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**Reinventing the Artistic Self:**  
**Coetzee's *Summertime* and Matar's *In the Country of Men***

By: Rana ElBowety

The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Reinventing the Artistic Self:  
*Coetzee's Summertime and Matar's In the Country of Men*

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By  
Rana Mounir ElBowety

Under the supervision of Dr. Ferial Ghazoul

February/2015

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*To my parents*

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Reinventing the Artistic Self: Coetzee's *Summertime* and Matar's

*In the Country of Men*

Abstract

This thesis attempts to explore the revival of the *Kunstlerroman* genre in two contemporary works of autobiographical fiction: J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006). The two main goals are to examine how an artist (author) reveals elements that have shaped his childhood in their writing in an attempt to reinvent the self in an artistic framework, and to understand how different genres transgress their boundaries to form hybrid genres that do not conform to the norms and conventions of one specific genre. I also explore the intertwining figures of the author, narrator, and protagonist of a story in an attempt to understand the aesthetics of the relationship between the author of a text and the hero he creates. To explain the term 'autobiography' and what it denotes, I refer to several major autobiography theorists such as Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, and James Olney. Additionally, I resort to an essay by Mikhail Bakhtin to decipher the dynamics of the relationship between the author and the hero. The reinvention of the self is a process requiring reliance on recalling the past through memory, which means all that is remembered is somewhat fictionalized and re-ordered; absolute truth cannot be represented. Coetzee and Matar do not only reinvent the self in writing; they consciously and actively participate in the creation of texts that transcend genres, hence defy definition according to set conventions. The outcome is narratives that reveal the reconstruction of the past in writing and new forms that constantly evolve and never fully belong to one particular genre. While *Summertime* resists constituting a definitive subject/protagonist, *In the Country of Men* goes beyond individual life to cover 'everyman'.

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## Introduction

The novel is a literary genre that essentially requires characters and a plot for coherence and significance. According to Katherine Lever, the novel is a “form of written prose narrative of considerable length involving the reader in an imagined real world which is new because it has been created by the author” (16). Characters’ dialogue and actions are the primary vehicle through which the devised plot progresses and becomes meaningful to readers. Characters – the creation of an author – contain within them a fragment of their creator. It is imperative then to understand that literary works of art cease to be entirely fictional, that an author imparts fragments of his self in the making of a novel. Such fragments do not necessarily require explicit referencing in the novel, but may at least be found in the act of constructing the narrative itself.

Within the long tradition of novel writing, the ‘Bildungsroman’, preoccupied with the formation of a protagonist, was given rise to in the nineteenth century, specifically in Germany. The term refers to the education or formation of the hero and portrays his growth to a certain stage of maturity (Swales 12). Stemming from the Bildungsroman is a subgenre called the ‘Kunstlerroman’; a type of novel that explores the growth of an individual who becomes an artist. In some cases, writers openly produce a narrative that can be solidly linked to their real-life personas. These narratives are fictions based on the actual lives of the writers as they draw on their past and present in writing fiction. This thesis focuses on examining the formation of the artist through self-reinvention in two contemporary works of fiction, J. M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* (2003) and Hisham Matar’s *In the Country of Men* (2006), as both novels transcend the defined borders of both fiction and autobiography; *Summertime* defies the traditions of memoir-writing while *In the Country of Men* merges fiction with life-writing.

The introduction is divided into three sections: the first section presents autobiographical fiction as a genre-transcending form of literary art, the second provides an overview of the *Kunstlerroman* as a genre, and the third examines the nature of the relationship between the figures of the author, narrator, and protagonist of a novel.

## **I. Autobiographical Fiction**

This section provides an overview of the genre of fictional autobiography through the exploration of various definitions of the word “autobiography,” the emergence of fictional autobiography with its many forms, and the reasons contemporary writers such as Coetzee and Matar choose to write their stories through reliance on this border-crossing genre.

Autobiographical fiction is a literary genre that combines the traditional characteristics of autobiography, which is – in simple terms – defined as “a biography written by the subject about himself,” and the imaginative and artistic aspects of fiction (Abrams 22). It thus transcends the borders of two types of literature to form a hybrid genre that is not bound to the conventions of the two original genres, but rather molds its own conventions.

The word autobiography has its roots in Greek. In *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*, James Goodwin notes: “The combining stem *auto* means self, self-acting, or self-caused. *Bio* derives from the root meaning in Greek: ‘mode of living’ or, simply, ‘life’. *Graphy* is another combining form; in English this is derived from Greek, with the root meaning ‘to write’” (3). In an essay entitled “Critical Mirrors: Theories of Autobiography,” Charles Berryman states: “The word ‘autobiography’ was invented in 1797 by a linguist who perceived the need for a common term in English to cover the many different accounts that authors make of their own experience” (71). Written for different motives and aims, autobiography – a genre where life, self, and writing converge – becomes a literary documentation of the development of human individuality.

Life-writing is a broad genre of writing that encompasses an array of narrative forms concerned with presenting the self in writing. Over time, the genre branched out to produce a variety of forms and techniques. In *The American Autobiography*, Albert E. Stone maintains: “Autobiography ... is no mere historical record of human events and relationships but a personal synonym and synecdoche of reality” (5). Autobiography then is a representation of reality; it is a lens through which past events are revisited through writing in the present moment. In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin writes, “autobiographical texts do not tell us as much about the autobiographer’s past history as earlier students of the genre wished to believe; they may nevertheless have a good deal to tell us about the autobiographer in the moment of his engagement in the act of composition” (22).

Such definition invites the reader to perceive of autobiography as a metaphor, a symbol of something, be it a specific incident in a writer’s life or the entire world of that writer.

In *The Forms of Autobiography*, William C. Spengemann maintains that “there are those critics who continue to insist that autobiography must employ biographical ... materials. On the other side, there are those who assert the right of autobiographers to present themselves in whatever form they may find appropriate and necessary” (xii). Spengemann’s statement introduces the two opposing stances of critics while struggling to affirm the conventions that autobiography must comply with or the elements it should contain. One camp of critics and theorists believes that autobiographies must contain factual information that is not in any way remolded in writing using devices of fiction. The other camp supports the notion that autobiographers are the ultimate authority in conveying their life stories, which grants them the right to employ whatever modes or forms they deem necessary for the conveyance of their stories. Although Spengemann does not side with one group or the other, he reaches the

conclusion that in order to recognize an autobiography or label a work of literature as such, one must be able to detect “evidence that the writer’s self is either the primary subject or the principle object of the verbal action” (xvi). Out of this statement, one could conclude that in order for a narrative to be considered autobiographical, the writer must construct and build the self he creates in writing by means of drawing upon his own. In other words, autobiographers are expected to form a self in writing that both embraces and stems from their own. Autobiography then is not the retelling of a life; it is rather a means of rediscovering or recreating it by modeling a self on the writer’s own. According to James Goodwin in *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*, “Autobiography is retrospective ... An autobiography represents the writer's effort, made at a certain stage of life, to portray the meaning of personal experience as it has developed over the course of a significant period of time or from the distance of that significant time period” (11). Goodwin’s interpretation of autobiography is an appeal to read autobiography as a form of commentary, through retrospective writing, on the writer’s past experiences.

But if autobiography is retrospective, as Goodwin indicates, then it must rely on memory. Memory contains shards of all that composes one's self; it encompasses love, anguish, anger, nostalgia, as well as other emotions and experiences. Yet, memory is unreliable; it often distorts those fragments and recreates them, and in the process transforms the self. Stone suggests that “memory actually obscures the shape of the self by setting up false categories” (*American Autobiography* 7). Several factors contribute to this distortion or unreliability, such as time, age, experience, and emotions. With time, certain memories may fade while others become more pronounced through similar, more current experiences. When strongly moved by an incident or a sentiment, a writer often subconsciously brings forth to his mind specific memories that emphasize or strengthen his or her current state of mind, as the mind turns to its past experiences

in order to formulate a means of dealing with the present. James Olney maintains: “Where does a mind discover itself and know itself except in memory?” (*Memory and Narrative* 67) Yet Olney’s question does not turn to the mechanisms of recalling memories in the present moment. Although a writer may rely on memory to reconstruct his earlier life, “the past evades complete recapture, especially as it recedes further back in time. Memory reconstructs and recreates, often more with an eye toward the present moment of remembering than toward the past experience remembered” (Goodwin 12). In his article on autobiography, Sabry Hafez emphasizes this notion by saying that the process of narrating the past is primarily an imaginative one where things are recalled from the past into the present and then transformed once more upon putting the recollections into writing (8). Memory tends to be fallible and is always selective. An artist writing an autobiography or memoir is necessarily structuring the material into an artistic composition. When a writer resorts to this unreliable memory, he is inviting the reader to reconsider the text not only as a truthful account of one’s life up to a certain point, but also as one narrative of the self, and in such case, a fictional one, since “[r]eaders, too, are travelers and interviewers” (*American Autobiography* 9).

An understanding of fictional autobiography entails understanding at least a little of the author’s life, not just that of his protagonist; when a reader approaches a text which he knows contains autobiographical elements, he subconsciously – and almost immediately – associates the author with the narrator or the protagonist of this narrative. Autobiographical fictions are indicative of the writer’s state of being at the time he wrote them. Therefore, even if a narrative comprises elements of fiction, the method of writing reveals something about the writer’s own self at the moment of composition.

But among all definitions of autobiography, the one that strongly asserts that autobiographies are not strictly factual and in fact embrace fiction at their core is James Olney's. According to Olney, "[a]n autobiography, if one places it in relation to the life from which it comes, is more than a history of the past and more than a book currently circulating in the world; it is also, intentionally or not, a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition" (*Metaphors of Self* 35). The word 'metaphor' here draws attention to how the self written is not the same as the self lived. It implies that in order for a text to be called autobiographical, it must actually present a model of the self that stands in for the writer's own self. Such mimesis in itself indicates that a process of fictionalization takes place in autobiographical writing, since the act of imitating, no matter how faithful the imitation is, can never be identical to the original model. In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin supports Olney's interpretation: "Autobiography in our time is increasingly understood as both an art of memory and an art of the imagination" (5-6). Eakin's own elucidation of the term 'autobiography' supports the fact that it is not an art of definitive rules or sets of restrictions, but rather one open to fictionalization.

There are various reasons that drive writers to resort to autobiographical fiction in their journey to narrate their life stories. Among the motivations for writing fictional autobiography is the desire for self-representation or self-exploration, revisiting the past, coming to terms with trauma, and articulating what has not been expressed. Out of a multitude of emotions such as confusion, pain, and loss, and sometimes driven by humor or curiosity, a writer is compelled to revisit his or her past – especially if it is traumatic – and reconstruct it in writing.<sup>1</sup>

Writing fictional autobiographies is an exploration of the past as seen through the lens of the present. A writer projects his developed and changed self onto the events of his past, not as

how they occurred but as how his memory and his creativity construct them. This form of writing provides the writer with an opportunity to explore his own formation, to rebuild the past, to inspect all the elements that led to the creation of who he is and what shaped his being. William C. Spengemann lists some of the motives for resorting to different forms of autobiographical writing. These include “[h]istorical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny, poetic self-expression, and poetic self-invention” (xvi). These are reasons why writers may resort to a genre that blurs the line between the autobiographical and the fictional; it gives them room to fictionalize their narratives while telling their own version of their stories. In an article entitled “Finding the Truth in Fiction,” Valerie O’Connor argues that “[f]iction brings out the innermost, invisible springs of life that cannot be revealed in factual narratives”.

Yet another reason why this genre is flourishing is that it finds a wider readership nowadays. It is not only writers who are turning to autobiographical fiction; readers too are finding their way into this genre. If we turn to them, we would see that reading about the experiences and lives of others fulfills an innate need to ground oneself in one’s present reality. Albert E. Stone believes that “we are chiefly interested in autobiographies in order to find out how people, events, things, institutions, ideas, emotions, relationships have become meaningful to a single mind as it uses language to pattern the past” (*American Autobiography* 8). Autobiographical fiction reduces the gap between reader and writer, turning the reading process into a phenomenon where the reader finds it easier to relate to the author’s experience than in fiction. In an essay entitled “Full of Life Now,” Barrett J. Mandel writes:

Readers turn to autobiography to satisfy a need for verifying a fellow human being’s experience of reality. They achieve satisfaction when they feel strongly that the book is true to the experience of the author and when they are aware, to a lesser degree, that the

book is an achievement of a literary construction, making use of pretense as a way of highlighting the opposite, reality (58).

Through the mixture of fact and fiction in a narrative of the self, a reader may be able to understand the formation of a writer's identity, not necessarily through the description of the past, but through the process of writing in the present moment about that past.

