

## A Libyan Novel in Metropolis: *In the Country of Men*

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### Abstract

*Orientalism, which played a key role in the exploitation of resources owned by the Eastern societies, was born mostly at the hands of the people with Western origins and carried on by them for a long time. It is possible to say that people with Western origins remained at bay and stopped feeding Orientalism openly after the second half of the twentieth century, and especially after the criticisms of Edward Said. It seems that the emerging vacuum is filled by the natives who are fluent in Western languages. In this new phenomenon called as New-Orientalism, the native informant puts his so-called inside knowledge on the Western market in the form of travel writing, memoir, journalistic reporting, and social commentary with the mixture of prejudices created by old Orientalism. In this article, these subjects have been treated more comprehensively and the book *In the Country of Men* by the Libyan author Hisham Matar has been analyzed in their context.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism, New-Orientalism, native informant, Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men*.

### Metropolde Bir Libya Romanı: Erkekler Ülkesinde

#### Özet

Doğu toplumlarının sahip oldukları zenginliklerin sistematik bir şekilde sömürülmesinde kullanılan Şarkiyatçılık disiplini genellikle batılı oldukları söylenebilecek kimseler tarafından icat edilmiş ve yine batılılar tarafından sömürü işleminin uzun yıllar devam etmesini sağlamak için kullanılmıştır. Fakat yirminci yüzyılın ikinci yarısından itibaren ve özellikle Edward Said'in şarkiyatçılığa yaptığı eleştirilerle birlikte bu disiplini besleyen batılıların bu disiplin içindeki etkinliklerini azalttıklarını ve kendilerini kenara çektikleri söylenebilir. Onların çekilmesiyle ortaya çıkan boşluğun ise batı dillerinde beceri sahibi doğulular tarafından doldurulduğu gözlemlenebilir. Yeni-şarkiyatçılık olarak isimlendirilen bu yeni olguyla birlikte, doğulu yerel muhabirler güya içeriden edindikleri bilgileri seyahat yazıları, anı, köşe yazısı veya sosyal analiz gibi formlar içerisinde eski şarkiyatçılığın yarattığı önyargularla da karıştırarak batı pazarlarında piyasaya sürmektedirler. Bu

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*makalede bu konular biraz daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde ele alınmış ve Libyalı yazar Hişam Matar'ın Erkekler Ülkesinde isimli romanı bu konular bağlamında incelenmiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Şarkiyatçılık, yeni-şarkiyatçılık, yerel muhbir, Hişam Matar, Erkekler Ülkesinde.

## Introduction

The subject of this paper is the first book of Hisham Matar: *In the Country of Men*. The paper will try to analyze this book by treating it as another example of new-orientalism. It will be argued in the paper that despite its poetic and sentimental narration of a childhood in one of the most brutal dictatorships of the Middle East, the book can be read as a literary contribution to a “massive and calculatedly aggressive attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women’s rights”<sup>1</sup> in order to justify the modern empire’s mission “to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy”<sup>2</sup> to these societies. To support the argument, the paper will resort to the helps of Edward Said and two Iranian scholars of comparative literature; Hamid Dabashi from Columbia University and Fatemeh Keshavarz from University of Washington.

## Orientalism, New-Orientalism, and Oil Politics

Edward Said opens his book, *Orientalism*, with a quote from Karl Marx, “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” Here, the pronoun *they* refers to the Orientals, to the people who, in a way imagined and created by the Europeans, are the inhabitants of the East and alien to everything Occidental, which should be read as European, both geographically and culturally. The classification of the people of the world as the Oriental and Occidental helped the Occidentals to rule, control, and dominate the Orientals. Edward Said argues that the disciplines of Orientalism were born as the result of the desire for ruling, control, and domination of the East. The aim of his book is to show the relation between these disciplines of knowledge and imperial power. To do that, Said employs the notion of discourse clarified by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). According to Said,

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. xix.

<sup>2</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. xxi.

unless Orientalism is analyzed as a discourse, it is impossible to understand how the European powers became capable of managing the Orient.

