



## LIMITS OF CATHARSIS IN AUTO/BIOGRAPHY: AN EXILED SON'S WITNESSING/TELLING OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN HISHAM MATAR'S *THE RETURN*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Communicating traumatic experiences into a personal narrative is a double-edged torture for every writer and Hisham Matar is no exception in the sense that he struggles with the question, “What do you do when you cannot leave and cannot return?” (*The Return*, 2) Hisham Matar’s autobiographical narrative ‘*The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*’ (2016) – winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Biography – emerges as a venue for an individual as well as collective representation of the history and politics of Libya as he actualizes the experiences and perceptions of storytellers including himself who have been witnesses to his father’s ‘disappearance’ and human rights abuses in the country. The paper aims at an analyses of the intersecting study of the literary-cultural and political mapping of listening and telling stories of human rights violation exhumed from his/others’ memories of sufferings, atrocities, and exiles imposed on the life of the author’s family and countrymen simultaneously. The paper considers Matar’s auto/biography as a human rights literary text that bears witness to the violations of his father’s political-civil citizenship rights and subsequent denial of socio-cultural rights in his homeland affecting his son’s victimized-traumatized experiences in relation to his erosion as a human being.

**KEYWORDS:** Atrocity, Disappearance, Exile, Identity, Suffering, Survival, Trauma, Witnessing

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### **INTRODUCTION**

“Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.”  
(Dover Beach, Matthew Arnold)

Human rights texts/discourses, recognizing the mutually complicit regimes of law and literature focus on human beings traumatized by hegemonic cultures with a therapeutic purpose to understand the psychological urge as well as the need of the injured self for convalescence. Writing/publishing personal narratives as a survivor is an emotional wrestling for the author who is face-to-face with his own memory as a ‘burden’ because a human being is an amalgamation of what he/she ‘is’ and ‘was’. One confronts compelling challenges from the vulnerability of being a victim as the past (memory) is articulated in the present (writing). Using personal narratives to campaign and claim for human rights arose towards the end of the last century when the phrase ‘*All I have is my story*’ became a call to attend peoples’ histories, lives, and experiences to situate human rights’ foundation across the domains of law and legal studies to literature and literary theories. Leigh Gilmore (2001) explores auto/biography as a literary form that records the traumatic experiences of the subjects who suffer violent abuses to their human subjectivity in relation to the societal-psychological frameworks from where trauma emerges connecting the self to other forms of historical, familial and personal pain as an I/eyewitness. Articulating ‘grief’ as part of achieving consolations of storytelling in the midst of cultural dislocation and geo-political displacement is, to say in the words of Schaffer and Smith, “one way in which people claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere”(19).

Etymologically, humanities and human rights share a common frame with a focus on the word ‘human’ and critics and scholars have been sensitive enough to raise questions and respond to the trauma of ‘war’ on several frontiers across the globe in the post-colonial world. Stories about political uprisings against dictatorships, anti-colonial wars, feminist movements, anti-apartheid revolutions, ethnicity movements, subjugation and marginalization of the subalterns, repressive socio-cultural hierarchies, and cultural genocides committed on those who ‘read’ and ‘write’ the freedom-text always speak ‘truth’, in Foucault’s terms, to those in ‘power’ invoking, “the humanitarian interventions” to “make a difference in the world...with their words and pictures”. (*Dawes, 166*)

Hisham Matar’s memoir *The Return* (2016) is structured on what Leigh Gilmore terms “the demands of autobiography (to tell my story) and the demands of biography (to tell your story)” (72) and foregrounds the filial grief and sense of loss emerging from the exiled state in which he and his family has been ‘emplaced’ by the dictatorial regime in Libya. The text explores, as Nayar says, “the *emplacement* of subjects in order to examine the conditions in which it is not possible to remain an autonomous, coherent and agentic subject.” (1) The author situates his memory in the map of the location prefixed to the text to unfold his experiential story in relation to the history, politics, and geography of the two continents across the Mediterranean Sea. For Matar, the dehumanized geopolitical-cultural space of his homeland Libya becomes an identity marker which forged an exiled writer from the history of oppression and multiple migrations. Two of his earlier published novels *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) are focused on the disappearance of a father and the consequent impact of it on those left behind in the politically charged landscape of Libya under the totalitarian regime imposing a narrative of tyranny, violence and fear through torture breaking down people’s trust.