## **II. The Kunstlerroman**

Before attempting to define Kunstlerroman, we must first understand the term Bildungsroman. A Bildungsroman, an originally German term, was first used by Karl Morgenstern in the 1820s. This type of novel usually focuses on the moral and psychological growth of its protagonist. There is no particular set of lessons that the protagonist must learn; the novel rather focuses on the journey of its hero and his eventual growth. As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, it presents "the image of *man in the process of becoming*" (*Speech Genres* 19). The plot of such a novel resembles that of quest stories; it depicts a "search for a meaningful existence within society" (Hirsch 297). This type of novel may be described as the overall development of a protagonist, a description general enough to be applied to a wide range of novels. The term has been adapted to English-language novels in the twentieth century and has expanded to encompass novels where the central plot features the mental and psychological growth of the protagonist. A subcategory of the Bildungsroman is the Kunstlerroman. While still retaining the basic features of a Bildungsroman, the Kunstlerroman is a novel about "the growth of a novelist or other artist from childhood into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of the protagonist's artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft" (Abrams 193).



The *Kunstlerroman* intersects with life-writing; the two genres are in effect about the figure of the author, in spite of the stark differences between the structures of both works. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately draw lines between autobiography and *Kunstlerroman*. A *Kunstlerroman* centers around a hero in the making, usually tracing the hero's growth until he becomes an artist, and expounds on the relation between him and the world. Since the hero, who normally represents the author, is in the process of becoming, he no longer remains a constant in the plot, rather becoming what Bakhtin calls a "variable" (*Speech Genres* 21). The hero emerges from the realm of idealism and as the novel progresses he is immersed in sobriety. While in a *bildungsroman* a hero can resign and give in to the demands of his life, a *Kunstlerroman*'s hero resists the mundane routine hurled at him by the society. According to Bakhtin, "[c]hanges in the hero himself acquire *plot* significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed" (21). To elucidate, the protagonist himself obtains the same level of importance as the plot and the direction of plot events is influenced by changes in the hero's life.

Yet the traditional *Kunstlerroman* prototype is no longer copied in contemporary works; while Matar's and Coetzee's novels do not precisely adhere to the *Kunstlerroman* model, both of them probe the life of the artist at an early stage of his life. *In the Country of Men* is a narrative of a Libyan childhood experienced by nine-year old Suleiman, a boy who transitions from innocence to maturity through the disappearance of his father under Gaddafi's rule in 1979 Libya. Suleiman provides a firsthand account of his father's persecution by the regime for the father's involvement in the opposition. The reader experiences Suleiman's life and is in a position of monitoring the gradual growth and disillusionment of the nine-year old as he comes face-to-face with the imperfections of his family and the ruthlessness of his country's regime. On the other hand, *Summertime* is a narrative of a man's life published posthumously through the

perspective of five people who were acquainted with him during an early stage of his life as an artist. The five characters provide varying insights into the life and mind of J. M. Coetzee the character through a not-so-reliable biographer and interviewer. Coetzee the character, dead in the narrative, is remembered as a struggling artist and relatively unimportant man to those who knew him during the 1970s. The author presents himself at a stage in life where he was no longer young enough to believe in the flawlessness of life yet not old enough to have achieved something of significance. Therefore, both novels can be categorized as contemporary representatives of the *Kunstlerroman*.

### **III. Author, Narrator, and Protagonist**

One of the problems that arise in forms of literary writing that merge genres is that of voice. Autobiographical novels, regardless of whether the narrative uses first or third person, contain three voices: the author's voice, the narrator's, and the protagonist's. In certain cases, the narrator is the protagonist of the novel. But what is the relationship between the three? Does the "I" in first person narratives such as Matar's narrative refer to the author or the hero of his story? Or does it reference only a persona created by the author but is independent of his own? Philippe Lejeune's *On Autobiography* examines the nature of the relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist to explore the intertwining identities of the three; and Bakhtin's essay "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" lays out the relationship between the author and the hero of his novel.

As Stone notes, "[a]utobiography is, simply and profoundly, personal history" (*American Autobiography* 3). But a personal history is no guarantee of historical accuracy. A personal history of any person is most probably infused with – and constantly reshaped by – that person's memories and experiences as well as the realities they lived. Thus lived realities do not always

act as an equivalent to truth. The notion of truth in itself poses several challenges, for the reader is uncertain what aspect of truth is to be absorbed or believed. There is authorial truth, which is the author's own account of his life. There is emotional truth, which could be understood as the truth that manifests itself in a writer's personal recollections and the manner in which he conveys his emotions in writing. And there is historical truth, which comprises facts that may be derived from actual records. These records document solid realities which can be easily verified. The authorial truth is put into question in light of the intertwining of fact and fiction. It is challenged by the reader, who becomes aware as the reading process unfolds that the narrative is neither entirely autobiographical, in the limited, traditional sense of the word, nor entirely fictional: "The presence of fiction in autobiography ... tends to make us uneasy, for we instinctively feel that autobiography is – or ought to be – precisely non-fiction" (Eakin 9).

On the diminishing distance in traditional distinctions between autobiography as "history" and novel as "fiction," Stone writes that new narrative styles, such as autobiographical fiction and fictional memoir, counter the notion of a "verifiable narrative" as well as the idea of a "coherent self" (*Autobiographical Occasions* 270). But whose self is this? Is it the author's, the narrator's, or the protagonist's? Such a blurring of boundaries is expected to disorient or perhaps mislead readers who believe that expressing or portraying an individual identity is the main goal of autobiographical writing. In *On Autobiography*, Lejeune defines autobiography as a "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Such a definition sheds light on four essential elements in an autobiography; the form of language, the subject treated in the text, the author's situation, and the narrator's position. Lejeune argues that if a text is written as a narrative or in prose, the central subject is an "individual life," the author, narrator and

protagonist figures are all identical, and that narrative is retrospective, then the work in question is undoubtedly an autobiography (4).

Thus, a text that does not entirely combine all those elements but has some of them is not an autobiography, but at the same time it is not essentially devoid of autobiographical elements. Although Coetzee's *Summertime* is marketed in the United Kingdom as a fictional memoir, it carries the subtitle 'fiction' in the United States. The fictiveness of this narrative is at once evident when J. M. Coetzee the character is found to be dead. Matar's *In the Country of Men* – as stated openly by the author – is not an autobiography, but it is certainly a narrative that derives its foundations from the author's personal experience and earlier life<sup>2</sup>. For Lejeune, the author "is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two" (11). The author becomes the intermediary between reader and text. He is "simultaneously a socially responsible real person and the producer of a discourse" (11). To readers, an author – whom they would not normally know in person – is known and understood from the narrative he produces; the author exists only insofar as he is the producer of a literary work.

Lejeune argues that an author "cannot be reduced to any of his texts in particular" (11). An author transcends the narrators and protagonists he creates simply because he is the originator of such characters. Yet on the other hand, the use of first-person point of view in Matar's story strengthens the belief that the novel comprises autobiographical elements because of the parallels between the author's and the protagonist's lives at the very least. Yet it is not only that experiences of author and narrator/protagonist are similar or move parallel to each other, the reader finds it easy to associate the "I" in Matar's novel with the author himself or presumes at

least that it is representative of personal experience because the “I” normally refers to the person who is speaking, or – in the case of written discourse – the one who is writing.

However, the use of “I” in writing is problematic since it invites this question: Who is “I”? Is the referent here the entity of the narrator or the author? Could the “I” refer to both author and protagonist? The reader often tends to associate the main character or the hero of the novel with the author. In “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Bakhtin writes: “The artist’s struggle to achieve a determinate and stable image of the hero is to a considerable extent a struggle with himself” (6). The artist/author is then mirroring in his hero his own struggles, which inevitably links both figures on some fundamental level. An understanding of the author as a creator is bound to aid the reader in knowing the author as a person, which, in turn, exposes aspects of the artist’s formation.

According to Lejeune, autobiography is “a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing” (30). This statement implies that an author is not the only figure who can label his work an autobiography – or a fictional one, for that matter – the reader plays a role as important in determining the nature of the text through the reading process. What Lejeune fails to recognize is that even an author whose first work is autobiographical should not be denied the label only because he incorporates fiction in his writing. As readers, we can see parallels – such as the age factor and the father’s disappearance – in the experiences of Matar the author and Suleiman the protagonist. In Matar’s case, which may be argued to be an exception, the reader creates a link between author and narrator or protagonist precisely because of the author’s verifiable past.

The first and second chapters of this thesis focus on exploring the elements that contribute to the formation of the artist, the interplay between memory and truth, the interaction’s role in the creation of an autobiographical work of fiction, and the relationship

between author, narrator, and protagonist, in each novel respectively. The end goal is to trace the processes of reconstructing the past and reinventing the self, and to understand the factors that influence each artist's formation at an earlier stage of his life.

## Chapter Two

### The Self as Other: Coetzee's *Summertime*

*Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.*

George Orwell

With much debate around what autobiography is and what it is not, Orwell's statement still finds relevance in the post-modern world where boundaries between literary genres have not only begun to blur, but to make room for the creation of new interconnected genres. If one applies the notion of trusting autobiographical writing when it exposes the inner imperfections of a writer's life to J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime*, it becomes evident that Coetzee's narrative as a form of fictionalized documentation of a period of his life should not be trusted but rather cautiously probed as an amalgam of fact and fiction, although it does not strictly conform to the genre of autobiography and its conventions.

J. M. Coetzee (1940 - ) is a prolific, acclaimed South African novelist and essayist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003 and won the Booker Prize twice. Coetzee's interest in the constant exchange between autobiography and fiction is traceable to some of his earlier works such as *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). In this novel, the protagonist, Elizabeth, reveals Coetzee's own sense of inevitable reliance on autobiographical material: "Of course we draw upon our own lives all the time—they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource" (12). A novel classified as autobiographical fiction integrates factual and fictional elements. In fiction, an author, usually unintentionally, puts into his characters fragments of his self or of those he knows. But in autobiographical fiction, the similarities between the author's past and that of his protagonist are sometimes too obvious to be overlooked, calling into question the nature of truth

and the authenticity of the narrative. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee writes: “All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography” (391). The statement reflects the merger of fact and fiction in *Summertime*, a narrative where Coetzee the character is dead. Burton Pike echoes Coetzee’s statement in his article, “Time in Autobiography,” arguing that “autobiography is not simply an attempt to retell one’s past life on a linear scale, but rather in effect a novel written in the present with one’s past life as its subject” (337). In light of that statement, the genre of autobiography can no longer be seen as a record or documentation of life but rather as a reinvention of a life lived. Pike’s conclusion on autobiography elucidates how the genre’s very nature is fictive: “Not all fiction is autobiographical, but ... all autobiography is fiction. The past does not exist. There are memories of it – scattered shards of events and feelings – but they are recreated within a later context” (337). Pike’s use of the word ‘recreated’ draws attention to the fictive nature of the written narrative. This emphasizes how memories, once recalled by the mind at the present moment, are altered by that present itself. The term ‘recreated’ implies a process of constructing a model from fragments and shards that, in this case, the mind retains over time.

Coetzee’s *Summertime* is a work of fiction about the life of the late author J. M. Coetzee from 1972 to 1977. *Summertime* is divided into seven distinct parts: two chapters containing dated and undated sections from the notebooks of Coetzee the protagonist with five interviews in between them. The notes, some of which date back to the early 1970s while others remain undated, are written by the late Coetzee the character. In addition to being labelled a memoir, the narrative was also dubbed an “autre-biography.” Autre-biography, a term Coetzee the author coins in an interview with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, means narrating the self as other, with *Summertime* being a prominent example (394). For the purpose of this thesis, and to avoid



confusion, I will use J. M. Coetzee or Coetzee to refer to the author and John to refer to the character of the late J. M. Coetzee in the narrative.

One of the subgenres of autobiography is memoir. Abrams writes that in memoir “the emphasis is not on the author’s developing self, but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed” (22). Memoir is unlike autobiography in that its chief focus is on people and events around the author, not the author figure himself. This interpretation applies to J. M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* since the reader is introduced to John through the characters of five individuals acquainted with the author at some point in his life. Coetzee’s narrative could be argued to focus primarily on the five individuals who knew John and secondarily on J. M. Coetzee through these individuals. James Goodwin’s argument that in memoir “there is typically an extensive concern with actions and experiences other than those of the writer” (6) again applies to Coetzee’s text. The five main characters interviewed in the book present themselves in different ways to the reader in order to be able to present John.

Coetzee’s memoir is a fictional one; it is not strictly concerned with the actions and experiences of other characters. The memoir declares its fictional nature once it is revealed that John is dead. This mode is an intermediary between the traditional memoir and the novel form which relies on creativity and the imagination. Hence, a fictional memoir may be understood as a narrative that deals with an actual period of time in the life of the author while integrating elements of fiction into the narrative. The narrative, being fictional in nature, should not be taken as a truthful account of the writer’s life. The fiction technique used renders the work a blend of reality and imagination.

