“Review of In the Country of Men, Hisham Matar”
By Amina Zarrugh

“Why does our country long for us so savagely? What could we possibly give her that hasn’t already been taken?” asks the nine-year old Libyan protagonist in Hisham Matar’s In the Country of Men. In this novel, Matar, who himself is the son of a Libyan activist who was forcibly disappeared by the regime, details the intimate inquiries of a young boy, Suleiman, simultaneously ambivalent and anxious to understand the changes to which he is witness in his home country of Libya.

Through a narrative of the state’s pursuit of his father, Suleiman details the violent transformation wrought by Libya’s secret police in the years following Muammar Gaddafi’s ascension to power in 1969 via bloodless military coup. For Suleiman, this violence is not an abstraction but a force that pervades every aspect of his life, from the relationships he develops with his friends in the alleys of Tripoli to the invasive search of his home by government informants. Trust is tenuous and the brand of “traitor” tarnishing in Libya under Gaddafi.

The setting for the novel is in the capital city of Tripoli in the late 1970s. This time period introduced to Libya the infrastructure of a police state, replete with secret informants and swift punishments for any form of dissidence. Matar contextualizes this period through descriptions of Suleiman’s father’s connections to the oppositional politics of the student movement, whose members were, in historical fact, targeted with military assault at Tripoli University and, later, deemed “stray dogs” and were victims of assassination attempts overseas.

Within this climate of distrust, fear, and uncertainty, Suleiman observes how neighbors become overseers of opposition, how friends become foes, and how even the most resolute of revolutionary sentiments can be compromised by tactics of intimidation and torture. The emblematic example of these conversions occurs within the person of Suleiman himself as he navigates what to say and do when solicited by informants to reveal the rendez-vous points and names of political opposition leaders.

A recurring theme in the novel is the notion of the “unmentionable.” The precise oppositional practices of his father, which appear to include authoring treatises related to democracy, and the retreats from home they require are obscured through their nomination as “business trips.” His mother’s addiction to a secret elixir, likely alcohol, purchased from the local baker is what Suleiman calls his mother’s “medicine” and her drunkenness is her “illness.” References to the sun, frequent in the novel, are subtle metaphors to Gaddafi, who fashioned Libya symbolically as the shining sun of Africa and himself as a prophetic visionary fated to deliver to the Libyan people a prosperous and bright future. This sun, however, is all encompassing and inescapable and the shade from it is narrow and elusive. As Suleiman’s mother warns, “you must be careful of the sun. It’s okay in the garden, under the trees, but on the naked roof it can kill you, habibi.”
The mighty, lethal quality of the sun and the unmentionables of the novel reiterate the repression, depression, and transgressions produced by and against the regime. This political and social climate has pervasive effects on everyone in the country so much so that politics enter even in the fairytale stories shared between parent and child. Suleiman idolizes the figure of Scheherazade, the storyteller of the infamous *One Thousand and One Nights*, who uses her intellect and intrigue to tell anecdotes so enthralling as to hoodwink the king, Shahryar, into deferring his plans to kill her so as to hear another of her stories. For Suleiman, the figure of Scheherazade is cunning, calculating, and wise but his mother implores him to find another role model as, in her view, “Scheherazade accepted slavery over death.”

This predicament paralleled the choices of many living under the authoritarian regime of Gaddafi – to submit in servitude to the sun or to risk certain death in defiance. That Suleiman as an adult finds himself exiled in Egypt at the conclusion of the novel underlines the only other option to dissidents in Libya, to seek the shade’s refuge through retreat from the country.

As part of the Smithville Public Library’s series “Muslim Journeys: Let’s Talk About it,” a public discussion of *In the Country of Men* will be held at Smithville High School on Monday, September 16th at 6:30 pm.