

Trauma and Loss in Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*

Eman M. Ghanem

The English Department, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

Abstract—This study examines the socio-political and cultural contexts that shape familial trauma in Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011). Specifically, it analyzes the fraught relationship between father and son, exploring how this dynamic intensifies Nuri's psychological and emotional distress and shapes the novel's narrative. Trauma theory has garnered significant attention among Arab diaspora writers, and Matar intricately engages with this discourse by portraying the lasting impact of loss and displacement. Through Nuri's childhood trauma—intensified by his father's disappearance—the novel interrogates themes of fear, anxiety, and unresolved grief. This study situates *Anatomy of a Disappearance* within trauma theory, emphasizing the parallels between Nuri's fictional suffering and Matar's personal experiences. By exploring the intersection of personal and collective trauma, it highlights how Matar's narrative reflects not only individual loss but also broader historical and political realities of Libyans during different times. Additionally, this paper contributes to scholarship on contemporary Anglophone literature by analyzing how Matar's narrative structure in English conveys Libyan political trauma to transnational audiences. Despite Matar's critical acclaim, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in relation to trauma studies. Addressing this gap, this study contributes to existing scholarship by examining how the novel engages with trauma in contemporary diasporic literature.

Index Terms—*Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Matar, trauma, Anglophone literature, diaspora

I. INTRODUCTION

Hisham Matar is a British-Libyan novelist and essayist who was born in the U.S. in 1970. His debut novel, *In the Country of Men* (2006), introduces the theme of family intertwined with the sociopolitical situation of Libya during the 1970s in the form of a fictional work that includes many autobiographical elements. Notably, the novel was nominated for the 2006 Booker Prize.

Following a similar style of narrating a family-oriented story that overlaps with outer political complexities, Matar's second novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, was published in 2011, coinciding with the Libyan civil war and the subsequent assassination of Muammar al-Qaddafi. Indeed, the war was hailed as a milestone in the history of Libya that invited many writers, both inside Libya and in the diaspora, to revisit the sociopolitical and historical realities of their country through their narrative and fiction. In 2016, unlike his first two fictional books, Matar published *The Return* (2016), a memoir in which he reflected on his visit to Libya in 2012 during the post-revolution period and sought the truth about his father's disappearance. In an interview with France 24 in 2017, Matar affirmed that he was still continuously searching to uncover not only his missing father but also the fate of many other Libyans who "disappeared" (France 24 English, 2017). Therefore, it appears impossible to separate the tragic fate of Matar's father from the broader sociopolitical situation in Libya, as both reflect a narrative of instability and continual flux.

The storyline of Matar's most recent book, *My Friends* (2024), is set in a diasporic setting and centers on three Libyan friends who live in London, which serves as a place of exile for them. *My Friends* explores the core value of friendship in light of the exilic experience that connects the characters with each other. According to Matar's interview with France 24, he plainly sees his contribution to Libya's history as not providing a resolution (France 24 English, 2017). Matar's cumulative narrative production can stand out as a point of departure where, through his works, he keeps moving between the present and the past through his characters and the narrative structure to question the political history of Libya over time. This is possibly because Matar needs to revisit his origin, not only physically but also narratively, to regain a deep sense of rootedness. The author's actual journeys to his homeland offer him a chance to reevaluate his identity, with his return home representing a moment of possibility (Worth, 2017).

Since its publication in 2011, few studies have been written about *Anatomy of a Disappearance*. Several critics have examined the book in the context of the author's background, viewing it as the firsthand account of a native Libyan whose life story could reinforce certain geopolitical theories about the Arab world. For example, David Mattin, in his review of the novel published in *The Independent* titled "*Anatomy of a Disappearance*, by Hisham Matar: The Changing State of Libya Spins a Tale," states that it is "a testament to the terrible human cost of unjust government in the Arab world" (Mattin, 2011). Mattin's remark clearly claims that the content of the novel can stand out as a "testament" to support a specific narrative on the Arab world, especially Libya. This blurring of the fictional and non-fictional lines can serve some strategic narrative agenda, where the representation becomes more powerful and heard than the truth. This interpretation of the novel, highlighting both the author and the book's background, is also echoed

in Barbara Harlow's article "From Flying Carpets to No-Fly Zones: Libya's Elusive Revolution(s), According to Ruth First, Hisham Matar, and the International Criminal Court" (2012). In this article, Harlow explores Matar's novels, including *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, to analyze the political regime in Libya. She underscores the significance of the novel's publication date, which came barely a month after the onset of Libya's most recent political transformation during the Arab Spring. For Harlow, what makes the narrative of the novel more significant during those major political changes is the role of Libyan writers like Hisham Matar, whether back home or in exile, in writing and rewriting the story of Libya (Harlow, 2012). The appearance of a new political status quo and the disappearance of some political figures also indicate changes in the intellectual scene, where new voices will appear and take part in writing or rewriting the story of Libya while other voices disappear.

