to free his mother and “rescue that girl from her black day” (148). In lieu of his father, other men satisfy his urgent desire to look up to a male figure. His surprising collaboration with Sharief, who patrols the neighborhood, is “a way of achieving some form of power” (Kearney, 2014: 133) because “unlike Mama and Moosa, he didn’t treat [him] like a child,” but rather empowered him to feel like a man. “Men are never afraid. And you are a man, aren’t you?” says Sharief, whose “stench struck [Suleiman] as a sign of manhood” that he was excited “in being so close to it” (130). Analogous to his mother’s story, privately told when intoxicated, the secrecy of Faraj’s involvement in a dissident movement of “foolish dreamers!” (52) weakens furthermore his father’s image, deems his hiding from the Mukhabarat a cowardly act, and undermines his political resistance, thus feeding the child’s yearning for agency. In his imagined manhood, his father stands out heroically in self-sacrifice, returns after a long absence, and rings the doorbell, “leaning with one arm against the door, sweating, bleeding beautifully from one eyebrow and panting—exactly like the heroes [he] saw in films” (60). However, reality disillusion him: during the Mukhabarat’s unexpected visit to their house, Moosa’s replacement of Faraj’s photograph on the wall with Qaddafi’s erases and emasculates him in order to affirm the family’s loyalty to the Guide (71). Suleiman’s idea of manhood is further challenged by Ustath Rashid’s public humiliation during his interrogation and the absence of blood on his shirt (35), crying during the trial “like a baby” instead of “honorably,” “begg[ing] for mercy,” trying to “kiss one of their hands” as they tied the rope around his neck, which reminds Suleiman of “the way a shy woman would resist her friends’ invitation to dance” (185–187). Ustath Rashid’s urination on himself during the interrogation
and execution, the memory of which haunts Suleiman who “enjoy[s] the jet of [his] urine” (19) the morning after the execution scene temporarily contests the expected manliness of a hero. Suleiman eventually fathoms that Ustath Rashid’s loyalty to his friend Faraj, the moment he denies the latter’s involvement despite the pressure and the imminence of his execution, overshadows his powerlessness. Rashid’s “no” resonates in Suleiman’s ears to some “heroic chords” (120), which by default compromises his father’s manhood who gave away Rashid. Henceforth, loyalty to one’s principles, defiance of the dominant’s power, and resistance to collective subordination epitomize manhood.

