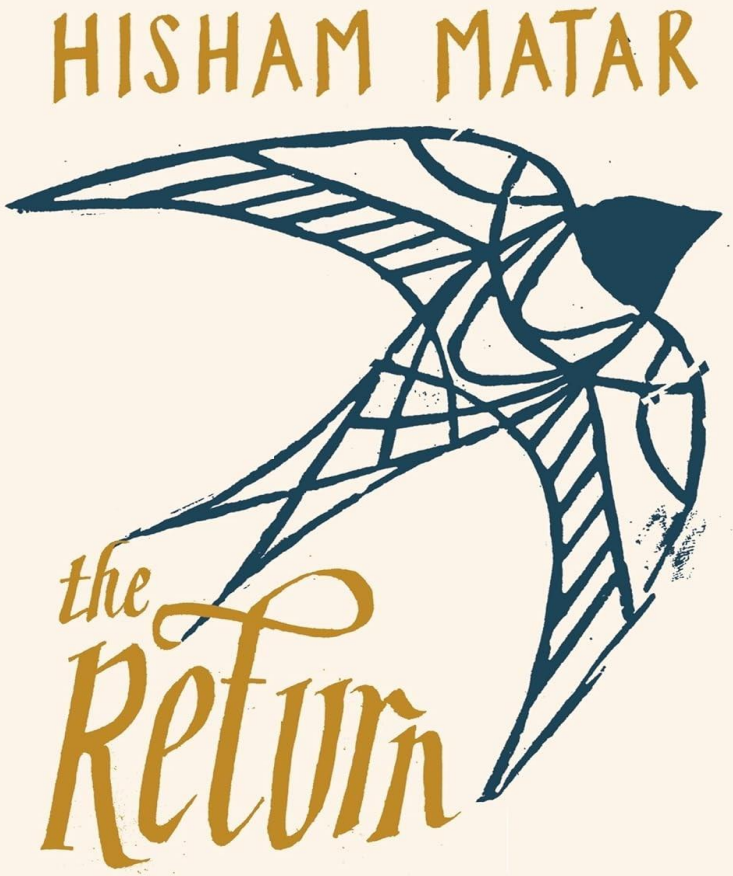

The Literatures of the Arab Spring: From Egypt to Libya

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03/07/25

Hisham Matar

- American born British-Libyan novelist, essayist and memoirist.
- Studied architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London
- Ran his own architectural practice in London in his 20s
- Started with poetry before moving to prose
- In 2006 published his first novel *In the Country of Men*
- Pulitzer Prize winner of *The Return*

First Impressions

A powerful and deeply personal memoir that weaves one man's search for his disappeared father into the broader story of Libya's modern history.

- **A Son's Quest**
- **Emotional Intensity**
- **Connection to Libyan History**
- **Exile and Return**
- **Literary Style**
- **Personal and Universal Themes**
- **Impact of Disappearance**

Close Readings and Analysis

Stuck Between Worlds

- She placed her mouth on my cheek and left it there for a long time. I still remember the delicate temperature of her lips. I could hardly sleep from happiness. But then the following morning, when she ran over to me as I stood in line to enter the dining hall, I turned all cold and silent. I couldn't imagine kissing a mouth that had never spoken my real name. The look on her face – taken aback, betrayed – is still with me. (24)

- I am still not entirely clear why my fifteen-year-old self, living inside a loving, unrestrictive family, would choose to leave Egypt, the horses, the Red and Mediterranean seas, the friends, Thunder – the German Shepherd I fed with my own hands – and, perhaps most importantly, my own name, and fly 3,500 kilometres north to live in a large, unheated stone house with forty English boys in the middle of soggy fields and under a sky that almost never broke, where I was Robert and only sometimes Bob. (24)

- It turns out that I have spent all the time since I was eight years old, when my family left Libya, waiting. 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 maybe not even to Libya but to the young boy I was when we left. (27)

- Later that evening, back at the hotel, I asked Mother if it was true that she had housed mothers of prisoners. ‘Yes, but he exaggerated a little,’ she said. ‘I did it a couple of times.’ ‘Obviously enough times that you earned a reputation for it,’ I said. ‘To be honest, I don’t remember. It all seems so long ago. Another life.’ (103)

- He felt responsible for her and me, and I felt responsible for him and her, and she for us all. Each one was parent and child. To make up for the missing pillar, the once balanced structure of four columns was now in perpetual strain. (58)

Loss, Love and What Remains

- We need a father to rage against. When a father is neither dead nor alive, when he is a ghost, the will is impotent. I am the son of an unusual man, perhaps even a great man. And when, like most children, I rebelled against these early perceptions of him, I did so because I feared the consequences of his convictions; I was desperate to divert him from his path. It was my first lesson in the limits of one's ability to dissuade another from a perilous course. My ambitions, when it came to my father, were ordinary. Like that famous son in The Odyssey – like most sons, I suspect – I wished that 'at least I had some happy man/as father, growing old in his own house'. But, unlike Telemachus, I continue, after twenty-five years, to endure my father's 'unknown death and silence'. 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. (33)