### **Storytelling, Incomplete Catharsis and Survival**

Narrativizing human rights stories gives one a feeling of fragility and vulnerability without any tangible promise to heal the wounds of the victims. It reminds one of Anton Chekov’s story ‘*Grief*’ that depicts the imperative of ‘storytelling’ in the very opening sentence: “*To whom shall I tell my grief?*” is not simply a yearning of a grief-stricken father to gain audience who has lost his young son to talk about his misery but an exercise in catharsis to find solace and

survival by sharing his ‘burden’ emphasising the psychological need to discharge the emotions associated with traumatic events in life. Aristotle conceptualizes catharsis as ‘purging’ and cleansing of emotions of pity and fear that are aroused when we watch a tragedy and the concept has metaphoric links with the positive psycho-social humanizing functionary/imaginary of renewal and rehabilitation of a human person/subject through art.

Writing memoir can also be an effort in the same direction for the inherent aim of the narrator is to gain some hearing which provides ‘a healing catharsis for many victims...releasing them from the burden of the silenced past’ (73) in the opinion of Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (2004) who testify memoir or personal narratives as a powerful literary genre to define human rights violations for ‘gaining both local and international audiences’(13) for the ‘voices of dissent’(15) where ‘the pressure of memories of traumatic past and the hopes for an enabling future are held in balance’(8). In their opinion, the process of storytelling marks the beginning of a healing process for the victims because it “functions as a crucial element in establishing new identities of longing (directed towards the past) and belonging (directed towards the future)”. (19)

According to Matar, “Grief is not a whodunnit story, or a puzzle to solve, but an active and vibrant enterprise... It is part of one’s initiation into death and...it is a hopeful part at that. What is extraordinary is that, given everything that has happened, the natural alignment of the heart remains towards the light” (167). The author when asked in an interview if his heart feels lighter as he wrote this he honestly replied that what he ‘was referring to was not so much a cathartic outcome, but rather...the direction...is towards creation’ which means his catharsis remains incomplete because James Dawes thinks that the “unique position of intimacy and distance, connection and alienation, generates a special psychic friction” (3) when the writer is ‘emotionally involved, but must remain detached enough’ (3) ‘in the representation of human dignity and its violation’ (8).

Foucault postulates that ‘one writes in order to become other than what one is’ and Hisham Matar’s writing is his Telemachus-like journey to affect his proximate catharsis to ‘finally turn and face forward and walk into the world’ (274), to surface and ‘socialize’ the emotions ‘born of loss’ and ‘fear and longing’ triggered from the traumatic experiences that led to his un/becoming of what grief has un/made of him as a victim-witness-listener-storyteller-survivor. Matar acknowledges in his interview ‘the power of storytelling and how...we can travel through time and share, at least in our imaginations, former aspects of ourselves’ and learn that ‘we can endure great suffering and survive, mostly intact yet altered.’

Storytelling is essential for reparation and reconciliation and Hisham Matar rediscovers his revival in his father’s principle that ‘need and uncertainty can be excellent teachers’ (62) who was not completely annihilated by oppressive environs in prison because he found consolation in creation and recitation of poetry. For Jaballa Matar, literature became the ‘strength at the weakest hours’ (180) and poetry served as a ‘comfort and companion’ (30) for he asserted that ‘knowing a book by heart is like carrying a house inside your chest’ (30) and, therefore, he could command faith and positivity during his imprisonment: “Don’t worry; I am well. I am like a mountain that is neither altered nor diminished by the passing storms” (273); these words echo the same spirit that he evinced in one of the short stories he wrote in a literary journal *The Scholar* – published with a motto that ‘Education is as necessary as water and oxygen’ (133) – in 1957 as a student. The words in the story ‘I will not let disgrace stain my forehead’ are also reverberated in one of his letters from the prison as ‘My forehead does not know how to bow’ (136). Hisham’s uncle, too, ‘had not been erased’ (34) and was ‘able to love and forgive everyone’ (261) since he managed to secretly write poems and letters to his children on a pillowcase that

he stealthily smuggled out at the time of his release. These thoughts and gestures are the symbolic representation of, what Nayar suggests ‘an ecosystem existing within the minds of the people’ (92) indispensable ‘for reconciliation and forgiveness, for a better understanding of history and for different imaginings of the nation’ (92).

