Summer 5-24-2024

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AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies
International Peer Reviewed Journal ISSN: 2550-1542

AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies, Volume 8, Number 2 May 2024 Pp.183-195
. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol8no2.13

The Journey in Hisham Matar's *The Return*: Between Freedom and Confinement

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Received:02/29/2024 Accepted:05/19/2024 Published:05/24/2024

Abstract
The paper explores Hisham Matar's journey in his 2016 memoir, *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*. In the book, Matar undertakes a journey back to his homeland in Libya to uncover the truth of what happened to his father, who was targeted by the Gaddafi regime during the sixties and was subsequently imprisoned for 20 years. While the memoir primarily focuses on the journey "back" to Matar's homeland in Libya, the memoir's depiction of "home" problematizes the concept, raising questions about its limitations beyond being merely geographical. Therefore, home becomes elusive and not necessarily at all feasible altogether. Matar's journey across continents foregrounds the contestation of boundaries. The oscillation between confinement and freedom overshadows the family's journey that seems to involuntarily revolve around finding a home. This struggle is also connected to the relentless attempts to find the father before finally deciding to go back to Libya. With the ongoing struggle in searching for the father who was abducted before his imprisonment, the father himself becomes a metaphoric border. Reading the memoir, the reader senses that this overshadowing presence of the father's legacy is juxtaposed with his perpetual absence signaling both a struggle to find the father and escape him. The interplay between freedom and imprisonment becomes intricately woven with the poetics of the journey and ultimately offers a narrative that defies victimhood and foregrounds agency.

***Keywords**:* anglophone literature, exile, Hisham Matar's The Return, Libya, memoir, spatial identity, sociopolitical conditions, Hisham Matar's The Return

Cite as: Hanafy, N. (2024). The Journey in Hisham Matar's The Return: Between Freedom and Confinement. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies 8* (1):
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol8no2.13

Introduction

The significance of reading and analyzing Matar's memoir lies in the way it presents a sociohistorical context that is understudied which is the situation in Libya under the Gaddafi regime. Moreover, it connects this context, and the literary production of the part of the region, to a bigger and more transnational exilic existence of a deeper historical and geographical level. The questions raised by Matar in his memoir do not solely relate to his individual experience; they transcend to encompass a national and even global experience of fighting oppression and living in exile because of it. In addition, the memoir presents an ontological dilemma that becomes the main drive behind Matar's journey. This dilemma presents itself in Matar's constant search of his father and his hope of "return" to his homeland while simultaneously escaping and detaching from it. This juxtaposition creates a tension that makes the memoir significant not only as a sociopolitical and historical documentation of the Gaddafi regime, but it more importantly allows for a room to explore the far-reaching repercussions of this context on individual stories and the ways in which these stories are told. The paper, thus, attempts to chart Matar's movement through the various landscapes of his childhood and adult years to explore the questions of identity, space, homeland and belonging. It also attempts to analyze the multiple ways in which freedom and confinement are oftentimes psychological rather than actual, tangible facts. The paper also argues for the possible reconciliation amidst the conflict between belonging and detaching which marked Matar's journey.

In his memoir, Matar recounts the journey of his return to his homeland, Libya, in search of the truth of what happened to his father's abduction by the Gaddafi regime during the 1960s and his subsequent imprisonment. Throughout the memoir, Matar introduces the reader to the life his family led before, during, and after the father's disappearance. The memoir not only focuses on the journey back, but it also problematizes this concept of home as it ceases to become purely geographical. Home becomes relative and conditional as the book raises the question of the nature of the concept of belonging to a place and whether it is at all feasible. The book highlights questions regarding the possibility of finding a home, what designates a sense of belonging, and whether home is solely connected to borders and geography or goes beyond that. These questions are depicted through the multiple Matar family's journeys throughout the book in their attempt to find a home that resists borders and geographical alienation. Charting his moves in and out of these multiple spaces, Matar asserts the confusion and in-betweenness of the journey. Borders, both geographical and psychological, become equally paradoxical and become a determinate factor in the family's fate. This sense of negotiated borders, boundaries, and freedoms marks the family's story that constantly seems at the cusp of finding "home." The dynamics of finding and negotiating home and spaces seem to be also intertwined with the journeys taken to find the father even before the family decides to go back to Libya. With the family's constant struggle in searching for the father, his memory and legacy become a mutually confining and liberating space as well. The overshadowing presence of the father's legacy is constantly juxtaposed with his perpetual absence which signals both a struggle to find the father and a hope to escape him. Hence, the legacy of the lost father and the lifelong search become itself a boundary that has to be navigated. This ambivalence associated with home in Matar's journey prevents the memoir from being a story of

