


**The House on Mulberry Street:
Authoritarianism, Orientalism, and the
Experience of Interior Spaces in
Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men***

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Abstract

Hisham Matar's debut novel *In the Country of Men* centers on Suleiman el-Dewani, a child growing up in 1970s Tripoli, Libya, and the moment his life is upended by the sudden disappearance of his dissident father. Matar compresses the political down to the personal level; for as much as *In the Country of Men* is about a country struggling with despotism, it is also a novel about a particular household and the connections sustained within the space of the home. Well aware of the centuries-old conflation of Arab domestic spaces with harems in Western literature, Matar subverts Orientalist representations of the harem, broadening his readers' notion of private, interior spaces in the Arab world consist of and the meaning these spaces are imbued with. While Edward Said cites architect Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* in *Orientalism* as evidence for how Oriental spaces may be restructured via the lens of Orientalism, *In the Country of Men* sees a North African writer mapping the poetics of the private Arab spaces for himself. Alongside Alifa Rifaat's short story "My World of the Unknown," Matar's shifts the emphasis from how Westerners imagine and interpret the North African domestic space to how Arabs bestow meaning upon their own homes. While Western representations of Arab spaces and their subjective value typically looks outwards towards the West, rationalizing eurocentrism and setting the stage for imperial-erotic fantasy, the "poetics" that Matar and Rifaat both engage with point inwards, with the private spaces of the home sustaining their characters' individuality and personal development. In this way, Matar presents the Dewani home as both a profoundly freeing space and necessary response to the dehumanization that Suleiman and his parents face as citizens in a patriarchal, politically repressive state.

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Introduction

Since its publication in 2006, Hisham Matar's debut novel *In the Country of Men*, referred to from here as *ITCOM*, has received unprecedented acclaim. Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and winner of the Guardian First Book Award, *ITCOM* was a favorite among critics. Although these accolades are impressive in and of itself, they do not begin to cover the impact that *ITCOM* has had on the literary world—this novel is also the recipient of the 2007 Commonwealth Writers Prize of Europe and South Asia as well as the adult fiction category of the inaugural Arab American Book Award in 2007. This diversity among the prizes *ITCOM* has received speaks to its singular position within contemporary Western literature. Written in English by a native Arabic speaker, this is both an essential piece of Postcolonial literature and a decidedly Arab novel. What is even more compelling is that *ITCOM* is set in, and seeks to unpack, the complex political structures of a country that looms large in the Western imagination precisely for its legacy of despotism, state repression, and anti-western policies—the vast, North African country of Libya. As a native Libyan and the son of the prominent businessman and political dissident Jaballa Matar, Hisham Matar is in a unique position to provide insight into a part of the world, and a moment in time of which (despite how prominently they may feature in Western perceptions of international and even national politics) his Anglophone audience likely has little real knowledge.

ITCOM centers around Suleiman el-Dewani, a precocious nine-year-old boy growing up in Tripoli, Libya in the late 1970s¹. Doted on by his parents and their friends, Suleiman still senses that something is amiss in his life; Baba, a wealthy businessman, is often away. Whenever he leaves, Mama falls ill and—after taking the mysterious medicine she secretly buys from the baker—tells him disturbing stories of her experience as a child bride. After the Dewanis’ next-door neighbor Ustath Rashid is arrested for counterrevolutionary activity, and it becomes clear that Baba has been kidnapped by the Mokhabarat, Qaddafi’s secret police, Suleiman is prematurely inducted into a world of political, familial, and personal turmoil that the adults in his life are hesitant to explain. Throughout the novel, Suleiman is haunted by the breadth of what he does not know and the seemingly inescapable gaze of the police state. Torn between loyalty to those closest to him—his parents, his fathers’ fellow dissidents, and his best friend Kareem—and the oppressive expectation of total submission to the state, Suleiman acts out against the people in his life in confounding, often violent ways. By the novel’s end, Baba returns home after being tortured by his captors and Suleiman’s unshakable suspicion that the life he led with Mama is now irretrievable turns out to be correct; his parents abruptly decide that he must complete his schooling in Egypt—in safety, but also in exile.

Though Matar’s novel is a fictional work, most of the discussion surrounding his novels and his 2016 memoir *The Return* revolve around the author’s personal narrative. Like

¹ Although indirectly referred to only as “the Guide” throughout *ITCOM*, Muammar al-Qaddafi’s presence permeates the novel. Qaddafi began serving as commander in chief of the Revolutionary Command Council and de facto head of state in 1969 following the overthrow of King Idris. Although the RCC “functioned as a collegial body in which . . . a consensus was reached” in theory, “all major policy statements bore the imprint” of Qaddafi in practice. An imposing personality with an appalling record of “savage repression of anyone who opposed regime policies,” Qaddafi served as head of state from 1969 until the 2011 Libyan Civil War (St. John, 208-209).

Suleiman and the protagonist of Matar's 2011 novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Hisham Matar's father was kidnapped by the Libyan secret police in 1990—as of now, Jaballa Matar's whereabouts are unknown, but he is presumed to have passed away. Both novels feature a young Arab boy grieving for an absent father and struggling to come of age amidst an environment marred by political repression, violence, family secrets, toxic relationships, and the realities of living in exile. Although Matar's literary career may be pigeonholed by some critics as a mostly personal endeavor, it is worth emphasizing that *ITCOM* is first and foremost a political novel. On the surface, *ITCOM* is a scathing critique of the decades long Qaddafi regime and an unflinching portrait of the diminishing, disruptive effects of political repression and police violence on his characters' lives. What's less obvious and just as essential, however, is the political function that the novel performs within the world of Western literature. Matar interrupts the enduring Western narrative regarding Arabs and North Africans and what is and is not possible within the spaces they inhabit. Because of this significant intervention, *ITCOM* can be read as a political novel in the sense that it responds to existing, politically-motivated representations of Arabs and North Africans, such as the tradition of harem literature. Not only does Matar subvert orientalist tropes by actively engaging with them throughout his work, but he places the right to imagine the private space squarely in the hands of Suleiman and his mother Najwa, a young boy and an Arab woman respectively. In this way, Matar manages to have a conversation with orientalist notions of private spaces within the Arab world while ultimately rejecting the harem narrative. I will argue that unlike Western imaginings of interior spaces such as the harem, in which the domestic incarceration of “oriental” women serves as a basis for male fantasy, Matar represents the interiors of the Dewani home as a liberating space, where Najwa and Suleiman may develop and fully exist as human beings.

In this essay, I am primarily interested in using a spatial lens to outline and argue how *ITCOM* successfully shifts the trajectory of how private spaces within the Arab world are represented in Western literature. I will begin with a brief overview of how Western writers and artists have historically represented interior spaces in the Arab world, representations that, I argue, revolve around imperial-erotic obsessions with the harem. Using Edward Said's discourse on Orientalism as a reference, I sketch out the five characteristics of the harem narrative in chapter one, describing how each of these serve to degrade and diminish Arab and North African women, spaces, relationships, and ways of life. Once this groundwork is laid, I will begin my analysis of the representation of the space of the Dewani home in the novel, paying special attention to how Matar references and subverts the characteristics of Western harem narratives, presenting the interior space as a lively, nuanced, and necessary refuge from the violent, politically repressive public sphere. Lastly, I will propose an interpretation of Matar's work in which even the protection and repose provided by the private space ultimately proves inadequate against the crushing power of the police state—as a result of this, Suleiman and Najwa require a further retreat in order to exist and develop as fully-fledged emotional, psychological, and moral beings. This retreat into what I call the liminal space, however, can only happen within the home; and, in this way, Matar imagines the interior space of an Arab home, so typically represented in western art and literature as confining, as profoundly freeing. Drawing from Edward Said's citation of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* as well as the work of 20th Century Egyptian author Alifa Rifaat, I argue that Matar contributes to a common aesthetic goal among contemporary North African writers—to define and present the symbolic, phenomenological value of Arab spaces for themselves.

From Home to Harem: Orientalism, Fantasy, and Western Representations of Private Spaces in the Arab and North African World

Although Matar occupies a unique place in the canon as a contemporary North African author writing about the 20th Century Arab experience for an Anglophone audience, the market for Arab narratives in the West is anything but new. In fact, European and North American art, literature, and media has fixated on capturing the Arab world for centuries—Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” summarizes this venture (Said 11). For many Western artists and writers, no facet of life in the Middle East and North Africa held as much aesthetic and imaginative promise as the space of the Arab home, the tendency being to conflate the home with the harem. While the literal meaning of the word “harem” is simply a room or rooms within a house set aside for women, the space of the harem quickly took on heady connotations within the western mind, many of which are still unshakable today. Because of this long-standing tendency to conflate the space and function of Arab homes with that of harems among the representations of Arab and North African life that Western consumers have historically had access to, it is essential to understand the mechanics of the harem narrative in order to properly assess how Matar disrupts it. In this chapter, I will outline how Western representations of the private spaces and lives of Arabs —what Ruth Yeazell calls “harems of the mind”—center around five central characteristics: the harem as

unchanging, as prison, as male fantasy, as a space of deviant sexuality, and the harem as devoid of love.

Despite the obsessive interest in “knowing” the harem that Western Europe developed during the 18th and 19th centuries, representations of the space are sensationalized and speculative at best, regardless of if they appear in poetry, painting, erotica, or pseudo-journalistic media such as travel literature. Indeed, Yeazell maintains that the desire for information about Arabs, in this case the structures of private life considered wholly unique and endogenous to the Arab world, is girded by an equal need to fantasize about what the harem may contain (8). Furthermore, the tendency of these accounts to associate the harem with polygamy—incorrectly assumed to be a social and cultural standard across the Muslim world—obscure the true nature of harems, which, geographic and economic variations notwithstanding, are merely areas of the home set aside for women. Notions of the harem’s inaccessibility further opened the potential for fantasy—popular narratives in which a harem is infiltrated, reveal both the sexual and geopolitical value that Western representations impose upon space of the harem. These attachments to heavily Orientalized misconceptions and imperial-erotic fantasies feature heavily in Western representations of the harem, and thus in conceptions of Arab and North African homes.