Matar, “infantilized by exile” (15), (em)places the grief of his ‘Absent-Present’ (39) father’s disappearance at the centre of the text where Jaballa Matar’s relational appearance never ceases; he is motivated to ‘life-writing’ that maps the disruptive effects of ‘disempowerment’ stunting life choices in a repressive regime in history personalized as a statement of injustice to address the denial of human rights to himself and his father as well as to the Libyan population. He belongs to the group of human rights’ activists/writers ‘who have their own histories of being victims’ and who write seeking to redeem themselves from their losses, pains and grieves to attain approximate catharsis for their sufferings “effectively situating themselves as world citizens in an international civic sphere” (136), says Schaffer and Smith.

### **Infantilized Exile, Identity, and Experiential Memory**

Matar’s memoir, to quote Hephzibah Roskelly’s words, claims ‘experiential verity’ to “share a haunting consciousness of the powerlessness” (Theoretical Perspectives, 221) of the author who, oscillated between the ‘longing and logistics’ (40) of exile, claims to foreground the experiential reality of his *lived life* spatially spent in exile in ‘several surrogate cities’ (3), from Manhattan to Nairobi, Cairo, Rome, London, and Paris with the tiresome question ‘Where are you from?’ (4) and his temporal permeations of *life unlivable* because he was ‘now fifteen...now forty-one...now eight’ (26) struggling to come to terms with his true identity. He cannot live elsewhere in strange places and he could not leave Libya for he is conscious that ‘part of me had stopped developing the moment we left Libya’ (15) and was politically forced to live his infantilized exile with which he could never negotiate, neither as a child nor as a grownup man:

Something about me, or about the life I have created in London, seems impermanent...I am often unnerved by exiles...who, unlike me, have surrendered to the place and therefore exude the sort of resigned stability I lack. Naked adoption of native mannerisms or the local dialect – this has always seemed to me a kind of *humiliation* (emphasis added)... My silent condemnation of those fellow-exiles who wished to assimilate – which is to say, my bloody-minded commitment to rootlessness – was my feeble act of fidelity to the old country, or may be not even to Libya but to the young boy I was when we left. (24-25)

Matar’s life narrative implicates political conditions responsible for his emplacement in a state of exiled, rootless global citizen where, he says, ‘as a man, I felt made’ (119) and, “in which autobiographical subjects fracture monolithic categories that have identified them...and reassemble fragments of memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency into new modes of subjectivity” (124), says Smith and Watson. Projecting repressed childhood/manhood as a truth of the human subjects unmade by exile, the text finds an echo in Edward Said’s views who considers that,

Exile is one of the saddest fates...a particularly dreadful punishment since it meant not only years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places but also being a permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and future. (113)

Matar’s family had left the country in 1979 and crossing ‘that gulf’ to return to those memories after thirty-three years *becomes* a traumatic event for ‘the chasm that divided the man from the eight-year boy’ (2) leaves him distressed and wretched: “Rage, like a poisoned river, had been running through my life since we left Libya. It made itself into my

anatomy, into details. Grief as a virus.” (119) He alludes to Joseph Brodsky, Conrad and Nabokov for whom leaving their native country was an immense wrench and who never returned; his heart aches to live away from people and places he loves and for him separation from homeland is embedded with the truth of ‘defacement of what you treasured’ (2) because once a subject leaves, all his/her ‘connections to the source will be severed’ and he/she ‘will be like a dead trunk, hard and hollow’ (2). Once the autonomy of the human anatomy is destroyed, there is always a threat to the coherent self which is the ‘Other’ in term of socio-cultural ontology.

Severed from roots, young Hisham and his brother Ziad went to remote boarding schools in Europe where they had to live under a false identity for their protection from the hostile political regime in Libya that ordered a hunt campaign for the families of dissidents. The constant fear and menace to life divested their bodies of their ‘real name’ (17), compelled them to ‘use a pseudonym’ ‘pretending to be someone else’ (16) where they were sometimes ‘Robert’ and sometimes ‘Bob’ and “It was out of question for Father to travel on his real passport.” (10) Distanced from name, home, food, music and language, the imposed depersonalization and cultural dislocation amounts to expropriation that constitutes, says Nayar, ‘the deprival of possessions, from body to names to identities’ (3) and ‘destruction of life-as-property’ (22). Matar thematizes confiscation of name and seizure of identity ‘as a strange thing for a ten-year-old boy’ who feels traumatized and victimized for being deprived of ‘something of personal value’ which was for the victimizer ‘of no value at all and therefore more vulnerable to damage’ (21). Such forcible claims on subjects’ identities by way of treating human body/life-as-property redefine individual’s freedom in human rights text.

