

**“LIKE HIS FATHER BEFORE
HIM”: PATRILINEALITY AND
NATIONALISM IN THE WORK
OF HISHAM MATAR, JAMAL
MAHJOUR AND ROBIN
YASSIN-KASSAB**

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Hisham Matar's autobiographical text *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (2016) is framed by a return to Libya in the wake of the 2011 uprisings, continuing a search for answers about the disappearance of his father in 1990. The "land in between" in the title captures Matar's ambivalence towards "the land my father loved more than anything else" (42), as he describes himself as "reluctant to give Libya any more than it has already taken" (2). In a passage that highlights the distance between these positions, Matar describes how his father was asked to refrain from putting himself at risk by openly criticising Gaddafi. He notes that "[t]he disagreement ... placed the nation against the intimate reality of a family" (42). This setting of nation against family captures the divide between the state and the private sphere of the home,

even as the danger of political defiance highlights the vulnerability of the home to the violence of the state. The violent intrusion of the state into the home reveals not only the contingency of a protected private sphere, but the illusion of a homeland belonging to its people. This passage thus sets the father's vision of what Libya could become against the reality of what it is.

Matar, in addition to his autobiographical writings, has written two novels focusing on the relationship between fathers and sons and the "land in between." Although, Matar has been careful to emphasise that his novels are not autobiographical, his fictional texts are very much concerned with a triad of fathers, sons, and "the land in between" examined in his memoir *The Return*. In this triad, the father is more than a symbolic representative of the nation. Rather, I argue that the sense of being "in between" which Matar is concerned with also relates more broadly to a sense of distance from the post-independence generation, and to the growing awareness of the discontinuities between an emancipatory national project and the reality of state violence. In this article, I consider the implications of the relationship between fathers, sons and the land "in between" as a recurring plot in Arab British fiction. I examine Matar's two novels, *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *The Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), alongside Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinn*s (2003) and Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road*

to *Damascus* (2008). Matar, Yassin-Kassab and Mahjoub are three writers settled in Britain and writing in English with family backgrounds in Libya, Syria and Sudan respectively. In each of their texts, the protagonist searches for a connection with an always distant father, aspiring to his level of patriotism. However, in attempting to follow in their father's footsteps, the sons discover both the failures of their fathers and the limitations of the patriarchal, postcolonial nation-state.

Discussing his second novel, Matar notes that he is

[F]ascinated with the structure of the family ... One of the questions that *Anatomy of a Disappearance* is asking is, is it possible to ever know your parent ... But also ... how do you tell the story or the reality of existing in this very peculiar political atmosphere? ("Reluctant Spokesman").

The link between the two questions—between the unknowability of the parent (here the father) and the peculiarity of the post-colonial Arab nation-state—does more than underline the connection between the family unit and the nation. As Anne McClintock writes, "[n]ations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. The term nation derives from *natio*: to be born" (357). This paradigm focuses on the gendering of the nation through the family allegory. In the texts that I examine here, the focus on the son's failure to inherit the father's legacy

raises questions about the patriarchal frameworks of the nation-state as well as the ideals of nationalism and patriotism. Mediated through father-son relationships which shift between idealisation and disillusionment, the texts open up a space where the patrilineal and patriarchal structures of the postcolonial nation-state are disrupted.

The gendering of the nation that takes place through the legitimating metaphor of the nuclear family includes the representation of the leader as the father of the nation. In his influential work *Neopatriarchy* (1988), Hisham Sharabi discusses the central feature of the modern Arab state as “the dominance of the Father (patriarch), the center around which the national and natural family are organised” (7). The cultivation and manipulation of the idea of the national family through the utilisation of the “metaphor of state leader as father” involves a naturalisation of power imbalances that depends on an acceptance of patriarchal authority (Joseph 348). The idea of the family as a microcosm of Arab society offers an understandable framework, though it reduces the connection between authoritarian structures to the cultural and tends to ignore the social and political.