The knowledge produced by the discipline of Orientalism preaches the Occidentals that they are not capable of anything, having said that there is no order and law in their societies if what they have as groups can be called as societies. The powerful ones in their world, which are almost always represented by men, are the prototypes of brutality and oppression towards the subjects of their power, which are mostly women and children. Simple as it is for them, the rule is the rule of jungle. Because of this knowledge the Occidentals acquired the feeling of the virtuous behavior and utilized every tool to civilize the Orientals. By the end of the day, the Occidental returned his home happily and had his sleep unbroken. But for the other the story ended differently. By the end of the day he returned his home, if he had one, conquered, plundered, subjugated, and humiliated.<sup>3</sup>

The second story is true for most of the people of Middle East, a land without its resources, the world we know cannot move on one single day. These resources are so vital for the operation of the world-system that they simply cannot be left to the owners of the land. When the owners of the land try to control their resources, their qualifications as the deep believers in the Western conception of liberalism and democracy will be futile in the eyes of the imperialists.<sup>4</sup> If they try to control their resources, the imperial power is going to think that they 'had committed no less than an act of piracy.'<sup>5</sup> Today the oil industry is the biggest industry of the world and it is the main reason of imperialism and colonialism, especially in the Middle East. The government of the United States of America has considered that it is responsible for offering protection to this industry and it has always reacted immediately when there is any threat for the interests of the industry. The U.S State

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said points out to two different narratives of the French invasion of Egypt; the Napoleon's narrative and Abdal-Rahman al-Jabarti's narrative. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 80-82.

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Musaddiq might exemplify the point here. When he was the Prime Minister of Iran, he tried to nationalize the oil industry of Iran between 1951 and 1953. But despite his loyalty to the democratic processes, he was overthrown by a Western backed coup. For many, the Iranian revolution of 1979 which the imperial power of the West relentlessly demonizes today was the result of what had happened during Musaddiq was in power in Iran. For more information see *Mussadegh, the Politics of Oil, And American Foreign Policy: Proceedings of a One-Day Conference*, (Montclair State, October 30, 1992), Sponsored by the School of Business Administration of Department of Economics and Finance.

<sup>5</sup> WM. Roger Louis, "Musaddiq and the Dilemmas of British Imperialism" in *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism, and Oil*, edited by James A. Bill and WM Roger Louis, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 228-260. The whole book is a good collection of oil politics, especially for its remarks on the imperial interventions in Iran.

Department's former Director of the Office of Fuels and Energy wrote in 1968 that "The U.S. government is greatly concerned that American oil companies abroad should be able to continue their operations overseas within a framework of mutually agreed relationships with host governments, serving the public efficiently wherever they are, and earning whatever is properly theirs because of the capital, skill and good fortune that have accompanied their operations."<sup>6</sup> One can easily see the presence of injustice in the results of these policies if one has some willingness to see it. However, the imperial power utilizes every tool to deflect this injustice from the views of its citizens. After all it needs to have these mechanisms of deflection to control, dominate, rule and exploit. Said shows us how these mechanisms were created and applied for their justification.

It is possible to say that the usage of the term 'Orientalist' was on the decline before Said published his book, but after the publication of the book, the usage has become completely pejorative. After the book, the discipline of Orientalism has changed and mostly faded. Today it is hard to find anybody who is well-versed and educated in the languages and cultures of the East like the old-school Orientalists. If the knowledge created by the Orientalists caused so many pains for the natives of the Orient, one must be happy that the Orientalism is on the decline. However, the decline of the Orientalism is an illusion since there is no sign in the decline of the imperial desire, and if the imperial desire is still strong this is because it must keep its mechanisms of knowledge strong, since it cannot operate smoothly without that knowledge. If the Orientalism is not operating now, what is operating for its place is the subject of this paper and deserves to be called new-orientalism.

The new-orientalist is not the European with white skin and blue eyes. He has a brown skin with a white mask. He claims to be a native, have the experience of the native, but his audience is the good-old dominator since he writes for the readers and consumers of the western metropolis. Hamid Dabashi calls this kind of new-orientalist as the *native informer*. According to him, the native informer is "more effective in manufacturing the public illusions that empires need to sustain themselves than in truly informing the public about the cultures they denigrate and

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<sup>6</sup> Peter R. Odell, *Oil and World Power*, New York: Penguin Books, 1983, 26-27. For more information see Simon Bromley, *American Hegemony and World Oil: The Industry, the State System and the World Economy*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, chapters 2, 3.