### **Disappearance**

In March 1990, Hisham Matar was 19 when his father, a Libyan dissident, was kidnapped from their flat in Cairo by Egyptian secret police and delivered to Libyan regime affecting his absence as a human body that he never saw again. From this point of time onwards father exists for him in photographs and letters, in poems and stories composed by his father, in stories/memories narrated by his mother, brother, uncles, cousins and ex-prisoners, as a voice in audio-letter haunting his memory and imagination sometimes as a sensory presence and sometimes as a ghost. The smuggled audio and letters from the prison, stories recounted by his uncles, cousins and ex-prisoners’ testimonies are the source of knowledge for Hisham Matar to believe that his father Jaballa Matar’s last known location was the infamous Abu Salim prison in Tripoli “which was known as ‘The Last Stop’ – the place where the regime sent those it wanted to forget” (10).

Disappearance ‘empowers’ the regime to operate its Endo-colonial practices towards what Nayar calls ‘the destruction of subjectivity...as a legitimate process conducted by the state in order to protect itself from its enemies *within*’ (25). According to him, “Endo-colonialism is a process of emplacement where individuals are put into categories that are perceived as threats to the nation” (25) and Jaballa Matar’s disappearance can be read from this perspective for his dissident identity was considered as a threat to the nation by dictatorial regime in Libya where thousands of dissidents vanished and erased under horrendous conditions and authorities never recognize the unlawful detention but kill them leaving no trace of the disappeared.

The grief and burden of absent/unavailable father ‘changed’ (38) the junior Matar as a subject because, as Smith and Watson have said, the “relationality born of communal social organization and a long history of kinship” (216) to the cultural constructs of family relates his subjectivity to vulnerability for he admits that “When a father is neither dead nor alive, when he is a ghost, the will is impotent.” (34) Unable to compromise with the fate of his missing father he finds himself placed, in terms of Nayar, as a “subject within a genocidal imaginary where a process of dehumanization works to

erode the subjectivity of the individual” (xvi) and which deprived him of ‘the strength to go to Abu Salim’ (46) on his return journey to Libya in search of answers to his father’s disappearance because ‘in that place where his smell and times and spirit lingered’ (46-47) he was afraid he ‘might be forever undone’ (47) feeling ‘an abyss open beneath’ (47) him.

Disappearance serves as powerful symbol for negating factual presence of humans as persons/bodies – alive or dead – for the state never gave any authentic documentary information to Matar’s family about his father ‘that could be marked by a date on a calendar’ (167) to be sure of the ‘exact day that a particular person’s life ended’ (166). The author, unable to locate his father in time and place finds no ‘grammar for him’ and when he refers to him he always ‘pause(s) to search for the right tense’ (167); his autobiographical inquiry into the material displacement of his body goes thus:

Cells were opened, the men in them released and accounted for. Father was not in any of them. For the first time, the truth became inescapable. It was clear that he had been shot or hanged or starved or tortured to death. No one knows when, or those who know are dead, or have escaped, or are too frightened or indifferent to speak. Was it in the sixth year of his incarceration, when his letters stopped? Was it in the massacre that took place that year in the same prison, when 1,270 men were rounded up and shot? Or was it a solitary death, perhaps during the seventh year or the eighth or the ninth year? Or was it in the twenty-first year, after the revolution broke? Perhaps during one of the many interviews I gave, arguing the case against dictatorship? Or perhaps Father was not dead at all... (13).

Matar imagines the paternal absence and erasure as part of the landscape of ‘diabolical nightmare’ (269) – the massacre in Abu Salim prison on 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1996 – for father remains untraceable and he imagines himself and his father “standing on the opposite sides of a river, and the water was growing wider, as wide as an ocean now” (270). With the bodies “buried where they fell, in shallow graves” (270) to be exhumed months later and the “bones were ground to dust and the powder poured into the sea” (270), his father is consigned to, to quote Nayar, the ‘zone of indistinction’ where “not only is the line between disappeared-but-alive and disappeared-and-dead left uncertain and blurred, but also because the line between living *body* and dead *body* is no longer drawable since there is nobody at all” (113). The oppressive regime implicates dishonour and indignity to the ‘dead’ body controlling the death of its human population in such state-sponsored performances that engineer disappearance into anonymity denying funerals and memorials to its citizens.