In her study of fathers and sons in modern Arab literature, Dalya Cohen-Mor notes that “[t]he father-son relationship is predominantly portrayed as conflicted in

Arab fiction” (qtd. in Preville). Examining this antagonism reveals how representations of filial relationships often intersect with the failures of decolonization. For example, in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s novel *al-Bahth ‘an Walīd Mas‘ūd* (1978, *The Search for Walid Masoud*, 2000), a family history of resistance is represented in terms of a broken patrilineal legacy. The novel centres on the search for Walid, a Palestinian political activist, writer and symbol for nationalist struggle. As Samah Selim suggests, the text “initiate[s] a journey through the psychic and political landscape of a quixotic Arab modernity that is, like the novel’s central character, intensely present and yet irretrievably lost” (89). One of Walid’s friends, Amer, represents this loss as a severance from what seem to be the futile struggles of previous generations in Iraq. He “refuses to look back at the past, to his country’s history”, relating the trajectories of national history to a patrilineal heritage he feels alienated from:

[t]o him all history started with his grandfather, when he was fighting the Ottomans during the last years of the nineteenth century, then continued with the British occupation of Iraq, when his father distinguished himself as a national fighter, sustained by the dream that every time he was jailed or placed under house arrest his country came closer to the day of liberation. But liberation remained a dream. From the time Amer crossed over into his forties, he felt his immediate history had been severed from him. (Jabra 140)

In this passage, Amer's identification with the nation is dependent upon what Diane King calls "lineal masculinity" where "collective memory is masculinised and codified as male achievement transmitted through patrilineal" (328). While his forebears work towards nationalist goals, Amer's severance from this heritage, living "for the present, for the present alone," reflects an awareness of his failure to continue their nationalist legacy (Jabra 146). Thus, Jabra presents the failures of decolonisation as inextricable from Amer's failure to continue the male intergenerational legacy of resistance. In the Anglophone novels that I will now turn to, this sense of distance from the nation and the attempt to affirm connection to homeland is further undercut by the discontinuities of exile. The novels reconstruct national history from both a spatial and temporal distance, with protagonists who themselves experience the dislocation of exile, as well the discontinuities of the nation itself, as contrasted against the myths of local and/or pan-Arab nationalism.

In Matar's debut novel *In the Country of Men*, the narrator Suleiman recalls his childhood in Libya, specifically recounting the months leading up to his father's arrest in 1979, and his own gradual awareness of his father's dissident activities. Christopher Micklethwait describes the novel as an exploration of "the mechanisms of state power in a violent hyper-vigilant postcolonial dictatorship" through the child narrator's

perspective on the surveillance, show trials and public executions of a police state (174). The novel depicts the way in which Suleiman is drawn into betraying his best friend, and later informing on his father to the friendly security man patrolling outside the family home. As Nouri Gana notes, Matar's novels convey "the power of the state apparatuses to penetrate the lives of Libyans and extend its rule over them with their own consent and collaboration" (20). This is captured in an early scene where Suleiman watches Moosa, one of his father's friends, hang up a portrait of Muammar Gaddafi to ward off suspicion and then pretend to salute the "[t]he benefactor, the father of the nation, the guide" as he "punched his fist, chanting El Fateh, El Fateh, El Fateh" (160-161). In identifying the dictator as "[t]he benefactor, the father of the nation," Moosa mocks the regime's assumption of paternal authority. Notably, this portrait of the Guide replaces the portrait of Suleiman's father, Faraj. The scene thus dramatises the antagonistic parallels between the father and "the father of the nation" (160). Throughout the novel, Suleiman yearns to connect with his "aloof" father, even as he becomes aware that Faraj's activities are endangering the family. When Suleiman's mother attempts to burn Faraj's political books, Suleiman saves one of them, leading to Faraj's arrest years later when he takes the book to work and reads from it to his colleagues. Suleiman's ambivalent feelings about his father are captured towards the end of the novel, when he concludes

that there was “an element of intrigue and madness in the way Father had behaved” (237).

Matar’s second novel, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, also centres on the relationship between father and son in the context of political struggle, but this time in a nameless country seemingly based on Iraq. At the beginning of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the young narrator Nuri el-Alfi lives with his father Kamal, an “ex-minister and leading dissident” in exile in Egypt (106). The novel is a coming-of-age story centred on a son’s struggle for intimacy with his father, a struggle extended indefinitely following the father’s abduction. Reading about his father’s political activities, Nuri imagines himself living a similar life, a life given significance by political goals: “I, too, wanted secret meetings in Geneva, allies in Paris with whom I had watched history march and worked to change its course” (Matar, *Anatomy* 90). The son seeks to inherit the father’s ideological convictions and work, in this case conjoined to a romanticised idea of espionage and being an agent of historical change.