As Said notes in his classic book of the same name, *Orientalism* derives much of its power from the assumption that the Orient exists independently and outside of history—virtually unchanged since ancient times, the Orient stands in stark contrast to the constant political, economic, and intellectual development of the Occidental (35). Meanwhile, the modern world—which Said maintains to be synonymous with the West in Orientalist structures—continues to develop and refine itself to the point that the development and

refinement of “subject races” is framed as the West’s moral duty. In the imperialist’s mind, the Orient’s “great moments were in the past” (35). This interpretation of social and cultural temporality, despite being blatantly false, is immediately visible in how artistic renderings of the harem—a popular subject in 18th and 19th century art—manifest the characteristic ‘harem as unchanging’ (Yeazell). While immensely popular across Europe, paintings of harem scenes, hammams, and odalisques from this time period display an alarming lack of variation in terms of how they portray life in the Arab and Muslim world—regardless of what era, country, or ethnic group they are meant to depict. Indeed, artists relied heavily upon a series of deeply codified symbols, which, regardless of their accuracy or value within the societies these paintings and drawings meant to represent, could serve as immediate visual markers by which Western audiences may identify and ostensibly know an Oriental space. While Western artists depicting scenes of life in Europe or North America were often keen to include some indication of the time periods portrayed in their work, time is irrelevant in representations of the Middle East relative to the importance of space—that is, the mythologized Orient.

For instance, Eugene Delacroix’s 1834 painting *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* demonstrate several clichés that would, to his 19th century French audience, signal an “Oriental” space. Lounging on richly patterned carpets and pillows, the women in the painting smoke from a narghile and are attended to by an opulently dressed servant (Boime 70). Absolutely no indication is given of the time period in which the painting is set—these women could as easily be medieval princesses or Delacroix’ contemporaries, although given Orientalism’s insistence that the Orient is arrested in time, one suspects that Delacroix meant for this scene to be set in the 19th century. British painter John Fredrick Lewis’ depictions of harems underscored this stagnancy with near-identical visual markers—opulent

fabrics, latticed windows, sofas, beds, narghiles, exotic animals, and, of course, beautiful Middle Eastern and North African women very obviously modeled after western women. Despite Lewis' commitment to maintaining the harem narrative via his representations of the space, the tone of his work differs slightly from that of Delacroix. While the odalisques depicted in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* lounge around on pillows and idly smoke from their pipe, the inhabitants of Lewis' harems are downright lethargic. In *The Siesta*, a work that is visually congruous with Lewis' many harem paintings despite its Spanish name, a woman "decorously sleeps" in colorful silk robes, "succumbing to a moment of soporific pleasure." (Yeazell 230). The arrangement of opium poppies on a table beside the woman performs the same symbolic function as the pipe in Delacroix' own harem painting. Lewis' representations of the Arab world suggest a pace of life that, at least for the woman cooped up in her harem, is oppressively sluggish, boring, and stagnant despite the rich sensuality associated with Oriental spaces. Time, it would appear, becomes distorted inside the harem to a degree that suggests not only the Orient's perpetual state of arrested development, but something of the supposed insufficiencies of the Arab personality. Said cites how 19th century British Orientalism painted "Orientals and Arabs . . . devoid of energy and initiative . . . lethargic and suspicious, and in everything opposed the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race." (38-39). The notion that Arabs do not have the same "highly developed consciousness of the value of time" is, in many ways, the operative element of Orientalist art—indeed, even the reductive, exoticized visual markers commonly employed by Western artists to indicate an Oriental space speak to both the excess and immobility of harem life (Said 49).

This lack of movement within the harem understood to be characteristic of both "Oriental" temperaments and society calls into question the Orientalist assumption that

movement between the harem and the outside world is impossible. Reinforced by notions of the Oriental man's "detestable egotism," the harem becomes the stage for the Oriental woman's "soullessness . . . a consequence of her being shut in" a world defined by the "narrow limits" of a monotonous home (Yeazell 75). This misrepresentation of the harem underlies Lewis' 1964 painting *Caged Doves*, in which, "significantly, no bird cage is visible: the walls of the harem presumably enclose both doves and woman. (Yeazell 62). To the European man, the existence of this home-as-prison served as proof of the barbarity of Oriental social structures and relative moral authority of Western ones. In an 1850 article for *Bentley's Miscellany*, a self-described "oriental traveler" urges his female reader to "learn resignation to her lot, as she compares it with the condition of the women of the East" (Yeazell 76). Conversely, early Western feminists employed a similar rhetorical approach to advocate for a validation of women's intellectual and spiritual potential within Western society. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* returns time and again to the image of the harem as a confluence of despotism, tyranny, and reduced spiritual and rational capacity brought about by sexual objectification and the dehumanizing effects of "Mahometanism" (Yeazell 77). While many 'progressive' Western women were horrified by accounts of life in the harem, and Montesquieu took the surveillance of women in harems as proof of the innate predilection for despotism among Orientals, still others were intrigued by the possibilities of the harem as "the locus for slavery" (Boer 50, Yeazell 3).

Just as 19th Century Orientalism simultaneously aestheticized and belittled the amputated history and timelessness of the Orient, the purported incarceration of Arab and North African women within the harem takes on a curious and disturbing quality in some notable visual representations. In *The Colonial Harem*, Malek Alloula deconstructs the second characteristic of harem narratives—the harem as prison—and how it manifests in 19th and

early 20th century French picture postcards of Algerian women. The images on these postcards—peddled as authentic illustrations of North African life—are almost invariably staged in studios in order to elicit certain aesthetic results and bolster pre-existing and interconnected colonial and sexual responses to such media. Indeed, Alloula characterizes the artifice of the photographer’s studio combined with the artifice of figure models posing as Moorish women in harems as “a double movement of appropriation. . .nothing more than the expression of the violence conveyed by the colonial postcard” (21). As Alloula suggests, the power of these images—and the power of their creators to offer up entirely imagined representations of the harem as true likenesses—is extreme. In one particularly striking image, a young Moorish woman stands behind a window covered with a lattice of thick metal bars. On the other side of the window, a man “desperately clutch[es] the bars that keep him from the object of his unequivocal yearning;” this, juxtaposition of male sexual frustration and female imprisonment, is, according to Alloula, one of equivocation (24, 25). Here, we see a return to Yeazell’s original thesis, in which the West’s perennial obsession with and reimagining of the harem speaks to a need to recontextualize and fantasize about these deeply charged notions, regardless of whether they hold any accuracy.

Perhaps no characteristic of the Western construction and representation of the Orientalized interior space is as obvious or broadly influential as the harem as a male fantasy. This third characteristic operates on at least two levels—firstly, one must acknowledge what the harem, from an Orientalist perspective, means to the Middle Eastern man. Alloula succinctly states that the harem embodies “the antithesis of repetition” in the Orientalist’s imagination, a space in which one man may have as many women as he desires (49). This idea, as unrepresentative of the reality for most Middle Eastern men as it is, combined with the “untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies” that writers such as

Flaubert presented as intrinsic to Oriental women, remain in the foreground of the harem narrative (Said 187). Indeed, the desire to believe in such a place as the Orientalized harem far outweighed any ethnographic evidence that might point to its lack of validity in the imaginations of 18th and 19th century Western men (Yeazell 7). Not only does this obsession with, and the resulting commodification, of “Oriental sex” via Western art and literature reveal little about the actual private lives of people from the Middle East and North Africa, it is far more telling of sexuality in 19th Century Europe (Said 188). With the “increasing embourgeoisement” of European society and the standardization of monogamy, sex became inextricable from “a web of legal, moral, even political and economic obligations” while the Orient served as “a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (Said 190).

This construction of the space of the harem and the Orient as a place for “the escapism of sexual fantasy” parallels the imperial fantasy both in form and theory. Indeed, the supposed inaccessibility and impenetrability of the harem made room for the fantasy of infiltration (Boer 50). Following Montesquieu’s theory of climate which assumes that people from Northern climates are intrinsically more active, courageous, and less vengeful and suspicious than those from warmer climates, the aggressive, masculine, and confident North provides a natural counterpart to the fearful, effeminate South, a dynamic that inevitably must result in the former conquering the latter (Boer 48). This theory, which speaks to the supposed naturalness of the colonial relationship, is invoked in various justifications for imperialism; in *Orientalism*, Said outlines Lord Balfour’s logic regarding the British occupation of Egypt; “England knows Egypt . . . England knows that Egypt cannot have self-government . . . that they are a subject race dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them,” (34, 35). Knowledge, for the British, is a mission and a victory—proof of

Northern superiority and the inferiority of a society that not only allows itself to be known, but will in due time be thankful for their subservient positioning. The fantasy here is of knowledge obtained as a result of Western—and thus, within Montesquieu’s framework, masculine—dominance. Just as European imperialism made room for the political fantasy of penetrating, knowing, and finding favor within the Orient, Orientalist art and literature open up the fantasy of penetrating, knowing, and finding favor within the harem. In Lord Byron’s poem “Don Juan,” the titular character infiltrates a Sultan’s harem disguised as a slave girl and, after being put to bed beside the concubine Dudu, removes the disguise and takes full advantage of his opportunity (Yeazell, 148). The fantasy at play in this wishful representation of a European man in the harem relies upon both the inaccessibility of the harem and the cleverness and courage needed to surmount this inaccessibility: it is as much a colonial fantasy as it is a sexual one.

