

The Psychological Dimensions of Exile in Hisham Matar's Selected Works

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000299>

Received: 04 September 2026; Accepted: 09 September 2026; Published: 22 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Exile is often understood as geographical displacement, yet literary representations of exile frequently reveal that its psychological consequences survive long after a border has been crossed. This article examines the relationship between exile, memory, loss, identity, and belonging in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006), *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), *The Return: Fathers, Sons, and the Land in Between* (2016), and *A Month in Siena* (2019). Rather than treating exile as a single historical or geographical event, the study argues that Matar represents it as an enduring psychological condition produced through fear, absence, political violence, bereavement, and the instability of memory. The article brings Edward Said's understanding of exile into dialogue with Cathy Caruth's account of trauma and selected perspectives from memory studies, particularly Maurice Halbwachs and Paul Ricoeur. Through close textual analysis, it traces a movement from disturbed childhood security in *In the Country of Men*, through the unresolved absence of the father in *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, to the complicated homecoming of *The Return* and the emotional displacement generated by bereavement in *A Month in Siena*. The study further argues that the latter text extends, but does not erase, the distinction between political exile and emotional estrangement. Matar's narratives therefore complicate the conventional opposition between home and abroad: home becomes a remembered, contested, and reconstructed space, while exile becomes a condition carried within the self. Writing and art provide forms of reconstruction rather than complete cures, enabling lost experiences to be remembered without being reduced to simple closure. The article contributes to Matar scholarship by reading the four works comparatively through the connected categories of psychological displacement, memory, and belonging.

Keywords: Hisham Matar; exile; psychological displacement; memory; trauma; identity; belonging; loss; Libya

The four texts should therefore be read not merely as four examples of exile but as a sequence of increasingly complex relations between the self and what has been lost. The sequence moves from fear within the homeland, to absence within the family, to return to the homeland, and finally to bereavement within an aesthetically mediated space. The category of psychological displacement is useful precisely because it allows comparison while preserving historical differences. The father figure provides another important bridge across Matar's works. The disappearance of Jaballa Matar is not merely biographical information surrounding the novels and memoirs; fatherhood becomes a recurring narrative structure through which questions of knowledge, inheritance, authority, memory, and loss are organized. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri's uncertainty about his father becomes uncertainty about his own history. In *The Return*, the search for the father becomes inseparable from the search for a country whose political history has made the father's fate difficult to recover. Recent scholarship on *Anatomy of a Disappearance* continues to identify familial trauma, unresolved grief, and narrative fragmentation as central to the novel, while recent work on *The Return* emphasizes estrangement and the instability of home after exile.

The historical context of Matar's fiction is essential to the psychological argument developed here. The Libyan setting is not simply a geographical backdrop. Under authoritarian rule, political power enters the ordinary structures through which a child learns trust, a family communicates, and a citizen understands public and private life. Scholarship on *In the Country of Men* similarly emphasizes that state violence is represented through the experience of a child and that the effects of repression extend into family relations and everyday emotional life. This is important to the argument here because the first rupture does not necessarily begin with departure from the country but with the transformation of the meaning of safety within the country.

INTRODUCTION

Leaving home is often described as movement from one geographical location to another. Yet the literature of exile repeatedly demonstrates that physical movement does not exhaust the meaning of displacement. A person may cross a border in a matter of hours while the emotional consequences of separation continue for decades. Memories of childhood, family relationships, political fear, lost loved ones, and unresolved questions can accompany the displaced person into a new environment. Conversely, physical return does not necessarily restore the earlier relationship with home. The place remembered and the place inhabited may remain permanently out of alignment.

Hisham Matar's writing occupies this difficult space between departure and belonging. Born in Libya and shaped by political exile and the disappearance of his father, Matar repeatedly turns to questions of family, memory, absence, political violence, and home. His fiction and memoir do not treat history as an abstract sequence of political events. Instead, historical violence enters intimate life: it changes how children understand adults, how families experience silence, how absence shapes identity, and how return complicates memory. Political history, in Matar's writing, is consequently experienced through the intimate lives of individuals and families.