complete reconciliation as there is a constant tension of belonging and alienation. This feeling is not only prevalent in Matar as the son looking for his father and his homeland; it filters through the characters, such as the uncle, forcing them into facing this same paradox/dichotomy of being free and confined all at once. This constant shift between freedom and imprisonment (both metaphorical and literal) becomes intertwined with the poetics of the journey and ultimately offers a narrative that defies victimhood and asserts agency. In an interview following the publication of his memoir, Matar discusses the impact of his father's disappearance highlighting an overwhelming sense of entrapment:

> "[the disappearance] alters the quality of your grief, it alters the quality of your memory, because the possibility of him being alive at this exact moment, not in some abstract hereafter, but exactly at this moment in the day, under the same sun, under the same moon, is vivid and real. And it alters the quality of your minutes." (*Hisham Matar's Memoir*, 1:38-1:43)

Writing against this background of disorientation and confusion, Matar's overwhelming sense of loss, rage and ultimately acceptance is perhaps one of the many ways with which to read, appreciate and attempt to understand his harrowing account of the life lived under the shadow of the father's absence. In *The Return*, Matar outlines his 2012 journey back to Libya – his homeland – post the 2011 revolution. His return was triggered by the news of someone recognizing his father, Jaballa Matar, on the streets after the prisons were broken into and prisoners were freed following the uprisings against Gaddafi. While Matar's journey back is marked by a sense of hope of finding out what happened to his father, Matar is not looking for a resolution or what he called in one of his interviews "a closure" about his father's fate. Rather, this journey invokes a sense of a rite of passage; it is Matar's way of coming home, of attempting a reconciliation and of finding the space with which he contested.

Negotiated Spaces and Contested Homes

Throughout the book, the spaces that Matar occupies shift and are repeatedly reproduced with each encounter. Matar seems to be moving from contention with his homeland, to navigating the complexity of that relationship upon his return to eventually reaching a semblance of reconciliation. This intricate journey lends itself to the way physical and psychological spaces constantly reproduce a shift in Matar's attachments. It also invites a re-evaluation of his connection to the space(s) he occupies and navigates throughout the book. At its core, this journey is a search for a home in both its literal and metaphoric sense. Matar's memoir is not detached from his literary trajectory and oeuvre. His previous works, *In the Counrty of Men* (2006) and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) are both heavily influenced by his father's disappearance. In the former work, Matar delves into a world similar to the one in which he grew up; the world in which the father is against the regime and is haunted, along with his family, by the father's activism. In the latter work, Matar depicts a father's disappearance and a son's exile quite similarly to his own life under the Gaddafi regime. Matar, (2017) abandons the fiction for the actual and writes an intimate and cathartic book. Marking a form of "return" to his homeland, while still graveling with his sense

of alienation, Matar's memoir follows a canonical literary tradition of diasporic and exile writing that relates to identity formation, spatial belonging, and questions of what defines a home.