- The dead live with us. Grief is not a whodunnit story, or a puzzle to solve, but an active and vibrant enterprise. It is hard, honest work. It can break your back. It is part of one's initiation into death and – I don't know why, I have no way of justifying it – 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. It is in that direction that there is the least resistance. I have never understood this. Not intellectually anyway. But it is somehow in the body, in the physical knowledge of the eternity of each moment, in the expansive nature of time and space, that declarative statements such as 'He is dead' are not precise. My father is both dead and alive. I do not have a grammar for him. He is in the past, present and future. Even if I had held his hand, and felt it slacken, as he exhaled his last breath, I would still, I believe, every time I refer to him, pause to search for the right tense. I suspect many men who have buried their fathers feel the same. I am no different. I live, as we all live, in the aftermath. (122)

- I was ashamed to think these thoughts, for who could blame a man for speaking under torture, let alone one's own father? But it was not just pride. I somehow needed to know that he did not break, that he went on retaining what was his, that there was a place they could never reach. (129)

- 'I didn't know your father before prison,' Ehlayyel said. 'I came to know him first by his voice. When one of us young prisoners was being taken to the interrogation room, your father would call out, "Boys, if you get stuck, say Jaballa Matar told you to do it." I loved him for that, because you have no idea what hearing that did for my heart. Strength at the weakest hour. (129)

- I was ashamed. There is shame in not knowing where your father is, shame in not being able to stop searching for him, and shame also in wanting to stop searching for him. (171)

- I wished I could cry. I sensed the old dark acknowledgement that Father had been killed in the massacre. I welcomed the feeling. Not only because it was familiar. Not only because certainty was better than hope. But because I have always preferred to think of him dying with others. He would have been good with others. His instinct to comfort and support those around him would have kept him busy. If I strain hard enough, I can hear him tell them, 'Boys, stand straight. With hardship comes ease. With hardship comes ease.' Those other options of him dying alone – those terrify me. (172)

- “I watched them from my window. They came with bulldozers and dug up the graves, one after the other. They burnt the corpses, and now everyone is afraid to touch them.” Then he said, “But, thanks be to God, my son is here.”
  “He’s safe?” I asked.
  “Yes. He’s in his room. The air conditioner has been on the whole time.”
  Then after a pause he added, “But it’s been three days now. I am doing my best but he’s beginning to smell. I must find a way to bury him soon.” (74)

- “Out of all the words she must have screamed that day, the only one that survived the various retellings of the story was "Years." She screamed it over and over. She might have been referring to the years she would have to endure without her son, or those in the past.” (177)

Nowhere Beyond Reach

- Officials from the Libyan embassy attended the first reading I gave from my first novel. A report was sent to Tripoli and I became a watched man. It was deemed no longer safe for me to visit my family in Egypt, which caused a second exile. When friends or relatives visited London, many did not feel it was prudent to be seen with me. Every time I gave an interview criticizing the dictatorship, I walked around for days feeling the weight of the regime on my back. (126)

- To have to sign an apology after twenty-one years of cruel and unjust imprisonment can break a man. Had I done nothing, they would have walked out anyway when the revolutionaries took over Abu Salim and hammered open the doors. But I acted on the facts I had then. Seif never mentioned an apology, and, even if he had, it would have been inappropriate for me to deny my uncles and cousins the choice. Nonetheless, this new piece of knowledge corrupted everything, and from then on, whenever anyone thanked or congratulated me on the role I had played in the release of my uncles and cousins, I quickly changed the subject. (183)

Selective Solidarity

- Never before had an African figure of Tutu's stature publicly criticized Qaddafi. Most African leaders, reliant on Libyan handouts, were shamefully servile to the dictator. One of Qaddafi's rare honourable acts was his long term and unwavering support of the African National Congress, which made members of the South African anti-apartheid movement even less likely to speak out against human rights abuses in Libya. Back in 2002, I had sent a letter to Nelson Mandela via a friend who had played a prominent role in the anti-apartheid movement and who knew the South African president personally. In the letter I asked Mr Mandela whether, given his close ties with Qaddafi, he could enquire about my father's whereabouts and well being. The answer, which was given to my friend, was unambiguous: 'Mandela says to never ask him such a thing again.' As it was second hand, it is impossible to be certain of the wording, but what was clear is that even a man as great as Nelson Mandela felt too indebted to Qaddafi to risk upsetting him. Such concerns were clearly not important to the archbishop. His statement gained our campaign extraordinary momentum. (138)

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