Other studies, on the other hand, explored the novel from a psychoanalytical perspective, where the writers delved into the characters' psyche to examine diverse themes, including family, love, loss, exile, and trauma, to name a few. In Evangeline Jemi's article "Psychosomatic Angst in Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*" (2017), the writer traces the life of the main character, Nuri, and his suffering, which leads to his sense of alienation and makes him in constant search first for his dead mother and then his missing father. According to Jemi, Matar "is both a visionary and a pragmatist...his *Anatomy of a Disappearance* grapples with a harrowing family history and probes the mysteries of father-son relationships" (Jemi, 2017, p. 1016).

In the same context, John C. Hawley, in "Mourning and Melancholy in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*" (2017), views Matar's endeavor to push the personal story of the characters beyond the limitations of the Libyan context to address "some common tropes of the psychosexual development of many men across the Arabic world," mainly "the trope of the missing father to suggest a tenuous hold on masculine agency throughout today's Middle East" (Hawley, 2017, p. 204). As a result, the novel's narrator, Matar, is interpreted in the context of his masculine development, wherein his internal and external problems are linked to his realization of his masculinity. Hence, this paper approaches Hisham Matar's novel through the psychoanalytical lens, specifically through Trauma Theory, where the narrator's struggle is severe due to the disappearance of his father and his continuous search for him. Nuri's search, first for his absent mother and then for his missing father, goes hand in hand with his life stages, starting from childhood and moving to adulthood, to form his perception of himself and the world around him. Consequently, Nuri's traumatic experience can be traced in connection with the anatomy of the recurrent disappearance of his parents over time, or as the title of the novel suggests. This paper concerns the narrator and protagonist Nuri, whose traumatized experience in relation to his father's disappearance underlines the more collective experience of the Libyans, including the writer himself.

Like the child narrator and protagonist of *In the Country of Men*, the narrator in *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) seems to be suffering due to the absence of his father. Likewise, Matar himself does not know anything about his own father since he was abducted in Cairo in 1990. In his article in *The Independent* in 2006, Matar bitterly states, "To this day, every knock on the door could be my father. But the only way in which he visits unannounced is in dreams. I dream of him frequently" (Matar, 2006). In his *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), Matar narrates the story of the adolescent Nuri el-Alfi from his own point of view. His homeland is unnamed, and his family had been exiled in 1958 to Paris before finally settling in Cairo. As a result, since his birth, Nuri has always been physically displaced.

The story begins with Nuri's flashback to the beginning of his school Christmas holiday in 1972, when he was fourteen. It was during this year, and specifically in Geneva, that Nuri's father, Kamal Pasha, disappeared, and since then Nuri has been haunted by this memory. Moreover, the disappearance of his father and his continuous search for him makes Nuri suffer emotionally and psychologically to the extent of being traumatized and more alienated. Yet, Nuri's traumatic experience started well before this turning point in his life. Furthermore, Nuri as a character suffering from his father's disappearance expresses not only his individual trauma but also a more complex and collective one.

Although Matar's writing mainly addresses Arab-oriented, or more specifically, Libyan-oriented themes and settings, he principally resorts to writing in English, rather than Arabic. In reference to his position as a Libyan living abroad, Matar's linguistic choices reflect a deeper sociocultural meaning in association with his diasporic experience, which is distinguished by its fusion of diverse cultural identities, leading to the creation of new culturally hybrid identities (Gilroy, 1993), like those of Matar and his characters. As Matar in his narrative moves between countries, cultures, and times, this fluidity of narrative underlines his diasporic identity that never settles down. Matar, then, like his characters, stands in-between cultures, experiencing both feelings of belonging and not belonging at once. Writing through his diasporic voice, Matar constantly encounters moments of transformation (Hall, 1990) and emergence out of this diasporic space (Brah, 1996), while attempting, through this diasporic consciousness, to reclaim his sense of self or belonging (Cohen, 2008). In short, Matar's diasporic narrative offers a space for reintegration into his homeland while, simultaneously, his diasporic identity is continuously evolving.