This article examines four texts: *In the Country of Men*, *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, *The Return: Fathers, Sons, and the Land in Between*, and *A Month in Siena*. Read together, the texts allow exile to be understood as a continuum rather than a single condition. *In the Country of Men* presents a child who remains geographically within Libya but begins to experience the erosion of safety and trust. *Anatomy of a Disappearance* turns political repression into the intimate uncertainty of a son whose father has vanished. *The Return* changes the direction of movement by bringing the exiled subject back to Libya, only to reveal the distance between remembered and contemporary homeland. *A Month in Siena* moves beyond political displacement toward bereavement and emotional estrangement, raising the question of whether loss can produce an experience analogous to exile.

Existing scholarship has productively examined trauma, political violence, memory, homecoming, and aesthetic experience in Matar's work. Kearney's study of traumatised narrators and Kim's discussion of state violence and family trauma establish important connections between political repression and psychological consequence. Bugeja's 2023 study of *A Month in Siena* further demonstrates the importance of aesthetic experience and the continuing relation between Siena, memory, and the absent father. More recent scholarship continues to examine *The Return* through homecoming, confinement, freedom, estrangement, and belonging. Hanafy's 2024 study, for example, emphasizes how the memoir problematizes home beyond geography, while Hasan's 2026 study foregrounds estrangement, fragmented narration, and the instability of belonging. These studies strengthen the need for a comparative account that places Matar's four works within one model of psychological displacement.

This article uses psychological displacement as a connecting idea, while keeping the differences among political exile, traumatic absence, return, and bereavement in view. Its central intervention is not to collapse these experiences into one identical condition. Rather, it argues that Matar's narratives reveal a shared psychological structure of rupture: an established relation to home, family, or self is disturbed, and the subject must reconstruct continuity through memory, narrative, and art.

Research Questions

- How does Matar transform political and personal rupture into psychological experiences of displacement?
- How does memory preserve and complicate the subject's relationship with home and identity?
- How do writing and art create possibilities for negotiating loss without promising complete recovery?
- How do the four texts differ while collectively revealing a spectrum of psychological displacement?

The research gap can be stated more precisely. Existing studies have established important connections between political violence and family trauma, trauma and narrative fragmentation, exile and home, memory and belonging, and aesthetic experience and grief. What is less developed is a comparative account of how these forms of rupture relate to one another without being treated as the same experience. This article addresses that gap by asking what changes when the source of displacement changes, and what remains continuous when the subject moves from political fear to disappearance, return, and bereavement.

At the same time, recent scholarship also demonstrates the breadth of possible approaches to Matar. A 2025 article on political obligation and loyalty reads *My Friends* through the tensions among exile, political obligation, loyalty, identity, and belonging. Although *My Friends* is outside the present corpus, the study indicates the continuing expansion of Matar scholarship toward ethical and political questions surrounding exilic identity. The present article deliberately remains with the four selected works and focuses instead on psychological displacement as a comparative literary category.

Other recent work approaches Matar through diaspora and the search for home. A 2026 study of *The Return* describes the memoir as a symbolic quest to reconcile personal loss, national history, fragmented identity, and belonging. Such scholarship confirms that Matar's representation of home is better understood as an ongoing process than as a fixed geographical possession.

Serdzhan Ibryam Hasan's 2026 study of *The Return* argues that exile remains a continuing condition after physical return and that memory, estrangement, and belonging remain unstable. Its attention to fragmented narration, sensory memory, shifting temporalities, and the father's unresolved absence closely supports the present article's claim that homecoming should be understood as negotiation rather than restoration.

Recent scholarship strengthens the comparative direction of the present study. Eman Ghanem's 2026 study of *Anatomy of a Disappearance* places familial trauma within the broader socio-political and cultural context of Libya and emphasizes the relationship between Nuri's psychological distress, loss, displacement, and narrative form. The study is particularly relevant to the present argument because it treats fragmented memory and narrative discontinuity as important literary manifestations of trauma rather than merely as thematic references.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative literary textual analysis and close reading. The primary corpus consists of four works by Hisham Matar: *In the Country of Men* (2006), *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), *The Return: Fathers, Sons, and the Land in Between* (2016), and *A Month in Siena* (2019). The texts were selected because, when read chronologically and comparatively, they present different configurations of rupture: childhood insecurity under authoritarianism, traumatic familial disappearance, return to a transformed homeland, and bereavement mediated through art.