Problematizing the concept of special identity and belonging is vital in understanding its significance in the memoir and how Matar engages with it. In this respect, Matar's memoir shares this entanglement with the view of the body of literature related to diasporic/immigrant experiences that conceptualizes home as a space of constant struggle and potential resolution. This problematization is not solely a critical standpoint. Rather, it is a lived experience that sometimes defies definition. In "Imagined Homelands" Salman Rushdie writes of his homeland as the "Indias of the mind"; an irretrievable aspect of his experience as an immigrant/writer in exile. His attempts to remember his homeland compels him to dwell in places where he feels a sense of loss without being able to "[reclaim] precisely the thing that was lost." (Rushdie, 1992, p. 10) To further explain the complexity of the notion of homeland and return, Friedman (2004) explains that in diasporic experiences, home is a "never land of dreams…it is utopia" but is also a place "already lost in the very formation of the idea of home" (p. 192). In this sense, the intangibility of home presents an ontological dilemma. When viewed as a fleeting idea, home becomes a state of mind, an in-betweenness that does not point to a place or a people. Being diasporic offers a unique view of what home and homeland are. Exile presents an impossibility of return and another impossibility of "being" in the newfound home. Said (2012) highlights this struggle by delineating how exile and ensuing diaspora cannot, and should not, be romanticized:

> Exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible…to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as "good for us. (p. 266)

As an anglophone writer, Matar's view of home/homeland/nation-states is not only complicated but rather ontological. The question of home is particularly relevant to Matar as an anglophone writer due to the diversity of contexts he has to mediate. Maleh (2009) explains that "pinning down an author to a cultural 'home' or a single geographic location"(p. 53) is increasingly difficult in a globalized world. The variety of interpretations offered to the notions of home, nationalism, and nation-states makes it improbable to assign one geographical identity to anglophone writers. While it is crucial to highlight Matar's struggle with his sense of home and space in the memoir, the notion of space has various other manifestations in his journey. The journey takes place in more than one place and is overshadowed by the confined "space" of the father's imprisonment.

The spatial interlinks in the novel are pretexts for what Gupta and Ferguson (1997) explain as:

> The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through conceptual and political acts of reimagination, means that space and place can never be "given," and that the process of their sociopolitical construction must always be considered. (p. 17)

The way Matar reconfigures his sense of home at multiple junctures and movements signals an ability to establish those "spatial orders" that constitute his relationship to his home – be it his homeland or his exile. Additionally, the making of space within its sociopolitical context and

conditions is vital in fully comprehending the complexity of space in relation to the people inhabiting it. Discussing the complexity of social space Lefebvre (1991) argues that:

> Space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity - their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object." (p. 73)

In Matar's book, this complexity of "producing" a space is connected to Matar's agency and the agency of those around him. While Matar's journey might have essentially been about finding his father, it slowly became a journey of producing a meaning of home and a sense of belonging. The interlink between the father's disappearance and Matar's journey is underpinned by an obvious sociopolitical situation. The authoritarian regime that both the father and the son are fighting against is the core of understanding the way the memoir works. Matar (2017) discusses his politically aware childhood and adolescent years saying, "as an Arab and as a Libyan, from as far back as I remember, I have listened to conversations about when are things going to change, and these conversations are shared across so many very different and diverse people." (p. 3) These discussions – political in nature – allowed Matar to understand the gravity of the context in which he lived. Coupled with his father's anti-regime activities, Matar's memoir charts not only an immigrant experience but also an experience somehow universal in nature. With his books banned from Libya for most of his career, Matar's role as an intellectual resonates with the way Said (1994) views the intellectual "Hence as exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power." (p. xvi) In his account, Matar expresses a similar sentiment highlighting that literature/writing is "rebellious" in nature and the intellectual as someone "perched on the trees" watching and reflecting on history. (*Arab Intellectuals Series*, 2011, para. 20) However, only adopting a sociopolitical historical angle when reading Matar's memoir is a disservice. It is plausible that Matar's writing about Gaddafi, particularly in exile, can be seen as a means and the distance to be able to criticize the dictatorship. (Vericat, 2014, p. 10) Nevertheless, the memoir goes beyond being a mere political commentary on the situation. The memoir engages with a level of personal struggle and trauma of trying to "find out" what happened to the central figure of the family. According to Brant (2016), this entirely different drive "entails scrupulous honesty if it is to engage readers and persuade them of the value of looking, and the truthfulness of how the personal is political." (pp. 7-8) In addition, Matar's act of writing is not seen merely as an act of documenting – a sentiment he shares with many other writers. In an interview with the Libyan Tribune, Matar eloquently states that the act of writing is "a space of service, where you're making yourself as available as possible for a thing that has no guarantees. It's an act of devotion." (Matar, 2017) The uncertainty of the act of writing is juxtaposed with the "certainty" assumed of historical documentation. Matar asserts the sense of intimacy and privacy that this memoir provides which contradicts his nature as he explains "I'm a private person and I don't talk about these things. A lot of my close friends didn't know most of this stuff, so it was strange to write about it in a very open way, and I felt very exposed." (Matar, 2017) This "exposure" is crucial in understanding Matar's journey. While most of the discussion surrounding

