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Longing and Belonging in Hisham Matar's *A Month in Siena*

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Abstract

The sense of longing and belonging overwhelms diasporic individuals, and Hisham Matar is no exception. His memoirs are living proof of the author's inner search for balance. In his work *A Month in Siena*, Matar embarks on a journey to a new space—a third space between his homeland and host land. Hisham visits Siena for the sake of the galleries the city possesses and the paintings it bestows for the beholder to contemplate and meditate. This paper then aims to examine how Matar navigates and transforms these intense emotions through the lens of art in Siena and seeks to uncover the psychological depth of his journey and the underlying motivations and implications of his engagement with paintings. Mainly, through Freudian and Jungian lenses, this paper links the fragmented aspects of the memoir to illustrate how time and place interplay in reinforcing the protagonist's struggle and the author's conscious and unconscious strategies to overcome such a predicament.

Key words: Longing; Belonging; Diaspora; Exile; Time; Space

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INTRODUCTION

"Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground."

There is no more mesmerizing way to commence a paper than with Alexander Pope's timeless poetry. His verses touch upon various human conditions physically, mentally, and spiritually. These very lines embody the human natural sense of belonging and the poet's deep feeling of longing that nudges him to compose. One's own land always holds a pivotal place in one's heart. Any detachment from it evokes the alarming sense of yearning. As belonging is associated with the feeling of acceptance, longing is linked to dissatisfaction; both emotions disturb the mind and heart of the diasporic individual. Exile intensifies this turmoil, amplifying the thirst for a place to belong.

It is this lost or distorted space that offers a place for a longing-belonging connection to be established. Longing for a seemingly lost connection (with one's own ground) typically entails feelings of alienation and separation (Chase & Shaw, 1989). "True belonging, however, does not rest in inclusion to ... spaces" (Wilson, Breen, & DuPré, 2019, p. 3). That is to say, it is crucial to avoid confining a multifaceted concept like 'space' to its tangible form, especially when discussing the situation of the exiled. These complex feelings of longing and belonging require an exploration of their causes and effects on the physical, psychological, social, and historical sides of the diasporic victims.

Hisham Matar's works are deeply embedded with these diasporic issues. Throughout his journeys, as depicted in his memoirs, to his homeland Libya in *The Return* and from Libya to Siena in *A Month in Siena*, the reader discovers both a physical and an inner journey. Matar reconstructs the lost connection with his father through memory, land, and art. "While Matar's journey might have essentially been about finding his father, it slowly became a journey of producing a meaning of home and a sense of belonging" (Hanafy, 2024, p. 187). Besides

space, the interplay between the past, present, and future plays a pivotal role in reinforcing Matar's longing and belonging senses. Matar's search for the past is not fueled by nostalgia but rather by a desire to reconcile with his own nation and reclaim a lost identity (Jemia, 2019, p. 45).

While Hisham Matar's works, particularly his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *The Return*, have received considerable scholarly attention, studies that address the themes of longing and belonging in *A Month in Siena* are noticeably absent. This paper seeks to sightsee how Matar endures, surmounts, and tames these savage impulses into a pure sublimation. After failing to find a trace of his father in *The Return*, the author embarks on a new journey to Siena. Through art, he seeks a connection, engaging imaginatively with paintings. This paper aims to unveil the psychological depth of the author's endeavor and uncover the reasons behind this adoption, as well as the causes and effects of such behaviors.

SHADOWS OF HOME

Unlike typical diasporic stories that take place either in the protagonist's homeland or host land, Hisham Matar's memoir unfolds in a third space, in-between the former and the latter—in Siena. By writing a memoir and using his real name, Matar transmits a clear message that this is a true experience, not fiction. This narrative comes not from the imagination but from the lived life of Hisham Matar, who is just one of many diasporic authors and artists sharing the experience of exile and opting for art as a means to release their captivated emotions and to share their journey.

From the very beginning, the light presence of his wife, Diana—as light as an angel, a spirit, or an idea—imbues her character with rich symbolism. Diana accompanies her husband only in the earlier stages of his journey and then returns home, allowing him to continue alone. "I missed her immediately" (Matar, 2019, p. 40), Hisham utters as soon as he drops his wife at the bus station. Indeed, immediately, a change overtakes him. Looking at paintings, the purpose behind his visit to Siena ceases to entertain him. It is as if the absence of Diana signifies the absence of meaning, and the bridge that connects his perception is destroyed. One might say she represents the thread that connects his homeland, his host country, his self, and his split mind after leaving home and becoming a victim of exile.

