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Psychosomatic Angst in Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*

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Abstract:

Matar tries to present the reality of the Arab world where the intellectuals and writers leave the country as self imposed exile in order to seek freedom, through the life of the Protagonist Nuri in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*. People with psychosomatic angst experience recurring flash backs, avoidance, numbing of memories of the events that continue long after the occurrence of traumatic event. This paper focuses on the ordeals faced by the characters that make them feel alienated from the mainstream and the struggle of the inner self to overcome the ordeals by accepting their identity and trying to reunite with the rest of the society.

Keywords: Exile, Ordeals, Depression.

Hisham Matar is a Libyan writer. He was born in New York City. He spent his childhood in America with his Libyan parents while his father was working for the Libyan delegation to the United Nations. When he was three years old, his family went back to Tripoli, Libya, where he spent his early childhood. Due to political persecutions by the Gaddafi regime, in 1979 his father was accused of being a reactionary to the Libyan revolutionary regime and was forced to flee the country with his family. They lived in exile in Egypt where Matar completed his schooling in Cairo. In 1986, Matar moved to London where he continued his studies and received a degree in architecture. Matar's second novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2001) contains a character whose father is taken away by the authorities, while Matar acknowledges the relation to his own father's disappearance. He has stated that the novel is not autobiographical.

Arab literature deconstructs the dogmas of the governing sector and defuses the elitist bias. Matar has given his voice in literary forms against social disparities. He believes that the suppressed should not stagger in the cesspool. Instead they should reconstruct themselves, restore their health mentally and emotionally. Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" deconstructs the centre-margin binary. Parry points out that, "subaltern voice can never be totally suppressed" (35). In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Matar narrates from the perspective of a sensitive child. Nuri el-Alfi, the central character is fourteen when the novel begins in 1972. Nuri is a young boy when his mother dies. Nuri meets Mona at Magda Marina, where he spends his holidays. The young Nuri falls in love with Mona, but his father remarries Mona by seeing his interest in her. Nuri feels thwarted at this moment. He is sent to Daleswick, English Boarding school for his studies, which makes him feel an exile. By this

time Nuri's father Kamal Pasha, the ex-minister of Cairo government is kidnapped from Geneva. The novel revolves around the overwhelming subject of his lost father. The world that is shared by Nuri and his stepmother is shattered by this event and they begin to realize how little they really knew about the man they loved. He completes his education, earns a Doctorate and comes back to Cairo apartment and begins his new life, waiting for his father's comeback.

The theme of exile has engaged the mind's eye of many writers in the itinerary of literary history. The argument might have aroused in the wits of the writers due to diverse reasons like their own individual experiences having left their native realm for political reasons, or because of their estrangement with their social order which consciously makes them to choose elsewhere. Historical circumstances dictate certain nation's leading intellectuals and writers to leave in order to seek personal as well as artistic freedom.

Hisham Matar is both a visionary and a pragmatist. Writing as a form of altercation, his *Anatomy of a Disappearance* grapples with a harrowing family history and probes the mysteries of father-son relationships. The suffering of Matar's family at the hands of Gaddafi is of relevance to his novel. Matar's father Jaballah Matar is a diplomat in New York. After his father fell out with the regime, the family left Libya in 1979 and moved to Cairo. In 1990, Matar's father disappeared in Cairo through conspiracy between the Egyptian and Libyan security services. He is clandestinely taken back to Libya and put into prison and twenty one years of his fate is unknown. The disappearing of opponents is a speciality of Gaddafi regime. The novel explores the impact of the disappearance on the son, and probes the mysteries of the father son relationships. Matar in his novel expresses the pluralistic hybrid identities of the people. The oppressive system exercise physical and psychological violence against citizens, including those on the periphery in order to exert nationalist dominion. The novel witnesses the political catastrophe caused by Gaddafi's xenophobic regime and the impact of the catastrophe through the protagonist. The haunting and traumatizing socio political scenario has a great impact on the life of the people. Matar brings out the ideologies and the mental and emotional discrepancies through his protagonist Nuri.

Nuri faces various psychosomatic disorders such as anxiety, depression and alienation caused by his mother's sudden passing and his father's disappearance. He suffers due to the infatuation that he develops towards his step mother Mona. His struggles for survival, in spite of his isolated life filled with mental agonies make him a gentle character. The minor characters Pasha, Beatrice, Mona too experience suffering due to the events that take place in their lives, which lead to psychological disorders. Matar's novels, "journeys into the horrific trials and tribulations of political prisoners in the Arab world and the physical and psychological impact of humiliation, torture and disappearance or death on their lives and families"(Sakar 94). Nuri flies back to London to see Mona, soon after he meets Beatrice Benameur, a Swiss woman who is with his father Pasha, at the time of his kidnap. Mona considers Beatrice as a whore. But Nuri tells her that they are lovers for a long time. Pasha is also in love with her and they have been together for years. When he talks pompously of Beatrice, Mona talks badly that she may be ready to be a whore even for Nuri. But Nuri