While Matar’s novels are narrated from the point of view of child protagonists, Robin Yassin-Kassab’s novel *The Road from Damascus* opens with the protagonist Sami Traifi returning to Damascus to “discover his roots”. Initially, Sami aspires to emulate his father Mustafa, sure that “as his father had before him, he

would write books about Arabic poetry” (14). Sami aspires to be “like his father. But better than his father. Leaping forth from the giant’s shoulders, he’d go further” (32). After his father’s death, however, he realises that he was “an academic only because his father had been ... [m]aking him in his own eyes not much of a man – unsettled, out of place, unexplained” (35). The narrative charts the protagonist Sami’s ideological transformation as he tries to convince himself that “there were paths other than the one his father had trodden ... other, valid paths” (10). As with Matar’s texts, the son looks back on the failures of the nationalist ideals of his parents’ generation, as he “stopped believing his own myth” (Kassab 87).

In Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinn*s (2003), the father-son dyad frames the protagonist’s struggles with his sense of nationhood. A journalist living in Britain, Yasin is on a road trip across Europe with his young son Leo, the narrative of this journey becoming intertwined with flashbacks exploring Yasin’s relationship to his own father, a dissident journalist ideologically driven by Afro-Arab nationalism. Yasin remembers that:

[t]here was a centre of gravity to my father’s life. ... The books, the piles of newspapers cuttings, the maps, the photographs of African statesmen on the walls – Nkrumah, Kaunda, Nasser ... The fate of the country gave his life meaning – the absurd conviction that the curious

collection of ethnicities, races and creeds fenced in together by colonial rule could be turned into a cohesive nation. (90)

For the journalist Yasin, “the absurd conviction” that Sudan could become a cohesive nation is belied by the current political stagnation, and the failure to achieve the aspirations of anti-colonial movements. Yasin sees his father as representing the disappearing generation who had witnessed “those halcyon days, with independence in sight” (104). He had lived to see that “[i]t had all gone terribly wrong. The great age of national independence had proved to be nothing more than a neocolonial mirage” (140). In Mahjoub’s novel, the politics of the independent generation seem to have no place in the current reality of Sudan. Yasin realises that “the ideals [his father] had founded his adult life on, from the dark pre-independence days ... all of it was gone, defunct, old hat. And so, in a manner of speaking, was he” (137-8). He reflects that those who fought for a “nation of equals ... were now just a gang of toothless old grumps who mumbled nostalgically about things nobody remembered” (138). At the end of the novel, Yasin’s father has joined the ranks of “the exiled journalists from Baghdad and Damascus, the poets from Lebanon” (325). Through this trajectory, Mahjoub dramatises the failure of the grand narrative of Arab nationalism from the perspective of the son who feels disconnected from this narrative (228).

Mahjoub raises this generational disconnection as a shared dilemma in an interview with actor Alexander Siddig, where they discuss what “link[s] the two of [them], both born in the 1960s, the children of Sudanese fathers and English mothers” (“The Accidental Arab”) A In this conversation, Siddig describes his character Ibn Khaldun in the British drama series *Spooks* as “trying to take a snapshot of this guy before he disappears. He was my father. He was your father. He was the father of all the generations that had a liberal upbringing” (“Accidental Arab”). Agreeing with this characterisation, Mahjoub adds:

He’s also the archetype of old Arab nationalism, the intelligentsia who became marginalised, the technocrats of Nasser’s early ambitions. But they were deemed a threat, and the West feared them. So did Nasser, who imprisoned them. They left a void that was eventually filled by political Islam. (“Accidental Arab”)

Both Siddig and Mahjoub mourn the “disappearance” of the nationalist generation and attempt in their work to represent them. In this sense, the disappearance of the father comes to reflect the disappearance of a generation for whom commitment to a nationalist cause was possible. In each of the texts, the sons’ severance from the past, and from the nationalist project, is sharpened by the tensions of the father-son relationship.

In Mahjoub’s novel, Yasin feels guilty about his inability to continue the father’s legacy. Even as a child he-

knows that he will be unable to carry on his father's work, reflecting that "[o]ne day ... I would inherit all these heaps of paper and books and would be incapable of carrying on where he left off" (91). That Yasin sees his father's work as a personal burden and that he does not feel qualified for both amplifies the idealisation of that work and sharpens his criticism of the naiveté of the nationalist generation.