Diana, with her lightness and slippery nature like a dream, is not confined to one singular meaning or interpretation; rather, she embodies a sense of balance and equilibrium for the protagonist. This equilibrium bestows Hisham with an illusory sense of safety, obscuring his troubled heart and mind. When she accompanies him, he finds solace in paintings and art, colorful and full of life. When he is alone, he gravitates toward cemeteries, gloominess, and death. According to the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, a "dream is […] on the one hand the fulfillment of a wish, and on the other the fulfillment of a fear" (Freud, 1931, p. 412). In this context, Diana represents both the wish for balance and the fear of imbalance.

The presence and absence of Diana plays a pivotal role in creating an interplay between Hisham's conscious and unconscious mind. Her presence brings him delight and shields him from the overwhelming feelings of longing and the intense desire for belonging and home. Essentially, she serves as his drug, his opium, distracting him from his inner struggle. Silberer's theory of the hypnagogic state suggests that "the hypnagogic state that emerges in connection with awakening or falling asleep was autosymbolic and represented the physical or the mental state of the subject" (Gyimesi, 2017, p. 41). Diana's absence forces Hisham to become a victim of this hypnagogic state—the transitional phase between wakefulness and sleep—compelling him to face the harsh truth about his lost home or to escape by projecting his sense of home onto Diana. Matar, through the character of Diana, emphasizes that any projection of home onto something or someone else is but a short-term and temporal solution that will eventually fade.

Throughout the memoir, Hisham's beloved activity is visiting galleries and analyzing paintings. These artworks, vibrant and full of stories, provide rich material for his reflections. However, the paintings lose their vividness for him, for he cannot live in the present without Diana or a sense of home. As he poignantly observes, "when one is alone time becomes a room with double windows: one looking into the past, the other into the future" (Matar, 2019, p. 40). Hisham feels trapped in a confined room, like a prisoner with no door to escape, only two windows—one to the lost past and the other to an uncertain future. Both realms are unreachable for Hisham, who admits that "time itself [is] a burden that had to be carried doubtfully and with a quiet show of regret in case fate might decide to double the load" (p. 64).

Hisham, with this third space (Siena) and the third dimension of time (the present), struggles to keep the narration consistent. This imprisonment in an indeterminable space and unattainable time has intensified his state and sense of loss and yearning. He is aware of this as he states, "I am never oblivious to where I am, and how often I have wished to be" (p. 40). He then continues, "It is a truly debilitating state. It fills me with immeasurable anxiety, sorrow and longing" (p. 42). The protagonist's defense mechanism, sublimation, which helps him escape an avalanche of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings in Diana's presence, ceases to function in her absence.

"I walked on and watched the city awake and busy

itself. I followed several individuals from a distance" (p. 53). He wanders lonely as a cloud, in search for his daffodils. Always searching, always looking for something—though he could not find what he's looking for and doesn't know what it is. He knows what he seeks, but he blocks it out and denies it. This aligns with Angeliki Yiassemides's conclusion drawn from Carl Jung's time theory, "*The psyche* – represented by the spatial metaphor of interiority – and *the world* – found in the opposite spatial realm, that of the exterior – convene to create a meaningful connection which is not about the chronological occurrence of the events; it is, nonetheless, dependent on, and created out of its *occurrence in time*." (Yiassemides, 2014, p. 91)

In simpler terms, the inner experiences and the outer world's events assemble to construct meaning in human lives. While this connection is not conditional on the order in which things happen, it still relies on the fact that these events occur over time, influencing our perceptions and interpretations. Likewise, Hisham is still processing his past, which is linked to his homeland and lost father, and that affects his ability to live in the present and perceive his future. His denial of loss drives him to escape through art, to project his homesickness onto Diana, and now to wander in hopes of finding a distraction to silence his thoughts and feelings of longing and belonging. As the journey and story go on, the short-term solutions fade one after another, and the events dust his fake veils to uncover his inner struggle with double consciousness.

