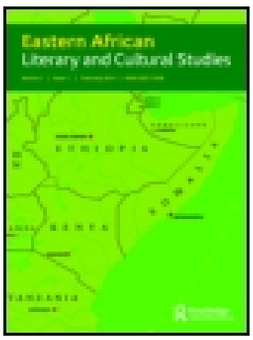

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Otherness and the Fragmented Self: A Review of *The Return* by Hisham Matar

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Existing models in writing reviews underscore the form and content of works of art with scarce attention to the philosophical maxims upon which the works are based. Most adopt journalistic models that are more or less book reports to advertise works of art for commercial purposes. New voices such as Allyson Skene (2015) underscore theoretical frameworks in laying down major arguments of the work to give book reviews a scholarly trajectory. This review extends Skene's argument by taking literary book reviews away from journalistic models.

Published in 2017, Hisham Matar's *The Return* is a memoir that narrates some of the harrowing consequences of alienation arising from political and racial otherness in contemporary Libya. Systemic racial and political marginalisation is facilitated by both colonial and autocratic regimes that adversely affect characters' psyches in the memoir. Matar's major objective is to elucidate Frantz Fanon's deduction that 'otherness is a systematised negation of the other' that causes psychic collapse among the oppressed (1961, 182). Citing Alice Bailey (1942), Harrison (2006) underscores the possibility of other selves substituting the host personality of characters as a result of the trauma (9). In short, *The Return* is a story of politically marginalised persons that exist in a binary opposition with the powers that be. The subsequent feeling of otherness results in fragmented states such as depression and dissociation.

The Return is a story of the plight of Hisham's family and Libyans during the insensitive Qaddafi regime that lasted from 1969 to 2011. Matar's father, Jaballa Matar was the undisputable leader of the opposition and suffers the brunt of the repressive regime. He is compelled to take Hisham and the family into exile to avoid arrest and detention. He stays in Egypt, Kenya, England, Italy, Sweden and the United States, but the highhanded regime eventually catches up with him. He is arrested, detained and 'caused to disappear.' The story revolves around Hisham's search and inability to find his father in every prison and nook of Libya. Using impressive narrative techniques such as flashbacks, hallucinations, dreams and semantic deviation, Matar explores aspects

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of oppression and their psychic impact on Libyans: the opponents of the regime are hanged in public squares and sports arenas and those who run away are pursued and assassinated in host nations (2017, 4). The repression is so intense that even students who criticise the regime are hanged at the gates of the universities and traffic diverted for commuters to see the dangling corpses (36). Books and musical tapes perceived as anti-regime are confiscated from shops and torched in public squares. Intelligentsia, businessmen and other citizens suspected of being critics of the regime are apprehended and their pictures published in headlines, handcuffed and dictating confessions to the police. In prison, the inmates are deprived water, food and clothes and when they complain, they are herded into a field and massacred. The oppressive political circumstances are the possible causes of insanity among characters in the memoir. Matar observes that there were a number of people in his neighbourhood who were so eccentric that no one bothered them. He writes, '[t]here was an old man with milky eyes who sat all day by the harbor, fishing. None of us ever saw him catch anything' (36–37). Political othering stands out as a possible cause of such symptoms of insanity in Libya.

Matar places his characters in surroundings polarised by colonial oppression and autocratic Libya. He exposes colonial woes during the Libyan resistance against Italian invasion for readers to witness the inhumane treatment of the leaders of the rebellion. Benito Mussolini presided over a massacre of Libyans. Air power was employed to gas and bomb villages (153). Matar describes it as 'the policy of depopulation' (153). After independence, the Qaddafi regime extended the repression.

The writer opts for a flashback plot structure to depict the psychological problems that characters experience in the memoir. Leah Mirakhov observes, '[t]his story — the true one — is not told chronologically because it cannot be; the past is fused into the bone of the present, not just thematically, but syntactically as well' (2019, 1). Mirakhov rejects the possibility of writing *The Return* in a linear plot probably because of the haunting memories that dominate Hisham's mind. The past and the present coexist in it to shatter his self. The story begins with Hisham's return from the West to Libya but dwells on numerous personal experiences that come in dozens of flashbacks. After a description of his anxiety-ridden arrival in Libya in the first subsection of the chapter "Trapdoor," Matar uses flashback to demonstrate political otherness adopted by the Libyan regime to quell dissent (2017, 4). Christopher Ball and Jennifer Little (2006) assert that such a flashback confirms how the character's life has been disrupted (175). What follows this first chapter is a back-and-forth narration of events that assigns the memoir a non-linear plot because characters' lives are disrupted by political and racial exclusion. The chapter "Black Suit" begins with a flashback about Hisham's family living in Egypt, Hisham recounts childhood memories for instance Ziad's plight in 1985 when he was compelled to take a pseudonym to conceal his identity from Qaddafi's spies in Europe (2017, 16). "The Sea" begins

with a flashback about 1969 when Qaddafi, described as a '27 year old captain no one had heard of overthrew King Idris and established a military dictatorship' (30–31). Hisham's father at this moment is described as a poet with many pages of verse on his mind and would sometimes tell Hisham, '[k]nowing a book by heart is like carrying a house inside your chest' (30). The memoir proceeds in many flashbacks to explore Hisham's fragmented self through melancholic episodes and tears.