the book focuses on it being a criticism to the Libyan regime in the wake of the Arab Spring, Matar's writing is not simply a political commentary. In fact, in an interview with Jadaliyya in 2011, Matar insisted that the "ideal reader" of his books "arrives at the book with their private passions; with their memories, psychology, and emotions." (para. 7) The "journey" presented in this book is a personal one, oscillating between hope and despair, confinement and freedom, and ultimately a semblance of reconciliation.

The Return Between Freedom and Confinement

In Matar's memoir, space is a medium for memory, negotiating one's identity, and admitting defeat. Matar's journey engulfs several characters in this whirlwind of events, including the family's life before, during, and after the father's disappearance. There is the son, Matar, whose father's disappearance prompts him on a quest that leads him to occupy various physical and psychological spaces. There are the uncles who were imprisoned with Matar's father and who live to relate the impact of that imprisonment on their lives and psyche. There is the cousin whose fight against dictatorship is triggered by the imprisonment of his father and uncles and who takes his fight around the country until he is eventually killed. Much like the novels published before the memoir, Matar's *The Return* "attempts to recover or redeem what has been lost through state violence." (Micklethwait, 2013, p. 173) In doing so, Matar excavates his trauma and history with oppression reflected in his homeland and triggered by his return. Negotiating his place in his homeland, the way he wishes to engage with the new post-Gaddafi reality, and his struggle with his father's unknown destiny articulate the complexity of his journey.

The first unpacking of the complexity of "space" in Matar's journey starts at the onset of the book. While retrospectively contemplating his journey around the world in search of a "home," he becomes skeptical of a return to Libya and even deems it nearly impossible. This skepticism turns into an indirect and subtle decision to revoke this return – and possibly his identity - and assume home elsewhere: "I would imagine a new acquaintance asking me, perhaps at a dinner party, or in a café, or in changing-rooms after a long swim, that old tiresome question "Where are you from?" and I, unfazed and free from the usual agitation, would casually reply, "New York" (Matar, 2017, p. 3). The self-effacing act of "being from New York" could indicate a seamless and even casual sense of assimilation. Nonetheless, this proves difficult as he soon explains that while he was determined to belong to New York as his chosen home per se, he would still "[take] pleasure from the fact that such a statement would be both true and false, like a magic trick" (Matar, 2017, p. 10). This "magic trick" and the oscillation between being and not being from New York exemplifies the way Matar's notion of home is ontologically problematic.

Nevertheless, the onset of Matar's life journey is both uncertain and hopeful. The time in which Matar was conceived is significant as it occurred between his father's initial arrest right after Gaddafi's ascend to power and his then immediate release and appointment as a diplomat (Matar, 2017, p.46). Following his father's resignation, the family relocated back to Libya where Matar spent his early childhood, in Tripoli then El-Medina el-Seyahiya. The city is central to the story in the way it resembles a place where the parents attempted to shield the children from the turmoil taking over the country.