Don Juan’s ruse—in which he takes on the identity of “Juanna” to slip into the harem—leads to a discussion of the fourth characteristic of the harem narrative which is in many ways inseparable from the harem as a male fantasy; the harem as a place of ‘divergent’ sexuality. The entire passage in which Don Juan, still in his costume, lies in bed with Dudu alludes to lesbianism; Dudu is described as a “genius . . . for this sort of sentimental friendship.” (Yeazell 122). Although Don Juan soon casts off his disguise and the homoerotic potential of the scene “dissolves” into a heterosexual encounter, the poem flirts with the idea of what would undoubtedly constitute sexual deviancy to a 19th century European audience, fulfilling, for this audience, the expectation that the Oriental harem was in itself “a universe of generalized perversion and of the absolute limitlessness of pleasure” (Alloula 95). Undeniably, the supposed polysexuality of the harem, a space in which polygamy, homosexuality, relationships between eunuchs and women, and “excessive”

sexual freedom allowed Westerners to observe the substance of their fantasies from a safe distance, where judgement could still be passed (Said 167).

For all of its far-reaching, wishful eroticism, the final characteristic of the Orientalist harem narrative is the harem as a space devoid of love. Yeazell concedes that while “the random force of erotic desire” tempered by jealousy and competition dominates Western imaginings of the harem, love as genuine emotional attachment cannot exist in this environment (137). As such, harem fictions often pit the freedom of the heart against the “imagined despotism of the harem,” the subtext of which being that Oriental women can only satisfy a latent desire for monogamous romance and fidelity once the harem is left behind, something that the second characteristic—the harem as prison—has already shown to be impossible. (Yeazell 140). This loveless existence extends from representations of the Oriental woman to that of “the master of the imaginary seraglio” as well, who, despite his enviable position in the eyes of European men finds himself “in a state of insensibility which leaves [him] with no desires at all” by virtue of the sheer number of and subsequent disposability of the women in his charge (Yeazell 149). In addition to the fact that this interpretation of the psychological and emotional challenges of the harem conflates polygamy—a rarity within the societies that harem narratives purportedly represent—with female promiscuity, it yet again speaks to the extreme confidence that 18th and 19th century Europeans had in their own social structures alongside a fascination with these fictitious accounts of life in the Orient. Ultimately, the notion of the harem as a space where love cannot sustain itself brings the discussion back to Edward Said’s original thesis, in which Orientalism functions as a lens through which the Orient may be dominated and restructured to create a representation of the Middle East and the people who live there as irreconcilably different from that of the West. Indeed, just as Orientalism insists upon a level

of barbarism, backwardness, and perversion that would be inconceivable in the West, it promotes an image of Arabs as victims of a shame culture, intrinsically “aberrant,” and incapable of the same emotional and intellectual depth as Westerners (Said 48).

Nowhere is the western tendency to conflate the space of the harem with that of the Arab North African home than in artistic and literary representations of each. In order to dissect Matar’s representation of the private space in *ITCOM*, it is crucial to form an awareness of the larger tradition of harem narratives that Matar works out of and responds to, as I have sketched out in this chapter. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Matar manages to both dismiss the reductions and misconceptions of the harem narrative and replace this conception of Arab and North African interior spaces with a more authentic representation. In the immediate next chapter, I discuss Matar’s characterization of the public sphere in *ITCOM* in order to form the argument that Matar presents the Dewani home as both a refuge from and challenge to the inescapable scrutiny, violence, and repression at the hands of the state. In other words, from here, I demonstrate how Matar’s representation of the interior, domestic space responds to both the despotism that the Dewanis must contend with as well as the tropes of harem narratives, with the home as a complex, dynamic, and ultimately freeing space for Sulieman and his family.

“True Mercy”—The Dewani Home as a Response to Both the Harem Narrative and Authoritarianism

As I have outlined in the previous chapter, the tradition of harem narratives has and continues to wield tremendous influence over how interior spaces within the Arab and North African world exist within the Western imagination. A lifelong devotee of 18th and 19th century European art and literature, Matar is undoubtedly familiar with both the West’s fascination with the private lives of Arabs and North Africans as well as the ways in which they have been misrepresented in order to suit pre-existing goals and prejudices. In this chapter, I will examine how Matar represents the space of the home in *ITCOM*, a representation that, I argue, references Orientalist models of the harem. Indeed, each of the five characteristics of harem narratives are present or at least acknowledged in *ITCOM*—the rooms of the Dewani house are “dark and [smell] of sleep,” (119) and while her husband Faraj is away, Najwa “walks aimlessly around the house,” and tells tales of Scheherazade and Shahryar to her son Suleiman (119, 122). Crucially, however, *ITCOM* is in no way a case of self-Orientalization. Rather, I argue that both Matar’s awareness of how Westerners have represented and consumed representations of Arab spaces as well as his masterful writing allow him to use the markers of Orientalism such as *The Arabian Nights* to achieve an opposite end. Indeed, Matar’s representation of the Arab North African home is nuanced, and based in an Arab phenomenological—that is, relating to and reflecting individual consciousness—experience as opposed to a Western one. By turning reductive,

dehumanizing, and baseless representations of Arabs and Arab spaces on their head, Matar's representation both contextualizes the private space within the realities of living in a police state and opens up a discussion of how his characters—both as Libyans and as individuals—interpret and imagine their own home.

In order to fully appreciate how Matar represents Suleiman's house in the novel, one must first consider his representation of public spaces in Tripoli, Libya during the first decade of the Qaddafi regime. While the reverberations of Libya's political realities are felt from inside the home—especially after Suleiman's counterrevolutionary father Faraj is captured by the Mokhabarat for his subversive activities—the public sphere is where Suleiman comes face to face with the police state's most potent violence and repression. The novel opens on a sunny day in the summer of 1979, when “every person, animal and ant went in desperate search for shade” (Matar 1). Immediately, the heat and sunshine so intrinsic to the Libyan landscape are framed as oppressive because of the harsh, inescapable visibility they inflict upon the population. Suleiman describes the sun as “everywhere. Tripoli lay brilliant and still beneath it,” speaking to both the merciless political visibility that Libyan citizens are subject to and the inertia of a society plagued by constant surveillance (1).

Despite his years, Suleiman seems to understand what is at stake whenever he leaves the shelter of his small neighborhood on Mulberry Street. Indeed, while Suleiman and his Mama, Najwa, drive to Martyrs' Square, Bahloul the beggar “appears out of nowhere” in front of the car, muttering his signature line “I see you, I see you” (3). This fixation on visibility is extended when Suleiman notices how his pretty, young mother draws eyes in the square, and wonders “if her dress shouldn't be looser,” although the activity of “seeing” appears to shift from the qualities of daytime—intrinsic and unshiftable—to Suleiman

himself, perhaps an internalization of the tense, insidious watchfulness embedded in his environment (3). While staring “into the heat and brightness that made me want to sleep with my eyes open,” Suleiman notices his Baba, Faraj, crossing the square (5).

What happens next would appear to contradict the oppressive visibility of both the sun and the bustling public area—what Suleiman calls “the world, a world full of men and the greed of men”—Baba, wearing dark sunglasses, walks past Suleiman, close enough that the boy catches the familiar scent of his father’s cologne, and seemingly does not notice him (4, 6). “Hoping he would call [his] name, wave his hand, snap his fingers,” Suleiman watches his father walk to the other side of the square, followed by his assistant Nasser, and enter a building with green shutters (6). The visibility that Suleiman observes and experiences in Martyrs’ Square, however, is rooted in the atmosphere of mistrust and surveillance promulgated by the police state, the contradiction here being that visibility of this sort makes the sort of visibility that Suleiman craves in this moment, acknowledgement from his father, impossible.

Not only is the public sphere entirely devoid of genuine human connection and the potential for such connection, it breeds constant and indiscriminate physical violence. Shortly after Ustath Rashid, Faraj’s friend and political partner as well as the father of Suleiman’s closest friend Kareem is arrested, Suleiman thinks back to how, just days earlier, he visited the ruined Roman city of Lepcis with Ustath Rashid’s university students. Even this innocent field trip devolves into physical violence when Suleiman observes two students get in a fist fight over a girl. When Ustath Rashid tries to break up the fight, he gets “his spectacles knocked off . . . everyone fell silent then. He smiled strangely as he searched for his spectacles . . . as if it was he who had lost his temper and was now embarrassed” (28).

Matar makes it clear that the public sphere, dominated by aggressive machismo and physical violence is an especially dangerous place for the bookish, mild-mannered Ustath Rashid—not only is he an intellectual and political dissident living in a police state, he cannot and will not participate in the brutish performance of masculinity that characterize public interactions. On the bus home from Lepcis, Suleiman watches his friend Kareem “nuzzle into his father’s side” in a display of affection and connection that contrasts starkly with he and his own father’s encounter in Martyr’s Square, a moment in which connection is rendered impossible by the public nature of the setting (28).