The comparative procedure is organized around four analytical dimensions: (1) the source of rupture; (2) the relationship between presence and absence; (3) the role of memory in reconstructing identity and belonging; and (4) the function of narrative or art in negotiating loss. Close reading attends to narration, retrospective perspective, silence, uncertainty, temporality, spatial imagery, familial relationships, and the movement between remembered and present realities. Selected passages are treated not as illustrations of a pre-existing

theme but as sites where Matar's language and narrative form produce the psychological meaning being discussed.

The theoretical lenses are used selectively. Edward Said provides the principal framework for exile and divided belonging; Cathy Caruth helps interpret the persistence and belatedness of traumatic experience; Maurice Halbwachs situates personal memory within social and relational frameworks; and Paul Ricoeur helps distinguish remembrance from simple recovery of the past. The theories therefore function as analytical lenses rather than as a catalogue of concepts.

The study does not make clinical diagnoses of Matar's characters or narrators. Terms such as trauma, psychological displacement, grief, and estrangement are used as literary-analytical categories referring to narrative representations, patterns of memory, and forms of subjectivity. This distinction is especially important in reading *A Month in Siena*, where bereavement is related comparatively to exile without being equated with politically coerced displacement.

The study also distinguishes between narrator, character, and author. Because Matar's fiction and memoir draw upon recognisable historical and biographical circumstances, there is a temptation to treat every fictional representation as direct autobiography. The present analysis avoids that reduction. The novels are treated as literary constructions with their own narrative perspectives, while *The Return* and *A Month in Siena* are read as memoiristic works in which recollection, selection, and aesthetic shaping remain central. This distinction is necessary when discussing psychological experience: the article interprets representations of fear, trauma, grief, and estrangement rather than diagnosing either the author or the characters.

The analytical procedure proceeds in three stages. First, each primary text is read independently to identify its dominant form of rupture and the narrative mechanisms through which that rupture is represented. Second, the texts are compared according to recurring categories—home, family, memory, absence, silence, temporality, and artistic representation. Third, the comparison is interpreted through the selected theoretical lenses. This prevents theory from determining the textual reading in advance and allows the language and narrative structure of each work to establish the particular form of displacement under discussion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Edward Said and the Divided Consciousness of Exile

Edward Said's understanding of exile is central to this study because it extends the meaning of displacement beyond the physical act of leaving one's homeland. In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Said presents exile as a condition marked by distance, rupture, contradiction, and an enduring sense of disconnection from an uncomplicated idea of belonging. Exile, therefore, is not merely a movement from one geographical location to another; it can also become a deeply psychological and cultural experience.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of Hisham Matar's works, where characters continue to maintain a complex relationship with Libya even when they are physically separated from it. The homeland remains present in their consciousness through memories, family histories, personal attachments, and experiences of loss. At the same time, Libya becomes difficult to recover as the familiar place it once was. It exists simultaneously as a real geographical space, an imagined homeland, a repository of memories, and a source of emotional pain. Said's concept of exile thus helps illuminate the divided consciousness experienced by Matar's characters. Their displacement does not simply place them between two countries; rather, it creates a tension between different versions of the self—between the person they were, the person they have become, and the person they might have been had they remained in their homeland. Exile consequently becomes an ongoing psychological condition in which questions of identity, memory, belonging, and loss remain unresolved.

Cathy Caruth and the Persistence of Trauma

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* provides another important theoretical lens for this study. Caruth understands trauma as an experience that cannot always be fully understood or assimilated at the moment it occurs. Instead, its effects may emerge later through repetition, fragmented recollection, silence, and belated recognition. Trauma can therefore remain active in the consciousness of the individual even after the immediate event has passed.

This understanding is particularly useful in examining Hisham Matar's narratives, which repeatedly return to experiences of disappearance, political fear, grief, violence, and unresolved loss. The past in these works does not remain confined to a particular historical moment. Rather, it continues to intrude upon the present through memories, questions, silences, and attempts to reconstruct what has been lost. The absence of definitive answers often becomes itself a source of psychological distress. Caruth's theory consequently helps explain the relationship between trauma and narrative in Matar's writing. His characters frequently struggle to establish a clear and continuous relationship between past and present because traumatic experiences disrupt ordinary patterns of memory and understanding. Psychological displacement, therefore, is not only a consequence of geographical exile but also a disruption of temporal continuity, in which the past remains unfinished and continues to shape the individual's present sense of self.