Enduring his father’s ‘unknown death and silence’ Matar feels shame and humiliation for having been denied his autonomy to have the rightful choice to give a dignified burial to his father’s human body: “I envy the finality of funerals. I covet the certainty. How it must be to wrap one’s hands around the bones, to choose how to place them, to be able to pat the patch of earth and sing a prayer.” (35) It also represents the collapse of the state’s duty to protect its subject’s from the injury and trauma caused to them by undermining their world of secure filial relationships. It characterizes the victimization of a subject’s grief whose private space of love and loss is encroached by the state depriving one of the sentiments of mourning and grieving for the missing/dead relatives.

The disappearance not only defines the past of Hisham Matar but his present and future as well – the sub-title of the memoir becomes significant here – landing collectively all human subjects in a country that compels sons to live with ‘the ghostly presence’ of fathers making them “part of this chain of gratitude and remembering, of blame and forgetting, of surrender and rebellion, until a son’s gaze is made so wounded and keen that, on looking back, he sees nothing but shadows” (57) because “One of the injustices involved in disappearing a person is...It turns the disappeared into an abstraction” (188).

### **Power Regimes and Inverted Identities**

With the installation of dictatorship in Libya in 1969, Matar's recounts, how "many of the significant features of my life – where I live, the language in which I write, the language I am using now to write this – were set in motion" (4) even before his birth. Countless accounts of atrocities and sufferings perpetrated by dictatorial regime in Libya in general and 'inside the walls of Abu Salim' prison in particular and the consequential 'unmaking' of subjects, in fact, "provokes inexplicable grief" (247) to Hisham Matar and he expresses the logical necessity of truth and knowledge for those in power who are very unlikely to understand the (un)reason of humanitarian values:

Power must know how fatigued human nature is, and how unready we are to listen, and how willing we are to settle for lies. Power must know that, ultimately, we would rather not know. Power must believe, given how things proceed, that the world was better made for the perpetrator than for those who arrive after the fact, seeking justice or accountability or truth. Power must see such attempts as pathetic, and yet the bereaved, the witness, the investigator and the chronicler cannot but try to make reason of the diabolical mess. (247)

Public executions, massacres, disappearances, arrests, kidnappings, blindfolding, handcuffing, incarcerations and censorship on judiciary, media, art and literature that form the part of the human rights discourse in *The Return* are the instrumental inventories of the dictator regime in Libya to display, in the words of Stephanie Athey, its 'theatricality' in 'the obscene exhibition...of its own power' and 'the terrorizing impulse' (Theoretical Perspectives, 188) managing unlawful monitoring and punishment to break the body of the subjects. Nayar suggests that "once the first home, the bounded body, has been broken into, it becomes impossible to be at home anywhere else." (3) and these torture practices enable the regime to construct 'Foucauldian heterotopias' (123) as referred to by Nayar who conceptualizes the theory in relation to human rights texts and asserts that such power-forged torture-structures create the "spaces where the relations between the state and its citizens are inverted even destroyed" (123) because they create 'inverted' identities of those who suffer 'otherness' as 'dissidents' including Jaballa Matar; they are tortured because they are 'dissidents' for the state. Nayar asserts that 'dehumanization' and 'demonizing' of the 'other' serves the state to decide the citizens' identities because their original identities 'did not fit within countries definitions' (23) to justify the incarceration and torture and target the '*citizens* of a nation...[as]...enemies within its borders' (23).

As part of this torture practice, the state, kidnapped, blindfolded, handcuffed and imprisoned Jaballa Matar and other dissidents 'in a place that was absolutely dark' (54), equal to the Dante's 'depths of hell' (68) and 'the fortress prison of Bastille' (10) where they could 'never see the light' (82) fallen 'into a bottomless abyss' (175) as Jaballa's smuggled letters reveal. He wrote that he could see cruelty in everything in that place where 'At times a whole year passed by without seeing the sun or being let out of this cell' and 'The world here is empty' (10). These visual images of darkness and torture are central to the theatrical representation of negation and elimination of the prisoner as a human being showing, what Nayar calls, 'moral vacuum' (13) on the part of the regime that invades the body of the subjects and reduces them to shadows confining their expansion zones.