Matar vividly illustrates the way the sea was one of the main "spaces/sites" of escapism and freedom within a growingly hostile space in post-Gaddafi Libya. Significantly, his description of the sea and swimming is rather liberating: "my idea of swimming then was to front crawl until I could no longer see land. I would float in the deep waters and then spin myself around until I lost direction" (Matar, 2017, p. 37). The sea is soon connected to the memory of his father and this, in turn, becomes reminiscent of a past that ushered in a sense of alienation: "I remembered, more vividly than ever before, that it was my father who had taught me how to swim: holding me up, one open hand against my belly, saying, "That's it." I never feared the sea until he was gone" (Matar, 2017, p. 37).

As a child, this sense of freedom connected to being in his home country is juxtaposed with the slow recognition of exile as a form of imprisonment once the family quickly relocates to Cairo for his father's security. Matar explains: "Once [father] joined us in Cairo, we moved to a bigger and better flat. It was there that I understood that we were not going back, that I had been tricked. I demanded to be returned to my country" (Matar, 2017, p. 40). He further stressed his homesickness saying that "for months after we left Libya, when I was a child, I used to lie staring at the ceiling, imagining my return. I picture how I would kiss the ground" (Matar, 2017, p. 39). At this stage, Matar's feelings towards his homeland pertain to the relationship between nationalism and exile. Said (2012) argues that nationalism is a byproduct of exile. While exile is a state of fragmented existence, nationalism offers a sense of wholeness: "Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people." (Said, 2012, p. 270) Nevertheless, attempting to reconstruct a form of belonging to a homeland that does not offer a triumphant narrative is "virtually unbearable" (Sais, 2012, p. 270). Therefore, returning to Libya after being in exile, Matar cannot hide a sense of detachment from his homeland echoed in the description he gives of Benghazi right after he landed in Libya: "The deeper we drove into Benghazi, the more material the world became. We went to Marwan's [his cousin] house, where we found a large family gathering waiting for us. After lunch, I slipped away on a walk. I felt strong and oddly detached, separate" (p. 43). Nonetheless, this feeling of being detached and alienated from the place is temporarily suspended once he is reunited with his family in yet another location – Ajdabiya – where he meets his uncle who was also imprisoned with his father:

> When I embraced him, I held on to his bony frame for a long while. Not since my father's disappearance had I felt closer to him. My aunts have his eyes. All they wanted was to look at me, and all I wanted was to look at them. We sat next to one another and held hands. My father had beautiful hands like theirs, the skin cool and soft. (Matar, 2017, p. 51)

The reunion with his uncle charts another way in which space/home is given yet another dimension in Matar's journey. Matar's sense of belonging found in embracing his uncles pertains to what Lefebvre designates as social spaces "[interpenetrating] one another" and "[superimposing] themselves upon one another" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 86). Meeting his uncle, Matar restores part of his own past with his father and, more importantly, restores a glimpse of the sense of belonging he

desperately wanted to feel towards his homeland. It combines the social space where Matar feels alienated and lost to a semblance of a father/a homeland. Nevertheless, reuniting with his family seems to be oscillating between fragmentation and unity. Whether in Libya, Egypt, or abroad, it seems that he is constantly at the cusp of being liberated from exile and into a homeland yet still never gets there. For example, in Cairo, the family does in fact experience perhaps a semblance of a homeland in Matar's journey despite of the father's disappearance happened in Cairo. In Cairo, Matar's memories are those of family dinners, his mother's particular taste in food and cooking, and an overall sense of security. Nonetheless, it is precisely in this place that the family loses home, again, and faces the aftermath of the father's incarceration. The Cairo time in Matar's life further reinforces the fact that spaces are constantly produced and reproduced within various contexts and for different reasons. In her article "Bodies on the Move", Friedman (2004) contends that "home is now here and nowhere at the same time…Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives" (p. 195). The relativity of home offers Matar and his family intervals of reconciliation with the realities of their forced mobility and exile. However, it does not resolve the dilemma of the journey.