respects Beatrice because she is the woman whom his father loved last. Nuri says, “He clearly loved her. He was good to her. She knew him better than we did” (224). Mona again doubts the character of Pasha and says Nuri may be the son of the maid Naima, and the colour of his skin makes it clear. Nuri gets irritated and replies that he looks like his great grandfather and that’s why he is darker. Mona is unable to accept her husband’s relationship with Beatrice and she being left alone. Mona to escape from loneliness decides to live together with her friend Toby after her husband Pasha’s disappearance. Nuri leaves to his School at Daleswick after his summer holidays. Mona too leaves Cairo and comes to London. She tells Nuri that she is staying with one of her University friends. Nuri visits the apartment at Little Venice, where she stays. She welcomes him with some uneasiness. She cannot hide her feelings for Toby, and Nuri understands that there is some other man staying there along with her. When Toby comes out of the room, she introduces him to Nuri. Toby is eager to talk to Nuri, but Mona stops him. Nuri does not like to stay there that night. So he leaves the place and goes to a hotel, even though he does not have enough money. Mona treats Toby as how she did for Pasha in past. Toby has a place like her father in her heart.

Anxiety disorder is, “the response to some unrecognized factor either in the environment or in the self and may be evoked either by changes in the environment or by the stirrings of unconscious, repressed forces in the self” (Rycroft 8). The excessive feeling of anxiety and fear makes a person to worry about future. Nuri, endures anxiety disorder, since his father Kamal Pasha’s abduction. Nuri is sent to English boarding school at Daleswick for his studies. He has a friend named Alexei, who is his roommate but he is unable to share the loss of his father. Nuri gets furious when his lawyer Charlie Hass speaks about his father in past tense, “There are times when my father’s absence is as heavy as a child sitting on my chest” (1). Every moment his heart is filled with the fear, thinking about his father. Nuri at his school does not want others to know about his father’s kidnap. Mona, Nuri’s step mother comes to Daleswick School to visit the headmaster and his other masters. She informs them about Nuri’s father’s disappearance and becomes his legal guardian. Nuri finds Mona talking to the headmaster and fears if she would reveal the truth. He fears of being ridiculed and wants it to be his secret, that his father is kidnapped when he is with his mistress Benameur, a Swiss woman. Likewise Pasha’s relationship with his beloved is kept hidden by his lawyer Charlie Hass. He fails to help Nuri and Mona to know about her during Pasha’s kidnap. The police officer, Inspector Martin Durand neglects to help Mona. Hass makes arrangement to meet Beatrice in her apartment at Rue Monnier. But the attempt ends in failure. Hass tells them that she has left the city as she feels very frightened.

Post traumatic stress disorder is a condition that can develop following a terrifying event. It involves sign of recurring flashback or avoidance of memories of the event to which a person is exposed. The haunting memories traumatize, “ people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. 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 37).Nuri experiences this post traumatic stress disorder.

Nuri is often interrupted by the memories of his mother after her death. Nothing in the world can fill the emptiness in him. He recalls how he enjoyed being with her and worries how she grows weaker and thinner day by day. He also senses her silence, her aspirin, sleeping pills and pain killers. He expresses his grief about the death of his mother, whom he loses at ten, at Magda Marina to Mona before she becomes his step mother. Similarly Nuri often recalls the event of his father's abduction and thought about his father's private life, his thoughts, secrets and enemies. He is much disturbed by the loss, since his father's disappearance. Lee says "The father's hidden activities, urgent and dangerous . . . seem obscured and mysterious, more dream-like, less close up" (37).

Adjustment disorder occurs when a person is unable to adjust or cope with certain circumstances in his life. Kamal Pasha undergoes adjustment disorder. Kamal Pasha, due to his relationship with Beatrice Benameur, fails to adjust his wife. They speak less to each other. They communicate few words for the goodness of their son. When Pasha disappears, Naima, the maid tells Nuri that his father often gets disappear and vanish for days, so that his mother would become sick with worry. But he will be back home and act as if nothing has happened.

Political conflict leads to Pasha's abduction and disappearance. Pasha is an ex-minister of Cairo government. He has been one of the king's closest advisers. When the king is shot to death, Pasha is the government minister, so to be free from problems, he flies to France. Few years later he comes to Cairo. Nuri hardly knows about his father's job. But in books which Nuri read, his father is described as "an aristocrat who after the revolution moved 'gradually, but the radical effect', to the left" (25). Pasha knows that he will be killed or kidnapped. After the event when Nuri opens the safe, he found a note written, "The will, effective in the event of death or disappearance" (147). Pasha's political influence makes way for his abduction which results in conflict.