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

The duality appears to be a central element in Hisham Matar's memoir. First, the split of the self is illustrated with Hisham and Diana, representing the animus and anima. The second instant is with the memory of his father and mother, the presence of the former and the absence of the latter. The third fragment occurs with the two old ladies, the Nigerian woman and the Italian one. This recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of double consciousness. He argues that this double consciousness represents the separated lives individuals live when governed by both rational thought and spiritual awareness (Emerson, 1950). Here W.E.B. Du Bois draws on Emerson's concept and shapes it, using it to describe the internal conflict African American individuals experience with their double identity. Du Bois describes it as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness […] One ever feels his two-ness […] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." (Du Bois, 1982, p. 45)

I find it legitimate to employ this critical tool and reshape it to decipher Matar's text. Du Bois' view resonates with Hisham's state and his relationship with his wife, Diana. It is needless to talk about her departure and his sense of loss, as I have mentioned it earlier. This two-ness, which depicts the inability to unify oneself that can be classified as negative in Du Bois' discourse, functions in the complete opposite way here. Because Hisham presents the animus and Diana the anima, they need each other to reach unity and completeness—to be one. This aligns with Emma Jung's words: "The anima and animus mutually constellate each other (since an anima manifestation calls forth the animus, and vice versa, producing a vicious circle very difficult to break)." (Jung, 1987, p. 11)

The shadow of the relentless pursuit of his missing father obscures Hisham's other endeavor: the quest to find the lost mother. The search for the father floats on the surface of his mind, while he deeply represses the search for his mother. This double quest translates his dual feelings of longing and belonging. In this sense, Freud argues that "the double is a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development, a phase that we have surmounted, in which it admittedly had a more benign significance." (Freud, 2003, p. 143) His inability to endure the absence of his mother leads him to project this void onto female characters, as we will see with both the Nigerian and Italian ladies.

The Nigerian woman Hisham meets while sitting on a bench in Siena has significance regardless of her short-term presence. She commences speaking to him naturally as if they have known each other for a long time. One of the few words Matar allows her to utter is "Yes, my country." (Matar, 2019, p. 53) And immediately Hisham feels that "something about her made [him] think of [his] mother." Choosing this stranger to be Nigerian is not arbitrary, for Nigeria rings the bell of Africa. And Africa is where Hisham's homeland, Libya, is situated. The Nigerian lady, before leaving the protagonist, "placed a hand on [his] cheek and thanked [him]." (p. 53) This very gesture is peculiar and associated with one's mother. Only mothers behave in such a manner, especially with their beloved son or daughter. Indeed, the lady here, in my judgment, is an embodiment of Hisham's mother and a symbol of his land.

Beatrice, Hisham's Italian friend, is another elderly lady who plays a significant role in his story, much like the Nigerian one. The first interaction between the two is when Hisham receives a phone call from Beatrice. He is "pleased but also hesitant to return the call." (p. 106) I argue that Beatrice symbolizes and embodies his host land, and receiving a call from her is an invitation. Here the duality takes place in his mind; he is content to be accepted elsewhere but at the same time hesitant to answer the offer. Nevertheless, his eager of belonging thrusts him to call back just to find himself invited to Beatrice's birthday party. Hisham easily blends in, save that "all along [he is] aware of a strange distance, a quiet regret, as though [he has] broken a vow." (p. 107) The protagonist's

yearning for his homeland continues to haunt him despite his efforts to heal. Apparently, his strong bond with Libya prevents him from creating an alternative bond with Siena or America.

PEACE AND TOLERANCE

One must be careful not to dive so deeply into the psyche and inner struggles to the extent of neglecting the conscious mind's powerful role in guiding everything. Hisham's journey is governed by his essential quest: to heal through art. "Perhaps the entire history of art is the unfolding of this ambition: that every book, painting, or symphony is an attempt to give a faithful account of all that concerns us." (p. 127) His engagement with the paintings, encompassing reading, interpretation, and active interaction, is itself an ongoing process of recovery and discovery. Through a candid interaction with the art of paint and drawing feathers, Hisham recovers from his disturbed and shattered self and discovers an elevated way to reshape, reform, and remold these impulses of longing and belonging.