Memory Studies: Halbwachs and Ricoeur

Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory provides an important framework for understanding how individual memories are shaped by social relationships and shared cultural experiences. According to Halbwachs, memory is not formed entirely within the individual mind; rather, it develops within the social frameworks to which individuals belong. Family, community, culture, and historical circumstances influence what is remembered, how it is remembered, and how the past is given meaning. This perspective is particularly relevant to Hisham Matar's writing, where personal memories of Libya are closely connected with family experiences, political repression, cultural belonging, and the memories of a homeland that has been transformed by violence and displacement.

In Matar's works, remembering Libya is therefore not simply an act of recalling a geographical place. Memories of the homeland are mediated through family narratives, childhood experiences, political events, and the stories surrounding absence and loss. Individual memory becomes connected to a larger history that extends beyond the individual. The memories of fathers, families, political prisoners, exiles, and those who disappeared contribute to a broader understanding of how authoritarian violence affects not only individuals but also the collective memory of a society.

Paul Ricoeur's work on memory, history, and forgetting further strengthens this framework by drawing attention to the complex relationship between remembering and historical reconstruction. Memory cannot always be treated as a complete or objective recovery of the past. It is selective, interpretative, and sometimes marked by gaps and uncertainty. At the same time, memory remains essential to the preservation of personal and collective identity. What is remembered, what is forgotten, and what remains uncertain can all influence how individuals understand themselves and their relationship with history.

This tension is particularly evident in **The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between**. Matar's remembered Libya is shaped by childhood memories, family narratives, exile, and years of separation, while the Libya he encounters upon his return is a country marked by political and historical transformation. The remembered homeland and the encountered homeland are therefore not identical. Yet neither completely replaces the other. Instead, they exist alongside one another, creating a complex relationship between memory, history, place, and identity. Halbwachs and Ricoeur consequently help this study examine memory not as a simple record of the past but as an active process through which Matar's characters—and Matar himself in his memoir—attempt to understand loss, belonging, and the continuing presence of the past.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND SCHOLARLY POSITIONING

Scholarship on Matar has increasingly moved from political testimony toward questions of trauma, narrative form, memory, fatherhood, disappearance, return, and aesthetic experience. John Kearney's discussion of traumatised narrators establishes the importance of narrative trauma in Matar's fiction, while HyunAh Kim's study of state violence in *In the Country of Men* connects authoritarian repression to family trauma. Bugeja's 2023 article on *A Month in Siena* is especially relevant to the present study because it considers the memoir's aesthetic response to the continuing absence of Matar's father and the possibility of articulating grief through the spaces and paintings of Siena.

Recent scholarship on *The Return* further expands this field. Noha Hanafy's 2024 article reads the memoir's journey in relation to freedom, confinement, and the problematization of home, showing that home cannot be reduced to geographical location. Research published in 2025 and 2026 likewise emphasizes belonging, estrangement, memory, and the continuing force of paternal absence. Eman Ghanem's 2026 study of *Anatomy of a Disappearance* foregrounds trauma, loss, narrative fragmentation, and diaspora, while Serdzhanyan Ibryam Hasan's 2026 study of *The Return* examines estrangement, sensory memory, shifting temporalities, and unstable belonging.

These studies demonstrate that Matar scholarship has developed substantial accounts of individual texts and individual themes. The more specific gap addressed here is comparative: relatively little attention has been given to how four texts across fiction and memoir can be read as distinct stages or configurations of psychological displacement. The present article therefore proposes a four-part comparative model: disturbed childhood security; traumatic familial absence; homecoming and the changed homeland; and bereavement as emotional estrangement. The model is designed to preserve differences rather than erase them.

Childhood, Fear, and the Early Formation of Displacement in *In the Country of Men*

In the Country of Men presents the political atmosphere of Libya in 1979 through Suleiman, a child whose understanding of the adult world is incomplete. The novel's psychological force comes partly from the gap between what the child observes and what he can understand. Political power is not first encountered as an abstract ideology; it is encountered through changes in adult behaviour, secrecy, fear, and the instability of family relationships. Suleiman notices that adults stop talking when he enters a room, that his mother is anxious, and that his father is connected to a dangerous political world. Through these details, Matar makes political oppression part of the child's everyday emotional environment.