dismiss.”<sup>7</sup> Contrary to classical European Orientalist, the native informers speak with the authority of the natives.<sup>8</sup> Their job is to manufacture consent for the imperial desire. In the time of globalization, the imperial power has increased the importance of the ideological machinery and presented its intervention as a humane project, liberation. Besides national-security interests, human rights and women’s rights are the hot topics in the hands of the propagandists. Native informers present a fierce critique of women’s rights violations, genital mutilation, or gay and lesbian rights in Islam by writing it in English for the American and European market. Native informer provides the psychological tools for the imperial authority to correct these wrongs committed by the natives. According to Dabashi, “what we are witnessing today is simply a more advanced stage of colonialism, reflecting a more advanced condition of capitalism in its globalized stage, with newer forms of domination in need of a renewed ideological language.”<sup>9</sup>

Dabashi also uses another term in his analysis of this new-orientalist. He names him as the *comprador intellectual*. The word *comprador* refers to a Chinese agent employed by a European business interest in China to supervise its local workers and to play the role of an intermediary in its business affairs. Later, the term had extended to refer to any native servant in the service of a colonial economic interest, ‘someone employed by Europeans, in India and the East.’<sup>10</sup> For him, “the *comprador intellectual* is a cultural broker, a commissioned operator, a ‘ten-percenter’ paid to facilitate cultural domination and political pacification.”<sup>11</sup> He has some knowledge of the dominating culture, he is able to speak its language, and he becomes abusive towards his own fellow-countryman.<sup>12</sup> Dabashi quotes from a speech delivered by Malcolm X in Detroit on November 10, 1963. According to Dabashi this quote is helpful for the identification of the *comprador intellectual*. Malcolm X says:

There were two kinds of slaves. There was the house Negro and the field Negro. The house Negroes-they lived in the house with master, they dressed pretty good, they ate good ‘cause they ate his food-what he left. They lived in the attic or

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<sup>7</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, 2011, p. 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 40.

the basement, but still they lived near the master; and they loved their master more than the master loved himself. They would give their life to save the master's house quicker than the master would. The house Negro, if the master said, "We got a good house here," the house Negro would say, "Yeah, we got a good house here." Whenever the master said "we", he said "we". That's how you can tell a house Negro.<sup>13</sup>

Another scholar, Fatemeh Keshavarz, identifies the writings of new-orientalism as follows:

They often have an informal tone and a hybrid nature that make for an accessible read. Most of them blend travel writing, personal memoir, journalistic reporting, and social commentary. They show awareness of the power of personal voice, nostalgia in exilic literature, the assurance that comes with insider knowledge, and the certainty of eyewitness accounts. Yet they do not demand that readers have an in-depth knowledge of the culture on which the book is focused.<sup>14</sup>

She continues to say that "it replicates the earlier narrative's strong undercurrent of superiority and of impatience with the locals, who are often portrayed as uncomplicated. The new narrative does not necessarily support overt colonial ambitions. But it does not hide its clear preference for a western political and cultural takeover. Most importantly, it replicates the totalizing -and silencing-tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness in the local culture."<sup>15</sup>

Hisham Matar's book, *In the Country of Men*, seems to fulfill all the requirements of new-orientalism by feeding the empire's effort to provide the psychological tools to its citizen for the continuation of its unethical operations.

### **Hisham Matar and his book, *In the Country of Man***

It is hard to find any substantial information about the life of Hisham Matar. He was born in November 1970 in New York and had spent his childhood in Tripoli and Cairo before moving back to Britain. He studied architecture at Goldsmith's College and in 1990, when he was a student, his father -a Libyan dissident living in

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<sup>13</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars*, p. 3.

Cairo- was kidnapped, taken back to Tripoli, imprisoned and tortured, and there has been nothing heard from him since 1995. Matar has lived in London since 1986.<sup>16</sup>

When we enter in a bookstore, we see the books in the shelves trying to capture our attention as we see any other merchandise in a competitive marketplace. The books are the products which must be advertised and sold, and the cover of the book is the first thing we see when we encounter a book. Most of the time, we decide to buy the book or to leave it based on the information we get from its cover.