Vincent, an English biographer, takes on the task of writing a book about the late John. He interviews five people, four of whom are women, whom Vincent judges were significant in

John's life during the years he considered formative to his identity as a writer. Three of the women interviewees – Julia, Margot and Sophie – loved John in different ways. Adriana, the fourth woman interviewee, is painted as the only woman in the memoir who refused John's love and did not succumb to his advances. With the only male interviewee, Martin, Vincent focused on the academic side of John and the friendship that flourished between the two men after they had first met in 1972 for an interview at the University of Cape Town. It may seem odd that four of the five interviewees are women, but Coetzee provides an answer to this peculiarity in the narrative of the first interviewee, Dr. Julia Frankl: "(I)t takes a woman to know a man" (*Summertime* 54). The interviewees all knew John to varying degrees, yet their relationships with him, as evident through their recollections and narration, are significantly dissimilar to one another. Accordingly, so are their stories. Although *Summertime* is the third book in an autobiographical series – it was preceded by *Boyhood* and *Youth* – it is the only one in which the author openly uses elements of fiction in the narrative.

A *Kunstlerroman* is a narrative about the formation of the artist. The 1970s appear as crucial in the development of both Coetzee's and John's artistic identity. At the same time, the narrative – while entirely void of John's voice – voices the author's wish to become an artist. John's desire to become an artist is what clearly anchors him in life. John is fit to be an artist as well because of the sense of alienation he seems to have been surrounded by. Through the five interviewees, the reader understands the depth of John's estrangement; he was a man who never quite fit with his family, a man whose native land was not a factor to contribute to his sense of belonging, a man whose relationships with women were in due course condemned to failure. John never seemed to share a strong relationship with his father although they lived in the same house. His relationships with women in the novel were doomed to failure.

*Summertime* is a modern Künstlerroman; it is a narrative that allows the reader an insight into the formative years of Coetzee as an artist. It explores the years where John's career as a writer has begun to take form, which – according to Vincent – are 1972 to 1975. The novel explores many aspects that contributed to the formation of John/Coetzee as an artist, such as the father-son relationship, the growing sense of alienation and detachment from people around him, the apparent lack of confidence and belief in himself, the subtle individual and national identity crisis, and the failing string of relationships with women.

The novel opens with a section titled “Notebooks 1972-75.” It contains incomplete notes about several disconnected incidents and topics. The narrative of Julia, which follows right after these notes, is filled with insights into John's life. Since he is dead, the interviewees find a certain sense of freedom in talking about him without worry. Julia Frankl, a psychologist, met John in the summer of 1972 and had an affair with him amid her unstable marriage. Julia's story is filled with textual clues that reveal not only undisclosed aspects of John's life but also inspect that of the author himself. Julia asserts from the beginning that in order to tell Vincent about John, she must also give some background about herself. Using Julia as a mouthpiece, the author describes his protagonist as “scrawny” and “out of place,” adding that there was “an air of failure” about him (21). He appears to be somewhat insignificant and has no assertive personality. John and his father are referred to as “loners” and “socially inept” (20). When Julia wonders: “does this cold fish have feelings after all?” (64), the reader is but forced to ask: Is this Coetzee talking about himself or John articulating his thoughts? The use of deprecating adjectives and phrases across the novel is extensive.

Touched upon by more than one interviewee, the father-son relationship in *Summertime* is strained. The father figure in *Summertime* appears quite early with Vincent asking Julia about

John's father even before discussing the details of the relationship she had with John. John, who is supposedly in his thirties during this period, still lives with his father after his abrupt return from the United States in the early 1970s. The two men seemed to get along well enough for two individuals sharing the same house, yet they never seemed to share a strong bond.

When John invites Julia to an early supper at his and his father's house, Julia senses the awkwardness and the silence hanging over the three of them. While trying to sustain a flow of conversation, it becomes apparent to her that the topics they discuss will be no more than small talk. Noting the "flatness of the conversation" and the "long silences," she suspects that there is discord or bad temper between the two men (42). As a man of his age, it certainly was not easy for John to live with his father. The tension springs not only from living together, but from the father's inability to boast about his son: "A son in his thirties, and nothing to be said for him but that he could lay concrete" (41-42). The absence of the mother figure in *Summertime* sheds even more light on the father-son relationship. In a declaration that asserts the Oedipal complex, Julia says that "(b)oy's love their mothers, not their fathers" (48). Yet in spite of her saying that John did not love his father, she opines that John was not capable of loving anybody.

The strains in John's familial relationships are not only confined to his father. Through Margot's narrative, it becomes clear that she is the only one who feels that the family ought "to try harder to make the lost sheep feel welcome" (89). Margot, John's cousin and the second interviewee, is portrayed as sympathetic with John whereas her sister Carol is not as understanding and constantly believes the worst of him. Carol unabashedly claims that John "is stuck up," "thinks too much of himself," and "can't bear to lower himself to talk to ordinary people" (99). When it is revealed that John is considering moving his father into a house in Merweville with promises of weekly visits, Carol jumps to the conclusion that he is abandoning

his father. With claims that he “never got on with his father,” Carol lashes at John with accusations of running away from South Africa to escape the army and of breaking the law when he was in the United States (127). As a White South African who tried his luck abroad then returned to his native land, John appears to his family as a failure, “a thirty-something year old with no prospects” (127). His presence on the farm was a source of unease as well. To his family, the sudden reappearance back in his hometown constitutes a problem because they do not “know how to behave toward him” (89). On a text-transcending level, the tensions J. M. Coetzee exposes reflect a subconscious recognition of the role his family played in shaping his being during this period of his life. The incorporation of family not as a pillar of support but rather as an imperfect unit with its own set of flaws contributes to the analysis of the factors influencing self-realization as an artist in the modern world.

In a model she proposes for the novel of formation, Marianne Hirsch writes that “society is the novel’s *antagonist* and is viewed as a school of life” (297). In his society, John experiences a sense of alienation on the familial and social levels seen in the portraits drawn of him by the five interviewees. The five interviewees emphasize – sometimes consciously – John’s estrangement within his own society. In the narrative, John is cold, awkward and distant. The demonstrated family ties further alienate the already-estranged John. But even apart from his ties to his father and cousin Margot, John is shown to be psychologically isolated from the people around him as though there were barriers around his inner being that shun him from regular interaction with others.

Julia’s profession as a psychologist sheds light on the many insights she adds to her story. She does not only remember and narrate events; she adds her analysis to them. At one instance, she describes John as having an “autistic quality” in his lovemaking yet explains that she is

offering it “not as a criticism but as a diagnosis” (52). Adriana Nascimento, the Portuguese woman who refused John’s advances, labels him as “a lonely and eccentric young man” (191). Such descriptions serve to underline John’s sense of alienation; it was not merely that he was distant or isolated from those around him; he was inaccessible to them. In spite of the varying sketches the reader gets from the interviewees, the common denominator in all accounts is the aura of estrangement that surrounds him.

Memoir writing, as established earlier, is other-oriented rather than self-oriented; it allows a writer to redirect the attention of the reader to other individuals involved in the narrative instead of focusing on a protagonist that may or may not reflect the author’s persona. One cannot write one’s life without writing about others’ lives as well. In Coetzee’s memoir, which is directly concerned with the lives of other people who knew the late writer, the author’s allusion to himself as a minor character that does not have “a strong presence” accentuates the growing sense of alienation. Julia tells Vincent: “the only story involving John that I can tell ... is this one, namely the story of *my* life and his part in it” (43; my emphasis). John, whom the story should be about, turns into a secondary character in the lives of these five people. While telling her story, Julia asserts that she was the main character and “John *really* was a minor character” (44). The marginalization of the self in writing may echo the author’s insecurities as an emerging artist. As a renowned writer who is a Nobel-laureate, it comes across as harsh criticism when he criticizes his own work. In her interview, Julia says: “I don’t say *Dusklands* is lacking in passion, but the passion behind it is obscure” (58). J. M. Coetzee’s voice here is evident; it is not merely a character voicing her thoughts, it is the author passing a judgment on his own work. Coetzee’s self-criticism does not stop at critiquing his first novel. In Vincent’s words, John was a “cold and supercilious intellectual” in the eyes of the public (235). The author exerts no effort in drawing

attention to his protagonist's status as a Nobel laureate or as a distinguished novelist or academic. In fact, he works to establish the opposite. Sophie DeNoel, a colleague of John at the University of Cape Town, judges John's novels as lacking in passion: "Nowhere do you get a feeling of a writer deforming his medium in order to say what has never been said before, which is to me the mark of great writing" (242). In such statements, the reader hears the authorial voice and is reminded that it is ultimately the author who is articulating these thoughts.

Through the eyes of Vincent's interviewees, the reader sees Coetzee as a character unable to commit to both his Englishness and his Afrikaness. At various instances during the interviews, the interviewees all seem to agree on the fact that Coetzee was displaced or uprooted. Some tried to disprove and invalidate his English identity while others tried to refute his Afrikaner identity on the basis that he never seemed to either belong to or fit in one of the two. On the other hand, others argued that he is distant not only from native Africans but from white Afrikaners as well, which dislocated his national identity. On language, Sophie DeNoel explains that while his written and spoken English were very good, John never wrote in Afrikaans. Yet in spite of commitment to the English language, he was ready to embrace an Afrikaner identity because "under the gaze of history he felt there was no way in which he could separate himself off from the Afrikaners while retaining his self-respect" (238). In spite of the obvious attention to the issue of national identity, Coetzee's dilemma, as articulated in this narrative, is also partly due to his inability to root himself in anything other than writing, especially poetry writing<sup>3</sup>.

Realizing he does not have the kind of passion that a good poet must have, he dismisses the idea of being a poet and begins to write fiction instead. J. M. Coetzee portrays his character as a man uncertain of himself and with an obsessively questioning nature. Through his narrative, he appears to be acutely self-conscious. Furthermore, he does not emphasize his greatness nor

does he attempt to distinguish himself as a great novelist. Yet he is portrayed as conscious of the incidents and interactions that have shaped him as well as the relationships that have had an influence on him. And one of the marks of artists is being aware of his own consciousness: “the artist is *self-conscious*” (Malmgren 8). Throughout *Summertime*, Coetzee is described as lacking a manly quality that has eventually made the women he knew agree that he is sexless. John is depicted as a failure when it comes to love and relationships. Julia declares John was never her prince and admits that her choice of accomplice in her extra-marital affair was wrong. She acknowledges that real love requires two human beings who “fit together, fit into each other, like Yin and Yang” and she comes to the conclusion that she and John did not fit (81). Towards the end of her interview, Julia describes John as a frog and as someone not fully human. She states that it’s unlikely “he could have been a prince, a satisfactory prince, to any maiden on earth” (80). In her interpretation of John’s character, she explains that he “wasn’t made for love, wasn’t constructed that way” (81). The reader is reminded that these statements are not merely uttered by Julia; they are articulated by the author himself. While no interpretation is conclusive, such verdicts on the self could denote a confession or an apology, or – at the other end of the spectrum – they could simply be the product of pure fiction.

Adriana is quite upfront about her feelings for John; she never liked him and was never interested in him. According to her, John lacked a quality that “a woman looks for in a man, a quality of strength, of manliness” (171). She maintains that Coetzee, whom she called soft, is “not made for the conjugal life ... for the company of women” (171). Adriana’s verdict on John is that he is not a sensual being, that freedom and sensuality were mere ideas in his head, not rooted urges or desires to be actualized. Her judgment on John is summed in the following statement: “He was a boy as a priest is always a boy until suddenly one day he is an old man”



(176). Sophie's opinion of John is less harsh than Adriana's, even though she describes him as "very cautious, very much the tortoise" (238). She defines her relationship with him as comico-sentimental, but recognizes that he also helped her escape a bad marriage. Like the other three female interviewees, Sophie did not think John had a strong presence; hence he did not leave a deep imprint on her. Among all interviewees, Sophie is the one who strongly emphasizes John's sense of alienation as an artist: "I think he was happiest in the role of outsider. He was not a joiner" (239).

Margot is the only female interviewee who is largely sympathetic to John although she acknowledges he is "an odd character" (99). In a letter she sends to her cousin – a letter for moral support regarding his decision to live in a separate house from his father – the reader can trace a quality of anguish for her inability to protect John: "I cannot tell you what tenderness I feel for you at this moment ... I long to protect you from the world, even though you probably don't need protecting" (134). Yet while Margot and John were never in a relationship, Margot can see that her cousin is not capable of "giving himself wholeheartedly to anyone" (134). It is once more an affirmation of John's remoteness and estrangement.

Coetzee's voice as an author rises once again when he explicitly makes a reference to a recurring theme: "It is that the woman doesn't fall in love with the man. The man may or may not love the woman; but the woman never loves the man" (81). Julia's interpretation of this notion is that it is a reflection of John's whole life. Taking one step back from the narrative, this statement may serve as an insightful perception into the author's mind and the lens through which he sees himself. The author makes direct references to artists and love. Julia tells Vincent: "You probably think it holds true for artists in general, male artists: that they aren't built for what I am calling love" (82). It's as if she consoles herself by claiming that artists do not wholly open

up or fully give themselves to something because of what she calls a need to preserve a secret essence for the sake of their art.