The metaphor of the "thread" is significant because it makes nationalism appear both fragile and subject to anxious protection. The narrator's retrospective voice transforms what might seem like a political observation into an insight about the emotional atmosphere created by authoritarian rule. The language of thinness suggests vulnerability, while "guarded" implies coercive vigilance. The quotation therefore links political ideology with psychological insecurity: the political order demands emotional as well as public loyalty.

Suleiman's uncertainty also complicates the conventional definition of exile. He has not physically left Libya and therefore should not be described as an exile in the conventional geographical sense. Nevertheless, his relationship with home is already becoming estranged. The home that should provide continuity becomes associated with secrecy and danger. Psychological displacement can therefore precede geographical displacement. The child remains physically located in his homeland while becoming emotionally less secure within it.

The adult retrospective perspective intensifies this process. The narrator looking back on childhood possesses knowledge that the child did not possess at the time. Memory consequently becomes an interpretive activity rather than a simple record. Earlier confusion can be re-read in the light of later knowledge. Political violence thus becomes part of the adult self's attempt to understand childhood. Home is remembered neither as a simple refuge nor as a wholly lost paradise, but as a place where intimacy and fear coexisted.

Absence, Uncertainty, and the Unfinished Self in Anatomy of a Disappearance

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, psychological displacement is organized around the disappearance of Nuri's father. The absence is particularly traumatic because it lacks finality. Death can establish painful knowledge, whereas disappearance leaves the possibility of return open and therefore sustains uncertainty. Nuri grows up with an absence that remains psychologically present. The missing father occupies the centre of the son's emotional life precisely because there is no definitive explanation.

The simile turns absence into physical weight. Absence is not represented as emptiness but as pressure, and the image of a child sitting on the narrator's chest suggests restriction of movement and breath. The sentence also establishes the instability of memory: at other moments the father's face becomes difficult to recall. Matar thus juxtaposes excessive presence with threatened visual disappearance. The father is simultaneously too present emotionally and inaccessible materially.

The balanced syntax of the sentence reproduces the unresolved condition of disappearance. The repeated "I don't" refuses closure in either direction. Nuri is suspended between two incompatible possibilities, and the sentence's symmetry becomes a formal representation of uncertainty. Caruth's account of trauma is useful here because the event cannot be assimilated as completed knowledge; its meaning continues to occupy the present.

The father's absence becomes a problem of identity as well as grief. Nuri must construct his understanding of family through memories, fragments, partial information, and unanswered questions. The question of where his father is therefore becomes inseparable from questions about who his father was, what happened to him, and which parts of family history remain inaccessible. Political violence becomes intimate: repression is experienced as a disturbance in knowledge, family continuity, and self-understanding.

Return, Memory, and the Changed Homeland in The Return

The Return: Fathers, Sons, and the Land in Between presents the apparent opposite of exile: homecoming. Yet Matar uses return to demonstrate why geographical presence cannot automatically repair psychological displacement. The narrator returns to Libya after years away, but he encounters a homeland that exists simultaneously in memory and in present reality. The remembered Libya is connected with childhood, family, and emotional familiarity; contemporary Libya has changed during his absence, and the returning subject has changed as well.

Although the statement comes from Matar's discussion of *In the Country of Men*, it provides a useful formulation of the affective intensity that informs *The Return*. Attachment is plural—"different ways"—yet Libya retains an "urgent" claim. The word suggests that belonging is not merely sentimental or voluntary; it persists as an emotional demand. *The Return* turns this urgency into a narrative encounter with a country that is both familiar and altered.

Memory tends to preserve selected moments and relationships, while lived places continue to change. The narrator therefore cannot simply exchange the remembered homeland for the contemporary one. Both versions remain part of his experience. Ricoeur's distinction between memory and historical reconstruction is useful here: remembering is not the same as recovering the past exactly as it was. Memory gives meaning to experience without reproducing the past without alteration.

The father's disappearance intensifies the difficulty of return. Libya is not merely the country of childhood; it is also the place associated with a painful family history. Returning therefore means approaching memories that have remained unresolved. Return becomes a process of negotiation between childhood and adulthood, absence and presence, memory and reality, and belonging and estrangement. Physical return does not end exile; it reveals what exile has done to the subject's relationship with home.