Suleiman’s reflections on obligation, self-reproach, and pleasure offer some of the most significant insights into the systematic behavior of those who “endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination” (Scott, 2008: 4). One such submissive participant in her own injustice is Najwa: she recalls feelings of guilt and self-blame during her beating at the hands of her father, “torn between desire and duty” (174). Nuances of conformity to pain and oppression as an accepted duty permeate the narration of her story, observing “although I always disagreed with his punishment, I also believed that perhaps due to an ancient failing that kept father and child from ever being reconciled I must endure the receiving of it as he must endure its administering” (174, emphasis added). Najwa’s compliance with the familial “basic internal relations [. . .] of authority, domination, and dependency” (Sharabi, 1988: 41) reaffirms her enthusiastic acceptance of, yet her ambivalence towards, higher authority as expressed earlier. Whereas her willing subservience is driven inwardly by contrition, Suleiman’s shame of submitting to authority turns into an outward incentive to defy patriarchy. His visit to Um Masoud and Ustath Jafer to help free his father, the ultimate scene of humiliation, initiates his “inauguration into the dark art of submission,” where he compares it to bowing during prayers, his “forehead pressed against the ground, fingers pressed tightly together, hearing [his] own whispered prayers—[he is] often overcome with regret and, yes, shame that [he is] gloating in it, enjoying [his] own deprecation” (159, emphasis added). His self-reproach for the “pleasure in submitting to authority” overshadows his oppressed mother’s assent in normalizing the oppressor’s injustice. Imageries of heroic stories and imagined heroes that set the individual against the collective condemn the latter as “enthusiastic partners in their subordination.” His recollection of the story of the African slaves’ “solemn standing ovation [. . .] to their master,” “clapping in unison,” is a memory of disappointment at his father’s admiration for those slaves’ obedience to their master: “they had one another, one person clapping wouldn’t do,” Suleiman observes (120–128). Paying collective homage to their master, he realizes, failed to free them and prolonged, like Scheherazade, their slavery, proving them too fearful to rise against the dominant power. His most
ostensive thoughts on individual agency are those on Adnan, his sick friend whose illness he strangely envies because it makes him “more independent,” sets him apart from, and elevates him to, his friends. Envious of his friend’s illness, he prays “for a disease that would give [him] what Adnan had,” yearning to his “peculiar sort of strength,” his independence as he “seemed to need no one,” and his closeness to death that “aged him and gained him a higher moral authority” (126–127). As a child, he can afford to dream about freedom and reconstruct power relations in punishing an adult, such as Bahloul, whose “face disfigured with fear” “irritate[s]” Suleiman and makes him chase the beggar, throwing stones at him until he falls in a lake and almost drowns (218). Critics’ interpretations of the child’s unexpected violent behavior towards Bahloul vary from a “befuddled sadism” (Turner, 2006) to Kearney’s (2014) conclusion that “Suleiman’s entry into treacherous behavior seems to be the consequence of his deep insecurity and anxiety about his mother.” A closer read of the narrative unveils Suleiman’s aspiration to experience agency, confessing to the “secret rush of power [he] had felt chasing him” (218, emphasis added) to punish him. Such violence in defiance of fear should not be unexpected, for “when subservience evaporates and is replaced by open defiance, we encounter one of those rare and dangerous moments in power relations” (6), as Scott’s theory pinpoints.

Suleiman’s adult state of forced exile in Egypt, sent there by his parents for his safety, reshapes his familial and national relations. Learning of his father’s arrest for reading _Democracy Now_ to his fellow factory workers and realizing that his “influence in this world might not be as insignificant as [he] had thought” (221), he decides to claim responsibility for the dangerous book in question at a time when Qaddafi’s regime was kidnapping “Strayed Dogs” (231) or escaped dissidents to bring them back to Libya, similar to the fate of Matar’s father. Aware of the Libyan intelligence’s eavesdropping on his phone conversation with his mother, and though “it was best to say nothing, but the temptation to inform our eavesdropper was too great,” he confesses “I saved it.” “It’s my book, I am to blame, Baba never believed in such ideas” (237). The narrative’s conclusion with his father’s adherence to activism not only redeems his past betrayal of his friend, Rashid, but also restores his manhood. Now reconciled with his father, Suleiman praises his risky behavior and the “element of intrigue and madness in the way Father had behaved” (237), which symbolically reconstructs power hierarchy by upholding his father to replace Qaddafi, “the Father of the Great el-Fateh of September Revolution” (183), and most importantly reiterates his past condemnation of relying on God’s intervention to make a change.

For Edward Said’s _Reflections on Exile and Other Essays_ (2000) “the pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question” (179). The final discourse on post-exile
nationalism and belonging in Matar’s novel sheds light on a new national relation to Libya which, as Suleiman confesses, “grew distant in the background, began to mean little” (230). Exile and “unchosen loss” weaken his ties to home, rendering “Nationalism […] as thin as a thread” (232). Critics have described Suleiman’s reflections as an “emotional numbing or dissociation” and a “‘coping mechanism’ whereby one cuts oneself from feelings that are too painful or frightening to handle” (Kearney, 2014: 135). Despite his clear desire “to be free of the past” (238), distance from home after a few years in Egypt asserts Suleiman’s earlier association of activism and courage with manhood: he concedes feeling “impotent somehow” (243) due to an inability to contribute to change in Libya. He experiences “void” and “emptiness” (233), fearful like Bahloul, and lacking that “peculiar sort of strength” like Adnan. His national disconnection is accentuated by a personal sense of inferiority to Kareem, now married to Suleiman’s childhood crush, Nasser’s sister, which parallels their fathers’, Faraj-Rashid, traitor-loyal status, respectively. This discourse reaffirms the impact of the social and cultural pressures in a patriarchal society that drive an oppressed citizen to long for individualism and agency.