Ustath Rashid represents a dangerously disruptive figure to the regime despite his gentle, almost passive nature not only because of his counterrevolutionary activity, but because of his refusal to engage with the behavioral expectations placed on Libyans, specifically Libyan men, in civil society. Whereas Faraj is somewhat predisposed to the aloof, domineering, authoritative model of Libyan masculinity—a precedent set by “the Guide” Qaddafi himself—and more importantly, performs accordingly in public, Rashid’s inability to follow suit costs him his life. The noxious effects of despotism on the minds of the Libyan public come to a head when Ustath Rashid’s execution is televised. After a long monologue about the benevolence of “our leader, the Guide, the Savior of our nation,” Suleiman watches the spectators

jumping and howling, Hang the traitor! Hang the traitor! . . . suddenly, like a wave rising, the cheering became louder and more furious. . . some of the spectators threw their shoes at Ustath Rashid, a couple of men hugged and dangled from his ankles, then waved to others to come and do the same. They looked like children satisfied with a swing they had just made. Everybody seemed happy (183, 188).

Suleiman, ever-observant and struggling to interpret the hushed, dangerous world of politics and family life, is himself not immune to the toxicity of Libya's public sphere. Indeed, Suleiman actively participates in the machismo and sadism that the political environment fosters at several points throughout the novel, often when he is outside playing with the other children who live on Mulberry Street. What's more, just as the spectators at Rashid's hanging move with a mob mentality, totally uncritical of the execution or the Guide's authority, Suleiman acts without thinking and cannot locate where these sudden bursts of violence and cruelty come from within him. Shortly after Ustath Rashid is arrested, Mama tells Suleiman to keep his distance from Kareem, providing the rationale that "it just isn't good for you to be so close to all of his sadness" (40). Through the lens of Suleiman's adult hindsight, Najwa's insists that Suleiman maintain an emotional distance from his closest friend to protect Faraj; even children as young as Suleiman are incorporated into a vision of public life and interpersonal relationships that is mistrustful, self-serving, and ingenuine as a matter of survival (40). One week later, after avoiding Kareem according to Mama's instruction, Suleiman finds himself beating Kareem in an outdoor game that the older boy generally wins; having gained this sudden and unforeseen advantage, Suleiman feels a "dark, unstoppable force gain momentum" within him, and taunts Kareem about his father's disappearance, calling Ustath Rashid a traitor (107). Kareem lunges at Suleiman, who is protected by the neighboring boys on account of his being the youngest among them—Masoud, the son of Mokhabarat antenna Ustath Jafer, dusts his back, "slapping it a little too hard. I thought, perhaps in his house, with his fat and certain mother, his powerful and well-connected father, such firmness was always necessary" (107).

The game ends with Suleiman telling Osama and Masoud about Kareem's secret love for their classmate Leila, and Kareem returning to his house in tears as Suleiman turns to the

other boys and says coolly “I don’t know why he’s so upset. It’s only a game” (109).

Suleiman struggles to take responsibility for this overwhelming desire to betray, demean, and inflict pain upon someone with whom he shares a connection so strong, it “rarely felt like friendship, but something like blood or virtue” (23). Indeed, Suleiman almost characterizes himself as two separate people in this moment, each vying for control over his behavior. Watching Kareem return home after the humiliating game, Suleiman “remembered him walking like this towards his house to comfort or shout at his mother after his father was taken;” here, Suleiman displays a deep, intuitive sensitivity towards his friend, for whom, he knows, the pain of losing his father is tied to and far greater than the pain of Suleiman’s betrayal (109). In the very next breath, however, Suleiman “heard [himself] call after [Kareem]: ‘Crybaby!’. . . ‘Girl!’” (109).

While nine-year-old Suleiman may find it difficult to interpret or understand his own behavior in public, the adult Suleiman, whose narration casts a sad, knowing voice over the events and interactions in the novel, provides a potential model for Suleiman’s unchecked aggression in Mokhabarat agent Shareif. When Suleiman first notices “the same white car that had taken Ustath Rashid. This time . . . parked in front of our house,” he finds himself oddly drawn to the man in the driver's seat; instead of walking back towards Kareem, he “turned instead towards the car and began walking forward” (128). Although Suleiman recognizes Shareif as a dangerous figure, the same man who previously infiltrated his house looking for evidence of his father’s political activity, tailed he and his mother on the way home from martyr’s square, and slapped Ustath Rashid on the day of his arrest, he cannot “stop looking into his eyes, a strange force within them seemed to be pulling me.” (129) For Suleiman, Sharief represents the promise of potent, dangerous masculinity; Shareif allows Suleiman to hold his gun and, the stench of sweat and cigarettes inside Shareif’s car strikes

Suleiman as “a sign of manhood, and there was some excitement in being so close to it. Perhaps to be a man was to be heavy, I thought” (131). Not only is the smug, overbearing bully Shareif completely unlike the mild, intellectual men that Suleiman has grown up around, Suleiman immediately identifies him as more successfully masculine than Baba and his friends. Despite his age, Suleiman already questions his own masculinity; while Mama drunkenly tells him of the emotional and sexual trauma she endured on her wedding night, Suleiman worries that “when the time came I might not have what it takes to ‘puncture’ a woman” (13). Here, we see that for Suleiman, masculinity is inextricably linked from the ability to dominate, a notion reinforced by the rigid patriarchy of Libyan society and the intimidation, surveillance, and constant threat of violence used by the police state as a means of control. Not only is toxic masculinity proof of one’s manhood, it is a means of survival—while men like Shareif prosper in Qaddafi’s Libya, men like Ustath Rashid and Baba are kidnapped, brutalized, and killed.

Inside the home, Suleiman is allowed to be and expected to be a child; he is lavished with attention, practices piano to his mother’s delight, and he may indulge in behaviors which, though merely indicative of his age, would result in him being called a girl were they to be seen by his peers (69, 98). In public, however, the pressures to exhibit violent masculinity become too strong for Suleiman to ignore, and the presence of people whom he views as an easy target give him a perfect opportunity to inflict pain and humiliation on others. In addition to deliberately tormenting Kareem, Suleiman displays brutal cruelty towards Bahlool, an elderly beggar who lives in Gergarish. When Suleiman sees Bahlool at the pier, the old man jumps into the sea rather than allow Suleiman to get closer to him; just days earlier, Suleiman threw rocks at him and chased him down Mulberry street (118). When Suleiman sees that Bahlool cannot swim, he runs to help him back onto the pier, but

“without deciding to I found myself pushing him down with my foot . . . He began to scream that horse-like scream of his again, louder than ever now. I pushed him down again to silence him” (219). Eventually, Bahlool manages to climb out of the water: when Suleiman sees the “mixture of fear and outrage” in Bahlool’s eyes, he thinks of apologizing to him, ultimately deciding to pick up his swimming flippers and walk away. As he leaves the pier, Suleiman longs for “[his] true friend,” Kareem, another victim of his inexplicable cruelty, who has moved with his widowed mother to Benghazi, twelve hours away (220).

Matar’s representation of the public sphere is bleak to say the least; authentic connections are impossible, those who attempt them are harshly punished, and human beings are pressured into in humane behavior because of indoctrination and fear. While the public sphere is profoundly limiting—a space where those who do not perform social-cultural expectations and political allegiance are persecuted—the space inside the Dewani home is ripe with possibility. Suleiman’s non-encounter with Baba at Martyr’s Square, an event shaped by the limitations of the public sphere, contrasts with the life he shares with Mama while Baba is away on business; Suleiman feels the weight of the profound, intense connection he shares with Mama on him like an unwanted gift (9). Because of Matar’s commitment to illustrating the landscape of Libya’s political challenges via the personal lives of Suleiman and his family, the Dewani house is where national politics and family politics become intertwined. More broadly, Matar’s representation of the Dewani house is both an artistic undertaking and a political one. *ITCOM* presents the realities of Arab and North African home life in a specific time and location alongside Orientalized generalizations about life in the harem, generalizations that not only loom large in the imaginations of his Anglophone readers, but distort and undermine the value ascribed to domestic, private spaces by the people who inhabit them. This approach has several effects: firstly, it allows

Matar to present the Arab home as a complex, ambiguous space against the reductive and racist harem narratives that have traditionally been available to Western readers. Secondly, it positions the home as a response to absolutism and domination, both the repression of the Qaddafi regime and the exercise of power present in imagining and assigning meaning to subaltern spaces based on what they are imagined to be. Ultimately, Matar shifts the representation of the private space from the locus of the Western and Orientalist imagination to that of the Arab and North African imagination.

In contrast to the representation of Martyrs' Square, not only a public space but one with special significance to the revolution, Suleiman's home on Mulberry Street is aligned with the "true mercy of night . . . a reluctant guest silently passing through the empty streets, vague about how far it was allowed to roam in this realm of the absolute star—" a glaring, unforgiving sun (1). Unsurprisingly, sleep is a prominent motif throughout the novel; like Delacroix and Lewis, Matar represents the interior space of the Dewani home as drenched in lethargy. When Baba returns home after Suleiman spots him in the square, he and Mama promptly settle down for a nap; Suleiman recalls how, "particularly in summer, when the sun swelled with heat, the whole world went to sleep," though he concedes that he himself never enjoyed napping (44). For each member of the Dewani family, the long, tense days that the novel documents are structured around and punctuated by periods of sleep; for both the reader and the characters, nightfall is the only way to separate one day from the next. Throughout the novel the space of the bedroom is emphasized; when Baba is away on business, Suleiman often sleeps in his parents' bed, and the reader is first introduced to Mama when Suleiman "sat watching her beautiful face, her chest rise and fall with breath" as she falls asleep just as the sun rises (2). In this way, Matar's representation of the Dewani house echoes the first characteristic of harem narratives, the harem as unchanging; a space

where listless women laze about, each day indistinguishable from the next. Just as visual depictions of the harem reference drug use in the form of narghiles, opium poppies, and thick smoke to underscore both the inertia of the harem and the way in which time is distorted within the harem, Najwa's alcoholism, euphemized as her "illness," perform a similar function in the novel. Similarly, the misguided tendency of Western artists to depict the harem without any visual markers that might suggest a particular historical period, the assumption being that the Orient did not develop or advance over time, is echoed by the very structure of the Dewani house, designed with

a front half and a back half . . . divided by the hallway swing doors. In the front there were the formal rooms: the reception room where we received guests we didn't know very well and where I practiced my piano, and opposite the hallway the dining room which we never used. In the back there was the sitting room, where we kept the television, then the kitchen, and beyond them the bathroom and bedrooms (51).