There are many fragmented characters whose selves are altered by political otherness in the colonial and Qaddafi regimes during which many poets emerged. Rajab Abuhweish stands as a prominent poet in Libya (156). Matar explains that colonisers marched Abuhweish 400 kilometres to El-Agheila concentration camp and denied him possession of a pen and paper. In the book, Abuhweish composes a thirty-stanza poem that he commits to memory and teaches others the very lines, which spreads among Libyans to mobilise them against colonialism. After independence, Abuhweish abandons the writing of poetry and turns to teaching (157). He does not write poetry thereafter, possibly because it was a phantasy to resolve the conflict in the mind stemming from colonialism. Abuhweishi's experience resonates with Eagleton (1990) that the writer displaces repressed desires through writing (199). Indeed, Hisham's father, Jaballa also finds consolation from the painful realities of his life by writing prose and poetry. Hisham is given Jaballa's short stories and after he reads them, he learns that they are 'fictional vessels into which the eighteen-year-old author could deposit his worst fears' (142). Jaballa creates a young character that wanders in Libya and only finds a home in the streets. The stories reveal despair to dissipate his fears after his painful experience under colonial rule in which he saw his people discriminated against and even killed by Italians. Jaballa's elder brother, Salah was killed by a mine (73), and such pain haunts him. Hisham's life demonstrates the presence of alter-personalities or what Harrison refers to as 'foreign dwellers' (9) as a consequence of trauma of political otherness. One conspicuous alter in Hisham's mind is his late father, Jaballa. After reading his father's story, which ends with the mantra 'I decided to work and survive,' Hisham discovers that like his father he is a writer and the jobs he takes in London resemble what his father did in Libya (142). In another passage, Hisham believes that his father lives in him. He says, '[m]y father is both dead and alive … I live, as we all live, in the aftermath' (167–168). It is the existence of this personality within Hisham that possibly gives him images of the massacre at Abu Salim prison in Libya.

The Return is a story of the psychological consequences of political and racial otherness on members of the marginalised group. The Matars are marginalised by colonial and subsequently Qaddafi regimes for questioning autocratic leadership. Grandfather Hamed is a poet who 'found great freedom in his poems' (148). He finds peace in the phantasy world of poetry to escape the traumatic experiences after taking part in the Libyan resistance against the Italian invasion. His

son Jaballa suffers when Hamed is exiled for his role in the resistance. Jaballa is also persecuted by Qaddafi regime and becomes a poet and short story writer (142). Hisham is traumatised when his father is caused to disappear by the colonial regime and becomes a novelist.

The stylistic choices in the memoir aptly suit otherness and self-fragmentation. There is use of paradox when Hisham says, '[m]y father is both dead and alive … He is in the past, present and future' (167). This contradiction demonstrates Hisham's fragmented self. Jaballa is an alter-personality in Hisham's self as a result of political otherness. Furthermore, Hisham is vulnerable to hallucinations. While talking to Maher (a member of the secret police after the revolution) about whether he could assist in the search for his father, Matar senses the presence of his father's ghost beckoning him away and hears a message from him to slow down on his search (127). This hallucination has prophetic significance because Matar is made aware that the father is dead and he should stop wasting his time searching for him. Matar has also used ambiguity to express self-fragmentation. He invites Maher, an officer responsible for gathering intelligence for revolutionaries, to assist him in the search for his father. After a hallucination, Matar writes:

> Thankfully, Maher stood up and said he had to go. I walked him out, watched him skip over the puddle that was always at the base of the steps outside the hotel. I recognized his prison body. That stifled gait all political prisoners have. As though oppression were toxic sediment that lingered in the muscles […] I waved as he drove off. He held his thumb up in a good-luck sign. I remembered his last words: 'I' here for you till end of time. Anything you need. As for hereafter,' he said, and laughed, 'you are on your own.' (127–128).

In this passage, it is not clear whether Hisham is talking about Maher or his late father, Jaballa. In the first sentences two sentences, Hisham talks about Maher 'I walked him out' and the reader follows this train of thought until the third sentence, 'I recognized his prison body.' It dawns on the reader that this is not Maher because he has not been a prisoner. The walking style 'stifled gait' and so forth do not refer to Maher. Matar then returns to Maher in the sentence, 'I waved as he drove off' (128). It is not clear whether it is Maher or Jaballa holding the thumb up in 'a good luck sign.' The ambiguity continues to the next sentences, but given the pious nature of the utterances, the reader presumes that the speaker is Jaballa Matar.

In conclusion therefore, Matar's *The Return* demonstrates the psychological consequence of otherness among some of the characters. The writer demonstrates that the political and racial marginalisation of groups has the potential to shatter their psyches and expose them to psychological problems such as dissociative identity disorder.

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