Conclusion

Though Matar indicates in Afikra Conversation (2021) that “political resistance” is not his primary interest, his debut novel invites readers to rethink the significance of the Arab citizen’s role in society. It also foregrounds the shortcomings of collective subservience that reinforces undermining voices and legitimizes power hierarchy between citizens, dissidents and subordinates, and their oppressive regimes. In this dangerous space, Matar’s clever choice of a child-observer narrator renders it possible to critically voice the nuances of subordination, act upon individualist aspirations to overturn marginalization, and construct a space of power against patriarchal and collective hegemonies. But in reality, beyond the novel, can a citizen reclaim their place in a country of men where obedience to a higher authority facilitates coercion, passiveness, and control of the powerless who in turn must thicken their mask in order to survive? How successful has Arab citizens’ resistance been against despots who rule by force of arms?

Indeed, “the amount of repression needed to sustain a regime is proportional to the depth and breadth of rejection it faces from the people” (13), as Elbadawi and Makdisi note in Democracy in the Arab World: Explaining the Deficit (2011). The long-term oppression and economic struggles drove the Arab uprisings of 2011, or “the second phase of decolonization” as historian Ilan Pappé describes them in an interview in 2011, demanding a restoration of the citizens’ karama or dignity, to topple dictators like Zine El Abidine of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and
Qaddafi of Libya. They broke the cycle of subordination and proved the possibility of the citizens’ “ownership of their own history,” as Ajami states in his commentary to CNN in 2011 upon Qaddafi’s demise. However, ten years later, the persistence of the citizen’s agency in resisting subordination across the Arab region is still in question. The amendment of the Egyptian constitution to extend President Al Sisi’s presidency terms until 2034, in support of which many Egyptians voted, reveals a prevailing ideology that still believes in the benefits of a presidency that extends beyond the number of allowed constitutional terms. Meanwhile, the uprisings coincided with a rise of consciousness of the regimes’ manipulation of religion in reinforcing collective dependency, an important element that looms in the backdrop of the novel, and brought into question the possibility of secular governance, an “inherently destabilizing process facing the Arab-Islamic world today” (Hashemi, 2013). For instance, the election of the short one-year presidency (June 2012 to July 2013) of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi proved Egyptians were polarized on the extent to which religion should play a role in governance. In 2017, Moroccan political activist Nasser Zefzafi was arrested for interrupting an imam’s sermon that condemned the Rif’s revolt in the name of Islam and claimed it incited fitna or anarchy. Zefzafi was later sentenced to 20 years in prison for protesting against the king regarded as amir al-mu’minin or commander of the faithful. Nevertheless, in Tunisia, Ennahda party’s cooperation with the secularist Nida Tounes party in drafting the 2014 Tunisian constitution represents a successful step that gives hope to political secularization and “demonstrates that forms of religious politics and democratic development are indeed compatible” in an Arab state (Hashemi, 2013).

While the social and political dynamics vary from one Arab state to another, the lack of a shared understanding of the well-being of the community and of the function of religion in serving that purpose contribute to the continued struggle against patriarchal and collective hierarchies in the Arab region. Colonialism undermined state sovereignty and ensured divisiveness among the colonized, and current regimes continue to follow suit in legitimizing their patriarchal control and marginalizing citizens. Five decades on from In the Country of Men’s 1970s historical context, the concerns it raises on power struggle and the collective contribution to patriarchal authoritarianism in contemporary Arab societies still endure.

References


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