On the one hand, Matar's choice of English as a medium of communication can arguably be viewed as a form of assimilation or integration into the new culture, where his hyphenated-identity is shaped by the consistent interplay between his cultural roots and reality. This hyphenated-identity possibly offers a space to reconcile the inherited culture and the lived reality, or, as Jarrar (2008) encapsulates the multifaceted nature of hyphenated identity, "I belonged nowhere and everywhere: the eternal condition of the hyphenated Arab" (p. 89). On the other hand, Matar's use of English can conceivably reveal deeper cultural displacement and exilic experience that results in linguistic dislocation.

This linguistic dislocation functions as a marker of a postcolonial style of writing (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Lionnet, 1995) altered by Matar's fragmented identity. In view of Libya's historical and political context, Matar's narrative in English rather than his mother tongue, Arabic, foregrounds the role of language not only as a medium of communication but also as a manifestation of identity formation in diasporic spaces. Furthermore, Matar's literary works can be particularly noteworthy for their literary value as part of the global Anglophone literature, considering their use of English by a postcolonial subject, i.e., the writer, or the so-called marginalized voices (Gikandi, 2001). Hence, Matar's writing in English positions his narrative in-between his homeland and host land, revealing deeper cultural negotiation and self-reclamation.

Using a first-person narrator, Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance* exhibits a sample of a fragmented narrative where the narrator experiences moments of confusion, especially while recalling the past. For example, Nuri's recollection of his memory seems to be disrupted by his trauma resulting from his father's disappearance in passages like, "There are times when my father's absence is as heavy as a child sitting on my chest" (Matar, 2011, p. 1). This confusion disrupts the sequence of events and consequently makes the narrative structure disjointed or incomplete. Essentially, this disjointed storyline reflects the narrator's deeper psychological instability brought on by tragedy, especially in Matar's novel. This trauma not only informs the thematic structure of the novel, but also shapes the stylistic and narrative choices, as Caruth (1995) explains, "the structure of the narrative itself becomes a site of trauma" (p. 4). In Matar's novel, the narrator, Nuri, being unable to understand his reality, experiences moments of mental distress. For example, Nuri's continuous obsession with the image of his mother and later his father, or, as Caruth (1995) explains, that trauma is "to be possessed by an image or event" (p. 4), severs his mental stability, leaving his narrative full of gaps and moments of silence and perplexity. Thus, this confusion disrupts the coherence of the storyline, making it a non-linear one, and transforms the narrative into a fragmented one (Whitehead, 2004). Essentially, Matar's fragmented narrative is viewed as a symptom of trauma, either reflecting the writer's personal trauma or that of the narrator, Nuri.

As *Anatomy of a Disappearance* presents countless moments of memory recollection, the narrator encounters some gaps in his memory. Within trauma narratives, memory recollection tends to lack coherence (Felman & Laub, 1992), which intensifies the fragmentation of the narrative. For example, Nuri's attempts to process his new reality, particularly after his father's disappearance, and to recall his memories fail to form a coherent structure. Being unable to construct a cohesive memory, the narrator, thus, appears to be unable to make sense of his reality. As a result, the narrator in *Anatomy of a Disappearance* is caught between two worlds, past and present. Additionally, the context of postcolonial writing is intertwined with trauma narrative, intensified by the voice of the child narrator (Nir, 2018), which contributes to the overall narrative fragmentation.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE MEMORY

It seems that reading Matar's novels in isolation is nearly impossible. His works often tend to involve deeper sociopolitical and historical contexts and intertwine personal and collective experiences, making them conceivably linked to broader themes such as trauma, memory, and identity. In essence, trauma theory investigates the effect of traumatic experiences on identity formation, where trauma can disturb the personal narrative, representing a rupture in the broader collective cultural and historical one (Caruth, 1996). Individuals who struggle with traumatic situations consequently tend to have fragmented memories manifested through non-linear or disruptive narrative in literary texts (Kaplan, 2005). Furthermore, analyzing the literary works through the lens of trauma theory enables readers to delve into the psychological and emotional depths of both the characters and the authors.

Additionally viewed as diasporic literature (Baker, 2017; Hawley, 2017; Jalal, 2014), Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance* explores displacement, exile, and loss, interconnecting this diasporic narrative with personal and collective trauma. Having prefaced this, trauma theory explores the possibility of generational overlap where trauma does not fade away over time and can transform from one generation to another, despite the fact that one generation did not experience the same traumatic experience (Hirsch, 2012). This intergenerational traumatic transfer is particularly significant in the context of diasporic literature, where the personal trauma interweaves with the collective one, and the past keeps informing the present (Baker, 2017). Hence, any individual traumatic experience can possibly extend to impact the descendants' generation beyond the confinement of the past generations.

