

Literature in the shaping of identity in Hisham Matar´s *The Return*

La literatura como formadora de identidad en “El Regreso”, de Hisham Matar

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Abstract

In trying to make sense of his experiences and cope with his father´s absence, Hisham Matar´s homonymous character resorts to several inter-textual references, storytelling and poems by his father and other writers in his culture which have at some point played an important role in his upbringing and later development. I will discuss how much these sources help him come to terms with his situation and define his identity and sense of belonging as a son of a missing father, brought up in several different physical locations and nurtured within disparate life outlooks he nonetheless feels his own. The presence of literature, all western, Libyan and Arabian, have shaped his sense of identity as a hybrid subject and have provided him, eventually, with a sense of home.

Keywords: literature, identity, hybrid, home

Resumen

Al intentar buscar un sentido a sus vivencias y sobrellevar la ausencia de su padre, el personaje homónimo del autor Hisham Matar recurre a variadas referencias intertextuales, relatos y poemas de su padre y de otros autores representativos de su cultura, quienes han tenido en algún punto un rol importante durante su crecimiento y desarrollo profesional. En este artículo se analizará el alcance de la influencia de dichas fuentes en cuanto constituyen un punto de partida para lograr la aceptación por parte del autor de su situación y para definir su identidad y sentido de pertenencia como hijo de padre desaparecido, habiendo crecido en diferentes lugares físicos y habiéndose nutrido de perspectivas dispares a las que considera, sin embargo, propias. La presencia de la literatura, tanto occidental como libia y árabe ha logrado dar forma a su identidad como sujeto híbrido y le ha proporcionado, finalmente la sensación de hogar.

Palabras clave: literatura, identidad, híbrido, hogar

Introduction

Writing has always proved a way of revisiting events, both experienced or retold by someone else, faithful to facts or adorned with personal feelings and perceptions but in any case helping the writer come to terms with aspects of their own lives, analyse situations in a new light, let out disparate feelings which pour to us from the pages. In many cases writing has meant a relief to some sort of internal pressure, especially in connection to those who have gone through agonistic experiences which would otherwise remain trapped inside their minds and hearts, provoking anguish and restlessness. This is why, in trying to make sense of his experiences and cope with his father's absence, the character Hisham Matar, in *The Return*, resorts to literature, writing on the one hand his own story as autobiographical fiction and, on the other, interweaving it throughout with several western canonical inter-textual references, storytelling and poems by his father and other writers in his culture who have shaped his hybrid life outlook. I will discuss how much these sources and the very process of writing help him come to terms with his situation and define his identity and his sense of belonging, as a son of a missing father, brought up in several different physical locations and feeling part of, but also a stranger, in all of them.

I will base my analysis on authors Smith, S. Mallet and Safia Aoude to deal with the aspects of: literature as a way to reflect upon life and our condition; literature as haven; literature as providing a sense of belonging and literature as resistance.

Development

Literature as a way to reflect upon life

Following Smith and Watson (2001), 'in making meaning of [events], we make that meaning discursively, in language and as narrative' we see that literature has played an important role for Hisham, his father and the rest of his family. We find the character of Hisham Matar, modelled in turn on the real writer, from the very beginning drawn to literature to reflect upon the existential problems that his father's imprisonment and later disappearance have created as well as in order to find his place in the world, after so much uprooting and relocation throughout his life. Hisham is actually a writer by profession and we can see his

qualm about returning home mirrored by his own fictional characters. At the airport, on the brink of boarding the plane, his mother wonders aloud: 'who's returning?...Suleiman el-Dewani or Nuri el-Alfi?...[they] are the exiled protagonists of my novels' (Matar, 2017, p.38), which shows how Hisham has deployed these characters to explore and exemplify his own obsession with unravelling the mystery of his father's disappearance and his mixed feelings about returning to Libya.

Hisham's father and other relatives have also resorted to literature to make sense of life during their stay at Abu Salim (2017):

Father sought refuge in the elegiac Bedouin poetry of the alam... It's a poetic form that privileges the past over the present... [his] voice seemed to open up a landscape as magically uncertain and borderless as still water welded to the sky.

The memories of ancient chants, of deeds and defeats of the nomadic Bedouin people, added to the 'borderless' landscape that opened up by means of his father's voice certainly provided some solace to Jaballa himself and the rest of the prisoners, as well as a way of breaking through the prison walls. A moving quotation about Hisham's uncle supports this last idea: "His stories were an attempt to bridge the vast distance that separated the austere cruelty of Abu Salim and the world outside. Perhaps, like all stories, what uncle Mahmoud's recollections were saying was: 'I exist'" (Matar, 2017, 52)

It becomes clear how by means of words woven into stories the imprisoned characters were able to assert their existence, connect to the outside world, "bridge the vast distance" and feel that despite the dehumanizing conditions in prison, they could still claim being their own selves, they 'had not been erased' (Matar, 2017, 52)