To occupy the geo-political-cultural spaces of the subjects the Libyan power regime deliberately 'compromised with the independence of judiciary and press, charged people with treason and not even 'assigned a defence' (83) to them, came down with 'violent crackdowns on journalists and human rights activists' (110), made it impossible for the dissidents' families 'to gain employment or receive a scholarship' (77), closed libraries, used a book festival as a trap to

arrest literary writers (77), and people

"...witnessed the militarization of schools...seen the banning of books, music and films, [Hisham Matar's own novel was banned in Libya] the closure of theatres and cinemas, the outlawing of football, and all the other countless ways in which the Libyan dictatorship...infiltrated every aspect of public and private life. (109)

Matar detects 'an echo of old power' exercised through cultural genocide under the Italian occupation of Libyan history in the first half of the twentieth century when the contemporary regime committed repeated assaults on bookshops and confiscated literature perfecting 'the dark art of devaluing...the life of the mind' (116) as the intellectuals and students were 'shown on television, sitting handcuffed on the floor, dictating confessions on the camera' (36). The 'obscene exhibition of power' in public executions of the critics of dictatorship instils fear and terror in the population half a century later than what the Italians did with Sidi Omar by making sure that his 'execution was attended by as large a number of Libyans as possible' (157) when the regime hanged the 'students in front of Benghazi cathedral and from the gates of the universities. Traffic was diverted to ensure that commuters saw the dangling corpses' (36). Matar, when questioned on this unravelling madness in an interview, responded that watching 'your own' human beings do such terrible things as public executions to 'your own' human beings is 'outrageous, horrible and deeply moving and '*interesting*' to 'anybody who is interested in the nature of being a human being.'

The text also details the telling his/story of violent colonial repression and Libyan resistance against Italian colonization in 1911 in which Matar's grandfather was also a participant-witness. Evidences of human rights violation in retaliation to the 'Arab Revolt' in Tripoli narrate how 'more than 5,000 men were banished from the city and sent to small islands scattered around Italy...kept in prisons there...one in every six inhabitants of the Libyan capital was kidnapped and made to disappear' (152) and hundreds of them perished either during the journey or in captivity in island prisons. When Benito Mussolini seized power numerous instances of genocide, depopulation, torture, humiliation, starvation, illness became common scenes and this wretchedness found a voice in a rare account by a journalist Knud Holmboe who was travelling Libya at that time; he was persecuted to death for troubling perpetrators.

Matar's text emerges as a human rights petition across the globe from a historically-politically wounded nation that appeals for the reconstitution of power politics in favour of victimhood against the savagery of the state and re-establish a balance between the rights of the states and that of citizens as insisted by Makau Mutua.

### **Witnessing/Telling Atrocities, and Suffering**

Matar's knowledge of the actualities of victimhood comes from letters smuggled from jail and the evidentiary memories of the survived relatives and prison inmates of the 'infamous courtyard, where so much blood had been spilled' (46) that addresses the truth of torturer and trauma of tortured inviting the readers to enter '*the dark chamber*' of history-memory-trauma in which Libyans found themselves embedded. The previous two sections above unravel how the regime concealed its atrocities and suffering to sealhuman rights, this section concentrates on how Matar reveals stories of injustice and erosion of identity he encounters in the first-hand witnessing/telling of his family members and other political prisoners who spent two decades in 'the Mouth of Hell' (238) that 'was absolutely dark' (54) with 'horrific noise' (53). Stories from witnesses form part of the text to facilitate, in the words of Carolyn Forché, the "reader's encounter with the literature of that-which-happened...bearing the legitimate trace of extremity" (Theoretical Perspectives, 141).