While the front of the Dewani house is indeed stagnant and unchanging, as soon as the swinging hallway doors are crossed, the home becomes a lively, bustling space. In the sitting room, the Dewanis play cards, drink tea, read the newspaper to one another, argue, and laugh. After the Mokhabarat agents enter Suleiman's house and leave the sitting room in disarray, Suleiman "longs for how things had been," remembering how "Baba would arrive, take off his tie and shoes and talk to us. . . before going in to shower and pray. He would reappear comfortable in his white jallabia, smelling of French cologne. Moosa would reread the day's articles to him, and Baba never minded Moosa's skipping or adding" (73). In the study, Baba and his colleagues smoke cigarettes and discuss books and politics (36-37). In the kitchen, Mama cooks and burns the counterrevolutionary leaflets that mysteriously

appear on the doorstep (33). This is also where Najwa hides her “medicine bottle” (10). In the front yard, Baba keeps the Swedish trees and Scottish cows that he brings back from various trade deals; in the garden, Mama draws and Suleiman eats his fill of mulberries from the neighbor’s tree (30, 46). In this way, Matar’s characterization of the Dewani home manages to reference the tendency of orientalist representations to depict the harem as a stagnant, inert space without resorting to an Orientalized view himself; indeed, the Dewani house is an active space far more so than an inactive one.

What’s more, both the activity and inactivity that takes place inside Suleiman’s house are a response to what is impossible in public and the limitations imposed on human agency and welfare by the regime. After the Dewani house is searched by Mokhabarat agents, Moosa takes down a picture of Faraj in the front reception room and replaces it with a massive portrait of “‘The Benefactor, the Father of the Nation, the Guide!’ Moosa said with a smile. He punched the air with his fist chanting, ‘El-Fateh, el-Fateh, el-Fateh,’ pretending to be several thousand people” (90). For the remainder of the novel, the Guide watches over the Dewani’s reception room. Here, Matar explicitly connects the inactivity of the front rooms to the looming, absent presence of the state and the threat of state violence. Staticness, it would seem, is necessitated by the realities of living under regime; the front part of Suleiman’s home is designed to maintain the appearance of loyalty to the revolution. The rooms on the other side of the hallway, however—designed for day to day use and more private activities—provide a space where the social and political expectations upheld by the reception room may be subverted.

Much like Orientalist representations of the harem, Matar gives special emphasis to the bedroom and what is possible inside this space. In the bedrooms, Suleiman has dreams

and nightmares, listens to his mother's stories, contemplates his betrayal of Kareem, reads from his father's diary, and watches his parents as they sleep. To Suleiman, the bedroom is inextricably linked from his relationship with and understanding of Mama; his childhood revolves around the moments when Mama "patted the bed and I lay beside her. Just as sleep was curling itself around me, she started her telling," (11). As overwhelming as the emotional intimacy forged between Suleiman and Mama when her illness takes over is, Suleiman "never wanted her to stop talking. Her story was mine too, it bound us, turned us into one" (11). Suleiman resents the fact that he and Mama can only sleep in the same bed, and thus that this level of connection can only be realized, when Baba is away on business trips believing a "good solution . . . was to have Baba sleep in my room, and, because neither Mama nor I snored, we could have the big bed all to ourselves" (84). When Baba returns home after being tortured and released by the Mokhabarat and is recovering in bed, the privacy of his and Najwa's bedroom is further heightened; Suleiman, and thus the reader, are not allowed into the room. Here, Faraj finds the rest and repose his broken body needs—the bedroom becomes a space of literal escape and refuge from the brutality of the regime. At the same time, however, Suleiman notices how Mama's attention has been diverted towards Faraj, how his parents giggle and whisper to one another, and how "their new life together, where Baba never went away and Mama was never ill, distanced me from them" (22). The emotional intimacy Suleiman once shared with Mama, a relationship predicated on the intimate nature of the bedroom, has transferred to Faraj, who now inhabits this space with Mama exclusively.

For Najwa, the bedroom is not only the place where she drunkenly recounts her memories of her wedding—"her black day"—to Suleiman; the bedroom also serves as the stage for the long-standing emotional, sexual, and psychological trauma she incurred as a

victim of child marriage and marital rape. During a bout of “illness,” Mama describes the events of her wedding night to Suleiman, when, at just fourteen years old, she was thrust into “a dreary room. It had nothing in it but a huge bed with a square, ironed white handkerchief on one pillow. [She] had no idea what the handkerchief was for” (13).

Paralyzed by fear, Najwa faints as soon as her new husband walks in the room, later waking to find that Faraj, nine years her senior, has left and Suleiman’s “grandfather was beside me, smiling, your grandmother was behind him clutching the now bloodstained handkerchief to her chest and crying with happiness” (14). Understandably, Najwa is deeply embittered by this experience—she drinks alcohol to dull the pain of her circumstances and, at least before Faraj is taken and returned by his captors, avoids sex with her husband. Her complex and ambivalent feelings towards Faraj are transferred to Suleiman, who, wracked with “guilt, fear, and anger” after he sees his parents having sex, is deeply disturbed by the vision of his mother as totally helpless and subordinate to his father in this moment (87).

In keeping with the second characteristic of Orientalist narratives in which the harem is effectively a prison, Najwa is depicted as a lonely woman, dragged down by a brutally patriarchal society as well as the sluggish pace of her stiflingly domestic life; Suleiman describes the two of them as “together—she alone, and I unable to leave her” (20).

Abandoned by her friends due to Faraj’s political alignment, Najwa’s life revolves around her husband despite the unspoken disillusionment with her marriage: Suleiman notes Mama’s restlessness during Faraj’s captivity, describing “I could hear her move around the house. I could tell she was bored. She often, during those empty days when Baba was away, walked aimlessly around the house” (122). For Najwa, the private, domestic space serves as the setting for her feelings of confinement, boredom, and purposelessness that, as a woman living in both a politically repressive police state and a society where a woman’s value is

contingent upon her performance as a wife, becomes inescapable for her. In addition to self-medicating with alcohol, Najwa enjoys watching Egyptian dramas on television whenever she spends the night on the sofa to avoid sleeping with Faraj—Suleiman recalls how

I felt then, as a boy, lying in my bed until the early hours of the morning, listening to the violins blaze out before Mama quickly turned down the volume. She must have sat on the edge of her seat, ready for the violins, impatient for the moment that would come to strengthen her doubts about love and confirm her instinct to go without it, accepting—always accepting—a life forced upon her (85).

Resigned to the inescapability of an unfulfilling marital life, Najwa pours all of her effort into advocating for a life away from the stifling, dangerous political environment of Qaddafi's Libya. Ever the idealist, Faraj dismisses this idea entirely, holding fast to his patriotism and unshakable faith in democracy.

Again, while Matar's characterization of Najwa and her relationship with the domestic space does recall racist, misogynist, and misinformed stereotypes of Arab gender politics that Western representations of the Orient have relied upon for centuries, it ultimately rejects the misconceptions perpetuated by the second characteristic of harem narratives. Firstly, while the confinement of Arab women within the domestic space was depicted as first and foremost an infringement of male sexual freedom in the context of Orientalist representations of the harem, Matar presents the cloistered "life forced upon" Najwa as having its most profound effect on her. Furthermore, Najwa is presented as a mysterious character throughout the novel. Suleiman's narration focuses on the inexplicable and unsettling aspects of her behavior, as well as the moments that allow him to wonder what she may think and feel, such as when she watches television. His understanding of his

mother's inner life remains speculative and detached at best, however; when he notes how "she had always seemed captive, captive in her own home, continually failing to prepare herself for anything else," Suleiman is unable to provide any insight as to why her life is this way, and the connection between her actions at the moment and this captivity (168). In this way, Matar rejects the Orientalist obsession with gaining an intimate "knowledge" of the Arab woman—Suleiman's narration acknowledges that, despite him being the focal point of Mama's outer life, her inner life is largely unknowable to him.

More importantly, Najwa—despite her weakness for alcohol and her disenfranchised position as a woman living under regime—looms larger than life in Suleiman's recollection of his childhood as well as the reader's impression of that stiflingly hot summer in Tripoli, Libya. To Suleiman, Mama exists as the ultimate authority in his life—and just as Najwa's trauma and ineffectualness is tied to the space of her house, so is her authority and power. In one brilliant scene, Suleiman recalls how, when standing on the rooftop of the house, Mama would

walk to the edge of the roof to look out onto the sea, her long silk house robe, decorated by a giant fanning tail of a peacock, billowing behind her . . . I would stand beside her, leaning against her leg, and every time I looked up her eyes would be fixed and squinting at the shimmering water. She would tell me how the sea changed because the sea changes every day. At those moments I could ask her any question, and she would give me the answer, any question I could think of (49).

Faraj and Moosa, while dismissive of Najwa's insistence that they leave the country, see Najwa as a worthy participant in political conversations, and Najwa does not hold back her opinions from either of them. Frustrated with Moosa and Faraj's political activity and

doubtful that their idealism will amount to anything other than putting her family in danger, Najwa cynically describes them as “children playing with fire. . .a handful of men with nothing better to do but hide in a flat on Martyrs’ Square and write pamphlets criticizing the regime. Why hasn’t anybody thought of that, I wonder?” (95). According to Lital Levy, Mama’s outspoken reaction to Faraj’s politics complicates the seemingly rigid dichotomy of Libyan society, in which political agency belongs to men alone (11).