In his critique of Azar Nafisi's book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Hamid Dabashi takes the attention of his reader to the cover photo of the book.<sup>17</sup> Following Dabashi's example, it will be convenient to start from the cover. *In the Country of Men* has been published in several countries with several covers and it does not have one single capturing cover like Nafisi's book, so to say the cover has different pictures for different editions. In Dial Press Trade Paperback edition, which is used here, the picture of the book cover has two children with their bicycles; they are standing under a tree next to the sea. One of them is slightly taller than the other, and the smaller one is drinking water from a bottle. The time might be a late afternoon since there is dimness in the picture. The sky seems cloudy, and in the open horizon of the sea lays another land. It gives the feeling of peace. Above the tree there is the title: In the Country of Men. It is a capturing cover. With a closer inspection, the cover advertises that the book was shortlisted for The Man Booker Prize and for the Guardian First Book Award, it became the finalist for National Book Critics Circle Award, and it won the Europe and South Asia Region of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize of Best First Book. There are five praising excerpts from the reviews written for the major newspapers as well. The cover also gives some information about the content saying that it is about a Libyan childhood in Qaddafi's Libya in the year of 1979.

There are some literary critics who persistently argue that the prizes designated to promote the literary scene are always controversial. It is claimed that even the longest-running literary prize, the Nobel, which grants the largest amount of money and promises a life-time success for the winner, is often influenced by

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.themanbookerprize/books/47>.

<sup>17</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 65-83; also see Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 1-7 June 2006, issue 797, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2006/797/special.htm>.

geography and politics. The prize has frequently been awarded to the mediocre writers; and most of the greatest writers have not won the prize. This is due to how the decisions are made. For its donator, Alfred Nobel, who is also the inventor of dynamite, it should be given to the author who produced "the most outstanding work of an idealist tendency." This notion of idealist tendency spoiled the process of choice from the beginning. The committee was accused of having a left-wing bias, and for this reason, it eliminated some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

The winners of the Nobel Prize are divided into four categories: 1. International reputations; 2. Serious and important; 3. Third-rank and often middle brow; 4. Obscure, unreadable, and forgotten. This division also reveals that only 16.5 percent of the winners are considered as the great authors while 60 percent of the winners are no longer read.<sup>19</sup>

The national distribution of the prize is also controversial. The prize has been mostly awarded to the Western writers. France and the United States produced the most of the winners with twelve and ten awards respectively; Germany followed them with eight, and it is followed by Sweden, Italy, and Britain with six; the Soviet Union and Spain had won five, Poland and Ireland with four, Norway and Denmark with three; Chile, Greece, Israel, Japan and South Africa with two.<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising that all these countries except Japan can be placed into the category of the so-called Graeco-Judaic civilization of the West.

The Academy of Nobel claims that geography and politics do not influence the results. But for the critics, it was no accident that some diplomats like Pablo Neruda won the prize. William Butler Yeats was rewarded two years after the independence of Ireland. Saul Bellow won it in 1976 two hundred years after the Declaration of Independence of America.<sup>21</sup> Orhan Pamuk won the prize after mentioning the Armenian massacres and Turkish state's atrocities toward the Kurdish population and opposing the nationalist tendencies of the state.<sup>22</sup> With these examples in mind, it is possible to say that geography and politics play an

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, "The Literary Politics of the Nobel Prize," *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2, The Nobel Prize for Literature, Spring, 2007, pp. 214-215.

<sup>19</sup> Meyers, "Literary Politics," p. 215.

<sup>20</sup> Meyers, "Literary Politics," p. 216.

<sup>21</sup> Meyers, "Literary Politics," p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> Meyers, "Literary Politics," p. 222.



important role in the process of nomination and winning the literary prizes even in the the Nobel, the most distinguished among them.