While physical places are significant in Matar's journey, metaphoric spaces are also equally important. While Matar recuperates his sense and memory of home through the social space of being with his family, the reality and purpose of his return are not lost on him. Despite the family reunion and the sense of recognition and initial reassimilation, he felt when he met his uncle, the reality of the "confinement" as embodied in the father's absence still casts a shadow on the life and memory of the family. The father's imprisonment is significant not only in Matar's memory but also in the memory of his uncles, who were also arrested and imprisoned. Nevertheless, in the case of Uncle Mahmoud, the experience had an additional dimension that was surprisingly liberating. During one conversation, Uncle Mahmoud recalls one significant incident during the early stages of this confinement experience. He explains how, during those early days of imprisonment, he could not recognize his brother's voice (Matar's father) reading poetry in the silence of the night in a cell near his. Matar's bewilderment is evident as he exclaims: "I could not understand why Uncle Mahmoud and the others were unable to make out the voice of a man they knew so well" (p. 58). While imprisonment is, in itself, the ultimate stage of detachment in Matar's journey, Uncle Mahmoud's story presents a variation of this experience. There is a twofold significance of Uncle Mahmoud's experience. On the one hand, imprisonment has its effect and this could have easily led to the confusion in not recognizing the brother's voice. On the other hand, and more significantly, there is a sense of liberation in subconsciously not acknowledging the imprisonment of the brother.

This experience of imprisonment reflects a Foucauldian biopower; the state's control over the lives – and deaths – of its citizens which makes it one of the key aspects of Matar's problematic journey home. It also implies a Foucauldian panopticon-like situation and indicates a much bigger "psychological" escapism for both the father and the uncle. Foucault (1977), explains that the panopticon rearranges the setting in the prison from the "dungeon" scenario to one where "visibility is a trap" (p. 200). While in Foucault's book, the panopticon preserves the right to see to the power controlling the prison, for Matar, it is the father who, in a way, controls this visibility.

Consequently, this panopticon-like situation highlights the central sentiment of the memoir: freedom and confinement as co-existing in a given context. In this way, Matar's father and uncle are both confined and are both free simultaneously. Matar significantly elucidates this as he highlights how the father wanted to be known through his voice only – which is why he did not directly address his brother by name - which would reassure him that "he was who he had been" (p. 53). In this way, the father was "free" by not being recognized as a prisoner. On the other hand, for Uncle Mahmoud, refusing to recognize his brother's voice was rebelling against the reality of his brother's incarceration – and by extension his own. Corresponding to this notion of "producing" the space we occupy; Lefebvre (1991) explains that "each living body is a space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces its own space" (p. 170). This production of space is the leeway for the father and his brother to rebel against the spatial condition they are in and construct a new spatial experience altogether. Both the father's refusal to make himself known and the brother's inability to know the voice are instrumental in what Lefebvre explains as the move from the abstract to the concrete – the path from the mental to the social (p. 171). The spatial alienation here stands in opposition to the sense of liberation and agency. These notions are in constant vacillation throughout the entire memoir.

Homeland and Belonging

Butler (2004) discusses the nature of mourning and grief in the face of a grave tragedy. She explains the way grief is misunderstood as a private matter and contends that mourning "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications" (p. 22). For Matar, his grief does not lend itself solely to his father's disappearance. He shares the sentiment, and its circumstances, with multiple people both on a personal and a public level. In this sense, the mapping of grief in Matar's journey starts with his return to his homeland which is twofold in its purpose and effect. While this return is vital in Matar's search for his father, it is more importantly crucial in his process of dealing with his family's dilemma. In going back to his homeland, he extends his private loss to the more public sphere – i.e. the family and the society in Libya – and allows his dilemma of freedom and confinement to materialize. Butler also elaborates that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever" (Matar, 2017, p. 21). In that sense, the nature of grief in Matar's journey is constantly going from the turbulent space of confusion and anger towards a liminal space of mourning and finally acceptance.