The central themes I chose to focus on reveal, on a textual level, John's insecurities as an individual, and, on a level beyond the text, Coetzee's insecurities as an artist in a postmodern world. The interesting relationship between Coetzee and John invites readers to question memory as a factor on which the author relies in the writing process of such hybrid text. It also calls for investigating the notion of truth not as a decisive factor in determining the certainty of the past but as an element as volatile as fiction, one that does not conform to the norms that define or delimit truth. Coetzee's writing against a background of ostensibly verifiable facts, such as the fragments of notes enveloping the interviews, is an attempt to establish gaps through which he can repeatedly brush the line between fictional truth and historical or biographical truth. However, it "inevitably asks questions about the reliability of the 'facts'" (Haeming 175).

In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin argues that autobiographical truth is not a fixed concept but rather an evolving one that entails a process of creating the self. His work explores the autobiographical act grants writers a space for creating a fictional self. Eakin articulates that autobiographical writing is a self-invention mode, which means that the self in such narratives is a fictive one. Eakin maintains that the autobiographical act demands a process of revising, therefore fictionalizing, the past self: "In making the text the autobiographer constructs a self that would not otherwise exist" (26). Eakin's statement invites the reader to understand the self presented in writing as a form of constructed being that is independent of the authorial self, hence solidifying the belief that the written self is rooted in fiction.

In *Summertime*, Julia candidly admits that the dialog she narrates is fictional: "as far as the dialogue is concerned, I am making it up as I go along" (32). If we as readers step back from

the narrative, this appears to be a confession from Coetzee that in order to reconstruct the past, one must resort to fiction for supplying the details. The essence of the dialog between Julia and John may have been preserved in the relayed meaning, but the words – which are necessary tools – require substitution. In such process of reconstruction, it is essential to understand that the idea of absolute truth is no longer important; both the past remembered and the past written are true, which annuls the need to validate the dialog and hence reach this impossible absolute truth. It is vital as well to realize that the fictional nature of this memoir impedes all attempts to distinguish the real from the fictional, which – in all cases – is not the goal. The question of different versions of the truth is brushed in Vincent’s interview with Margot when she suggests that the version he is supplying does not sound like the one she narrated. Margot’s insinuation acts as a reminder to the reader himself that no two versions of the truth are the same, which once more invalidates the concept of one absolute truth.

Coetzee’s use of third person in *Summertime* supports the work’s status as autobiographical fiction where “the reader is invited to an ambiguous reading” (Lejeune 32). As Margaret Lenta maintains, “the third person becomes a candid admission of the distance between author and autobiographical subject” (“Autrebiography” 168). The use of third person allows Coetzee to establish “textual spaces which explore the relationship between experienced ‘reality’ and documented experience. Through these textual spaces, Coetzee draws attention to the *edges of texts*, and consequently, the *edges of fact and fiction*” (Haeming 174). But even the author himself cannot fully grasp the consequences of establishing these spaces in a text, hence he is “denied absolute authority over it” (Poyner 168). In his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts,” Coetzee writes that some forms of autobiographical writing delineate a form of secular confession that has to be distinguished from religious confession. The motive of such

form is to “tell an essential truth about the self” (*Doubling* 252). Yet the notion of the self should be questioned, for “What is the self? How can the self be grasped?” (Kundera 23). The act of creating a self – a protagonist, for instance – entails the formation of a whole autonomous entity that emerges from within the author’s own self.

Fictional memoir affords Coetzee the freedom to navigate through his past and employ a selective process to reconstruct that past, a process that is both objective and subjective. The objectivity stems from the inability to alter his past, whereas the subjectivity is established in the notion of selecting and discarding the recalled memories as well as the ability to rewrite them in light of the present. In “Autre-biography: Disability and Life-Writing in Coetzee’s Later Works”, Alice Hall concludes that for J. M. Coetzee, “semi-autobiographical fiction creates a space in which alternative versions of himself can be imagined and distinctions between past, present, and future are collapsed” (65). The interplay between the figures of the author and protagonist in the novel leads to the formation of a hybrid author/protagonist identity. But first, we must understand the meaning of the term ‘author.’ According to Albert E. Stone, an author “stands both within and outside individual experience, for each in effect is an anthropologist returned from a sojourn in the country of his or her own past” (*American Autobiography* 9).

In writing this fictional memoir, Coetzee’s choice to name his protagonist after him drives the reader almost instantaneously to associate the two together or to consider Coetzee the character as a substitute, albeit as readers discover not a very truthful one, for Coetzee the writer. But the persona of Coetzee-the-character should not be mistaken with Coetzee-the-author. In *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity*, Micaela Maftei writes: “The persona is not synonymous with the author, and is specific to the work” (44). But being fictional, Coetzee’s narrative does not need to present the reader with a persona of the real Coetzee. In fact, it makes

the dividing line between the two Coetzees, author and character, indistinct. In fiction writing, Maftai goes on to explain that the image the reader ends up with is “one of a particular self being constructed from parts of a person’s other selves” (44). It is implied then that creating a persona means the author is conscious of an ongoing process where he examines his life through memories, selects some and eliminates others, and allows an individual self to grow in writing through his choices. Therefore, the reader may regard John a stand-in for the author but not the other way around. According to Maftai, “[t]he persona is therefore simultaneously the author and not the author. It cannot be divided from the story, and in memoir and autobiography, the story is usually that of an individual. Yet it is fashioned, constructed in a conscious manner, *by* the individual, and exists at a distance from the material at hand” (45). This persona, this created self, is not “a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self” (Kundera 34).

Maftai argues that in order for an author to assemble a narrative of “lived experience and past events, it is necessary to stand apart from them, even while constantly figuring as the subject matter” (45). This is what J. M. Coetzee applies in his novel. He removes himself from the subject he writes about; first by presenting the protagonist through five other individuals and second by altering facts<sup>4</sup>. Such act differentiates between what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call the ‘real’ I and the narrated I (*Reading Autobiography* 72). In the process of writing, so many selves are created and destroyed through only words until a writer realizes an image of the self that comprises in its heart all the selves that were made and unmade in the process of its formation. The root of the fictional self a writer creates is ultimately derived from a mixture of his present self that writes, his past memories – which comprises all his past selves – and his projections of his past aspirations.

While Vincent attempts to assure Sophie that the interviews he is conducting are for a “seriously intended biography,” there are many instances that prove his unreliability and untrustworthiness (225). Sue Kossew argues that “the truth-value of autobiography is doubly displaced in the major part of this text” (370). This statement proves true if one examines both interviewer and interviewees. First, Vincent, the interviewer, reveals at various points in the narrative that he has tampered with the interviews he obtained. Second, the interviewees themselves allow their own memories to shape their reflections on their relationship with and view of John. At several occurrences, Vincent proves to be an unreliable narrator. He takes liberties with the interview of Margot and turns it into an “uninterrupted narrative” spoken in her voice (*Summertime* 87). While reading through the final text with her, he promises to change certain words and phrases that she does not approve of and assures her that he will cut out parts that she does not like. When Margot questions the authenticity of certain narrated incidents, Vincent admits he “added a detail or two to bring the scene to life” (105). Towards the end of the interview, Margot points that she is not happy with the story as it stands and wants “to go over it again” (91). When Margot objects to Vincent’s bold additions, she exclaims: “You can’t write that ... You are just making things up” to which Vincent says: “I’ll cut it out” (137).

Similarly, at the end of her interview, Adriana asks Vincent to notify her before publishing the interview in case he plans to quote her. Vincent assures her with an “of course” which the reader by now recognizes is a lie. The end result, if we were to consider that the narrative he reads is compiled by Vincent, is that the reader ends up with a manuscript of the interview unedited after those last meetings; Vincent then seems to have betrayed his interviewees, proving himself to be an unreliable narrator. Another core issue that is at the heart of the novel’s instability as a reference on John’s life is that Vincent admits to having tried to

communicate with people who claimed to know John but in some cases it turned out they had the wrong John. The interviewer informs Sophie that most of the people who knew him had left South Africa or died, which could be considered an attempt on his part to justify his choice of interviewees who are friends, ex-lovers, and colleagues. Although two of the interviewees were work colleagues of John, the focus on John's academic achievements is minimal, with the personal side of him being the highlight of the novel.

Although "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" is one of Mikhail Bakhtin's earlier essays, it contains insightful observations about the dynamics of the relationship between author and hero. In this essay, Bakhtin argues that "the artist's struggle to achieve a determinate and stable image of the hero is to a considerable extent a struggle with himself" (6). The statement speaks directly to the artist's dilemma of self-representation in writing. As a rule, revealing oneself to another individual is not an easy task for it entails the exposure of one's innermost being in a manner that leaves one vulnerable. The self-exposure that straightforward autobiography requires could also illuminate the motive behind a writer's opting for fictionalizing narratives of the self in life-writing, such as *Summertime*, since fiction would, by default, distance an author from his hero.

According to Bakhtin, "[t]he author is the bearer and sustainer of the intently active unity of a consummated whole (the whole of a hero and the whole of a work) which is transgredient to each and every one of its particular moments or constituent features" ("Author and Hero" 12). In light of this definition of what an author is, Bakhtin attempts to define the figures of author and hero in an attempt to illustrate the aesthetics of the relationship between them. He argues that the author – who is not passively receptive – is a "uniquely active form-giving energy" actively responsible for generating the figure of the hero "as a definite whole" ("Author and Hero" 8).

The author's consciousness is "a consciousness of a consciousness" which is that of the hero; it encompasses the hero's figure as well as his actions, utterances, and horizons, in other words, his whole world ("Author and Hero" 12). The authorial consciousness thus transcends the hero's own in that the author sees and knows something inaccessible to the hero. During the time when he created the hero, "the author experienced only his hero, and he put his whole essentially necessary relationship to the hero in the image of the hero" thus reflecting the hero's own position within the world he is placed in ("Author and Hero" 7). Yet while he pours his whole into the hero, the author's own position is not something he experiences in the process of aesthetic creation; "he sees only the emerging product of creation, and not the inner, psychologically determinate, process of creation" ("Author and Hero" 6). In that sense, Coetzee is capable of experiencing his protagonist and his world as a product, but is not qualified to experience the aesthetics of the creative writing process.

Bakhtin upholds the notion that the author's own ongoing life can never be examined as a whole, as an autonomous body complete in itself; we cannot see the whole of a life still being lived up to the moment of writing because we are then unfinished subjects. The creative act of writing allows for the hero, on the other hand, to be regarded as a finished object, a whole that is complete in and of itself. In the case of autobiographical writing, a writer usually examines an earlier period of his life; it is this temporal distance between the author at the present moment of writing and the past events revisited in writing that makes these past events accessible to the author in a way that allows him to situate his hero in them and to have a fully developed consciousness of this hero and his world. Not only did Coetzee create a character that is dead before the beginning of the narrative, he explored a very early period in the life of the protagonist as well. Referring once more to the artist's struggle in writing autobiographical narratives,



Bakhtin maintains that “the author’s position of being situated outside the hero is gained by conquest, and the struggle for it is often a struggle for life, especially in the case where the hero is autobiographical” (“Author and Hero” 15).

An act or a certain period of time has to elapse and a certain event or a life lived needs to be complete in order for us to be able to examine it as a complete whole, an autonomous self-contained body of knowledge. In *Summertime*, Coetzee provides this by focusing his plot on the life of the character that carries his name. John is representative of this body of knowledge, in the sense that he forms a consciousness surrounded by its own world, with its own set of experiences given to him by the author; it is a consciousness that is complete in death. But the relationship between the author’s consciousness and the hero’s own raise questions about the point where their identities overlap and where they branch out.

In *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune defines the autobiographical pact as a contract made between writer and reader – implicitly or explicitly – to assure the latter that author, narrator and protagonist are one and the same (17). Yet Coetzee shatters the conventions of autobiography and defies these norms by way of transcending the boundaries of the autobiographical pact. Alice Hall writes that “Coetzee views the pact of genre as always open to renegotiation” (62). The means through which Coetzee undermines the genre structure puts the notion of narrative truth into question. The integration of genres breaks the writer-reader pact Lejeune speaks of and disrupts the reader’s expectations about the novel. At the same time, such integration proves successful in creating new forms of writing as well as new modes of reading: “By locating texts in between genres, he opens up alternative modes of understanding life stories as a present attempt to read and interpret the past, rather than a faithful rendering of any kind of retrospective ‘truth’ constructed according to the logic of teleology or chronology” (Hall 62).

In *Summertime*, Coetzee coined the term ‘fictioneer’. When Sophie asks Vincent about the excessive emphasis on the interviews, the interviewer claims that John’s letters and diaries “cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer” (225). The argument Vincent provides is that the letters embrace fiction constructed by John, whereas if one seeks the “truth,” one must go beyond the fictions of these letters and “hear from the people who knew him directly, in the flesh” (226). Sophie’s questions alert the reader to the fact that everyone might be a fictioneer who makes up his own life story. Yet Vincent ascertains that he would like to hear John’s story from “independent perspectives” than from the writer’s own “unitary self-projection of his oeuvre” even if he risks that these people might themselves be fictioneers (226). The author’s voice surfaces as Sophie says that “our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints imposed by the real world” (227). It is a clear statement recognizing that life stories are constructed by people, exposing the subjectivity and inevitable partiality of the process. Autobiographical fiction then is one form of bridging the gap between reading and writing while allowing the construction of a self that materializes from within the folds of this gap.