The Man Booker Prize is no exception to these processes. It is sponsored by Man Group which manages an asset more than fifty-eight billion dollars. The website of the prize gives the following information: "Man is a world-leading alternative investment management business. It has expertise in a wide range of liquid investment styles including managed futures, equity, credit and convertibles, emerging markets, global macro and multi-manager, combined with powerful product structuring, distribution and client service capabilities. As at 31 December 2011, Man managed \$58.4 billion."<sup>23</sup> In order to see how this money was made, one can look at an article in the website of Guardian, another shortlist for Matar's book. The article is about John Berger who won the same prize in 1972. In his speech Berger talks about the sponsors of the prize, Booker McGonnall and his 130 years of trading in the Caribbean. He says that "The modern poverty of the Caribbean is the direct result of this and similar exploitation."<sup>24</sup> It is also ironic that a book which its title immediately gives the impression of gender discrimination is being advertised before its title with the word The Man in its cover. Another prize given for the book is the Europe and South Asia Region of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. A little research is going to show that everything related to the Commonwealth was born out of the British imperial desires.<sup>25</sup> It seems that the irony is still in effect since we learn from the back of the book that the story takes place in Qaddafi's Libya in 1979, two decades later from the independence of Libya from its European colonizer, Italia.

After finishing the inspection of the cover, the reader might move to the verso title page with the intention of learning what the name of the book is in its original language, where it was published first, who translated it etc. After all the cover advertises that it is a novel about Libya, the reader might expect that it was going to be in Arabic, the language which the Libyans speak. But contrary to the expectations, the verso title page says that the book was published in the United Kingdom by the Viking Press in English.

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<sup>23</sup> For more information see [www.themanbookerprize.com](http://www.themanbookerprize.com).

<sup>24</sup> Sam Jordison, "Looking back at the Booker: John Berger," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2008, <https://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2008/jan/09/lookingbackatthebookerjoh>.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on The Commonwealth see W. David McIntyre, *The Commonwealth of Nations: Origins and Impact, 1869-1971*, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

In this respect, which is the preferred language of the book, the author was questioned by Nouri Gana, who is an Associate Professor of Comparative Literature & Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA<sup>26</sup> Gana asks: “Was it natural, artistic and/or political for you to write in English? At least retrospectively, would you have chosen to write your novel in Arabic? Is your novel going to be translated into Arabic?” Matar answers:

My novel was translated into Arabic by the Lebanese poet Sukainah Ibrahim and published in December 2006 by Dar al-Muna, a publisher based in Stockholm. Since I was a boy, I attended English schools. For this reason, my English tends to be better than my Arabic. This is the practical reason behind my writing in English. That is not to say that it is “natural” as you call it, to write in English. In fact, what interests me about my situation is how unnatural it continues to be. It never ceases to unsettle me that I am operating in a language my grandparents would have not understood.

Since he implies that it is unsettling to write in a language not understood by one’s grandparents, the reader of the interview might develop some empathy towards him. On the other hand, his excuse for not knowing his own language is no better than an excuse given by a student who did not do his homework due to his grandparents’ sickness. His language, Arabic, is spoken by millions of people and is taught throughout the world by thousands of universities, he might have spent some time to learn it. Considering Matar’s case, it seems reasonable to feel sympathy toward the Algerian writer Tahir Wattar who criticizes the Algerian writers who write in French as the vestiges of colonialism.<sup>27</sup> The criticism of Tahir Wattar cannot be said for Hisham Matar since he does not write in Italian. But one can say that instead of being a vestige of Italian past of his country, he is doing some pioneering work for the global empire by writing his stories in English.

In the same interview Matar also says that “It is certainly not an easy thing to write outside one’s language. It is the deepest and most peculiar dimension of exile that I have experienced.” One learns from this statement that he identifies himself as an exile, and again, one might feel sympathy towards him. After all

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<sup>26</sup> Nouri Gana, “An Interview with Hisham Matar,” *Words without Borders*, August, 2007, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/an-interview-with-hisham-matar>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.revolv.com/main/index.php?s=Tahir%20Wattar>.

Edward Said says that "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever."<sup>28</sup> If this is the case for Hisham Matar, one cannot do anything but feel grief for him. But again, on the other hand, in a context in which he tries to show that exile in Saidian notion does no longer exist, Dabashi gives the example of an Iraqi exile, Kanan Makiya, who was used to justify the invasion of Iraq. Dabashi says that "Home is where you hold your horses, hang your hat, and above all raise your voice in defiance and say no to oppression."<sup>29</sup> One can be sure that the people who die under the atrocities of the empire everyday would be grateful to live in exile in London just like Matar does.