There are instances where inhuman prison practices resulted in physical disability, cognitive failure, and insanity in the inmates interpreted as “eroding the psychological and corporeal integrity of individuals” (124) by Nayar. To cite in-sight examples, the latest designed handcuffs with a thin plastic wire were so cruelly tightened around the wrists of prisoners as though they were to slice the hands and they ‘felt the pain not so much around the wrists but inside the head’ (267); there were *re-education* loudspeakers purposely fixed inside each cell playing propaganda songs and speeches by the dictator ‘every day from 6 a.m. to midnight, and at full volume’, ‘so loud’ that the prisoners could feel their ‘muscles vibrate’ (256); there were unlimited occasions when prisoners were verbally and physically tortured, deprived of the privileges of medical care and sleep and being ‘fed and watered and not beaten’ (266); torturers spilled over the chest ‘a bucketful of cockroaches’ (260), beaten them ‘black and blue’ until ‘bleeding from several places’ (263) and ‘became as thin as ghosts’ (264); it was hollow to talk of human rights for them for the brutal treatment and ‘ghostification and anonymization of people by state’ (Nayar,118) worsened their conditions rendering them powerless to not even have animal rights.

The text bears witness to how profoundly wounded prison bodies *became* when they came out of the ‘abyss’ two decades older, unable to recognize and be recognized by their loved ones because, as Dawes argues, ‘violence...triggers so many cognitive resistances’ (35); the mothers of the disappeared, imprisoned and dead lost their minds; the body in pain broken by the torture built up frustrations ‘to the edge of sanity’ (176); the prison body could be reckoned with the ‘slightly stifled gait all political prisoners have’ (128); these traces of past oppression lingered in the future throughout life. Matar narrates how an old blind man when released from the torture territory came out with all incapacity for language because he ‘lost his memory’ (11).

The author recounts Uncle Mahmoud’s ‘cognitive limitation’ (Nayar, 14) when he could not promptly recognize his brother Jaballa Matar’s voice as he recited poetry in the adjacent cells even ‘in those dark and silent nights...when the prison fell so quiet you could hear a pin drop’ (59) because “the general confusion of prison life, the shock of his capture, the endless interrogations, the disorienting confinement... ‘tamper with...cognitive powers’” (67). Invisibility and anonymity inflicted through physical separation on the prison inmates forced them to trace the identity of their fellows only through ‘voice’ as it happened in case of Jaballa Matar. When the body ceases as a tactile appearance the voice becomes a cognitive measure to ascertain the presence of a human subject.

Matar’s narrative reconstruction of imaginary of suffering from all the possible witnesses tells how his father ‘might have changed, been altered or reduced by his incarceration’ (171), looked frail, ‘exchanged messages through the passages’ (174) under the pressure of being interrogated and ‘tortured so badly that he could not stand up’ (178) and probably-finally ‘killed in the massacre at Abu Salim’ (181) on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1996 along with 1270 prisoners which reminds one of Nazi holocaust or Rwandan genocides. The witnesses tell they “heard a loud explosion, then dense and unceasing gunfire – all sorts of weapons: pistols, machine guns – and the sound of men screaming” (269) and ‘The dead were left there for four days. Until the smell caused many of us vomit’ (269); the author conjures up how the executioners and prison guards ‘were digging the mass graves, rolling the bodies...one over the next, until the earth was full’ (243). A former inmate who was a cook in the prison told the shooting was like a drill inside the head that went on for several hours and then ‘the guards brought him a box full of blood-stained watches and rings...to wash them clean’ (174). It was a testimony to an act of extreme dehumanization on their part which suppressed during those years later ‘gave campaigners and human rights organizations an early indication of the numbers killed that day.’ (175) Matar, in his human rights text, thus records traumatized memories of survivors, victims and sufferers as witnesses bringing them together in the landscape of empathy

through pain collectively felt for brutalization and loss.

### Campaign

Hisham Matar's desperate desire to know the facts about his father Jaballa Matar's disappearance converges in his campaign for truth and justice to focus on his 'father's case and, more broadly, human rights in Libya' (186) through various government officials, diplomats, journalists, writers, poets, human rights activists, lawyers and organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, political leaders including members of the House of Lords in Britain; he wrote and published hundreds of letters, articles, staged demonstrations and gave interviews to convince the international community to intervene in the matter. His campaign, to reverberate Stanton's opinion, "has emerged to limit the state's impunity and its sovereignty" to formulate 'universal' opinion against "the trampling of human rights by the state" and a sharp attack on the theory that "the state is the ultimate determinant of rights within its territory" (Theoretical Perspectives, 70). Because the dictator regime rejects all kinds of intervention against the abuses, the representation of campaign in the HR text, to quote Stanton, "underscores the primary responsibility of the state to protect their own citizens from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other massive human rights violations" (70).