Coetzee’s narrative not only gives him the opportunity to examine his protagonist’s life from the standpoint of others but allows him to distance himself from that life, whereas the opposite happens in a traditional autobiography. In the latter, a writer seems obligated to dig into his past and encounter everything that has been shunned away for years in his mind, even if the end result is not entirely faithful to the version of truth that the audience seeks. Yet in *Summertime*, the writer retells, and in the process invents, a past that is beyond verification; he ends up with a self that is complete in and of itself yet relies on the author’s own more

comprehensive self for its construction. By estranging himself in writing using fiction, Coetzee has evaded what puts him face to face with the innermost composition of his being.

Coetzee's choice of autobiographical fiction as a mode of writing this narrative in particular may be ascribed to several reasons: one interpretation could be that he saw in it an attempt to escape a direct confrontation with the self as it emerges from the past or as it is reshaped by memory; another could be that he sought a new understanding of the term autobiography or 'autrebiography'<sup>5</sup> as Coetzee calls it by allowing others to voice their opinions of him in a text constructed by him. What is certain is that Coetzee's genius provided a narrative where the reader, at any given point in the reading process, has no proof whether what he is reading is Coetzee's view and opinion of himself or an entirely, or mostly, fictional narrative of the self as it appears to the writer at the moment of writing. The reader is unable to distinguish not only between reality and fiction but between the real and the unreal in the fictive as well. By unmasking his self in this manner, unveiling his shortcomings and admitting his failures, Coetzee succeeds in not only pursuing the definition of the self through others but exposing the uncertainty of the artist in the modern world. The self-critical tone he adopts gives little space for readers and critics to criticize his protagonist.

The novel is full of confessions strewn all over the five interviews that raise the following question: Which confessions belong to author and which belong to character? There could be no decisive answer because of the entanglement of fact and fiction. Although grasping the essence of memory and defining or finding truth in a work of art cannot be definite or conclusive, Coetzee's narrative is an attempt on the author's part to explore the paradoxes between the real, remembered self and the fictional, contrived self, ironically through distancing himself from his protagonist in more than one way. The third and last book of his autobiography is more of a

collage where Coetzee groups incidents and thoughts of people whose stories eventually intertwined to tell the story of his formation as an artist during the first half of the 1970s. Coetzee's innovation is manifest in the division of his book into the sections it contains. Unlike other fictional autobiographies, Coetzee's eliminates a possible understanding of a definite grasp on identity. The idea of one coherent self that does not change dissolves with the progression of the narrative.

To the reader, J. M. Coetzee appears to seek the distortion of his image through the eyes of others. Although the manner in which he portrays his self is harsh, the apparent self-critical tone evokes sympathy and pity. The narrative's technique – its use of the name John Coetzee for the central character – could contribute, on the one hand, to interpreting the image painted of the late John as a mirror – however askew – of the writer's own image of himself. On the other hand, it could be that this self-deprecating approach to one's own self is a means of defense against possible criticism; if one belittles oneself openly, there's little room for others to do the same. At the same time, such numerous interpretations only serve to emphasize the notion that there are multiple means of understanding the mechanisms of fictionalizing one's life in writing. It also highlights the role of memory and the artist's reliance on a symbolic version of the truth in the process of reinventing the self.

### Chapter Three

#### The Self as an Imagined Protagonist: Matar's *In the Country of Men*

*If writing is the discovery of the self, it is also its reinvention.*

Hisham Matar

After writing a novel that has frequently led people to tie him to its protagonists, Hisham Matar reaches the conclusion that writers are never in control of how their works are received or interpreted. Matar has been closely associated with the protagonist of his first novel *In the Country of Men* although he asserts in an interview with Nouri Gana in 2007 that “*In the Country of Men* is entirely fictional” (Gana n. pag.). But Matar retracts his statement when he explicitly states in a lecture at the American University in Cairo in 2012 that the only resemblance between him and his protagonist is that they were “both boys from Libya” and that they “both left Libya” (“Men Who Tiptoe” n.pag.). The use of real-life characters and the author’s reference to real-life incidents in his fiction is a proclamation of the existence of autobiographical elements within Matar’s novel even if the author openly claims the narrative is not autobiographical. The inconsistency of these assertions on Matar’s part allows the reader to delve into the reading process and draw his own assumptions about the ‘autobiographicality’ of the text. After all, Matar himself admits that the writer is not in a position to control how his text is perceived: “The writer can’t control how he’s being read, nor should he try to” (“Men Who Tiptoe” n.pag.).

Hisham Matar, born in New York in 1970 to Libyan parents, lived in Tripoli from age three to nine. When he was about nine, the same age as his protagonist Suleiman, his family had to relocate to Egypt after the father, a diplomat, was “threatened with interrogation and arrest” (Tarbush n. pag.). *In the Country of Men*, his debut, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2006, and won the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize in 2007. But aside from the

author's own statement, there are parallels between author Matar and protagonist Suleiman that are too strong to be overlooked, which eventually earns *In the Country of Men* the title of "autobiographical novel."

*In the Country of Men* is a poignant autobiographical novel about the disenchantment of a boy who grows up under the rule of a regime that oppressed both its men and women. The novel starts in 1979 in Gaddafi-ruled Tripoli with nine-year-old Suleiman as its main narrator. Through the eyes of Suleiman, the reader gets a sense of the tension both at home and within the state itself. The boy's father, Faraj al-Dewani, is a business man who "traveled the world looking for beautiful things and animals and trees to bring back to our country" (*In the Country of Men* 25). Faraj, or Baba as Suleiman calls him, appears to be involved in an underground movement against Gaddafi's regime. Suleiman's world, limited only to his home and street, acts as a microcosm for Libya; the boy's dwindling sense of innocence mirrors Libya's own political fall into instability and turmoil. When Faraj is away, Najwa, his wife, resorts to her "medicine." The young boy notes that his mother "only fell ill when [Baba] was away on business" (2). In spite of the obvious discord between Najwa and Faraj, Najwa obeys her husband although she does not approve of the resistance movement he belongs to.

Suleiman's innocence as a child is manifest in the scene where he stuffs his stomach with mulberries, the fruit he believes is from Heaven, the "angels' gift" that was never intended for this earth (58). This scene does not foretell the horrors the child is to witness as the novel unfolds. Suleiman is the reader's link to the politics of Libya at the time. Although he is only a child, he witnesses what no child should be exposed to. The Revolutionary Committee, a body acting as a watchdog for the regime to target dissidents and Gaddafi opponents, intimidates and terrorizes the masses. At some point, Najwa and Suleiman are followed by men of the

Revolutionary Committee, a terror that renders both mother and son anxious and tense. The committee detains one of Suleiman's neighbors, Ustath Rashid, who also happens to be the best friend of his father, and later Suleiman's father himself. Several incidents, including the public execution of Ustath Rashid on television, are evidence of the mounting repression practiced by the state against its own people. In an attempt to avert further damage to the family, Najwa and Moosa – a family friend and brother-like figure to Suleiman's father – gather Baba's books and burn them to the ground. Suleiman, confused and unable to understand why his father's beloved books should be disposed of in such manner, saves one book from the fire. After a considerable period of disappearance, a battered and broken Faraj is returned home but Suleiman is not allowed into his father's room. Faraj gradually gets better but is already scarred for life. He denounces his political convictions, or "[has] them denounced in him" (234).

Uncertain of the future in Libya, the family is forced to send their son to Cairo. He stays with Judge Yaseen, a friend of his father. Unable to afford a visit to Cairo after the regime eliminated private saving accounts, Suleiman does not receive a single visit from his family for fifteen years. Growing up in Cairo, Suleiman becomes a pharmacist, "a concocter of remedies" (232). He is aware of the influence of his mother's "illness" on his decision. In May 1994, Suleiman receives news of his father's arrest once more in Libya. Amid rumors of embezzlement, it is soon revealed that *Democracy Now* – the book Suleiman saves from burning 15 years earlier – is the reason behind the arrest<sup>6</sup>. For four months, Suleiman attempts to distance himself from his mother who has been obsessively trying to reach him and who seems to have surrendered to her medicine once more<sup>7</sup> in light of her husband's imprisonment. Furthermore, he refuses to respond to a letter from his childhood friend Kareem, choosing instead to remain silent in a bid for "immortality, a desire very similar to wanting to be free of the past" (238). In

September of the same year, an amnesty in commemoration of the revolution in Libya grants Faraj a pardon. Granting himself the sense of closure that he was never given in real life, Matar kills off Suleiman's father; one month following his release, "and, cruelly, a few days after the ban on Libyans traveling abroad had been lifted," Baba died (240). The novel ends with Suleiman reuniting with his mother, widowed at thirty-nine, at a bus station in Alexandria. In a scene that offers the possibility of reviving ties; he sees her waiting for him and he utters the word 'Mama' over and over again.

Establishing itself as a novel of formation, *In the Country of Men* traces Suleiman's psychological and moral growth in the summer of 1979. Jack Kearney writes that "novels that deal with child development invite consideration in relation to the *Bildungsroman* genre" (126). The novel later jumps to the year 1994 with hardly any reference to the fifteen years in between since the main theme of a *Bildungsroman* is "the passage from childhood to the threshold of adulthood" (Austen 2). But the novel is not only a *Bildungsroman*; it is a story of an artist's formation, a *Kunstlerroman*. That last summer in Tripoli constitutes a formative period in Suleiman's early years. The title offers a glimpse into the late 1970s Libya under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi. That it is no country for women is made clear from the beginning; the spaces left for women and children to navigate through in this country that seems not to be made for them are minimal. Children are essentially victims of the ramifications of the regime while women are reduced to objects or, at best, maids that obey their master. Yet Matar proves that Libya is no place for men as well. While women are objectified at home, the regime dehumanizes men in the public sphere; Baba returns home as a broken man after his implied confession against his comrades under torture and Ustath Rashid wets his pants and begs for mercy like a remorseful child before his public execution on television. The shadow of these



traumas hangs over the novel. In choosing a child narrator to tell the story of a Libyan childhood, Matar sheds light on the factors that entwined to shape his growth and influence his bringing up: “Much literary autobiographical writing ... has a tendency to become fixated on childhood and adolescence” (Pike 333). There are several elements that contributed to Matar’s formation as an artist, such as the mother-son and father-son relationships, the recurring sense of guilt, the absence of a sense of closure, and the eventual exile.

The mother-son relationship in the novel is one of the formative aspects of Suleiman’s childhood. Although Najwa’s secret drinking habit adds a stressful pressure on the boy, the intimacy between Najwa and her son is evident from the novel’s beginning: “If love starts somewhere, if it is a hidden force that is brought out by a person, that person was her” (*In the Country of Men* 21). Yet when Faraj is away, Najwa subconsciously turns to her son and speaks to him like an adult: “You are my prince. One day you’ll be a man and take me away on your white horse” (12). With the “smell of her medicine alive in the room” and while she is not fully unaware of the thoughts she articulates out loud, Najwa tells Suleiman of “that black day” she got married to Faraj, who was nine years older than her (11). She recounts intimate details of her wedding night – the references to virginity, blood being spilled, and puncturing a woman – that are inappropriate for a nine-year-old, to say the least. She tells him how one of her brothers – who himself married an American girl – caught her and another girl sitting at the Italian Coffee House with two boys. The “High Council”, namely her father and brothers who met to decide her fate when she was only fourteen, decided on the same night to marry her off and conceal her shame.

*In the Country of Men* employs a recurring motif; the novel is filled with repeated references to Scheherazade, most of which are associated with Najwa. Najwa, whose mother was

illiterate yet memorized *A Thousand and One Nights*, is always angered by the story of Scheherazade although the story is Suleiman's favorite. By stating that "Scheherazade was a coward who accepted slavery over death" (15), Najwa reveals her image of herself as a victim to the oppressive patriarchy surrounding her and mourns her lack of choice. She loathes Scheherazade whom Suleiman admires and calls her a "stupid harlot" (17). The story of Scheherazade is pivotal to the narrative as well since the reader can see uncanny parallels between Scheherazade and Najwa, whose stories "didn't move in a straight line but jumped from one episode to another" (11). Suleiman implicitly sees parallels between his mother and Scheherazade and longs to save her and be her "prince," but as readers, we know that his proximity to his mother and her reliance on him do not help his cause.