Trauma in Matar's novels can be traced through his narrators, who experience different levels of suffering, making their narrative seemingly incomplete and making them unwilling to express themselves adequately through language (Felman & Laub, 1992). This is particularly true about Matar, who, as his narrator, confronts his suffering and struggles to express himself adequately. For example, Matar highlights the traumatic experiences of his characters to underline their suffering. This suffering does not start in the present but has roots in the past, which continues to shape and reshape their present and possibly their future. This discontinuity between times aligns with the continuity of traumatic memories to intervene. Therefore, it appears difficult, if not impossible, for characters to process their traumatic experiences in order to either cope with or repress them (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). This is arguably possible, as he himself has gone through a similar experience. As trauma disrupts the coherent memory of his characters, Matar's fragmented memories of his homeland in general, and his father specifically, keep haunting him. Through the narratives of his works, Matar attempts to reconcile the past, the present, the personal, and the collective by exposing the traumatic

experiences first, then by confronting them. As a result, his story acts as a conduit for him to find personal redemption from accumulated grief, unpleasant realities, and frequent displacements (Garcia, 2019). This narrative, loaded with traumatic experience, stands out as a point of departure where Matar aims to examine identity and sense of belonging to facilitate healing for himself and the Libyans.

Matar's works feature his contribution to global Anglophone literature, not only due to their resort to using English as a medium of communication but also as a tool to explore diasporic identity. Hence, Matar's writing functions as a form of diasporic expression or a form of linguistic dislocation where the writer struggles while using his mother tongue. Through his writing style and linguistic choices, Matar explores the formation of identity between cultures, making his fiction resonate with the thematic concerns of diasporic literature. Besides exploring the theme of trauma, Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance* addresses themes of displacement and identity, like the works of Diana Abu-Jaber, Randa Jarrar, and Leila Aboulela, to name a few. Through its fragmented narrative, the novel closely showcases a postcolonial-trauma-oriented structure where the narrative serves as a symptom of trauma. In other words, the fragmented narrative in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, combined with the first-person narrator, functions as a manifestation of trauma and its influence on both content and form. Trauma does not only disrupt the coherence of memory, but it also makes the storyline non-linear, resulting in a disjointed or fragmented narrative. Consequently, the narrator experiences difficulties while attempting to make sense of his reality through the past and present. Likewise, the writer himself navigates his reality between two cultural identities.

Having said that, this study examines *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, emphasizing trauma theory to illustrate the similar experiences of trauma experienced by the narrator, Nuri, and the writer, Matar, through their interactions. By underlining Nuri's trauma in relation to Matar's, this study investigates how personal and fictional narratives overlap. While Matar's works have been widely studied, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* has received relatively little scholarly attention, significantly in reference to trauma theory. Hence, this study attempts to address this gap and contributes to existing scholarship on how the personal and fictional traumatic experiences intersect, building on studies that have analyzed trauma, particularly in a contemporary narrative context (e.g., Caruth, 1995; Schönfelder, 2013; Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996; Vickroy, 2002).

III. DISCUSSION: REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAUMA AND LOSS IN THE NOVEL

Ever since losing his mother at ten, Nuri has been looking to his father to replace her love. Yet, his father's silence only causes Nuri to suffer from feelings of alienation. Moreover, Nuri now also questions his and his father's familial role, saying, "At these moments it felt as if he were the boy obliged to pass a meal with adults; that he was the son and I the father" (Matar, 2011, pp. 8–9). Nevertheless, Nuri's feelings of alienation are halted temporarily when, while on vacation with his father in Alexandria, Egypt, he meets a young British-Egyptian woman named Mona. Unexpectedly, however, Mona and Nuri's father marry, and Nuri is suddenly sent to England, giving him another reason for his detachment from his father, stating that his father "had already enrolled me in Daleswick, a boarding school in northern England, and there was nothing I could do about it" (Matar, 2011, p. 74). All of this only serves to increase his emotional suffering. As Nuri is only 12, this growing physical and emotional distance between him and his father, Kamal, leads to Nuri's estrangement, and his sense of alienation only increases. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018), one of the causes of childhood trauma may be a result of father-son separation, either physically or emotionally. It is believed that children who experience any level of separation from their parent figure, specifically sudden separations, may feel more traumatized (Children with Traumatic Separation: Information for Professionals, 2016).