The influence and power that Mama wields in Suleiman’s life is echoed by the initiative she takes in order to save Faraj from suffering Ustath Rashid’s fate, an effort that succeeds due to her ingenuity and *realpolitik* approach to surviving in Libya’s political environment. Although Najwa feels trapped by the traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood, she shows the political relevance of her domestic skills when, realizing that an appeal to Qaddafi’s agents is the only thing that could save her husband, she “woke up not so much happy as certain. She began to make a cake” for Um Masoud and Ustath Jafer. Suleiman notes the clarity and precision with which she moves through her kitchen. Ultimately, Najwa’s desperate plea to the Revolution succeeds—Suleiman recognizes the transformative effect of Mama’s visit to Ustath Jafer, saying that “whenever I am faced with someone who holds the strings of my fate—an immigration officer, a professor—I can feel the distant reverberations from that day” (159). In this way, one must question if, despite her disenfranchisement and bitterness over the circumstances of her life, Najwa is the only true authority that Matar gives his readers. Undoubtedly, Najwa is the only character who is able to make an effective political move, and in doing so, shift the trajectory of her family’s life.

Of Matar’s many allusions to the tradition of harem narratives throughout his representation of the Dewani home, perhaps none carries as much cultural baggage for

western readers than the recurring motif of Scheherazade, the heroine of *The 1,001 Arabian Nights*. If the representations of Arabs and Arab spaces that westerners commonly had access to from the 18th century onwards set the stage for male fantasy, Richard Burton's explicit, sexually obsessive translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* stands out as a prime example of what was possible within the space of the harem according to the European man (Kennedy 331). Matar's allusions to *The Arabian Nights* recalls the third characteristic of harem narratives, the harem as male fantasy. Just as Orientalized representations render the space of the harem inextricable from the concept of the Arab home for his Western audiences, *The Arabian Nights* remains culturally linked to the Burton translation—characterized by Julie Codell as sexual content falsely presented as authentic translations of “the ‘other’s’ texts” (116). For Matar and his characters, the value of *The Arabian Nights* narrative is entirely different. Matar frequently invokes *The Arabian Nights* throughout the novel, this being one of Mama's go-to stories whenever she has indulged in her “medicine.” Najwa's interpretation of *The Arabian Nights* hinges upon what, in her view, is the story's conflation of Scheherazade's human value with her sexual value; she bitterly predicts that as soon as “Scheherazade's fine, supple muscles. . .those so important for pleasing the king, the mighty, majestic Shahryar, had loosened. . .as soon as she was no longer beautiful: whack! Gone with the head” (17). While Suleiman regards Scheherazade as a courageous and inventive woman who manages to sing under the sword of the ruthless prince Shahryar, Najwa thinks that Scheherazade is a coward for having begged Shahryar for her life, “and not because she had as much right to live as he, but because if he were to kill her, his sons would live ‘motherless’” (16). Najwa's reinterpretation of the character of Scheherazade—one of the most influential figures in Arabic literature as well as the preeminent model of Arab femininity in literature—shifts the focus of the narrative to what

her example lays out for real-life Arab women (Levy 12). Like Scheherazade, Najwa is confined indefinitely by a despotic leader and by a social structure that conflates a woman's value and identity to her ability to perform wifely duties and motherhood, the only difference being that for the former, Shahryar occupies both roles.

Similarly, whereas Burton's translation revolved around the Western man's imaginings of Oriental women in the harem, Matar's allusion to the very same source material is squarely rooted in the Arab woman's self-perception and perception of the space she occupies. Najwa's interpretation looks inwards; this is where the reader learns about how Najwa imagines herself. Before her wedding, the fourteen-year-old Najwa swallowed a handful of 'magic pills,' so called "because they made a woman no good . . . who would want to marry a woman who couldn't bear children?" (12). She describes how, as soon as her parents had found a suitable husband for her, they "rushed through the wedding as if I was a harlot" (12). Najwa uses similar language to describe Scheherazade, a "stupid harlot" who bought into a belief system that equivocated her human value with her attractiveness and ability to bear children, ultimately marrying the man who victimized her (17). Here, Najwa indicates her desire to deviate from the model of Arab womanhood that Scheherazade manifests, and, despite her efforts, her inability to do so. Like Scheherazade, Najwa's life revolves around her son; for both she and Suleiman, her nighttime storytelling becomes a mode of dredging up and interpreting not only her past, but the social expectations that shaped it. And for Suleiman, the traumatic stories that Mama tells him elicit a confused, confusing response; "I often lay in my darkened bedroom," he says, "dreaming of saving her" (12).

The insular, secretive world that Suleiman and Mama share inside the space of their home, a world opened up by both the frequent absence of Faraj and the presence of Najwa's illicit alcohol often plays out while the two are in bed together. Although Suleiman displays marked ambivalence towards both of his parents at different points throughout the novel, Faraj becomes the object of contempt when Suleiman inadvertently observes his parents having sex, an incident that Suleiman feels like "a failure" for not having stopped (87). Lying in bed "picturing how I could have saved her then, when she was fourteen, before what happened happened . . . running away somewhere beautiful and green and cold," Suleiman's fantasy draws an uncomfortable comparison to Said's citation of Flaubert's *L'education Sentimentale*, in which a Frenchman recalls a night in bed with an Arab woman "Watching that beautiful creature asleep (she snored, her head against my arm: I slipped my forefinger under her necklace), my night was one long, infinitely intense reverie" (Matar 148, Said 187). In both cases, Said's interpretation of Flaubert holds weight; "The Oriental woman is an occasion and an opportunity for Flaubert's musings. . . what, lying next to him, she allows him to think," (Said 187).

Undoubtedly, Suleiman's relationship with his mother has a distinctly oedipal cast. Thinking back to the fourth characteristic of Orientalized harem narratives, this dynamic between mother and son—a dynamic that Matar presets playing out in the space of the bedroom—would seem in keeping with the assumption that the harem provides a setting for sexual deviance. Suleiman's fantasy of "saving" his mother from his father and replacing his father in their bed recall the "perversions" that Western art, travel journals, Orientalist erotica, and translations such as Burton's *Arabian Nights* frequently invokes in representations of interior spaces within the Arab world. Faraj's insistence that Suleiman be the man of the house while he is away only serves to further complicate and confuse

Suleiman's feelings towards his mother (Kearney 131). After his father returns home, Suleiman senses a profound change in his parents' relationship—his parents laugh, Mama sings absentmindedly to herself and, “their voices light, floating with love in our house” (214). Realizing that his father has now become a primary or at least equal object of Najwa's attention and affection, Suleiman's days “seemed muffled by dread” (221).

In his paper “Traumatized Narrators in Hisham Matar's Novels,” John Kearney goes so far as to suggest that, when Suleiman, after waking up from a bad dream, sees Mama sleeping on the couch “with no room to lie beside her. . .then I lay on top of her,” he is assuming a “conventional male sexual posture” (Matar 222, Kearney 142). This interpretation is not only far-fetched, it fails to consider how this rich, tragic scene resolves itself. Firstly, Suleiman is just nine years old, and while Matar does imbue a certain “proto-eroticism” in his depiction of Najwa and Suleiman's bond, there is no indication that Suleiman feels any sexual attraction towards his mother or is even old enough to have concrete sexual impulses at all (Kearney 142). Kearney concedes that Suleiman's behavior “probably has more to do with trying to assume the role of a husband substitute rather than trying to mime copulation,” yet he still fails to consider the intimacy that Suleiman and Mama share outside of a romantic context, and so doing bypasses the entire point of the novel's ending: that the intense, confusing, convoluted, and emotionally unsustainable relationship that Suleiman shares with his mother has reached its natural conclusion. Whereas earlier, Suleiman would “pretend some bad dream had broken [his] sleep” and Mama would invite him into her bed, she now sends him off to his own bedroom after real nightmares (11, 222). By the novel's end, Faraj is home to stay and Suleiman's childhood, characterized by his relationship with Mama, has been amputated—soon, his parents will send him to complete his schooling in Egypt.

ITCOM is both a political novel and a profoundly psychological one. While Matar does characterize their relationship as shaded by Suleiman's oedipal anxieties, this functions as a meditation on the nature of parent-child relationships rather than evidence of full-blown sexual attraction between mother and son. Suleiman and Najwa's complex, ambiguous bond is rooted in their mutual reliance on one another; for both characters, the love they have for one another drives their decision making and gives purpose to their bleak, disrupted lives. The love that Suleiman feels for his mother is complicated by the violent, unforgiving world that lies outside their home—for that matter, so is Suleiman's relationship with Faraj. *ITCOM* presents love as difficult, confusing, and painful: the novel's oedipal overtones are just one instance of Matar's dedication to representing his characters as dense, nuanced, and intensely human emotional and psychological beings.

The final characteristic of the harem narrative is also the easiest to refute in the context of Matar's representation of the Dewani home. While Westerners may have historically been confronted with the assumption that private spaces within the Arab world restrict love, love is everywhere in *ITCOM*. Suleiman himself says so, with the caveat that "there was anger, there was pity, even the dark warm embrace of hate," between he and Mama, "but always love and always the joy that surrounds the beginning of love" (21). Whereas Orientalized narratives tended to fixate on the ways in which the space of the harem shut out the possibility of monogamous, "correct," romantic love, the Dewani house accommodates the complex love between Najwa and Faraj—besieged by political repression and patriarchal norms alike. The Dewani house also provides a backdrop for the love between the Dewanis and their friends. Undeniably, however, *ITCOM* revolves around Suleiman's love for his parents. Shaded with "confusion and resentment," Suleiman's

feelings of love towards Mama and Baba, intensified by the responsibility he feels towards both of them, weigh on him to an almost unbearable degree.