Najwa elicits from her son half-hearted promises to keep her 'medicine' a secret between the two of them: "Habibi, light of my eyes, promise you won't tell anyone" (19). On mornings following her drinking episodes, Najwa takes Suleiman in car rides, buys him sesame sticks, and sometimes takes him to Signor Il Calzoni's restaurant by the sea for grilled shrimps and spaghetti, which is her way of making it up to her son. Yet such small bribes hardly ease Suleiman's conscience or quiet his apprehension. On the one hand, the heaviness of these stories and promises weighs down on Suleiman: "[t]he things she told me pressed down on my chest" (19). At times, Suleiman finds it hard to carry on without spilling these secrets, and the burden of promising his mother to never tell on her makes the process even more difficult. Margaret Scanlan notes that "Najwa's alcoholism, and the lies required to keep it half-concealed, damage Suleiman even before his father's underground political activities are exposed" (268). For a boy his age, Suleiman's inability to properly cope with the burden of the secrets he had to refrain from betraying is understandable to the reader. Yet Najwa is sometimes tormented by her son's

reaction; with no reasonable way out for him, Suleiman doubles over and wraps his arms around himself: “this is the only way [he] could keep it inside” (19). On the other hand, Suleiman felt obligated to rescue his mother, to save her from the marriage forced upon her. Moved by urgency to remedy what he considered ‘injustice’ to her, he fantasized about avenging her: “I couldn’t wait to be a man ... to change the past, to rescue that girl from her black day” (148).

The incidents Najwa narrates from her past reveal to the reader the oppressive measures taken by patriarchal figures – such as fathers and brothers – against female family members, which reflects on a larger scale the then Libyan regime’s stronghold on its people. But they give greater insight into the mother-son relationship and disclose not only the son’s conflicting feelings towards his mother, but the mother’s dependence on her son as well. In a way, both mother and son have had their childhoods maimed; Najwa when at fourteen she was forced into a marriage she had no say in, and Suleiman when his innocence is gradually usurped from him and later when he is forced to leave his family behind and move to Cairo.

Similar to the relationship between mother and son, the father-son relationship in the novel is essential to understanding the key factors that influenced the writer’s formative years. The mere choice of making the father figure’s disappearance a central and consuming event in Suleiman’s life echoes the magnitude of such an incident in the author’s life. The father figure acts as a guide, mentor, and role model for Suleiman. As a child, Suleiman is kept in the dark; no adult explains to him the truth of his father’s involvement in dissident underground movements against the regime. Thus, the disappearance of his father causes him an anguish he cannot easily articulate. Faraj’s political activism and involvement in anti-Gaddafi secret movements is a catalyst for his abduction by the secret police service of the Guide/dictator’s regime during 1979. In spite of the temporary tension caused by the father’s disappearance and his imprisonment for

the second time, there is no long-term anxiety concerning his fate; Faraj dies soon after his release in 1994. Unlike his second novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, where the fate of the protagonist's father remains unresolved<sup>8</sup>, Matar provides a conclusive ending that does not leave Suleiman in the agony of disappearance even if it causes him to experience the grief of death.

When away on business trip, Faraj designates Suleiman "the man of the house" (6). Yet Suleiman is not always capable of dealing with his mother's crying or the dark stories she tells in her states of intoxication. This temporary role shifting does not allow Suleiman to properly assume the role of the son. This is fostered by his mother's calling him a prince who will save her one day and is evident when Suleiman reaches the conclusion of wanting to avenge his mother. Unable to conflate the two roles of husband and son to the same woman, Suleiman finds himself troubled and distressed. But he turns to his father for guidance and attempts to protect his mother when Baba is absent.

The father figure is frequently physically absent, either when he is on a business or when he is temporarily abducted. Yet Suleiman at times feels closer to the absent father than the present mother, especially when the former is away. When his father is absent, Suleiman fondly recalls memories of random father-son moments: "My mind escaped to a memory: Baba was sitting reading a book by the light, I beside him. I had tried to snuggle into his side, but his body didn't give" (97-98). When his mother and Moosa burn all of Baba's books, which Moosa claims is "for Baba's own good" (99), Suleiman breaks down and screams at them both. The depth of the boy's attachment to his father is demonstrated when Suleiman shouts at his mother and demands to see him after his return from detention (201). Readers are aware of what Suleiman as a child cannot see; Faraj has failed his comrades since it is implied that he gave in and provided the names of his complicit colleagues under torture. Ustath Rashid acts as a foil to Faraj.

Rashid's refusal to name names and his decision to remain tight-lipped till the last minute before his execution only serves to highlight Faraj's betrayal of his comrades. Although Faraj does not meet the same end as Ustath Rashid, he is now a traitor in the eyes of even his closest of friends, Moosa, who says: "I can't bear looking at him. The betrayal is in his eyes – I am sorry, I am sorry ... forgive me – this is the blackest day of my life" (208). To Suleiman, and Najwa, the father's return from "behind the sun" is a miracle and Suleiman's bond with his father remains intact, although the two do not share many activities together after Baba's return (32).

Yet ironically, in his childish naiveté, Suleiman unwittingly takes part in his father's imprisonment for a second time when he saves a copy of *Democracy Now* from burning; Faraj takes the book to the factory where he works in 1994 and reads sections from it to his co-workers, resulting in his arrest and imprisonment for several months before he is pardoned. Suleiman's interpretation of such act is that maybe Baba had come "to prefer death over slavery ... refusing to live under the sword?" (237). Faraj and Suleiman never meet again; Faraj dies shortly after his second release. Although his mother tells him that Baba died of a "[h]eart attack, in the night, during sleep" (242), Suleiman later finds out the truth from his mother's brother, Uncle Khaled: Baba had a heart attack during lunch while having soup, and he "kicked as furiously as Ustath Rashid's legs did above the National Basketball Stadium" (244). To Suleiman, "he died two deaths, both existing simultaneously in [his] heart" (240). The attention dedicated to Suleiman's tangled relationship with his father emulates Matar's own relationship with his father Jaballa, who was abducted in March 1990 in Cairo, transported to Libya where he was imprisoned in Abu Salim Prison<sup>9</sup>, and is believed to have perished there<sup>10</sup> (Barrowclough).

One of the noticeable themes manifest in the novel is the recurring theme of guilt and betrayal. As Michele Levy puts it, "[a] Kafkaesque world emerges wherein all, including

Suleiman, betray or are betrayed” (62). Suleiman is perpetually haunted by a sense of guilt which, at times, physically and psychologically distances him from his friends and alienates him from the people around him. Suleiman’s sense of guilt and shame makes the process of empathizing with him easier. He is a child susceptible to making mistakes and to feeling angry and jealous; the protagonist of a novel of formation is “not expected to establish a moral universe” (Moretti 189). The first act that ignites Suleiman’s guilt is his cruelty to his best friend Karim, the twelve year-old son of Ustath Rashid. While playing a game on the street with their peers, an altercation leads Suleiman to taunt Kareem with his arrested father. Noting that he feels “a dark, unstoppable force gain momentum,” Suleiman verbally attacks his best friend Kareem (107). In an act of absolute betrayal, he deliberately affronts Kareem by dropping hints that “people are talking” about his father whom he almost calls a traitor (107). The two boys clash, and in spite of Kareem’s self-control, Suleiman further taunts him by calling him a coward and a crybaby. As Kareem walks away from the scene, Suleiman aggravates the situation by revealing the name of Kareem’s beloved, a secret meant to remain between the two of them. In front of all their friends, Suleiman betrays his friend’s trust: “He can’t stop dreaming about her ... Every time he heard a love song he would go all soft in the stomach for her” (109). Kareem walks off telling Suleiman that he is “not a man because [he has] no word”; this appears to trigger an intense session of self-questioning that shows Suleiman’s capacity for self-awareness (109).

In a powerful internal monolog, voices in Suleiman’s head accuse him of betrayal, of being a traitor himself. It is this criticism directed at himself that triggers Suleiman’s sense of inferiority in relation to Kareem when he grows up. Towards the end of the novel, as both boys outgrow their differences and childhood disputes, Kareem attempts to revive their friendship in a letter he sends to the grown-up Suleiman living in Cairo. And in a later phone call, he extends his

condolences to Suleiman on his father's passing. When Suleiman learns of Kareem's engagement to Siham, Nasser's sister whom Suleiman fell for although they only met once, Suleiman feels no bitterness or resentment, as if he silently acknowledges that Kareem is more worthy of her than him.

As if to further ascertain its powerful hold, his sense of guilt emerges once more when Suleiman betrays his father's friend Nasser on the phone. During that time in Libya, it was not uncommon for the phone to be tapped and for calls to be overtly monitored; echoes were the distinct feature that alerted a caller to the presence of a third entity listening to the phone call. When Suleiman answers a phone call from Nasser, Najwa asks her son to tell Nasser she is not present. Suleiman realizes there is a detectable echo in the line, and shortly after, a third person announces his presence. Nasser shouts at Suleiman to hang up and not listen to this anonymous intruder. In a following phone call, this time from the intruder alone, Suleiman succumbs to the remarks of this third entity and the conversation carries on between them both. Suleiman then unsuspectingly answers the anonymous man's questions, giving him the address of the flat on martyr's square. When two days later Nasser's father, Bu Nasser, stops by their house accompanied by his nine-year-old daughter Siham, Suleiman realizes how his actions have led to Nasser's arrest. Nasser's father is grief-stricken; "The catastrophe has fallen. I called you yesterday to prevent it. Now it's too late" (150). When Suleiman hears Bu Nasser saying that people at Martyrs' Square saw "a young man running across the square with a typewriter under his arm, chased by a group of Revolutionary Committee men," which coincides with the night of the phone call with Suleiman, Suleiman feels "dizzy, sick" (154). His sense of guilt is heightened upon realizing that he now cannot marry Siham with whom he was instantly infatuated: "How could I ever marry her now when I had betrayed her brother, the man who was to be an uncle to

my children?” (154). In his naiveté, Suleiman realizes that his impulsiveness has a price, yet it also has ramifications bigger than his capacity to comprehend.

The ultimate act of betrayal though is perhaps that where Suleiman consciously and willingly complies with Sharief, a Revolutionary Committee officer who constantly keeps watch on Faraj’s house even when the latter is away. Suleiman is attracted to Sharief in the first place because the latter “did not treat [Suleiman] like a child” (130). When they first talk, Sharief attempts to win Suleiman over by giving him “one of Baba’s English fiery mints” (130). He introduces himself as a good friend of Baba, one who knew him for years. Suleiman is old enough to realize that Sharief is lying yet his drive to save his father furthers his involvement with Sharief. Sharief blackmails the nine-year-old by telling him he knows of Najwa’s drinking habit. He guarantees Suleiman’s cooperation when he confirms to the boy that her secret is safe with him: “I was so grateful I could have kissed his hand” (131). When Sharief asks for a list of Baba’s friends to ‘vouch’ for him, Suleiman is unconsciously an inch away from betraying complicit his father. A second encounter with Sharief occurs shortly after. This time Suleiman gives Sharief the book *Democracy Now* upfront and provides the names of Nasser and Moosa, believing that such information would somehow lead to his father’s immediate release, yet Sharief does not take the book. To Suleiman, the collaboration between him and Sharief is a method of gaining the attention he cannot receive from Mama or Moosa. In one incident, Suleiman accidentally hits Adnan, a handicapped boy in the neighborhood group, and Sharief comes to his rescue. According to John Kearney in “Traumatized Narrators in Hisham Matar’s Novels,” Suleiman’s “rescue from them by Sharief creates a further barrier” and distances him from his friends (133). It ties Suleiman further to Sharief as well and he subconsciously feels indebted to him. The son’s betrayal of his father echoes the father’s betrayal of his comrades in



the revolution, and it haunts Suleiman till the end of the novel since it is this book that he rescues, the one Sharief refuses to take, is the object behind Baba's arrest in 1994.

One of the heavy burdens that the author has been carrying around for years is the indefiniteness of his father's situation. This lack of a sense of finality is one of the powerful influences on Matar, and is among the main reasons for his becoming a writer. In *The Fiction of Autobiography: Reading and Writing Identity*, Micaela Maftai maintains that everyone's life consists of significant periods that involve events which are not yet completed. She argues: "Writing about these events as testimony thus becomes a method of attempting to understand, or expressing a search for understanding, as well as a means of adding our own voice" (26). Matar's unfinished story – the absence of closure – is his attempt to attain that closure. The process of writing in itself is not evidence of an event's completion but rather the expression of an ongoing process to understand both present and past.

In an interview with Jonathan Derbyshire, Matar talks about "the inconclusive sense of grief" associated with the absence of a sense of closure when his father disappeared. The family lived for years not knowing if the father was alive or not (n. pag.). Matar concludes that the grief of someone's death is different from that of someone's disappearance. While in reality Matar never conclusively knew if his father was dead or alive when he wrote the novel; he leaves the story open-ended yet provides closure with Suleiman meeting his mother in Alexandria when he is twenty-four. Only then is the written story complete, finally linking both beginning and ending to form a full circle. The reader by then is aware of the fictionality of this ending. He catches a fleeting glimpse of Matar's childhood and grasps how it may have contributed to his formation as an artist, all while admitting that separating truth from fiction in such a narrative is an impossible task for it reduces the aesthetic value of the narrative.