Nuri suffers from depression because of his mother's death. He realizes that after his mother's death, his father hardly speaks about his mother. Rycroft refers depression as "an emotion in low spirits. It is also a state of low, gloomy and disgusting feeling" (13). In the same way depression makes Mona to perform against moral doctrines. Mona, after her husband's disappearance has an estranged feeling which makes her to have wrong relationship with Nuri. One night to get relief from her awful thoughts about her vanished husband, she takes brandy, plays cards, switch on the music, dances with Nuri, listens to his stories and finally spends the night with him. Though Nuri feels guilty, he wants to make her happy and feel ease from her dreadful thoughts.

Pasha becomes a powerless person at the time of his kidnap. Nuri meets Beatrice Benameur, his father's beloved, who was with him at the time of his kidnap, few years after his disappearance. She explains him how he is kidnapped. On that particular night, Pasha is already awake, sits on his bed and thinks about something seriously as he waits for somebody to come. Suddenly a couple enter the room. The man talks to Pasha in Arabic. Pasha dresses up and they both hold him by each arm and walk out. When Beatrice starts to shout, the

woman pulls out a gun with silencer. Pasha does not take his eyes off from Beatrice. Thus at the time of his kidnap Pasha seems to be powerless. Nuri's waiting for his disappeared father to come seems to be meaningless. When Beatrice asked Nuri, what he thought has happened to his father, he does not know how to answer. But Matar ends up the novel with hope which seems to be meaningless. Nuri keeps his father's suits and rain coat ready for his father to wear, when he comes back. Nuri faces obsessive compulsive disorder, when he knows about his father's kidnap. He has constant thoughts of fear about his lost father. Nuri has lot of questions in his mind. He feels guilty that he has lost him and at not knowing how to find him. Nuri fears, "whether he would be counted amongst the living or the dead – was like a mask that suffocated me" (108).

The post colonial literary theory, "erode the colonialist ideology by which that past has been devalued" (Barry 192). According to Thiongo resistance is "decolonizing the mind" (02). Nuri feels proud when he listens to people who spoke well about his father even though he feels depressed at his father's dejection. Nuri learns from Taleb, his father's friend that his father has loved him so much. Taleb also tells him that Pasha has a bigger smile when Nuri is born and in his letters he always mentioned about every test his son passed and every new sport his son started. Nuri has a feeling that he is a disappointment for his father. Nuri's eyes fill with tears when Taleb says, "There was nothing you could do wrong. When you got accepted at that famous English boarding school, he called me. He was so proud" (143). Nuri feels proud about his father, when he meets Beatrice. She makes him to know how deeply his father loved him. She tells that, "He always punished himself, wishing he were a better father. He used to say he loved you so much he froze around you" (222).

Alexie and Taleb use exaggeration as a device to escape from their anxieties. Pasha's friend, Taleb after his father's disappearance telephones nearly every day while Nuri is at Cairo. He addresses Nuri as young Pasha. He sounds cheerful. He speaks about the weather or some film he has seen the evening before. Taleb worries about Nuri and feels somehow responsible for what has happened to Nuri's father. Alexie is presented as an exaggerating character to come out of his worries. At Daleswick School, Nuri's only companion is his roommate Alexei. Nuri feels that Alexei's world is new to him. Alexei has a tendency to boast when he talks, Nuri used to watch him like a film. When Alexei's father gets a job in Dusseldorf he decides to shift his room. Alexei solicits Nuri not to say anything if he notices something unusual about his mother. His mother comes balancing on a cane. She does not speak when Nuri shakes her hands. Nuri finds out that she has completely lost her voice. He realizes the fact that Alexei's exaggeration is to hide his worries.

Caruth believes that the victims need to express the traumatic memories to another person. It reveals a serious desire to reconcile them to his or her consciousness. She points out victims' consciousness:

The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it. And this suggests that what returns in flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been

obstructed by a later repression, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness. (152)

Nuri has constant thoughts about his maid being sent out of their apartment after his father's disappearance. When he leaves Cairo to his school for his education, Naima hugs and requests him not to forget her. Nuri loves her so much because she is the person who brings him up from his child hood. At school Nuri calls Mona and enquires about the settlement she has done for Naima. Mona replies that she has paid her salary, equivalent for three months. Taleb, Nuri's father's friend gives him Naima's phone number and compels him to call her. When Nuri speaks to her, she cries out that she misses him and promises him that she will not cry next time when he calls her. After completing his studies he becomes a learned scholar. He comes back to the Cairo apartment facing the river, Nile. He invites Naima back again for work. She feels happy in cooking and taking care of the young Pasha. Matar captures the terror of Gaddafi regime by the portrayal of the ex minister's kidnap and disappearance and also the emotional trauma experienced by the protagonist Nuri due to the losses, tyranny and exile. However, every character makes attempt to come out of their disorders through their inner strength and manage to survive with hope

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