In both the novels of Matar, the narrative is similarly framed by the son's awareness of his failure to continue his father's cause, contrasting a nationalist sense of purpose with his own unsettled identity and exilic perspective. As Kamal's friend Taleb tells Nuri in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, "he wanted someone to inherit it all" (62). The use of the word 'inheritance' again presents the obligation to continue in the nationalist struggle in terms of familial legacy. Having ultimately failed to commit himself politically, Nuri describes feeling "guilty ... at having lost [his father], not knowing how to find him or take his place. Every day I let my father down" (108). Here, the ambivalence about taking the father's place becomes a political indictment as well as a personal failure. The dynamic of inheritance presents the national project as a failure to carry on a father's legacy, giving an emotional impact to the characters' conflicted feelings towards their countries of origin.

In both Matar and Mahjoub's novels, then, the protagonists' conflicted relationship with their dissident

fathers is accompanied by the recognition that they are unable to “inherit” their nationalist work. The same notion of inheritance also appears in Robin Yassin-Kassab’s *The Road from Damascus*, though here the son transitions from feeling he has failed to continue his father’s work, to questioning his father’s Arab nationalism, eventually coming to “the realisation that the condition of being an Arab was impotence ... not the idea he’d inherited” (90).

Framing Arab failure in masculinist terms, this anxiety of “impotence” in Sami’s words is a recurring rhetorical trope in the works of Arab writers. Lebanese writer Etel Adnan, for example, speaks of a region “castrated by underdevelopment and occupation” (12). Similarly, in his indictment of Arab nostalgia for the golden age, journalist Samir Kassir speaks of “the feeling of impotence” which is “coupled with a civic powerlessness ... all the more overwhelming because the Arab unconscious filters it through nostalgia for a forgotten but still fantasised-about glory” (27-8). The language of patrilineal inheritance here highlights the masculinism with which the idea of nationalism is forged. Masculine and national identities become intertwined, with the masculine ideal representing a parallel to the idealised notion of the homeland. Reflecting this intertwining, these novels emphasise how the protagonists initially construct their sense of self through attempting to model themselves on their father’s example.

However, as the protagonists mature, they confront the gap between these masculine and national ideals, and the violent realities which are gradually revealed to them.

Both the novels of Matar explore familial bonds in a context where, as he puts it, “private life is infiltrated regularly by these regimes” (“Reluctant Spokesman”). The narratives dramatise what Homi Bhabha describes as the “unhomely” intrusion where “the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions,” where “the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (141). Bhabha defines the unhomely as “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the-home-in-the-world” stemming from “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place” (141). In these novels, the protagonists’ growing feeling of estrangement develops through their uncovering of secrets that come to light to destabilise the sanctity of the home, tarnishing their “inherited” ideals.

In *The Road from Damascus*, Sami realises early on that “there was a secret here which [he] alone had not penetrated”, though it takes him the course of the novel to understand the full story of his father’s direct

implication in the Syrian regime's suppression of the 1980s rebellion (5). As a secular nationalist, Sami's father Mustafa supported the Ba'athist dictatorship over their opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, during the armed conflict. Sami recalls what Mustafa has to say about the government's suppression of the Hama uprising in 1982 : "[i]n the face of the Brother's fanaticism, the government stood unwaveringly firm. Sami's father, Mustafa, safe in London, had explained it to him" (3). The narrative Sami inherits is then challenged when he meets his maternal family in Damascus, and understands that they have suffered as a result of the regime's brutality. While Sami accepts in principle the death of tens of thousands, he is unable to deal with the revelation that his father had informed on his uncle, who spent twenty-two years in a Syrian jail and was mentally disturbed after his release. The justifications his father had given him for supporting a secular police state seemed valid until Sami is forced to confront the human cost to his own relatives, through a betrayal that undermines the national family myth. This discovery turns Sami's former idealisation of his father into disillusionment. As Sami's mother Nur tells him, "[n]obody should tell anybody that their father was a traitor" (342), pointing out that personal ties should trump loyalty to the regime, something her husband had failed to respect. In this novel then, the anxiety of inheriting parental legacies is inextricable from the guilt by association that in part motivates Sami's cri-

tique of his father's politics on moral grounds, and his later rejection of nationalist frameworks.