While the Dewani house serves as the only space in Suleiman's life that can accommodate love, it can only do so imperfectly. The liberty that the space of the home opens up is constantly under threat of infiltration and punishment from the police state. As such, both Suleiman and Najwa's need to exist and develop as complex psychological, emotional, and moral beings is unfulfilled by the private space alone. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Matar represents the intimate rooms of the Dewani house as a gateway to what I have termed the liminal space—a transcendent heightened reality where the imagination and emotions reign supreme. In this liminal space characterized by drunkenness, dreams, and conversations with the self, Najwa and Suleiman's full consciousnesses—marginalized by the pressures of living under regime—can finally be accommodated. Drawing from Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and Alifa Rifaat's short story "My World of the Unknown," I will demonstrate how Matar representation of the liminal space in *ITCOM* expands the symbolic, aesthetic, and phenomenological potential of Arab spaces, presenting what has been deemed invariably restrictive as profoundly liberating.

Into the Liminal Space: Mapping the Arab Poetics of Arab Space

As discussed in the previous chapter, while Matar presents a vision of the Arab North African home that not only serves as a response to Orientalized harem narratives but a haven from political violence and repression, the private space ultimately proves insufficient. In this final section, I will discuss how Matar's represents the home as a reflection of Sulieman and Najwa's inner lives and a threshold to the liminal space. In the first chapter of *Orientalism*, Said cites architect and philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of the poetics of space—an examination of human consciousness via how human beings ascribe value to space—the arbitrary geographic and historical boundaries by which the West distinguishes and measures the Orient (Said 53-55). According to Said, Bachelard's original claim maintains that “the inside of a house. . .acquires a sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imagined, because of the experiences that come to seem appropriate for it. The objective space of a house . . . is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value” (Said 54-55). Although Said expands this concept so that it may be applied to the figurative value of the geographic space of the Orient and Western assumptions regarding what the passage of time and what took place historically within this geographic space, the poetics of space is at the heart of the harem narrative, or, at least, the cognitive processes that this particular shade of Orientalist discourse stems from.

Said presents the poetics of space and the consequences of this way of seeing as a Western construction; indeed, the phrase was coined by a Frenchman. What *Orientalism's* citation of the poetics of space need not acknowledge, however, is how the mental processes by which a space is “poetically endowed” with imaginative, non-literal, and transcendental values are not unique to Western ontologies or cognitive processes. Furthermore, the inhabitants of a particular space participate in assigning meaning to the “corners, corridors, cellars, room” of their homes. The private spaces of homes, harems, and hammams are no exception; as Matar clearly demonstrates in his representation of the Dewani’s house, Arab writers, artists, and theorists have found and continue to find “poetic” meaning within the walls they themselves construct. Just as the Western poetics of Arab spaces provide a reductive interpretation of Arab life and the value of private spaces within the Arab world, the Arab poetics of these same spaces expands notions of what it means to grow, develop, and build relationships within Arab society, as well as how the spaces that Arabs build for themselves may accommodate these processes.

The space of the harem looms large in the western imagination, a platform for extreme restructuring and inexhaustible fantasy; for Arabs, however, the objective space of the harem provides immense potential for meaning. Mid-Century Egyptian architect and playwright Hassan Fathy expresses as much in his 1942 play *Al-Mashrabiyya*, itself titled after the “projecting oriel window with lattice work enclosure, typical of Arab houses” designed to allow those inside the house to look outside, while obscuring the view in from the street (Damluji 65). In a dialogue between the characters Mushtaq and Nadim, the former exclaims, “I shan’t forget what I have experienced in this mashrabiyya. Its decoration is like a melody, struck on the strings of a lute” (Damluji 65). Contemplating the “music” of the mashrabiyya—an intimate, ornately decorated space typical of harem architecture—

Mushtaq marvels at the fact that “I used to think this house, which seemed dominated by silence, was uninhabited. It’s as if I were sensing music, not mashrabiyya, or mashrabiyya and not music.” During a 1982 dialogue with Samar Damluji, Fathy deconstructs the psychological, emotional, and symbolic value of traditional Arab architecture, stating that intimacy is created in and sustained by “small spaces, like in a bedroom, while in the living room you have a larger space . . . and the intimacy is reduced. And when you go outside, you lose intimacy all together” (Damluji 69). Fathy goes on to discuss how “when the desert dweller became sedentary, he preserved his contact with the sky through the design concept of the courtyard house;” effectively enmeshing Arab and North African history and historically-informed ontology within the structure of Arab houses (71). Fathy’s approach to envisioning the private space both as a playwright and an architect speaks to the same element of liminality that *ITCOM* captures: in both cases, the Arab home sits at the threshold of what can be observed, and what can merely be sensed.

Both Matar’s fiction and nonfiction displays a deep commitment to restructuring the poetics of space—a longstanding, palpable element within the Western art and literature he adores as well as a tool of Orientalism—and representing the transcendental value of interior and domestic space within the Arab world from an Arab perspective. In his memoir *The Return*, Matar meditates on the physical space of his grandfather’s house. Here, Matar likens the space of the house to “one of his grandfather’s long poems: austere, unpredictable, plain, unfinished, yet inhabited,” and acknowledges how his memory of the home’s mysterious architecture remains inseparable from his memory of “[his] grandfather's life and character” (Matar 128). In other words, Matar participates in the poetics of space by transforming his grandfather's house into a product of his own unique consciousness. The phenomenological process by which this happens can be observed in *ITCOM*, too. While the reception room at

the front of the house must act as a buffer between the unmitigated cruelty and constant surveillance of the public sphere, the back of the house accommodates both the subversive politics, illicit behaviors, and genuine human connections that would be impossible elsewhere. Within this space—a necessary but imperfect relief from the repressive politics that the Dewanis must navigate—rooms closely associated with heightened intimacy and privacy such as the bedroom and bathroom allow Suleiman and Najwa to retreat inwards in a society that demands performance. The purpose of this chapter is to draw the connection between Matar’s representation of the private space and what I will call the liminal space—a transcendent, imaginative space where Najwa and Suleiman’s reality is broadened to accommodate them as individuals with constantly evolving emotional, psychological and moral selves. Furthermore, I will contextualize Matar’s representation of the private space as it relates to the liminal space within other North African artists and storytellers’ meditations on the poetics of Arab space.

Artistically, Matar maps out the edges of this liminal space using elements of magical realism. Although the magical realist touches that Matar uses throughout *ITCOM* are not as overt as those in his fellow Libyan Ibrahim al-Kuni’s 1990 novel *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Miriam Cooke’s analysis of the later holds true for the former. In reference to al-Kuni’s protagonist oscillating between a human and animal form, Cooke writes, “This reality. . . happens in the space of flux where the subaltern is at home and the state is not. . . on the border where the magical reserves of the periphery can be mobilized. . . Importantly, it is in this same space that redemption may be found” (21). The contrast between the narrow iteration of life that Suleiman and Najwa must adhere to and the influence that drunkenness, dream interpretations, and the imagination wields over their psyches and choices is striking; Matar presents these subjective experiences as having real effects on their lives. More

relevantly, Matar presents a causal relationship between these phenomena and the places in which they occur—Najwa must put on lipstick and comb her hair to receive guests in the formal area of the house, and drunkenly tells her stories in her bedroom. These two behaviors would be incongruent if they were to occur anywhere else in the house. As one would guess, retreating into the private rooms towards the back of the house—the bedrooms and the bathroom—opens up the potential for Suleiman and Najwa’s separate yet interconnected inner retreat. The most secluded spaces of their home provide Suleiman and Najwa with access to a transcendent, liminal space where both characters may confront the realities of their lives and choices to a degree that both the repressive public sphere and its influence on the private space restrict.

One of the most startling artistic choices Matar makes in *ITCOM* is his simultaneous portrayal of Suleiman as a young boy and a man looking back over his childhood. Throughout the novel, Matar sustains a delicate balance between Suleiman’s childhood perspective and the knowing yet futile interpretation he can provide as an adult remembering his last Summer in Libya; Suleiman effectively acts as two distinct narrators. This duality that Suleiman manifests transcends into the liminal space when, after his betrayal of Kareem, he retreats into his bedroom, “closing the door behind me. I sat on the foot of the bed and thought about what had happened with Kareem” (110). Immediately, Suleiman is bombarded by “voices in [his] head,” whose uncompromising position that he is a “traitor!” eerily presage the mob present at Ustath Rashed’s trial and execution (110, 113). These voices and their insistence that Suleiman “[has] always been bad. Just waiting for your true nature to rise. . . This is only the beginning. Things only grow in this world” move him to tears and, even, to responding verbally (111). Here, we are witnessing a dissociative experience within the liminal space as well as what this ‘threshold’ between the observable

and unobservable can provide Suleiman—a place to contemplate complex moral questions regarding betrayal, complicity, good, and evil. In a world where citizens must assume a position of total submission to a despotic leader and the only loyalty one is expected to have is to the state, the privacy that exists within the home space of the home proves inadequate for the kind of moral questioning that Suleiman engages with in this moment. Closing his bedroom door to the rest of his home—which, you’ll recall, has recently been outfitted with a massive portrait of The Guide—Suleiman may enter the liminal space. It is important to note here that the liminal space is only accessible within the private space; Matar charts the relationship between public, private, and liminal as a series of concentric circles; the further his characters physically retreat from the restrictive, toxic public sphere, the closer they are to the liminal space.