Matar's narrative reveals how Libya's politics under the rule of Gaddafi bordered on totalitarian. The constant watch on Suleiman's house, the phone tapping, and the car shadowing are reminiscent of the flagrant, relentless watch of Big Brother in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The secret police awaits any opportunity to drag people to torture rooms. To quote Suleiman, "informing on your fellow citizens is Libya's national sport" (237). The climax of the regime's power is epitomized by Ustath Rashid's degrading execution, which underscores the powerlessness of the people in the face of the state's violence and brutality. The regime's pawns persecute the people to eliminate any potential opposition. The country's politics are mirrored in the world of children's games: Suleiman and his peers play a game called 'My land, your land'; a parable for the land of Libya itself over which the revolutionaries and the regime fight. It echoes the older men's game of politics. Almost all individuals in the novel, old and young, are caught in the intricate web of politics; some are active members in the government or the opposition, like Faraj, Ustath Rashid, Sharief, Nasser, and Moosa, and some merely suffer the consequences, like Suleiman, Bu Nasser, Kareem, and Najwa. Even young Suleiman is aware of "the horrors of falling into the hands of the secret police" (Scanlan 268). The regime's clampdown on dissent and opposition almost foreshadows the exile to be imposed on Suleiman. It is the continuous escalating horror against the masses that ultimately drives Faraj and Najwa to send their son to Egypt where he lives in the care of Judge Yaseen.

Following his enforced exile, Suleiman quickly adapts to his life in Cairo. He even feels that "Libya grew distant in the background, began to mean little" (230). But even though Suleiman may have not been affected by the exile on a political level, he ached for things and people that shaped his childhood: "I yearned for them, my room, my workshop on the roof, the sea, Kareem. What I missed most was the smell of our house" (232). In spite of the smooth

integration into the Egyptian society, leaving Libya seems to have taken an inward toll on Suleiman. In a statement that seems to echo the author's own state of mind, the grown up Suleiman says: "I suffer an absence, an ever-present absence, like an orphan not entirely certain of what he has missed or gained through his unchosen loss" (232). The novel is pervaded by a sense of ambiguous loss and exile although Matar has emphasized it is not an autobiographical narrative, and it raises as well questions about nationalism which Suleiman believes is "as thin as a thread" (231).

*In the Country of Men* is permeated by potent imagery on the censure of art and the restrictions imposed on those who promote it. The profession of Ustath Rashid as an art history teacher is no haphazard maneuver on the author's part. The arrest and later humiliating execution of Ustath Rashid is a blow from the totalitarian regime not only to resistance movements but to art as well. One of the most powerful illustrations for the Libyan government's condemnation of all art forms is when Suleiman calls to mind Judge Yaseen telling him an incident about a young man seen running across Martyrs' Square with a typewriter under his arm chased by members of the Revolutionary Committee. Thus, Matar's becoming a writer – an artist – is an indirect form in itself of resisting the government.

Reinventing the self in writing is a means of reconciling with the past and adapting to the present. It is also a method of coping with trauma. Such process of reinvention invokes the need for altering the past, hence condemning fragments of the writer's truth to oblivion. Imaginative reconstruction then becomes a factor in writing autobiographical novels; the writer relies on memory to rebuild his childhood. The world created is both the author's own and yet dissimilar to it. In relying on memory, a writer asserts his recourse to fiction. In "Time in Autobiography," Burton Pike views autobiography as "a novel written in the present, with one's past life as its

subject” (337). In light of this interpretation, it is clear that “all autobiography is fiction” (Pike 337). Jan Tlustý emphasizes the notion that recalled memories differ from the actual reality that took place: “Talking about the past is tricky, as we are often self-deceived and remember things differently than they actually occurred; we have a natural tendency to forget or alter our past (such as to idealize the past or only recall events that were traumatic)” (183). In a lecture he gave at the American University in Cairo in 2012, Matar himself refers to “how the memory of a specific time sits in the present and is influenced by the present” (n. pag.).

The question of memory summons to mind the notion of truth. The nature of truth in a work of fiction must not stand for a historical truth that should be verified in terms of authenticity and validity. Each individual, reader, and writer constructs their own conception of truth based on the experiences and states of being they bring to the text. In his introduction to *Fictional Truth*, Michael Riffaterre argues that “truth in fiction is not based on actual experience of factuality, nor does the interpretation or esthetic evaluation of fictional narrative require that it be verified against reality” (x). It is because of the reliance on signs and arbitrary conventions that fiction emphasizes both the fictionality of a text and its truth at the same moment. A text can employ verisimilitude to substitute an actual experience with the idea of truth of that experience. Riffaterre maintains that verisimilitude is “a verbal representation of reality rather than reality itself,” hence it requires fictionality (xv). Thus, verisimilitude not only diminishes the gap between truth and fiction; it frees “fiction from the shackles of reference” (6). Therefore, truth is no longer to be defined or shaped by one particular perspective according to the presence – or absence – of verifiable facts: “Readers need not be familiar with the reality that the text is about in order to believe it true” (Riffaterre 8). Readers of autobiography expect verifiable and reliable life narratives, yet in the case of autobiographical fiction, the nature of fiction alters expectations.

In “Autobiographical Criticism,” “conscious fictionality” present in autobiographical novels eliminates boundaries between material reality and any imaginary construction of a world (Kaminsky n. pag.). As Katherine Lever puts it, “[f]iction is concerned with the real but not the actual. Imagined characters may seem so real to readers that they become confused and think the novelist is writing about actual people” (21). Furthermore, she adds that the writer’s fictional world “must be a credible and possible one if the book is to be called a novel” (23). Matar’s narrative readily complies with this condition as the world he constructs around Suleiman is not only credible but the elements that shape Suleiman and his world are real and plausible to the reader.

Paul John Eakin believes that writing an autobiographical narrative means “the autobiographer constructs a self that would not otherwise exist” (*Fictions in Autobiography* 26). In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera writes: “All novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self” (Kundera 23). It is this self that Matar strives to understand or make sense of in writing. This self is the intersection point where author, narrator, and protagonist converge in narratives of autobiographical fiction. Thus it is imperative to understand each figure individually and independently in order to comprehend how they overlap and produce what I propose to call an autobiographically fictional self.

In *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune defines the author as “a social responsible real person and the producer of a discourse” (11). To readers, an author – whom they do not necessarily know in person – is known and understood from the narrative he produces. Lejeune argues that an author “cannot be reduced to any of his texts in particular” (11). An author transcends the narrators and protagonists he creates simply because he is the originator of such characters. This description of author coincides with Bakhtin’s definition of author as an entity

that constructs the hero and thus has dominion over this hero and his realm. Therefore, Matar – although linked to his protagonist Suleiman – should not be strictly associated with Suleiman, nor should Suleiman be considered as a comprehensive double for the author. Suleiman can at most be regarded as a representative of a fictionalized segment of Matar’s childhood as Matar recalled it and chose to narrate it.

Lejeune maintains that “[a]n autobiographical work of fiction can be ‘exact,’ the protagonist resembling the author” (*On Autobiography* 14). The term ‘exact’ in this context does not imply exact mimesis but rather refers to the possibility of having events in the narrative that echo events that occurred in reality. Perhaps if an author chose to present his work as an autobiography he would be criticized for what readers or critics may point to as inaccuracies, since it is expected of him to be thorough and factual in his text. But the mere fact that any autobiographical narrative is a *representation* of a life denies any text the status of an accurate record of a life. Therefore autobiographical fiction could be more plausible and easily accessible – on the part of the reader – than more conventional forms of autobiography. The failures of autobiography and the reader’s expectations from an autobiographical act are made up for if a narrative takes on a fictive nature.

In *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*, James Goodwin argues that “[f]or Lejeune the textual property that most distinguishes autobiography from fiction is in the form of a pact or contract between an autobiography and the reader, a pact initiated from the attribution of authorship on the autobiography’s title page and onward through the book” (15-6). From the onset, Matar instantly declares there is no autobiographical pact by labelling his work a novel. However, Lejeune articulates that parallel to the autobiographical pact, there is a “fictional pact” that consists of two aspects: “obvious practice of nonidentity” and “affirmation of fictitiousness”

(*On Autobiography* 14-15). Matar's *In the Country of Men* fulfills these two conditions; the author does not grant his protagonist the same name, and he adds the word 'novel' as a subtitle to his work. It thus qualifies as a fictional pact. Yet this fact does not automatically eliminate the parallels or similarities found between the lives of author (Matar) and narrator (Suleiman). Lejeune deduces that if the author does not name his protagonist after him, then the narrative immediately ceases to be an autobiography; yet eliminating the possibility of a narrative being called an autobiography does not accordingly mean that such narrative is devoid of autobiographical elements.

According to Lejeune, autobiography is "a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing" (30). This statement implies that an author is not the only figure who can label his work an autobiography or a fictional one, for that matter, the reader plays a role as important in determining the nature of the text through the reading process. Thus we can see the parallels in the experiences of Matar and Suleiman. In Hisham Matar's case, which could arguably be an exception, the reader creates a link between author and narrator or protagonist precisely because of certain incidents in the author's verifiable past which the readers can map out in the protagonist's story. Lejeune examines the fine line between identity and resemblance, stating that while identity is "a fact immediately grasped ... at the level of enunciation," resemblance is more of "a relationship ... established from the utterance" (*On Autobiography* 21). Following this notion, we must therefore not mix between the identity of the author and that of his narrator or his protagonist. While the author as referent is at the edge of his text, the narrator and/or protagonist are immersed in the text, unaware that they are part of the author's consciousness.

Andrea Schwenke Wyile defines a first-person narrative as "one in which an I tells his or her story" (185). *In the Country of Men* is told in the first-person voice of the older Suleiman

who is recalling events during the summer of 1979 in Tripoli. Yet at times, the prose shifts from the bewildered voice of a child to the reflective voice of twenty-four-year-old Suleiman who is in fact telling the whole story: “older, wiser narrators reflect back on their past and narrate the events that have brought them to their present vantage point” (Wyile 186). Philippe Lejeune argues that since “childhood appears only through the memory of the adult,” reconstructing the discourse of a child as told by an adult requires that we “enter the space of fiction” (53). The older Suleiman’s voice as narrator surprises the reader in the middle of the narrative: “As I live now in the country that produced those films I am familiar with their shortcomings” (85). The purpose of such reminiscence is to remind the reader that it is the voice older Suleiman who is telling the story of that summer. It is the same narrator, the same ‘I’, but an altered perspective of an older ‘I’. Though he has excelled in his studies and has secured a decent living as a pharmacist, the tone of the older Suleiman reveals a sense of internal displacement and a need to affirm the presence of his voice. In his storytelling, the older Suleiman appears to be trying to “mend the fracture, the point at which his personal narrative had been amputated” which is why the narrative oscillates between the perspective of the child and the adult Suleiman (Gana n. pag.). The language Matar employs adequately suits the voice of a child-narrator; we believe that Suleiman is nine-year-old, although we are aware as the plot progresses that it is twenty-four year old Suleiman who is narrating the story.

In “Fictional and Factual Autobiography from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory,” Jan Tlustý discusses how to approach fiction and the speech acts that a writer performs by writing fiction. To explore the relationship between the fictional and the factual, Tlustý refers to Gerard Genette’s *Fiction and Diction*, arguing that “[i]n the case of factual autobiography, the author is identical with the narrator and at the same time with the main character” (180). In such



cases, Tlusty claims, the author is fully responsible for their declarations, meaning that their narration is expected to be verifiable and true in terms of documented facts. If Genette's statement of equating author with narrator in case of a narrative's factuality is accurate, then the opposite purports to be true as well. When a writer turns to the third-person perspective in a narrative, that writer proposes that he is not one with the narrator or the main character.

According to Tlusty, such narratives are "necessarily fictional, which is true even if the depicted events accord with the events in the actual world" (181). The fictional aspect here initially stems from the author's choice to not become identical with his narrator and to maintain a safe distance by putting the veracity of what he writes entirely on the narrator. If applied to *In the Country of Men*, then Matar is consciously choosing not to align himself with Suleiman, his protagonist and narrator.

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the hero or protagonist is a whole autonomous entity independent of the author. He maintains that the relationship between author and hero is one in which the author's position is always maintained outside the hero. It is this being-outside that enables the author to assemble the hero until he "forms a whole by supplying all those moments which are inaccessible to the hero himself from within himself" ("Author and Hero" 14). This relationship gives birth to the hero as "a new human being on a new plane of existence" ("Author and Hero" 14). The hero then is an independent self, yet one that nonetheless draws upon the author's own; a being that is given consciousness "from the creative consciousness of an author" ("Author and Hero" 12). Suleiman then is the product of the amalgamation of the author and Bakhtin's 'hero.' To elucidate, the protagonist is a hybrid self that is assembled within and emerges from the author's consciousness. Resorting to the novel form in *In the Country of Men* is Matar's way of escaping from the confines of the term "autobiography" and the entailing

conventions. On one level, it liberates him from the need to answer for the accuracy and reliability of a text that is arguably semi-autobiographical, and it also allows him a mode of exploration and reinvention of the self that is not restrained by or strictly limited to real-life events and incidents.