Though Nuri's traumatic experience stems from his imbalanced relationship with his father, where he feels emotionally detached from him, he becomes even more traumatized by the physical separation after his father's disappearance. Moreover, what makes this separation much more problematic is Nuri's awareness of how his father misses him, as he states, "I could tell Father missed me, that in the act of putting me in boarding school, he had run against his own heart" (Matar, 2011, p. 83). Nuri's words are quite indicative of his inner struggle, reflected in his attitude at the boarding school, where he mostly feels out of place and alienated from his surroundings, including his peers. Like his father, Nuri was secretive and did not share much about his life. Nonetheless, it became obvious on Nuri's 14th birthday when he declared, "I hated everyone at Daleswick that morning. I had told no one, not even Alexei, that it was my birthday" (Matar, 2011, p. 86). Still, this birthday unexpectedly became a critical moment in his father-son relationship when, in contrast to the reader's expectations, a moment of reconciliation occurs between the father and son when Kamal reunites with Nuri on that day. Nuri reflected on this intimate moment:

Father opened his umbrella, and it covered us both. I wanted everything good in the world for him: every dream he had, all of his secret plans, to come true. I suddenly was glad that Mona was his. A strange contentment towards the order of things fell on me. (Matar, 2011, pp. 86–87)

This change in Nuri's attitude towards his father showed a possibility of a reconnection between the two. Nevertheless, this momentary reconnection ended with the disappearance of Kamal during that same year in Geneva in 1972. Though Nuri did not have a stable relationship with his father, he was so highly affected by his disappearance that he spent the coming years of his life waiting for him. What is more ironic is that Nuri learned more about his father after his disappearance, and he became more emotionally attached to his father, or more precisely, to the memory of his

father. Moreover, from 1972 until he finished his doctorate, his life was entirely shaped by his continuous search for his father. This circular search motif continues throughout the novel with both Nuri and the reader trying to answer the unanswered questions and seek the truth about the fate of Nuri's father. Similarly, Hisham Matar, like many Libyans, also seeks the truth about their missing family members back in Libya, especially during the aftermath of the 2011 revolution.

A few years after his father's disappearance, and driven by his confusion and sense of disorientation, Nuri insisted on meeting Beatrice, the woman who happened to be with his father during the kidnapping. With the help of his father's lawyer in Geneva, Monsieur Charlie Hass, Nuri was introduced to Beatrice, of whom Hass said, "She meant a great deal to your father and had nothing to do with his disappearance. She has suffered deeply, and silently, ever since it happened" (Matar, 2011, p. 214). After telling Nuri the details of that night, Beatrice asked him, "What do you think happened to your father?" (Matar, 2011, p. 218). Unable to answer back, Nuri said, "I did not know how to answer. The truth is, I don't believe Father is dead. But I don't believe he is alive either" (Matar, 2011, p. 218). After all the years that followed his father's disappearance, the encounter between Beatrice and Nuri marks a moment of realization, an epiphany, or an awakening. Nuri then recognizes the truth—his father disappeared.

After meeting with Beatrice and his gradual awakening, Nuri decided to go back to Cairo and settle down in his family's apartment. Later, he visited Agamy Beach in Alexandria, where he used to spend his vacations with his father. This decision shows how Nuri was still searching for a father figure. However, even more striking is that, after a decade of his father going missing, he was still willing to wait more, as the closing chapter of the novel presents Nuri visiting his father's study and trying on his father's clothes: "One evening, after Naima had left for the day, I found myself taking out one of Father's suits" (Matar, 2011, p. 245). Contrary to Nuri's expectations, he "never knew clothes could shrink so much from lack of wear" (Matar, 2011, p. 245). Nevertheless, he believed that the suit would "gradually return to its original size" (Matar, 2011, p. 245), because he also believed that his father would return soon. Either living in denial or reaching a level of hopelessness to resist any alternative but his father's return, in the last two lines of the novel, Nuri still maintains that his father "will need a raincoat when he comes back" (Matar, 2011, p. 246). Whether Nuri was optimistic that he would find his father one day or remained desperately hopeless, the novel ends with no clear-cut closure. John Kearney, likewise, in "Traumatized Narrators in Hisham Matar's Novels" (2014), sees this novel as a pessimistic statement that "may reflect a growing awareness in Matar himself of the profound difficulties for Libyans in constructing a new post-Gaddafi vision for themselves" (Kearney, 2014, p. 124). Whether it's Nuri or Matar himself, both are left without any resolution regarding their fathers' fate.