In Matar's *In The Country of Men*, there is a similar transition away from an initial hero-worship of the distant father. In a central scene, Suleiman becomes implicated in Faraj's political activities after he watches the televised interrogation of Ustath Rashid, his father's close friend. During the interrogation, he hears a question about "Bu Suleiman" (father of Suleiman): "[i]t was strange to hear Baba's name on television ... [t]he voice reread the name, this time inserting "Bu Suleiman" into Baba's name, which ... made me feel implicated, dragged by my name into something I knew nothing about" (114). Following this interrogation, Faraj is arrested and tortured to the extent that Suleiman is initially unable to recognise him when he is released. This traumatic scene, where the son sees the father as a stranger, symbolically represents the *es trangement* Suleiman experiences as he comes to understand that Faraj was released because he had given the names of his co-conspirators. While Suleiman does not fully understand this betrayal as a child, the older narrator who looks back on these events is aware of the implications of Faraj's actions. In this sense, the impact of violence at the level of the family parallels the sense of alienation from the nation.

In Matar's second novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father's name is again central, as Nuri becomes aw-

are of Kamal's political activities by "search[ing] the indexes" of his father's books: "[i]t was not until [he] encountered [his] father's name—Kamal Pasha el-Alfi—that [he] realised what [he] was looking for" (66). Again, the father's name represents the intersection of political and personal. In these scenes, histories of violence intrude suddenly into the protagonist's life: as Nuri reflects, "[he] read these things about [his] father before [he] could understand what they meant" (26). The uncovering of the father's political role, which explains his later abduction and disappearance is paralleled by the eventual revelation that the family's servant, Naima, is in fact Nuri's birth mother. As the nation-as-family myth is based on the notion "that the nation, like the family, has a single point of origin", the revelation of mistaken origins and unclear lineages undermines that analogy (Puri 133). Significantly, the period of Naima's arrival into the family is narrated together with the repercussions of the event that exiles them: "[e]ighteen months after my parents employed Naima, our king was dragged to the courtyard of the palace and shot in the head" (58). This one sentence, we later understand, conjoins the beginning of the unhomey "secret" in the family (the fact that Naima, the maid, is Nuri's real mother) and the violence that prevents them from returning home. In both Matar's texts then, the confrontation with the father's name involves the son's discovering or acknowledging the cost of his nationalist agenda, and coming to a realisation

about the gap between his father's avowed principles and his actions. As the protagonists become aware of their implication in their fathers' choices and the moral failings of their worldview, they gradually become disillusioned from the nationalist cause.

In Mahjoub's novel, though to a lesser extent, the protagonist Yasin's admiration for his father's nationalist work is similarly tempered by doubts about his father's teachings. As a reporter during the first Gulf War, witnessing the backlash against Arabs drives Yasin to reconsider his views of British journalism, inherited from his father: "[f]or the first time in my life I began to wonder about the integrity of the British press, which I had always been lead to believe was second to none (my father of course)" (95). The betrayals of the press here are connected not only to the shock of the war on leftist sensibilities, but also to Yasin's unease about his father's conflicted ideology. As Yasin realises, his father's "claims of Afrocentric allegiance only went so far" covering "a thick, chalky streak of Anglophilia" (103). His sister Yasmina is more forthright in her rejection of her father's "high ideas about western civilization" which she describes as "[c]ultural slavery [...]" The big postcolonial trap" (166). Once a fan of Olivia Newton-John, she is described as becoming "Malcolm X in drag," dressing "in the drab greys of a Muslim feminist of the late twentieth century; emancipated and devout in one breath," resorting to an Islamist pol-

itics that opposes that of her secular nationalist father (138). In Mahjoub's novel, ultimately, the nationalist father's teachings and dreams are rejected by both his children, though the narrator Yasin is almost equally critical of his own confused politics, and especially of his sister's Islamism. The result is that Yasin's father realises that he has not been able to convey "those principles he had tried to instill in his children ... telling [them] about the great leaders" of the anti-colonial era (137). This attempt to "instill" nationalist ideals captures the ideological locus of the family as a crucial site for the formation and enactment of national identity.

In Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father similarly attempts to instruct his son in his duties towards the nation. In an early scene, Nuri recalls witnessing his parents arguing, his mother Ihsan objecting to the idea that Nuri should inherit Kamal's project:

"Don't transfer the weight of the past onto your son," she once told him.

"You can't live outside history," he argued. "We have nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary."