The novel is a representation of the collective Libyan childhood during the late 1970s. Through poetic prose, Matar has not only given his readers a personal account of one childhood, but an insight into what it meant to be a child in Libya, and, in the process, revealed all the factors that shaped his own being and led to his formation as an artist. The trauma of his father's abduction has brought out the artist in Matar: "I sometimes wonder if I would have become a writer if what happened to my father hadn't happened" (Derbyshire n. pag.). The novel also transcends the geographical borders of Libya and the temporal boundaries of the year 1979 as the story could apply to the trying hardships faced by civilians under the rule of any harsh dictatorship.

After establishing that an author's declaration on the fictionality of his narrative is irrelevant to the reader's assessment, the novel could be read as a narrative of an artist's formation since it unveils the significance of particular elements that shaped the author's childhood. In writing, Matar constructs not only a hybrid hero but a hybrid world sustained by the interaction of life stories and fiction. Bakhtin's extrapolations on the aesthetics of the relationship between author and hero serve to assert that the reinvention of the self necessitates an awareness of one's consciousness as well as that of the hero one endeavors to create. Lejeune's interpretation of 'fictional pact,' on the other hand, combined with an awareness of the shortcomings of Lejeune's hypothesis allows the reader to acknowledge the existence of a substantial grey area between the documentary (autobiography) and the unreal (fiction). In spite

of the differences between Coetzee's *Summertime* and Matar's *In the Country of Men*, the two narratives assert that fictional narratives – on a minimal scale at any rate – contain autobiographical elements and, even more importantly, that the autobiographical truth is a myth; at most, writers can only aspire to *represent* a symbolic truth.

## Chapter Four: Conclusion

*The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined, out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.*

James Joyce

James Joyce, whose masterpiece *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a pivotal work in the corpus of English *Kunstlerroman*, extricates the artist from the confines of his heroes and his narrative, believing that his position is always outside of the sphere of his own creation. The artist resembles a demiurge or a creator of a universe since he is in a position of omniscience and has a consciousness that simultaneously transcends and encompasses the collective consciousnesses of all the characters he creates. Various elements contribute to the creation of a narrative dealing with an artist's growth and maturity. The novels I chose underscore the modern artist's dilemma and explore the diverse factors that shape an artist both in childhood and in adulthood. On the other hand, the genre of autobiographical fiction is, as previously asserted, not a new one, but the hybrid nature of texts belonging to this genre is in itself an invitation to find a firm grasp on the constituents of both fiction and autobiography. At the same time, understanding the nature of the *Kunstlerroman* genre is key to exploring the novels as modern representatives of this genre. The reader experiences firsthand the internal growth of the hero/artist and comes to understand the difficulties associated with identifying the borders between figures of the author, narrator, and protagonist.

Bakhtin's "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" explores Joyce's definition of the artist in depth and elucidates how the author has authority over the world he generates in writing as well as a transcendental awareness of its very components. Bakhtin's postulation that the author/artist reflects in the hero's figure his own struggles is established and verified in

Coetzee's *Summertime* and Matar's *In the Country of Men*. Lejeune's *On Autobiography* offers the fictional pact through which it is possible to understand that an author may steer away from conventional forms of autobiographical writing and affirm the fictitiousness of his narrative while expanding the gap between himself and his protagonist. While *In the Country of Men* employs an adult narrator who revisits his childhood, *Summertime* opts for an unconventional means of narration. The first person narration in Matar's novel is distinct from the beginning, yet the third person narration of the unreliable Vincent in Coetzee's fictional memoir – combined with having a dead protagonist that carries the same name as the author – is confusing but at the same time marks a new avant-garde approach in exploring one's past in writing.

In Matar's narrative, the protagonist is a nine-year-old whose view is naïve, limited, and constrained. As readers, we know about Suleiman's situation more than he does, which is a form of structural irony. According to M. H. Abrams, structural irony introduces a naïve hero who is incapable to seeing his world as it is (135). On the other hand, Coetzee's narrative challenges the reader through dismantling the conventions of fictional memoir, triggering an inability to demarcate the boundaries of reality and imagination. The irony in both texts is that one cannot constitute the self intrinsically; the two novels are synchronously autobiographical and not autobiographical. While Matar's story is quasi-autobiographical since it seemingly relies on real-life events in its construction, Coetzee's narrative is anti-autobiographical as it does not only deconstruct autobiography's conventions, but it attempts to "outwit the prurience and immodesty of the genre by frustrating [the reader's] own desire to enter [the author's] innermost life" (qtd. in Mars-Jones). The reasons for both writers' resort to such unconventional means of representing life stories may shed some light on the artist's plight in the postmodern world.

Autobiographical fiction, by nature, points to a presence that is neither the real author nor the narrator; in other words, an implied author. This implied author “chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man” (Booth 74-75). In *Summertime*, the implied author is the fictionalized Coetzee readers envisage. He is embodied in the persona of the late John, of whom readers form a picture drawn by the accounts of the five interviewees. The chief basis for constructing the image of the implied author thus becomes the voices or points of view of the five interviewees. *In the Country of Men* also reveals an implied author, a persona of Matar that is not identical to the author yet whose life is parallel to his.

Both writers rely on multiple voices in conveying their stories. While all interviewees sometimes offer similar or parallel insights into John’s character in *Summertime*, each interviewee presents a specific, individualized perspective. Yet while none of the voices converge with the others, each voice is believable to the reader; no voice negates the other. Therefore the multiplicity of voices in *Summertime* constitutes a fresh means of artistic self-exploration and offers a new understanding of the genre of autobiographical fiction. Similarly, *In the Country of Men* proposes the technique of embedded voice as a new mode for exploring a protagonist’s past. While the narrative style suggests that a nine-year-old is telling the story, the reader is introduced to the actual narrator – twenty-four-year-old Suleiman – early on in the novel. The voice of a child embedded within the voice of an adult is another means of revisiting one’s childhood within a fictionalized context.

These two narratives, *In the Country of Men* and *Summertime*, may differ in aspects such as narrative voice, yet one of their shared features is that they explore the formation of an individual who grows up to become an artist. By focusing on certain elements in their narratives

and subconsciously highlighting them, each author has exposed some of the factors that have played a considerable role in shaping his identity as an artist. Both narratives trace the protagonist's development as an individual growing up within a given culture and society, *and* as a human being trying to find his vocation in a postmodern world. Among the two novels' shared aspects is the kind of silent alienation that subtly radiates from both texts. In *Summertime*, John is ultimately portrayed as a loner, an individual alienated from his native environment; it is a conclusion accentuated to varying degrees by those who knew him. On the other hand, *In the Country of Men* introduces Suleiman as a boy who initially appears to belong to his small society but who gradually drifts away from his parents, his peers, and eventually his country. The image of displacement both physically and internally emphasizes the long-standing depiction of the artist as an alienated being, one that does not fully belong to his social, cultural, and sometimes political environment. In both novels, the artist-in-formation is rendered as a figure whose center is himself and whose universe – while tied to others – is not reliant on or at the mercy of others' fates.

*Summertime* counters the formation of a proper protagonist by disrupting the expectations of the reader. While expectations comprise having a central character that is somehow physical or tangible in the reader's mind, the novel offers a protagonist whose own voice is never heard. The voices introducing this protagonist are divergent but not necessarily contradicting; the different insights they provide contribute to the process of shattering the convention of having a character. *In the Country of Men* ventures into the opposite notion since it not only proffers a firmly-built, consistent protagonist but molds him to become a representative of all Libyan children who were witness to the violence and brutality of Gaddafi's regime in the late 1970s, a sort of everyman.

Autobiography is not a science of exact facts; fiction in autobiography is inevitable because unconditional objectivity is as unattainable as absolute truth. Paul John Eakin maintains that “[t]he presence of fiction in autobiography is not something to wish away, to rationalize, to apologize for, as so many writers and readers of autobiography persist in suggesting, for it is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (Eakin *Fictions in Autobiography* 10). The question of absolute truth is substituted by one that attempts to shed light on the artist’s version of the truth as a symbolic one. It is understood now that the act of creative writing, when merged with the reliance on one’s own past, involves the making and unmaking of many selves. The outcome is a conglomerate self incorporating the past and present of an author. As Albert E. Stone maintains, “[t]he autobiographer aims to recreate the self-in-its-world, not by literal reproduction of remembered facts (a boring as well as impossible achievement), but by patterning the past into a present symbolic truth” (*American Autobiography* 6). The writing of autobiographical fiction is a poetic process of self-reinvention, one allowing writers to concurrently scrutinize and express not one but many selves that compose their being. These two works always try to surpass the genre norms.

To sum up the position of these two novels in the debate on genre theory, one can assert that it is in the nature of literature to transcend the boundaries and conventions set by genres. Derrida in his seminal essay “The Law of Genre” formulates “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity” (206), meaning that the law itself is paradoxical since it invites the deconstruction of genre. He reaches the conclusion that “every text participates in one or several genres . . . yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (212). *Summertime* and *In the Country of Men* are prime examples of participating in the genre of autobiography without belonging to it.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the relation between trauma and memory, see the special issue of *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 30, entitled *Trauma and Memory* (2010).

<sup>2</sup> In an article published in *The Telegraph* in 2010, Neil Tweedie recounts that Matar was nine years old when he left Libya with his mother. This makes him the same age as Suleiman, his protagonist, when he left Libya for Egypt. Suleiman's father is abducted by the Libyan authorities in the novel, whereas Matar's father was abducted by Egyptian authorities from his home in Egypt on March 12, 1990 and handed him over to Libyan authorities. For more on parallelism between Suleiman and Hisham, see Hisham Matar's "The Return" in *The New Yorker*.

<sup>3</sup> In another autobiographical work, *Youth*, Coetzee emphasizes how his protagonist, John, desires to "leave behind, were he to die tomorrow, a handful of poems" (58). Yet he realizes that his poems are not only growing shorter but less substantial as well. He even describes his poems as "wry little pieces, *minor* in every sense" (59).

<sup>4</sup> There are certain events and instances that remind the reader of the fictionality in *Summertime*. According to an article by James Meek in *The Guardian*, J. M. Coetzee was married with two children in 1971. In *Summertime*, the author is portrayed from 1972 to 1975 as a single young man still living with his father.

<sup>5</sup> Derived from the French word *autre*, which translates as *other*, 'autrebiography' is a term J. M. Coetzee coins in an interview with David Atwell in *Doubling the Point*. Autrebiography refers to writing the self as other (*Doubling* 394). In *Summertime*, it is associated with the use of an unreliable third person narrator, a technique that distances the author from the protagonist. Autrebiography implies and thus strengthens the notion of fictionality in an autobiographical narrative.

<sup>6</sup> Through research, I found that *Democracy Now* is not an actual book. However, the title Matar invents implies that the father was an advocate of democracy and thus the book is the ultimate cause of the father's imprisonment.

<sup>7</sup> The mother's medicine is a euphemism for alcohol which she secretly buys and consumes whenever Faraj is away. While alcohol is illegal in Libya and most Arab countries, it appears to be one of Najwa's few means of coping with her problems, especially when her husband is not around. Having the child-protagonist in Matar's novel as the narrator through whom we as readers experience the world of the novel is a defamiliarization device used to allow the reader to see ordinary things through a different lens, a lens that secures a deeper, more aesthetic perception of what has become ordinary and dull to our eyes. Shklovsky argues that defamiliarization in art is meant to make "the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object" (779). Suleiman himself does not defamiliarize the objects or events he describes but it is rather his description of them – a description through the eyes of a nine-year-old – that causes the reader to appear as though he is seeing this object for the first time. An example would be Mama's medicine bottle; Suleiman is unaware of the nature of this medicine, he calls it medicine

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because his capacity for understanding is limited. Readers on the other hand acquire at this point a new awareness of this bottle and what it signifies, and they understand what Suleiman cannot; the medicine is alcohol. Instead of writing ‘alcohol’ or using a referent that directly alludes to it, Matar’s child-narrator is a means of imparting this piece of information in a manner that appears to acquaint the reader with this object for the first time.

<sup>8</sup> In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri’s father disappears without a trace. Unlike Faraj, whose disappearance is only temporary in *In the Country of Men*, Nuri’s father is never heard from again. The recurring motif of the disappearing father in the two novels underscores the writer’s desire to emphasize the enormity of the trauma created by his own father’s disappearance, whether consciously or not.

<sup>9</sup> In a poetry collection entitled *Amorisco*, Khaled Mattawa wrote a poem entitled “Night of the Dulcimer” (46-48). The poem is dedicated to the “jailbirds of the Black Horse Prison” (46) in Tripoli. The prison was abolished in 1988, and where it stood was built another prison where Matar’s father has been detained since his abduction (75).

<sup>10</sup> Abu Salim Prison in Tripoli is where Jaballa Matar was imprisoned after his abduction. Nikki Barrowclough reports in *The Sunday Morning Herald* that Jaballa managed to smuggle out two letters to his family in 1992 and 1995. Barrowclough adds that although Libyan prisons were opened during the revolution against Gaddafi’s decades-long rule in 2011, Jaballa did not resurface as a survivor. He is believed to have perished in light of the absence of any evidence that proves he is alive.

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