IV. TRAUMA, MEMORY AND DIASPORIC IDENTITY

In *Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon* (2012), Nikro (2012) states that "the significance of what is remembered can never be stabilized but remains contingent on how others variably recall and orient themselves to the past ... or else how past experiences and events are passed on as stories" (p. 30). Nuri's resistance to having closure to his story and his indulgence in his past make his traumatic experience more overt. Despite the fleeting sense of kinship with his father in Cairo, where they once shared a home, Cairo served as an exile for Kamal, who previously escaped there. In his attempt to try on his father's clothes, Nuri's act of keeping his father's clothes shows his intention to await his return. Nuri's inability to come to terms with his father's undetermined destiny will extend his feeling of exile and will leave a birthmark that will make him experience a more traumatic state of in-betweenness and loss. All things considered, Nuri's father's absence remains the backstory of his life, something he cannot get over at the end of his narrative, and his shared memories with his father forever haunt Nuri, who becomes haunted by those memories. Much worse is that he has become traumatized. In her *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Judith Herman states, "People relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present... The traumatic moment becomes encoded in the abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking state and as traumatic nightmares during sleep" (Herman, 1997, p. 37).

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri, the narrator of the story, first recalls memories of his dead mother, followed by those of his missing father. Haunted by many memories, Nuri seems to be emotionally stuck in them; as a result, whenever he moves forward, he keeps moving backward. Herman emphasizes that the traumatic moment becomes part of the consciousness, the same as Nuri's reality seems clearer in his mind when he started investigating the unforeseen circumstances of his father's disappearance, including revisiting his memories of him. His narrative moves between the past by revisiting his traumatic memories, and in the present, he aims at finding a resolution to his trauma. However, finding closure is a lost dream. Likewise, Matar, the author of the novel, is indulged in his search for a resolution regarding his father's fate, which is much the same as the fate of many Libyans during the post-Gaddafi era. Whether it is memories of his dead mother or the missing father, Nuri's traumatic experience becomes embedded in those memories that keep interrupting the flow of his present.

Along with the novel's events, Nuri is disrupted first by the memories of his dead mother and then those of his lost father. In her *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth states that the people who suffer from any traumatic experience must find a medium of expression through which they can access their trauma to recover from trauma or to find a ground of self-reconciliation (Caruth, 1995, p. 152). Like Nuri, Hisham Matar himself had the same experience with his father, Jaballah, who disappeared "[w]hen Hisham Matar was a nineteen-year-old university student

in England, his father was kidnapped. One of the Qaddafi regime's most prominent opponents in exile, he was held in a secret prison in Libya (Matar, 2013). Hisham would never see him again. But he never gave up hope that his father might still be alive. "Hope," as he writes, "is cunning and persistent" (Matar, 2013). This intersection between the biographical background of the writer and the narrator of the novel reflects how the trauma of Nuri depicts a subtler self-reflexivity dimension of the author himself. Thus, the fictional work has become a medium of self-representation in which the writer, through exploring the traumatic experiences of the characters, is willing to have another level of exploring his own traumatic experiences and to reflect on them, yet shrewdly enough, through his fictionalized characters, he can avoid any direct association.

The theme of trauma has recurred in the writings of Arab writers in diaspora due to diverse circumstances such as their individual experiences in politics in their homeland or their current state of feeling in their unfamiliar territory. By writing about such a theme, they therefore initiate a quest for their homeland with all its metaphorical associations of homeliness and belonging, and this happens to be possible through their writing. As Laurie Vickroy states in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), "literary and imaginative approaches [to trauma] provide a necessary supplement to historical and psychological studies" (Vickroy, 2002, p. 221); thus, through the literary work and its depiction of the characters, the writer can explore diverse socio-political, cultural, and historical domains freely. In *Wounds and Words*, Christa Schönfelder declares, "Literary texts and their fictional worlds allow for nuanced engagements with the subject of trauma...to engage readers' powers of emotional identification and sympathy on the one hand and critical reflection on the other" (Schönfelder, 2013, p. 29).