Grief and Emotional Displacement in A Month in Siena

A Month in Siena extends Matar's exploration of displacement into the terrain of bereavement and aesthetic experience. The memoir follows Matar's encounter with Siena and the paintings that become occasions for reflection on mortality, beauty, memory, and loss. The text is important because it raises a conceptual question: can emotional estrangement be understood through the language of exile without equating bereavement with political exile?

The phrase "new terrain" converts grief into spatial language. The terrain is not geographical in the ordinary sense; it names an altered emotional world that must be navigated after loss. The verb "continue" is equally important because it frames grief not as a problem that can be solved but as a changed condition of living. Painting becomes a means of moving through this terrain without claiming that art restores what has been lost.

Political exile and bereavement remain historically different. Political exile involves geographical and often coercive displacement, while bereavement results from the loss of a person and the emotional world structured around that relationship. Nevertheless, Matar shows that loss can make a familiar world feel altered. The body remains in place, but its emotional coordinates have changed. The value of A Month in Siena to the present argument therefore lies in extending the category of psychological displacement rather than redefining grief as political exile.

Bugeja's study of the memoir's "orphaned memory" is useful here because it draws attention to the relationship between Siena, aesthetic experience, and the absent father. Art functions as a mediated form of encounter: it does not provide factual closure, but it offers a language through which absence can be contemplated. This develops a recurring pattern across Matar's works in which writing and art preserve traces without restoring the lost object.

A Month in Siena makes the spectrum broader by showing that emotional displacement does not always depend on migration. The death of the mother alters the emotional structure of the world even though the narrator remains physically free to move through it. Siena becomes a reflective space in which paintings, streets, and memories acquire new significance. The city does not replace Libya, and grief does not reproduce exile; rather, the memoir demonstrates that displacement can describe a transformation in the relationship between the self and a previously familiar world.

The Return changes the spatial logic of displacement. The subject who was previously separated from Libya physically returns, but the return reveals that geographical proximity does not recreate historical time. The memoir's importance lies in its refusal of a simple homecoming narrative. The country has changed, the narrator has changed, and memory has selected and preserved particular versions of the past. The resulting encounter is neither simple recovery nor complete alienation. It is a negotiation in which belonging must be reconstructed in the present.

In Anatomy of a Disappearance, the narrative problem becomes more concentrated. Disappearance creates an absence without a stable ending. Because the father is neither definitively present nor definitively recoverable, the son is forced into a permanent interpretive position. Memory becomes investigative: recollection is not simply a return to what was known but an attempt to determine what might have happened. The narrative consequently produces a relationship between memory and uncertainty. Nuri's identity develops around an unanswered question, and the missing father becomes a negative centre around which family history is organized.

The novel's domestic spaces are therefore politically charged. The home is not destroyed physically, yet its emotional function changes. A room in which adults stop speaking is no longer simply a private space; it becomes a space organized by surveillance and secrecy. This transformation is crucial to the article's definition of psychological displacement. Displacement can begin when the familiar environment ceases to provide the emotional security that gives the idea of home its meaning.

A closer attention to narrative perspective reveals why *In the Country of Men* is especially important to the spectrum model. Suleiman's limited understanding produces a double temporality: events are experienced by the child and interpreted by the adult narrator. The distance between those two positions is itself a form of psychological displacement. The adult knows that apparently ordinary domestic scenes carried political danger, whereas the child can register only fragments—silences, changes in tone, anxious behaviour, and forbidden subjects. The reader is consequently placed between immediate perception and retrospective knowledge. Political repression becomes psychologically powerful not because the child possesses complete political knowledge, but because he senses that the world of adults contains meanings from which he is excluded.

Memory and the Reconstruction of the Self

Across the four works, memory functions as both continuity and disturbance. It preserves relationships that physical circumstances have disrupted, but it also keeps painful experiences active. The absent father survives through recollection; childhood Libya survives through narrative; the lost and altered familial world remains present through grief and artistic contemplation. Memory therefore becomes one of the principal means through which Matar's subjects maintain relationships with what is no longer fully available.

At the same time, Matar does not treat memory as an exact archive. The child remembers differently from the adult; the exile remembers differently from the returnee; the grieving person remembers from within a changed emotional world. Memory is reconstructed from the standpoint of the present. This is consistent with Ricoeur's emphasis on the complex relationship between remembering, forgetting, and historical understanding. Halbwachs's concept of collective memory also clarifies why personal memory in Matar is never purely private. Family, community, political history, and cultural identity provide the frameworks within which individual experience becomes meaningful.