Another instance of resorting to literature as a way of reflecting upon our condition in life is the passage where Hisham remembers a fragment by Jean Rhys (1979), which he always quotes to himself: "I would never be part of anything. I would never belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong and failing" This quotation, taken from Jean Rhys's autobiography, captures Hisham's feeling of displacement and otherness, his not fitting in, not being part. The use of the modal verb

“would” suggests irreversibility, steadfastness, further emphasised by “never”, “anything” and “anywhere”, which show his conviction that no place or activity are entirely his. The fact that Jean Rhys was also a postcolonial subject, shaped by clashing cultures is also telling in the way he feels as regard his own identity and real possibilities. Lines from other western texts, in as much as they have to do with missing fathers expected back home and the effect the delay in their arrival has on their sons, are seen in the following quotation:

“like Gloucester wandering the heath in *King Lear*. ‘Give me your hand: you are now within a foot / of the extreme verge’ ...a line that has lived with me these past twenty-five years” (Matar, 2017, p. 13)

In this quotation we can see how Hisham regards Gloucester’s situation as parallel to his father’s. The idea of being “at the foot of the verge” shows the inevitability of his death, as Hisham perceives through his father’s letters from prison, when he states that he “will fall into a bottomless abyss” (Matar, 2017, 75) and Hisham feels powerless, unable to give his father his hand, unlike Edgar who did and saved him from his fate. We can also see the duration of the effect those lines have had on him, “the past 25 years” emphasises his feeling of lasting helplessness.

Literature as Haven

The situation of falling into death is mirrored by Hisham himself some years later, when he feels he can’t cope with life. At that point, however, literature proves to be a haven, to bring some solace in his life:

in the darkest moments [it] would come for me (...) urgently ringing, *work and survive, work and survive*(...) It never left me and yet it has never felt entirely my own. It belongs to some other presence implanted in me (Matar, 2017, p 142)

This quotation portrays an urgent call when he is considering committing suicide as well as in other critical situations in his life, suggested by “in the darkest moments”, the words from his father’s short story ring in his head, encouraging agency and providing a measure of hope. There is also the idea of literature being “implanted in” him, a long tradition of writing which is at the same time influenced by his father’s own upbringing and experiences as a hybrid

subject himself. And at the same time it creates the image of juxtaposition of the present and the past, as Hisham by virtue of these words, sees himself side by side with the young poet his father must have been at that time, and the passion for literature and writing unites them in this liminal space opened up by the lines in the short story, a space of transformation and transition which eventually “talks” Hisham out of ending with his life.

Literature as Home

Literature also provides a sense of home and belonging, which the narrator/writer lacks as a result of his family’s political situation. The concept of home, as elaborated in Hisham’s *own* writing, is ambivalent. The effect of displacement on this character prompts him to show contradictory feelings about home and the possibility of returning there:

‘Return [home] and you will face the absence or defacement of what you treasured (...) Leave and your connections to the source will be severed. You will be like a dead trunk, hard and hollow’ (Matar, 2017, p. 2)

The richness of language in this quotation exposes the conflicting nature of the concept of home for Hisham. On the one hand, there is the idea of fluidity, constant change that prevents us from finding things as we have left them, so home and our understanding of it also transform themselves along time and, as in Hisham’s case thirty-three years have gone by, he can hardly fit the memories in his mind into the new reality in Libya. His feeling is then that ‘you cannot return’, as you will ‘face the abasement of what you treasured’, in which lines it is clear that his associations with his home(land) were of love, affection, ‘treasured’ experiences.

However, he cannot return to that, because it no longer exists as it was. But then he cannot leave either because, as he puts it in the moving tree metaphor, your ‘connections to the source will be severed’. The choice of words is telling in that he compares home and our relationship to it with a plant, we being a tree or sapling that depends on that ‘source’ (home) for survival, nurture, growth and personal development as we stem from it, it is our origin, our roots, so that if we are ‘severed’, with the violence and suddenness this word connotes, and which was certainly Hisham’s experience when he was forced into exile, we become just

'a dead trunk, hard and hollow', so giving the impression of life on the outside but empty and hardening deep inside. This is the effect of being deprived of the haven home usually provides.

Following Gingsbur, home 'is a place of origin as well as a place of destination' and 'a realm from which people venture into the world and to which they generally hope to return' (Mallet, 2004, p.77), and this explains the unanswerable question, the dilemma Hisham faces after his reflections in his previous lines, a dilemma that tears him, provoking uncertainty and helplessness:

'What do you do when you cannot leave and cannot return?' (Matar, 2017, p 2)

However, at this conundrum, Hisham Matar finds home and solace in something that provides continuity and accessibility, which can be recalled at any moment or place and relates him to his past and his roots as well as to his present, and this is literature.