After a long pause she responded, "Who said anything about shame? It's longing that I want to spare him. Longing and the burden of your hopes." (26)

Nuri recalls that his mother shielded him from his father's "secret work". With hindsight, he sees his father's "daydreaming" as out of joint with his parental role: "as

if he were the boy obliged to share a meal with adults, as if he were the son and I the father” (8). This role reversal, where the father is imagined as the son, not only unsettles the ideals of fatherhood, but disrupts the binary constructions which uphold the model of the nuclear patriarchal family. As the father, Kamal, is represented as naïve and childish, the ideals of fatherhood are revealed as a precarious performance.

It is not only in this novel that the protagonists’ image of their father as a nationalist hero are disrupted along these lines. In very similar terms, Suleiman’s mother Najwa in Matar’s first novel *In the Country of Men* describes her husband and his colleagues as irresponsible “children playing with fire” (95), and critiques her husband’s “crazy dreams” (80). Similarly, in *The Road from Damascus*, Sami’s mother Nur describes her husband’s hopes of a socialist nationalist utopia as “Mustafa’s day-dream” (245). Towards the end of the novel, Nur explains Mustafa’s single-minded belief in the pan-Arab narrative, telling Sami that “[his] father had dreams” (340) about what Syria could one day become:

He thought it was only a matter of time until everyone would work in an office, productive eight-hour days, and go home in the evening to read novels or go to the cinema to watch art films. He thought everyone would own a car and a house to fit a nuclear family ... Progress, so-called ... they made the country a prison to do it ... He thought there’d be one Arab nation. One Arab nation from the

Ocean to the Gulf. What we have now is everything but. We have everything smaller and everything bigger. Little sects and ethnicities, little nationalisms and big Islamism. But no Arab nation. (340)

In the phrase “they made the country a prison”, Nur locates the failure of Mustafa’s project in its repressive demands for conformity as a path towards progress. The fact that Nur “veer[s] from he to they, from Mustafa to the Ba’ath Party,” suggests an overlap between the state’s repressive structures and the family crises (340). This overlap ultimately undercuts notions of the nation and family as stable anchors, moving away from an idealised vision of nationhood towards the development of a more complex view of both personal and national histories.

In these four novels, the protagonists’ relationships with their father are not only conflicted, but intertwined with their sense of connection to the nation, and with their coming to terms with the past. The novels dramatise both a sense of estrangement from a repressive regime and the creation of a diasporic identity which acknowledges the protagonist’s distance from his parent’s homeland. The struggle to make sense of complicated national and personal histories is never resolved; instead the protagonists attempt to create a new identity after accepting the exiled outsider’s vantage point.

In Mahjoub's novel, Yasin eventually finds reassurance in the idea that he and his son "are part of that vast, nameless body of mongrel humanity ... there is nothing odd about us really in that chaotic tumble ... Nothing odd about us at all" (173). The repetitions however suggest an attempt to convince, to revise the understanding of identity through territory. Throughout the novel, Mahjoub subverts the notion that as James Clifford puts it, "[d]welling [...] [is] the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes." Instead, the journey reveals that displacement is "as constitutive of cultural meaning rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (Clifford 3). Yasin attempts to reframe Europe as a space where displacement is as inscribed as territoriality: "[t]he face of this continent is scarred by the passage of people ... A history of transgression, of frontiers and border lines being crossed and recrossed" (Mahjoub 173). Here, the notion of a history bound to origins and roots is replaced with the routes that people have traversed. However, there is never any sense of resolution to the question Yasin returns to throughout the novel: "am I just running away?" (86). Undercutting the notion of roots might ease the restrictive trappings of national belonging, but it raises the question of whether such distancing is simply an escape from the complex issues of postcolonial nationhood.

The same emphasis on revoking the notion of origins is expressed in *The Road from Damascus*, in Sami's re-

alisation that “[t]he roots are shallow and mythical, we all come from everywhere at once, and we are floating creatures” (38). Towards the end of the novel, Sami is left without an ideological narrative to make sense of his life. After 9/11, having abandoned the nationalist framework that made sense of the world, he is left with no frame of reference: “What was happening? Sami couldn’t tell. He had not scale to measure the event. Nothing inherited from [his father] Mustafa. No nationalist way of judging. No Qabbani verses to help him” (315). Having acknowledged the inevitable break with the past does not resolve the search for belonging. The novel ends with this tension between seeking a stable sense of identity and acknowledging the shallowness of roots, with Sami left asking, “what is he now?” (340). At this point, after the revelation about the imprisonment of his uncle Faris, Sami has abandoned his nationalist agenda. In a sense, the novel comes full circle from the early scenes when Sami’s aunt tells him that Faris’ imprisonment was a reduction to “Mr Nobody”, as the guards make him “write his name, his family’s name, and his address” and then ritualistically burn the paper “because he had no name or family or address any longer, nothing to write down” (6-7). At the end, it is Sami rather than Faris who is “Mr Nobody,” at a loss to define his identity:

For what is he now? Not much any more. Not Mustafa’s son, nor Marwan’s son-in-law, not an academic. Not a

member of the eternal Arab nation. So what, then? He's Nur's son. Muntaha's husband. But to define himself as other people's attributes – it isn't much. (340)

This trajectory away from nationalist ideology is followed by other characters in the novel, including Marwan al-Haj, Sami's father-in-law. Once a "secular and romantic" would-be poet, who "believed he was a model citizen of the new Iraq", Marwan is imprisoned and then exiled (71). Moving in the "wide-ranging circuits of Arab London," Marwan becomes more insular, going to the mosque to foster a sense of alternative community (79). Marwan's increasing conservatism and withdrawal from his family leaves Mustafa's son, Ammar, feeling as distanced from his father as Sami does: "Ammar wasn't sure what was wrong ... Except that he had no country. Except that he was orphaned. Except that there was nothing for him to love. Except the endless gaping depths of space separating him from his father" (142). This passage rehearses the themes that recur in these four texts dealing with patrilineality and nationalism: for each of the protagonists, the sense of "space separating him from his father" is intimately related to his sense that he has "no country" (142). To return to Matar's *In the Country of Men*, "the country of men" signifies not only the opposite of a country of law, but also an induction into a society where men are both beneficiaries of and victimised by the patriarchal autocratic system.

At the conclusion of *Anatomy*, Nuri has returned from England to Egypt, the country where he and his father had last lived together in exile, and in the final lines, is trying on his father's clothes, and then replacing them to await his return: "[t]his might still fit him. I returned it to its place" (246). These lines capture the condition of being suspended in the past, in the limbo that is the psychological shadow of a disappearance, without the finality of bereavement. Metaphorically, this suspension of temporality, the inability to come to terms with an undetermined fate, is in all four novels extended to the exile's relationship to the lost homeland, the unhealable rift that makes belonging always contingent.

As we have seen, all the novels I have discussed have endings which offer little sense of resolution, concluding with their protagonists coming to a full realisation of the impossibility of return. In *The Return*, Matar weighs the arguments of those who try to "cure [themselves] of [their] country" and those who returned: "[r]eturn and you will face the absence or the defacement of what you treasured ... Leave and your connections to the source will be severed ... What do you do when you cannot leave and cannot return?" (Ch. 1, location 58). As Yasin reflects in *Travelling with Djinns*, "coming back was not just a matter of physically returning, there were other adjustments to be made, gaps that had to be compensated for. You are no longer one person ... but two – both of them strangers" (204). This recog-

nition of otherness within the self captures the conflict that recur in these novels, between political engagement and personal fulfilment, between the instabilities of diasporic identity and the weight of an inculcated sense of obligation to the country of origin, between the father figure's high-minded teachings and his moral failings.

This article has traced similarities in the way three Arab British authors depict the relationship between fathers and sons as central to the national project. The negotiations of nationhood through the lens of filial relationships in these texts interweaves the political and the personal to analyse the predicament of the region for an international audience. The novels showcase the “unhomely” intrusions that collapse the illusion of a private sphere of the home and the dream of the homeland, rewriting the plot of the national story to include the intra-national violence excluded from official representations of the national imagination. The rendering of the “land in between” is thus ambivalent and contradictory, represented both as an idealised space with emancipatory potential and as a narrow and claustrophobic site of violence and control. The novels explore the failings of a post-independence generation who have dedicated their lives to national project, and the ways in which the second generation desperately want to believe in this project, even as they find it deeply problematic, and ultimately unviable. At

the end, both the fathers and their sons are alienated from the national cause, and exiled from the homeland itself. Thus, in Yassin-Kassab's novel, the protagonist describes himself "[a]rrrowing westwards like his father before him." The very next few words however are "he thought of the past". This double movement of "arrowing westwards" while remembering foregrounds the inability to fully leave behind the complexities of national narrative, the nation remaining "in between" (12).

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