Now it is time to move to the novel. There are major themes in the novel that every reader can easily identify. It is an individual story of a woman, Najwa, who "dealt with the world, a world full of men and the greed of men."<sup>30</sup> When she was fourteen years old, she starts realizing what to deal in this world of men means. One day, one of her brothers, Khaled, sees her in a café sitting with male companies. Najwa's friend, Jihan, a Christian girl from Palestine whose parents treats her same as they did her brothers is also with her. Khaled kindly pays for their cappuccinos and warmly says hello to her friends. But when he returns home, he immediately tells what he saw to the male members of the family, which Najwa calls it as the High Council. She says that "Oh yes, when it comes to a woman's virtue, we are fierce. Fierce and deadly. And when it comes to a daughter's virtue, we are fierce, deadly and efficient. In such matters our efficiency rivals that of a German factory."<sup>31</sup> She later learns that Khaled, the enlightened poet, tells his father "Your daughter is fourteen and is already spending her days in cafes with strange men. I tremble to imagine what next. Marry her now, or she'll shame us." In her narration of the event,

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<sup>28</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men*, New York: The Dial Press, 2008, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Matar, *In the Country*, p. 147.

she does not spare her mother as well; her mother grabs her by the hair and throws her in her room calling her “you little slut”.

From this chapter, one can assume that according to Matar, for every individual, man and woman together, the thing which is taken most seriously is the virtue of a girl. Of course, the virtue of a girl must be one of the things taken most seriously in every culture, but in a culture, which is predominantly Muslim, the virtue means isolation of women. In this culture, a male can do anything he wants in public or in private, but the rules that apply to women do not apply to men. After all, they are not Christian like Jihan who gets treated equally in her family. The depiction of Khaled exemplifies this contemptuous approach towards the Muslims. Khaled is a poet who had studied in the United States of America and married with an American woman. He is educated and enlightened. If he is that much evil, consider how evil the rest who stayed in their country without a Western education.

Another angle about Khaled is that he is the Arab immigrant in the West. He is a hypocrite who can do whatever he wants in the liberal west while he oppresses his own sister at home in his own country. One can speculate what he is in the West; he is a university professor who teaches North African Literature. One of the hot topics for the class he teaches is gender politics in North Africa. He stands for the liberation of women, his wife after all is an American, and he wants his sister to be that liberated woman of the West. But Hisham Matar warns us that this is a disguise; deep down he is still the oppressor, he oppresses his sister in a place where the observations of his western audience cannot reach. Matar knows it, because he is an insider. He informs his audience about the danger of this immigrant while he equates Christianity with the equal treatment between men and women. In the domain of Islam, which is more backward compared to Christianity, however, men treat women maliciously if he is a father or a brother; and women treat women maliciously if she is a mother.

After this café incident, the family starts looking for a bridegroom to marry their scandalous daughter. They find Faraj el-Dewani, a twenty-three-year-old man with Bedouin origin. He left his Bedouin lifestyle, studied at a university and become a successful businessman. Najwa recalls their first day as follows:

They passed the judgment and he, the stranger armed with the marriage contract signed by my father, was going to carry out the punishment. When he touches me, which I was sure he was going to do, there will be no point in screaming; I was his right, his wife under God. I was only fourteen, but I knew what a man had to do to his wife. Cousin Khadija, a chatterbox who had fallen as silent as a wall after her wedding night, had later, when she and I were alone, told me how her husband had lost patience with her and with his fingers punctured her veil and bled her. It was the duty of every man to prove his wife a virgin.<sup>32</sup>

At the day of their marriage, her father buries a pistol in his pocket saying, "Blood is going to be spilled either way."<sup>33</sup>

Faraj is one of the main characters of the novel. He is politically active and fights against the Qaddafi's brutal regime in secret. His behavior could be considered as heroic in different context. He is a well-to-do businessman who lives a comfortable life with his family. He risks all he has for the sake of freedom and democracy. But despite all his efforts for freedom and democracy, he is not a hero, he is far from being a hero. First, he is a pedophile who buys a fourteen-year-old girl and has sex with her. In his critique of the cover picture of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Hamid Dabashi talks about the connoted message. He says:

Look at these two Oriental Lollitas! The racist implication of the suggestion – as with astonishment asking, 'can you even imagine reading that novel in that country?' – competes with its overtly Orientalised pedophilia and confounds the transparency of a marketing strategy that appeals to the most deranged Oriental fantasies of a nation already petrified out of its wits by a ferocious war waged against a phantasmagoric Arab/Muslim male potency that has just castrated the two totem poles of the US empire in New York.<sup>34</sup>

With his narration of the wedding night, Matar fills this hole for the prejudices of his audiences.