In this sense, I find no one who expresses what Matar attempts to show us through his writings better than Carl Jung. He affirms that "art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is [...] a 'man' in a higher sense—he is 'collective man'—one who carries and shapes the unconscious, psychic life of mankind" (Jung, 1933, p. 195). That is to say, art speaks through the artist. Furthermore, the art and artist transcend the individual self to encompass humanity as a whole in the collective unconscious. Jung here underlines the powerful and transformative nature of art and its ability to bridge mankind on a profound psychological level. Art, with its intangible features, may be the only thread that weaves us into a common fabric.

Matar, through the experience of *The Return* and the voyage to Siena, recognizes that the solace for these mental and emotional crises is found in the artistic activities—both the art of writing and the art of enjoying and appreciating the art of others. This solace is weaved with the threads of peace, both inner and outer, which is a true descendant of tolerance. Matar denounces the false division that is guided by misunderstanding and the false advocacy of beliefs based on separation, animosity, and hatred: "as though the point of history [is] to prove ourselves correct, more God-loving, more true, or more human, as though spirituality [is] not the private realm of the heart but rather a race to finish the line where a smiling god would hand out the medals." (Matar, 2019, p. 88) This takes us to the very beginning, in the first pages, when Hisham expresses it explicitly: "What we share is more than what sets us apart." (p. 10)

Eventually, driven by the impulses of longing and belonging associated with time and space, Hisham surmounts this by adopting a transcendentalist doctrine. The attempts to rally space to reconstruct his identity end up getting lost in time, and vice versa. Longing for a lost time and belonging to a lost place are two opposite poles; the closer the protagonist gets to one, the farther he moves from the other. Thus, this linear endeavour is doomed to fail when the view is linear. Hisham understands that moving beyond the boundaries of the self, body, space, and time is a tool to surpass the individual crisis. To absorb this, Hisham keeps visiting Siena's gallery as a reminder: "Diana joined me [...] We went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art a couple of times [...and...] we returned to it almost every week" (p. 127).

Matar's central message in his memoir is an explicit call for meditation and reconsideration of how one perceives and reacts to their struggles. Governed by peace and tolerance, this contemplation should aim for artistic activities. By carefully collecting the pieces scattered by the artist, the beauty of the tableau speaks for itself, demonstrating how fragmented parts can create a harmonious whole. One's inner and personal struggles that seem to belong to the individual are, in fact, a reflection of the collective human experience. In this way, art releases one from all forms of earthly shackles; it actually heals and cures. This recalls Kahlil Gibran's prophet's words: "And when the shadow fades and is no more, the light that lingers becomes a shadow to another light. And thus your freedom, when it loses its fetters, becomes itself the fetter of a greater freedom" (Gibran, 1951, p. 59). The true longing of Hisham Matar is the longing for tolerance and peace, and true belonging is belonging to humanity.

CONCLUSION

A Month in Siena proves to be a journey of contemplation rather than a simple visit to Italy. This physical journey serves as a necessary cover for an inner and spiritual pursuit. Hisham Matar, driven by a longing for lost time and belonging to a lost space, initiates his quest for meaning. The art created by previous artists, who are part of the human race, forms a bridge that facilitates the crossing from the realm of the individual to the vastness of the universe. This philosophy transcends tangible borders and blurs the intangible boundaries between time and space, individualism and collectivism. The shadow of land and nation, which often destabilizes the formation of the identity of diasporic individuals, causing a split in their minds and hearts, is liable to be erased by the light of peace and tolerance.

For double identities, the one inherited and the one acquired, the homeland and the host land, tolerance and acceptance of both is the true cement that brings the divided identity together. With that, the gray area of in-betweenness, or what Bhabha calls third space or interstitial space, where one belongs neither here nor

there, becomes a plain area with incommensurable space for new meanings. In this space, individuals celebrate their double belonging, multiculturalism, and multifaceted identity. This furnishes the foundation for inner peace to be established, which in turn allows relationships with others to be governed by peace and understanding. Thus, the journey towards a reconciliation of one's double identity is not just a personal endeavor but a collective one.

As I draw this paper to a close, I would like to terminate with what I have commenced with, a stanza from Alexander Pope's poem "Ode on Solitude":

> "Blest, who can unconcernedly find
> Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
> In health of body, peace of mind,
> Quiet by day,"

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