It was out of his responsibility as a member of the international community to intervene and articulate voice for human rights that the Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu addressed a statement to the dictator in Libya "to urgently clarify the fate and whereabouts of Jaballa Matar" and provide "victims of human rights abuse with the remedies they deserve" (192) giving the 'campaign extraordinary momentum' (193).

During the campaign Matar and his brother's meeting with the dictator's son is embedded in feigned sympathy, face-saving, torture, shame, guilt, anger and moral vacuum for the author as a son 'was a desperate man willing to talk to the devil' (199) to find out if his father was dead or alive and if dead 'when, where and how it happened' (205); Matar acknowledges that 'placing us at the same table with the son of a man who killed our father' (207) 'was one of the hardest things...ever' (206) because sitting face to face with the perpetrator means in Nayar's words, 'revisiting the trauma' (96) his family has been suffering. It, to quote Schaffer and Smith, "reopened wounds and triggered further suffering...when perpetrators did not respond with recognition or contrition or even acknowledgement." (69) The dictator's son tries to 'buy' a dissident's son failing to conceive that it demands human empathy to break the 'barrier' to heal and accept the individual 'as a friend and a brother' (208) who is being threatened to be prepared 'for the worst' (206). The collapse of interpersonal communication is addressed by Nayar as 'a distance between victim and perpetrator, with no common ground' (13) placing both the parties in 'a void', a moral vacuum with a collapse of mutual assurance in suffering because "human relations are built around the vulnerability of one person and the limitless power to injure on the part of the other." (57)

Makau Mutua says that "The human rights corpus, though wellmeaning, is fundamentally Eurocentric" (11) and the 'basic claim of universality is undermined' in the face of "the overwhelming hegemony of neoliberal capitalism" (Theoretical Perspectives, 117), observes Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg. Matar critiques the lopsided power relations between Eurocentric Britain and Libyan dictatorship for economic interests in the way they address human rights issues in Libya. PEN International published a letter in media urging the British government to 'use its new relationship with Libyan government to demand sincere and significant improvements in Libya's human rights record' (186); another newspaper article by novelist Kamila Shamsie and international lawyer Philippe Sands concluded that 'Jaballa Matar's disappearance violated international law and Hisham Matar, whose rights are violated, is entitled as a UK national for a direct

intervention from British government to bring an end to his torture.

During the debate in the House of Lords, British parliamentarians demanded an explanation from the government whether and “to what extent are the government muting criticism of human rights abuses in Libya to establish trade relations, particularly on oil?” (190) which shows “how the global interests of the...powerful countries determine what fits into and what is excluded from the agenda of international human rights” (10), argues Dawes. Such debates contain an irony that, argues Greg A. Mullins, ‘demystifies the claim that human rights precede the rise of state’ and are ‘universal’ because, ‘human rights also bear a paradoxical relationship to capitalism and imperialism’ (Theoretical Perspectives, 121). Mullins reasserts that “human rights paradoxes are...profoundly shaped by the pressures of neoliberalism...neoliberal economic policies have gained ascendancy in international economic policy... And a state must be strong if it is to stand up to powerful economic, social, or political actors...who violate human rights.” (122)

British government’s ‘leveraged engagement’ (230) with Libya and their neoliberal economic interests are at the centre of European nation’s ambivalent and ambiguous attitude towards human rights violations including torture, assassinations and genocide, disappearances, persecution of dissidents and suspension of political and cultural rights of the Libyans in *The Return*.

## CONCLUSIONS

*The Return* carries the message from *the child who is the father of man* ‘Don’t lose hope’ (46) because Hisham Matar on his *return* to Libya finds people concerned about “the challenges the country was facing after the revolution, the place of literature and ideas in Libya, the role of education and civil society, human rights and the importance of addressing past atrocities” (136). The auto/biography realizes, what Dawes asserts, ‘the capacity of language to rebuild worlds broken by violence’ (227) and Matar delivers the truth about Libya’s violent history placing human rights concern at the centre of the collective empathy of the nation seeking recognition and redress for traumatized memories. To alleviate pain and suffering, telling-listening-healing is a better alternative and ‘writing does provide a centre’ and ‘my desk is my country’, acknowledges Matar in an interview with an ‘inability to resist hope’ (83) from his father’s message to ‘work and survive’.

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