The paradox is that memory both sustains identity and complicates belonging. Without memory, the subject risks losing continuity with the past; with memory, the past remains capable of causing pain. Matar's narratives therefore refuse the idea that forgetting is a simple cure. The task is instead to develop a way of living with memory without allowing the past to become the only possible present.

Home, Belonging, and the Divided Self

The meaning of home changes across Matar's selected works. At first, home appears as a physical and familial space, but political fear, disappearance, exile, return, and grief gradually transform it into a more complex psychological construct. A house may remain standing while the people who made it meaningful disappear. A country may remain geographically recognisable while the individual who returns to it has changed. Home is therefore produced through relationships and memory as much as through territory.

This explains why Matar's subjects can experience belonging and estrangement at the same time. Suleiman belongs to Libya but experiences the weakening of safety within it. Nuri's relationship to home is marked by the absence of his father. The narrator of *The Return* belongs to Libya through family and memory, yet his years away prevent a complete return to the past. In *A Month in Siena*, emotional displacement temporarily separates the narrator from an earlier sense of the familiar world. Said's divided consciousness therefore receives an intimate dimension: the division is between childhood and adulthood, presence and absence, remembered and actual places, and earlier and present versions of the self.

Silence, Uncertainty, and the Burden of the Unspoken

Silence is a recurring form of psychological pressure in Matar's writing. Under political repression, words may become dangerous, and families learn to communicate through avoidance, gesture, and incomplete explanations. Children perceive that adults know more than they say. Important events remain unexplained. The result is an environment in which uncertainty becomes part of everyday life.

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, silence is particularly significant because the father's disappearance leaves the son without definitive knowledge. Silence therefore becomes more than an absence of speech; it

becomes an absence of explanation and closure. In *In the Country of Men*, silence also shapes childhood consciousness. Suleiman encounters a world in which adults cannot freely express what they know. Matar thereby shows how authoritarian conditions affect not only what people say but how younger generations learn to understand trust, fear, and relationships.

Writing, Art, and the Possibility of Reconciliation

One of the most important connections among Matar's works is the movement from unresolved experience toward artistic representation. Writing cannot restore the missing father, undo political violence, or bring the dead back to life. Yet narrative gives experiences a form in which they can be revisited and interpreted. In *A Month in Siena*, painting provides a parallel mode of contemplation. Art does not erase grief; it creates a space in which grief can be encountered indirectly.

Writing consequently becomes an act of reconstruction. The adult narrator returns to childhood, family history, disappearance, political violence, and grief from the standpoint of the present. The past is neither simply repeated nor finally resolved. Instead, narrative allows the subject to establish a relationship with what remains. What takes place is better described as a reconciliation with memory than a recovery of what has been lost. Matar's narratives propose that language, narrative, and art can help the individual live with absence while retaining the significance of what has been lost.

Comparative Discussion: A Four-Stage Spectrum of Psychological Displacement

Read together, the four works reveal a progression in the forms through which displacement is experienced. *In the Country of Men* begins with disturbed childhood security under political fear. *Anatomy of a Disappearance* transforms political repression into familial absence and uncertainty. *The Return* examines what happens when the exiled subject physically returns to the homeland. *A Month in Siena* moves toward bereavement and emotional estrangement, extending the study of displacement into the personal sphere.

The comparison can be seen more clearly in the following four-part model:

Text	Primary rupture	Psychological form	Response
<i>In the Country of Men</i>	Security under authoritarian fear	Internal/political displacement	Retrospective memory
<i>Anatomy of a Disappearance</i>	Father's disappearance	Traumatic absence and uncertainty	Searching and narration
<i>The Return</i>	Disjunction between remembered and present Libya	Homecoming as negotiation	Memory and historical reconstruction
<i>A Month in Siena</i>	Bereavement and altered emotional world	Emotional displacement	Artistic contemplation

This model is not intended as a psychological diagnosis or as a rigid sequence. It is a literary way of showing how the source and experience of rupture change from one work to another. For Suleiman, the disrupted element is childhood security. For Nuri, it is the presence and knowability of the father. For the narrator of *The Return*, it is the uncomplicated relationship with homeland. For the narrator of *A Month in Siena*, it is the emotional world altered by loss. In each case, something that once provided continuity becomes unstable, and the subject must negotiate a changed world.