As a consequence, the literary text functions are not only on the micro textual level but also on the macro socio-political, cultural, and historical ones. For Vickroy, the writers of trauma "make terrifying, alien experiences more understandable and accessible" (Vickroy, 2002, p. 222), and their writings serve as a means of "witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people" (Vickroy, 2002, p. 221). In reference to *Anatomy of Disappearance*, Matar uses his narrator to explore not only his personalized trauma of losing his father but also to make a statement about the future of Libya during the aftermath of revolution. Though he was able to go back to his homeland, his memory of his father still occupies his perception of the present. Like Nuri's narrative that intertwines the past and the present by revisiting Nuri's memories, it invites the readers to not only question the circumstances of Kamal's disappearance but also to sympathize with Nuri's search for him, knowing that this search is never fulfilled as Nuri's trauma. On the same basis, Anne Whitehead in her *Memory* (2009) states that writings of trauma depict "the denied, the repressed, and the forgotten" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 82). Matar, then, has used his fictional narrative to explore the lives of many Libyans who either experienced exile or went through traumatic experiences due to the sociopolitical situation. In addition to helping Matar deal with his own pain, Nuri's voice allows him to contribute to the rewriting of Libya's post-revolutionary history.

The disappearance of Matar's father has shaped and reshaped his literary career, and this can be traced through the thematic affinities of his literary productions, which are self-referential as they either directly or indirectly refer to his biographical background. Matar's debut novel, *In the Country of Men* (2006), narrates the story of the nine-year-old Suleiman, whose father disappears in Tripoli, and over time it is revealed that he was taken by the Revolutionary Committee, or the *mukhabarat*, of Qaddafi because of his supposed association with Ustath Rashid, who is accused of treason because of his anti-Qaddafi activities. The narrator in the novel, Suleiman, describes Libya under Qaddafi's regime and highlights some socio-political issues during the 1970s. Suleiman's father reappears after being physically tortured and psychologically traumatized, yet Suleiman is sent away to Cairo to continue his education and, most importantly, to escape a destiny similar to that of his father. This distant relationship and disconnection between Suleiman and his father cause a sense of loss for the former. Much like the paper "Trees as Safe Havens in Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Matar's *In the Country of Men*," Sadouni and Abu Amrieh (2022) point out the significance of trees, specifically the mulberry tree, which gives the narrator of the latter, Suleiman, a sense of affiliation and belonging with his homeland. By the end of *In the Country of Men* (2022), after Suleiman moves to Egypt, references to trees vanish from the narrative. According to Sadouni and Abu Amrieh, this reflects "the protagonist's state of rootlessness. The absence of trees in the post-Libya narrative illustrates Suleiman's state of exile and disconnectedness" (Sadouni & Abu Amrieh, 2022, p. 10). In *Anatomy of Disappearance* (2011), Matar continues in the same manner, but this time the narrator, Nuri, who lives in exile with his father, suffers from an actual disappearance, and the sense of loss is maximized to reach a level of trauma. His continuous longing for his father makes Nuri alienated and detached from his reality. In his narration of the last chapter of the novel, Nuri is still waiting for his father, much like Matar himself.

In Matar's first two novels, the narrators also search for a connection with their fathers. The fathers in both texts are distant, and the protagonists have reluctant relationships with their fathers as well. Nevertheless, in their search for this connection with their fathers, either physically, as in Nuri's case, or emotionally, as in Suleiman's case, the protagonists discover the flaws of their fathers. In a discussion of his *Anatomy of Disappearance*, Matar points out that the novel addresses the theme of family, yet in reference to Libya's sociopolitical reality (Kunzru, 2011).

In sum, the individual trauma of Matar is part of a more collective trauma. As a result of the socio-political oppression in the Arab world during specific historical moments, Arab writers in diaspora tend to reflect on their personal background while creating their literary works. Hence, the individual trauma of the characters cannot be

separated from the trauma of their author, and the individual trauma of the author cannot be separated from the collective trauma of the community. In his paper “The Return,” Matar recalls his mother’s commentary while they were in the airport waiting for their flight back to Libya. Matar, then, concludes his novel with non-closure, where he still questions his reality, as “Suleiman el-Dewani and Nuri el-Alfi are the exiled protagonists...[s]he would rather me return with my two fictional characters than carry the ghost of that man she calls the Absent Present” (Matar, 2013, p. 38).

V. STORYTELLING AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PEDAGOGY IN THE EFL/ESL CLASSROOM

The nature of narratives, as being emotionally engaging, makes them quintessential in creating empathy among learning communities (Fryer, 2003). Like novels, EFL/ESL learners can acquire a beginning in narrative structures to form common ground through which they can establish an interpersonal rapport (Abrahamson, 2006; Maguire, 1998). Teaching trauma narrative in an EFL/ESL classroom has a dual nature, having both benefits and pitfalls. In the context of the EFL/ESL classroom, integrating trauma narratives into teaching practices and designing inclusive curricula can support students’ self-expression and foster students’ well-being (Medley, 2012).