Accordingly, despite the sense of family and initial attempts to reassimilate, Matar's sense of homeland is tumultuous. There is an alternation between the sense of community found in family and friends, and the sense of a detachment from the country that has thus far rejected him and his father. On the one hand, Matar's return is an attempt not only at finding the father, but also at re-engaging with a country he left thirty-three years ago. Therefore, this sense of detachment is integral to his experience. On the other hand, his return signals the "homecoming" to the place where his initial journey started. His return is a return to the starting point that overshadowed his

entire life. While there is a sense of detachment from belonging to Libya as a homeland, there is a sense of "home" that is private.

Matar's encounters in Libya are centralized around questioning his sense of belonging. For instance, upon his arrival to Libya, he is told that his books have been banned for years in the country and are available through illegal distribution. As Matar continues meeting other family members in Libya, he is eventually subdued by a sense of alienation similar to what he felt at the beginning: "At times I was experiencing a kind of a distance-sickness, a state in which not only the ground was unsteady but also time and space. The only other individuals I met who seemed afflicted by a similar condition were ex-prisoners" (Matar, 2017, p. 118). The recalling of a prison experience while meeting his family both foregrounds his alienation and heightens the overall sense of confinement of the journey. Moreover, the constant search for his father and the knowledge he now had about the reality of the situation of his father's incarceration led to a feeling of disorientation and uncertainty. In addition, returning to the place of his initial home and memories was disorienting and even frightening and threatened his entire sense of self. As Matar vividly explains:

> I realize now that my walks, whether taken to pass the time or to better acquaint myself with a foreign city or conducted in a hurry…all took place under the vague suspicion that I might somehow come upon myself, that is to say, that other self who lives in harmony with his surroundings, who exists, like a chapter in a book, in the right place, not torn out and left to make sense on its own. All the tools I had to connect with my country belonged to the past. (Matar, 2017, p. 119)

The "freedom" of being allowed to belong to his homeland had within its folds its sense of confinement. This freedom plays against his sense of alienation, rage, and cynicism. Said (2012) illustrates this sense of confusion by saying: "No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who feel their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood" (p. 276). This eccentricity is even more pressing when Matar's sense of alienation is juxtaposed with the people he meets in Libya. While he finds it hard to recognize everyone, those he meets seem to be in a harmonious and "linear" progress which seamlessly connects them to that initial point of departure to which he felt detached. To further illustrate this sense of "orphanhood", Matar quotes Jean Rhys: "I would never be part of anything. I would never really belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong, and failing. Always something would go wrong. I am a stranger and I always will be, and after all I didn't really care." (as cited in Matar, 2017, p. 118).

There seems to be a constant fluctuation between Matar's desire to go through the change and linear progress that the journey dictates and the impossibility of escaping the confinements of his reality. Eventually, Matar's sense of confinement reaches a moment of identification with his imprisoned father, in a place that is equally uncertain and ambiguous: "When Qaddafi took my father, he placed me in a space not much bigger than the cell Father was in" (Matar, 2017, p. 246). This limbo echoes Edward Said's exile and the space existing between "us" and the "outsiders" which renders the subjects "banished." This is the space that the refugees and displaced usually occupy. (Matar, 2017, p.177) Matar occupies this space involuntarily even as he plans for a future

where he "willingly" leaves his homeland behind. However, this sentiment is overridden by existing in this space where he is present, and his father is absent, which dictates a course of action that initiates his entire journey. In one elaborate passage, he describes the psychological and emotional toll of this separation:

> To be a man is to be part of this chain of gratitude and remembering…With every passing day the father journeys further into his night, deeper into the fog, leaving behind remnants of himself and the monumental yet obvious fact, at once frustrating and merciful—for how else the son is to continue living if he must not also forget—that no matter how hard we try we can never entirely know our fathers. (Matar, 2017, p. 57)

Interestingly enough, Matar's relationship with his father was, at once, the only way of relating to his homeland. The traumatic experience of imprisonment and the ensuing family alienation casts its shadow on Matar's only existing sense of purpose relating to his homeland. By acknowledging that he "can never entirely know" his father, he further problematizes his sense of confinement and detachment.