The father with a pistol is also another scene one may want to see in a story that takes place in a Muslim country. He eagerly waits to see the blood on the bed sheet; otherwise he is going to kill his daughter to save the honor of his family. The

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<sup>32</sup> Matar, *In the Country*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Matar, *In the Country*, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> See citation 18 above.

scene will probably shock the western audience, but it is normal in an Arab society, since it is “the inner workings of Arab behavior.”<sup>35</sup>

The depiction of the opposition movement in the book is also humiliating. Faraj is the leader of the movement, and when he gets arrested, he betrays his friends and gives away all their names. Ustath Rashid, the professor of art history, pees on his pants when he is being executed publicly. The members of the opposition movement are awkward and inept, and they do not know what to do and how to do. It seems that it is better for them to wait until the age of Facebook comes, and helps them to have their revolution. Matar’s depiction of them reminds one what Chateaubriand says as quoted by Said “Of liberty, they know nothing; of propriety, they have none: force is their God. When they go for long periods without seeing conquerors who do heavenly justice, they have the air of soldiers without a leader, citizens without legislators, and a family without a father.”<sup>36</sup>

Not every man is depicted badly in the book. Signor Il Calzoni is a good man toward whom the reader might feel sympathy. He is a European, if the flaws and evil are inherent in the Arabs, the goodness and kindness are inherent in him. He is a restaurant owner in Tripoli. He is always pleased to see Najwa and her son; he would take them to their table and hover around them in search of conversation. He speaks about how much he misses Italy and how much he loves Libya. He is also Libyan like them and he speaks Libyan.<sup>37</sup> In the whole book, the mother and Suleiman go out for eating once, and they go to an Italian restaurant for grilled shrimp and spaghetti. There is another man in the book who has a relation with Italy. He is Septimius Severus, the Roman emperor who was born in Libya. In a novel, which takes place in Libya that gained its independence from Italy just recently, it is surprising to see the colonizer rendered with such sympathy. Matar does his best to denigrate and humiliate the Libyan men while praising the colonizer. He reminds the reader that long time ago he was an Italian. Libya and Italy are both the sons of this Libyan Roman emperor, Septimius Severus. His attitude is like the woman who says

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<sup>35</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 172.

<sup>37</sup> Matar, *In the Country*, pp. 18-20.

this: "Me, a Negress? Can't you see I'm almost white. I hate niggers. Niggers stink. They're dirty and lazy. Don't ever mention niggers to me."<sup>38</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The countries of Middle East had been held under the chains of direct colonialism for centuries. After the colonialists left, they left behind the native colonizers to be able to continue their exploitations of the natives. The Arab Spring has showed the world that the people are aware of their situation, and their demands to be free from the colonizer are legitimate. They have the means and courage to get their freedom. The way ahead of them might be long, but at least they started moving towards it. Their rich culture and history have the capacity to sustain them in this journey. In this culture and history, not everything is bad as the new orientalists remind them regularly. Not everybody who embraces this culture is the oppressor of the weak; and they do not wait on the doors to check the virginity of their daughters with the pistols in their hands. Like the rest of human beings, they do what they think is best. And again, like the rest, they have the capacity to improve their thinking for the better if the imperial power leaves them alone.

This paper does not try to say particularly that Hisham Matar intentionally depicts his own country and culture in a negative way. However, his approach to them has the potentiality of being very useful if the empire intends to use it to justify its colonial desire and actions.

In one interview, Matar says that "I am not interested in political resistance, although I am deeply interested in justice. Justice is educative, justice is apolitical, justice resists nothing" and he adds "what preoccupies me in my work is the art itself."<sup>39</sup> If there has ever been anything apolitical, one might securely say that it is not justice; justice may not resist to anything as Matar says, but many things resist to justice. And it seems childishly naïve to believe such a thing as 'the art itself' ever existed. Everything partakes in the struggle of the oppressor and the oppressed, and the question is to which side the artist serves. In Matar's case, it is hard to say that his art serves for the interests of the oppressed.

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<sup>38</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin*, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Gana, "Interview."

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