Storytelling, as highlighted by Berdesi et al. (2026), goes beyond a language-teaching method; it allows learners, especially those from migrant backgrounds, to express their own experiences, connect prior knowledge with new contexts, and build both linguistic and personal identity. For example, Hisham Matar’s *Anatomy of a Disappearance* can provide EFL/ESL learners with a rich text in terms of its thematic and narrative structures. As the novel addresses themes such as exile, displacement, and identity, learners from migrant backgrounds may find it particularly relevant (Wilbur, 2017; Medley, 2012).

In addition, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* portrays the life of its narrator through different phases, so learners may identify with the narrator and other characters. Thus, reading the novel can help learners find a space to express their ideas without the need to disclose their privacy. The novel, then, functions as a medium of communication where learners can find safe spaces to engage with the content, either emotionally or intellectually, while reading and contributing to the discussion in class. In essence, the implementation of trauma-informed teaching should provide learners with safe spaces to reflect on their personal experience (Reynolds & Costa, 2023; Pappamihel et al., 2022) and express themselves clearly. Besides its role as a tool of healing (Zacarian et al., 2017) and enhancing emotional well-being (Wilbur, 2017), trauma narrative can offer a wide variety of linguistic choices that learners can utilize while articulating their ideas and consequently supporting their language learning outcomes (Mason, 2021; Wilson et al., 2024).

Conversely, teachers who implement trauma-informed techniques should be mindful that re-traumatization may occur if traumatized students reflect on their painful experiences without the proper assistance (Herman, 1992). Moreover, teachers who engage with students’ traumatic experiences might possibly suffer from distress or secondary traumatic stress (Crossman et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers involved in trauma-informed practices should receive appropriate training from experts to avoid any possible emotional damage or re-traumatization of students (Wilson et al., 2024).

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper traced the roots of Nuri’s trauma in reference to his father’s disappearance, which destabilized him and led him on a circular search in an attempt to discover the unknown fate of his father. Through precise intrinsic analysis of the novel, it is evident that the writer himself was also traumatized by the absence of his father, revealing a more complicated sociopolitical situation in his country, Libya. Like his narrators, Matar continuously searched for his father. His father figure, with its diverse representations, stands out as a symbol of certainty and truth. As the narrators of his novels, and even Matar himself, do not find an end to their traumatic experiences, they are still in search of a conclusion. Moreover, the future of Libya, then in flux due to the political changes over time, is still unknown for many. As an Arab writer in diaspora, Matar has depicted the father-son relationship in his novel and other literary works as an illustration of a more cosmic representation of the relationship between the individual and his homeland. Matar’s *Anatomy of a Disappearance* and his other literary works showcase the intrusion between the private sphere and the public one, where they have, in the case of Matar specifically and Arab writers in diaspora in general, become inseparable. Moreover, in writing Nuri’s story, Matar is rewriting his own story, which is, at the end of the day, the story of a generation rather than an individual.

To conclude, Matar’s work can be read as a documentation of the socio-political and cultural situation of the context that negatively affects the family members in Hisham Matar’s *Anatomy of a Disappearance*. Specifically, the novel focuses on the exilic experiences of both the father and the son and their role in augmenting the traumatic influence. The continuous losses and displacements in the lives of both Kamal and Nuri affect familial relationships and are affected by the socio-political and historical contexts. Moreover, the novel investigates how the father-son relationship influences their traumatic and exilic experiences. Matar’s depiction of Kamal and Nuri’s relationship is realistic and genuine since the novel meticulously chronicles how the whole of Nuri’s trauma is intensified by Kamal’s sudden disappearance. In contrast, the novel also echoes Matar’s personal story and his own suffering from his father’s disappearance.

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Eman M. Ghanem is a university lecturer and EFL instructor in Jordan with over 10 years of experience in language education. She holds a PhD in English literature and is CELTA- and PCELT-certified, specializing in integrating literary analysis into language teaching. Her research interests include storytelling in EFL, ecocriticism, the literature of the Levant and the wider MENA region, and literature's role in environmental discourse. She participated in the SUSI for Secondary Educators program at the University of Montana (2022) and is a 2024 MEPLI Fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), deepening her expertise in educational leadership and global teaching practices.