Another central character in Matar's memoir is his cousin, Izzo. Izzo's presence in Matar's memoir significantly highlights the far-reaching impact of the family's prison experience beyond the actual physical/spatial confinement of prison. Following his father's imprisonment, Izzo joins the rebels' forces in their fight against the Gaddafi regime. He is eventually killed along with his best friend in arms, Marwan. Significantly, Izzo's stories present another facet of confinement and freedom. A form of parallelism can be found between Izzo's story and his father's imprisonment. Izzo's last words were: "that he wanted to be buried beside Marwan" (Matar, 2017, p. 102). A burial is a physical site of confinement which somehow echoes the prison where Matar's father was kept. Much like the father's rebellion against being recognized as a prisoner, Izzo's final words – along with his life trajectory as a rebel against oppression – emphasize the element of freedom in the journey. Izzo's story and destiny flips the script of Foucault's "Biopower" which entails that power would no longer be merely concerned with "legal subjects" or individuals with the authority over their death. Rather, it extends its power to "taking charge of life" more than death granting power access "even to the body" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 142-143)

In this sense, Izzo's rebellion and eventual death stand in direct defiance of this biopower and is a liberating agent in the book. This, however, still foregrounds the way the prison experience established a form of control over the Matar family outside of prison. It is in this in-betweenness, in the space of freedom and confinement, that the journey becomes significant. This parallelism between Izzo's life and the imprisonment of his father and uncle reflects the way freedom and confinement are intricately intertwined producing a more complex reality of home and belonging.

Toward the end of the memoir Matar narrates his visit to his cousin's room where a semblance of freedom and belonging is implied. Lying in his cousin's bed and feeling the presence of a family member who lost his life trying to repel the confinement of both their fathers' imprisonment represents a final stage in Matar's newfound sense of peace towards his home country. This peace, albeit conflicting, is foregrounded through the father's disappearance with Matar's initial reason for the return/ journey seeming to be pushed to the background towards the end of the book.

Existing in the space of liminal belonging, he eventually admits that the past is not a site of mere contention but rather an understanding and, at one point, acceptance:

> Twelve years on from when I lost my father, I found myself standing at the edge of the Pont d'Arcole in Paris, staring into the green rushing waters below. The novel I was writing was not going well. I felt overwhelmed by the desire to be swept away. I wanted to descend into the depths and be lost forever, taken. Until I heard the bell toll: *work and survive*. (Matar, 2017, p. 246).

The possibility of reconciliation, though doubtful in the end, is not altogether lost. Turning the urge to be "swept away" to a persistent "work and survive" implies a sense of acceptance. The journey does not end with finding the father, nor does it end with a particular tangible sense of victory. Nevertheless, the journey was not necessarily about resolution per se. It was about finding any possible way back to that memory and that homeland.

Conclusion

Reading Hisham Matar's *The Return* offers a unique examination of the notions of home, homeland and spatial experience. While the article attempted to chart the way Matar, and other characters from his journey, move through the various spaces without and outside his homeland, the significance of his journey goes well beyond the mere geographical move. The confinement and freedom of Matar's journey present a dilemma. The complexities of his return and the challenges presented in his proximity to his father's fate alternate in his journey to highlight the problematic nature of separation, alienation, and possible return. Even though the father's fate remains unknown till the end of the memoir, it is perhaps Matar's sense of belonging that was meant to be found along the journey. Confinement and freedom interlink in Matar's journey, offering a unique reality of both belonging and detachment.

Funding
This research is not funded.
Acknowledgments
Not applicable.
Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Authenticity
This manuscript is an original work
AI and AI-assisted technologies were not used.

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