The four texts therefore reveal continuities without erasing crucial differences. Political exile is historically distinct from bereavement; traumatic absence differs from homecoming; and childhood insecurity differs from adult reflection. What connects them is the disturbance of continuity. The self can no longer inhabit its earlier relationship with home, family, or the world without reinterpretation. This is the precise sense in which exile can be understood as a spectrum of psychological displacement in Matar's writing.

Seen together, these differences make the central argument clearer. Psychological displacement should not be treated as a substitute for the historical concept of exile. Rather, it names the continuing psychological effects and literary representations that emerge when an established relationship between self and world is disrupted. The spectrum is therefore relational, not diagnostic. It measures changes in the subject's relationship with home, family, memory, and belonging rather than assigning clinical categories to characters or narrators.

The comparison also clarifies the role of silence. Silence under dictatorship is associated with danger and self-protection. Silence after disappearance becomes an absence of explanation. Silence during return is filled by archives, memories, conversations, places, and encounters that cannot completely resolve the past. In grief, silence becomes contemplative: art permits attention to what cannot be directly recovered. Across the four texts, silence therefore changes from political constraint to familial uncertainty, historical incompleteness, and aesthetic reflection.

The model also reveals a change in the function of memory. In the first novel, memory interprets childhood from the standpoint of adult knowledge. In the second, memory attempts to reconstruct a missing father and incomplete family history. In the memoir of return, memory is tested against physical and historical reality. In *A Month in Siena*, memory becomes a means of living with bereavement through aesthetic contemplation. Memory therefore changes from retrospective interpretation to investigative reconstruction, then to negotiation with place, and finally to contemplative preservation.

The four-stage model can be further clarified through the relation between presence and absence. In *In the Country of Men*, presence is unstable: family members are physically present but psychologically altered by political fear. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, absence becomes literal and sustained: the father is missing, yet his absence dominates the son's consciousness. In *The Return*, physical presence is restored but historical presence is not: the narrator can stand in Libya but cannot stand inside the past he remembers. In *A Month in Siena*, the lost person is absent while memory and art create forms of symbolic presence. The sequence therefore moves through four configurations—unstable presence, traumatic absence, problematic return, and mediated presence.

CONCLUSION

Hisham Matar's selected works present exile as an experience that exceeds the moment of geographical departure. His characters and narrators are separated from places, people, relationships, and earlier versions of themselves, and these separations continue to influence identity long after the immediate event has passed. In *In the Country of Men*, political fear enters childhood and weakens the sense of home as a secure space. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father's disappearance creates an enduring absence around which the son's identity develops. In *The Return*, physical homecoming exposes rather than eliminates the distance between memory and present reality. In *A Month in Siena*, bereavement produces emotional displacement and opens a different but related way of thinking about loss.

The theoretical framework of Said, Caruth, Halbwachs, and Ricoeur helps clarify these patterns. Said illuminates the divided consciousness of exile; Caruth helps explain the persistence of traumatic experience; Halbwachs situates personal memory within social frameworks; and Ricoeur highlights the reconstructive and incomplete character of remembering. Used together, these perspectives show that Matar's subjects do not simply move from past to present. They continually negotiate between them.

The treatment of *A Month in Siena* requires particular care. Grief should not be equated with political exile, since the historical and geographical conditions are different. Nevertheless, Matar's memoir demonstrates how bereavement can produce emotional estrangement: the world remains physically available while its former emotional meaning has been altered. Keeping this distinction in place actually strengthens the broader argument that psychological displacement can take different forms.

What finally emerges from these works is that exile in Matar is not simply a matter of distance from a homeland. It is a change in the relationship between the self and the idea of home. Home survives as

memory, but memory is never complete; return restores geographical proximity, but not the past; writing and art preserve experience, but do not reverse loss. The subject must instead learn to live with the coexistence of presence and absence. Matar's achievement lies in making this psychological process visible without reducing his characters to political symbols. His narratives show that history becomes intimate when it enters family life, childhood, memory, and grief. Exile consequently becomes a continuing negotiation rather than a single event.

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