His father's words: "knowing a book by heart is like carrying a house inside your chest" (Matar, 2017, p.30), —which became accessible to him through his uncle after over fifteen years, defeating space and time— reach him in his moment of need. This quotation shows how literature creates, as said before, a haven, a safe place in our *chest*, the most cherished and sensitive part of our bodies, where emotions and feelings are metaphorically located in our hearts. And this *house*, with everything it entails, you carry with you wherever you go so that you have somewhere to return to and find shelter when external situations make you feel at a loss. And it also soothes his feeling of displacement, as he can resort to literature in his mind —through books, poems and stories— and find a lasting and stable *place* which keeps all his experiences, emotions and the collective memories of his own past and his people's history.

Literature as resistance

And finally, literature becomes a way to resist, oppose the oppressive and brainwashing system of Libya's government. In Hisham's own words, when talking about author-editor Ahmed al-faitouri: 'To be a Libyan artist in Libya was heroic. The country, its politics and social dogma thwart every possible artistic instinct' (Matar, 2017, p.116). Through photocopying, smuggling forbidden books and holding secret

meetings, Libyan intellectuals managed to keep the flame burning and got ready for the moment to finally strike back as stated by the aforementioned author:

'You can change the world in a day. It might take forty-two years for that day to come, but when it does...' (Matar, 2017, p.117)

It is clear from his words that Libyans had to endure this situation patiently for long, but still kept hold of cherished cultural artefacts, especially literary ones, to spread and express their ideas. It is also interesting to point out in this quotation how literature is regarded as a powerful weapon for change, as its accumulated power can change the world 'in a day'.

Already at the dawn of the twentieth century, during Mussolini's invasion of Libya and in Hisham's grandfather's lifetime, tribal peoples detained in a concentration camp in the desert united and challenged the alien oppressor through literature, in this case a poem:

...being deprived of pens and paper, he [Rajab Abuhweish] composed a thirty-stanza-long poem that he committed to memory. It was memorized by others and that way spread through the country. It (...) fortified the spirit of the resistance. (Matar, 2017, p.153)

The importance of this poem, namely *I Have No Illness But*, which had a strong impact on Hisham himself as a child, and on the whole country at the time, can be seen in the fact that it was taught at school as part of the story of Libya's struggle for independence. In addition to the effort implied in the composition, memorization and rendering, it gathers Libyan's common language, experiences and suffering to create a stronghold, an intangible wall against the foreign menace, in an attempt to reassure Libyan's identity. Following Aoude (2014):

Poetry of that time is often considered *shi'r al-tahir* (liberation poetry) (...) to express modern critique of occupation or colonization, and putting emphasis on the urge to identify and recover the mental shape of Arab roots in a modern context. (p.25)

In the light of these words: 'identify and recover the shape of Arab roots' and especially important for this analysis, literature became, for Jaballa and the rest of the prisoners in Abu Salim, a way to resist dehumanization and keep their own voices and ideas. As a response to the persistent roar of

the loudspeakers blasting out propaganda for Qaddafi during the day at top volume, the inmates found refuge in the still of the night in books:

They found out that if they chipped away the plaster, they could open a channel to the next cell, one big enough to pass a book through (...) all sorts of goods pass this way. None are more precious than books (...) the prison is a great library. (Matar, 2017, p. 171)

In this quotation it becomes clear how literature provided both personal and collective peaceful resistance to a regime which, as mentioned above, strove to destroy culture and imagination. Their shared reading experience united these prisoners against their common enemy and gave them something to long for and keep pride of whilst their surroundings debased them. And the fact that Hisham was brought up in the bosom of this politically-engaged family, their experiences intersected by literature at meetings, chats, shopping trips, imbued Hisham with a way to perceive, assimilate and express experiences through literature. It became his tool to make sense of reality, of his situation, of his country's history. By establishing parallels, quoting, retelling and creating his own characters, even fictionalizing himself, he weaves the fabric of his life and identity. By revisiting others' experiences, as encountered in literary texts and art in general, Hisham is able to compare, contrast, befriend himself with the fictional characters, and this helps him understand himself and many times prompts him to action.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the analysis above, we may conclude that the pervading presence of narrative, storytelling, poetry and other forms of literature—all—western, Libyan and Arabian, with their distinct and common elements have helped Hisham model his identity throughout his life-path. As he himself acknowledges, his father's works, which are a gift from the past, consequently connected to his roots and history, have not only been helpful in particularly painful moments, but have also determined alongside the other literary texts, his identity as a hybrid subject, a product of colonization, post-colonization and fundamentalist government, experiences which have affected him negatively but also enriched him, and provided

him, eventually, with a sense of home and belonging, though only after assembling and organizing the disparate elements in them. The discovery of the power that lies in his father's works which enabled the latter to stir his fellow countrymen during their imprisonment, has served to show how literature can become a tool to rebuke and resist the limitations to imagination and the narrowing of people's minds brought about by the regime in his country; and a means to understand oneself in the light of history.

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