Matar’s exploration of how his characters experience the liminal space do not end here, however. Dreams take on a deep significance in *ITCOM*; Baba records his dreams in a notebook under his pillow and Mama—who’s worldview, we have established, acts as the reigning authority in the novel—“believed that in [dreams] lay secret messages for telling the future or revealing the true nature of a person,” (53). Suleiman’s dream both lends itself to and evade perfect interpretation via Mama’s system² of dream symbolism when he dreams of

Baba floating on the sea. The water was unsettled, moving as it does in the deep, rising and falling in hills . . . I was there too, working hard to keep my shoulders above water, to not lose sight of him . . . I kept swimming. I knew I was close . . .

² “a sea in dream means life. If it’s wild and raging you are going to have some hard times, but if it’s calm your days will be calm and beautiful. Fish is greed. A girl is good luck and also means luck. A boy is very bad luck. But the most important thing to remember about the meaning of dreams is how you feel when you wake up from one of them” (53)

When I reached out to touch him he turned into a fish, agile and shy. He plunged with a splash down and away. I could see his silver spine flicker below the water. I turned around and saw no shore to return to (50)

Suleiman awakes from this dream to find himself in his father's place in his parents' bed. In this dream—and thus in the liminal space—Suleiman is allowed to confront aspects of his personal reality that are either not fully known to him, such as the precarious position his father is in, or that he would otherwise find too confusing or distressing to consider, such as his vague role within the family structure. Later on, Suleiman recalls a recent dream while sitting in the garden; “out of nowhere it returned. Mama was ill again. She was laughing at me because I couldn't walk. When I looked down I saw that I had no legs. She giggled in that crazy way she did when she was ill. I realized then that I had grown wings, wings as long as Mulberry Street. She clapped her hands and laughed so hard her eyes were crying,” (178). Regardless of what hidden meaning—perhaps anticipating Suleiman's rushed relocation, orchestrated by Najwa herself—may be present within this experience of the liminal space, “remembering the dream gave [Suleiman] an excuse to run to [Mama]” and ask her to interpret the dream. Not only does this emphasis on dreams and their meaning signal another entry-point into the liminal space—and one that can only be accessed from within the private space, as well—it suggests that Najwa may have some preternatural knowledge of or connection with the liminal space and its potential to reflect and shape reality.

Matar's exploration of the phenomenological response to interior spaces in the Arab world may initially seem like another callback to Orientalist art's obsession with the harem and its effect on the observer. Although there may be room for this argument, I rather suggest that Matar participates in a common aesthetic goal of North African art and

literature; mapping the poetics of Arab spaces from an Arab perspective. Egyptian author Alifa Rifaat's short story "My World of the Unknown" in her collection *Distant View of a Minaret* revolves around an unnamed woman for whom the unassuming space of a rented home becomes the gateway to her emotional and sexual fulfillment. Forced to leave "beloved Cairo" when her husband acquires a new job, the narrator quickly finds a temporary living arrangement in a beautiful abandoned house. "Overcome by the feeling that [she] had been here before," the narrator decides to move in despite the mysterious squatter Aneesa's attempts to displace her from the home (Rifaat 62). The narrator quickly learns why Aneesa was so reluctant to leave the house; when she sees a snake in the garden, the narrator's "senses were numbed, [her] soul intoxicated with a strange elation at the exciting beauty of the snake" who eventually vanishes through a crack in the wall (Rifaat 68). The narrator finds that "those diversions and recreations that previously used to tempt me no longer gave me any pleasure," preferring instead to lie in bed and wonder "Could it be that I was in love? But how could I love a snake? Or could she really be one of the daughters of the monarchs of the djinn?" (Rifaat 70). Ill from the force of her desire, the narrator finally meets her beloved in the bedroom; hearing "a faint rustling sound coming from the corner of the wall . . . I looked down and kept my eyes fixed on one of the holes in the wall . . . I lay back in submission to what was to be," (Rifaat 72). From this point onwards, a passionate, all-consuming love affair ensues between the narrator and her beloved.

Just as Rifaat's representation of the beloved as both a snake and a djinn straddles the line between an observable reality and a heightened, transcendent space, the setting of their love—an ordinary house—bleeds into the liminal space. Hissing in the narrator's ear as she lies in her bed, the beloved says "I showed you my home in your sleep; I called you to my kingdom when your soul was dozing on the horizon of dreams, so come, my sweet

beloved . . . come to where no one will find us, where no one will see us . . . come, without fear or dread, for no creature will reach us in our hidden world” (Rifaat 72). The narrator describes this ‘hidden world’ as being “fashioned of jewels, a world whose every movement was radiant with light and formed a thousand shapes, a thousand colors” (Rifaat 75). At the same time, the narrator’s experiences with her lover are squarely rooted in the physical space of the house; after finishing her housework, “roaming around the rooms in boredom . . . I sat in the hallway and suddenly she appeared before me, gentle as an angel,” (Rifaat 73). Before the narrator finally succumbs to her beloved’s promise of that love which her disinterested husband cannot give her, she patches the holes and cracks in the walls and moves her bed—her beloved responds, “why are you so coy and flee from me, my bride?” to these evasions (Rifaat 75). Indeed, the djinn identifies herself as “the guardian of the house;” when the narrator’s husband kills “a black, ugly snake” in their bedroom, her beloved visits one last time, insisting that, for having “betrayed one of my subjects. . .you must both depart from this house,” (Rifaat 76).

The conversation surrounding Rifaat’s stories tend to focus on her representation of the emotional and sexual lives of Egyptian women, encumbered by unfulfilling relationships, tedious work, and lack of social recognition. The liminal space provides the narrator with more than just a romantic experience, however. As part of her promise to protect the narrator from the snakes in the house, the beloved says “I shall place my fingers over your hand and we shall recite together some verses from the Qur’an,” earlier on, the beloved describes the liminal world in which the love between the narrator and herself can be sustained as invisible to all but “the eye of God . . . He alone will know what we are about and He will watch over us” (73, 72). Here, the djinn-beloved confirms what Sheikh Farid suggests earlier in the story; that a deeper level of intimacy with the Divine is possible within

the liminal space. In “My World of the Unknown,” the strange house in which the narrator and her beloved interact with one another opens up a vast, transcendent space in which the practical, worldly narrator submits to her own desires and the immeasurable forces of sexuality and spirituality. When the narrator is forced to leave “the house in which [she] had learnt of love and enjoyed incomparable pleasures;” she not only yearns for her beloved, but “craves for the house” that brought them together (Rifaat 76). Although she does so in a more explicit way than Matar, Rifaat also presents the private space of the home as a gateway to another world, a world where the true self can be acknowledged and, perhaps, realized. Given the larger context of the narrator’s position within a dissatisfying marriage and a social order that places little value on her satisfaction, this liminal space becomes the necessary location of her personal development.

For Najwa, alcohol holds the key to this liminal space. Despite how distressing her alcoholism is to Suleiman, only when under the influence of her “medicine” is Najwa able to exorcise her trauma and speak about her feelings and worldview with total openness. Given her constant need to return to, and elaborate, on the events leading up to her wedding, her resistance to becoming a mother, and the Scheherazade story, Najwa desperately needs to process and discuss these aspects of her life and self-image as candidly as drinking allows her to do. This kind of self-acknowledgement of her own pain must extend into the liminal space: after all, Najwa’s primary roles within the private space of her home are that of devoted mother and wife. Indeed, Suleiman views Najwa’s alcoholism as a threat to her ability to properly mother him; whenever Mama drinks, Suleiman wakes up “in the night to make sure all the cigarette butts in the ashtray beside her were out . . . that was one of the reasons I couldn’t leave her side when she was ill,” effectively reversing, in his view, their parent-child roles (122). At the same time, however, Suleiman exclusively references the

alcohol that Mama buys from Majdi the baker as the corresponding “medicine” to her unpredictable illness. As much as it could be argued that this is a simple euphemism employed in socially conservative cultures, Suleiman would, as a young child, likely not be tuned-in to how dangerous and socially transgressive Mama’s alcohol use is. In my view, it is far more plausible that, despite his very understandable apprehensions surrounding Mama’s “medicine,” Suleiman recognizes that whatever is in that bottle does have a restorative, vitalizing effect on her. Although Matar never suggests in any way that Mama’s self-medicating is a sustainable or even positive feature of the Dewani’s home life, he does not shy away from the fact that alcohol provides Najwa with both an escape from reality and means of processing reality that, outside of the liminal space, would be denied to her.

Alcohol, and the liminal space it opens to her, also allows Najwa the opportunity to make choices that transgress against a social order that has stripped her of any personal agency. Although Suleiman’s observations of Mama tend to focus on her victimization at the hands of a society in which political repression and patriarchy are mutually reinforced, Matar characterizes her as someone with an intrinsic desire and capacity to defy authority. When she and Suleiman stop under the pedestrian bridge to “watch the bad boys hanging above the fast traffic by their arms and some, the truly brave ones, by their ankles,” Najwa demands that Suleiman never follow suit, but she cannot keep herself from muttering “I must admit, they are quite brave,” (18). This fascination with, and self-conscious admiration for, socially disruptive behavior and those “brave” enough to partake in it extends to Najwa’s decision to swallow “magic pills” before her wedding night—even though this attempt to render herself infertile fails, it demonstrates both Najwa’s disdain for the expectation of motherhood and her determination to challenge it. In this way, Najwa’s alcohol use—forbidden by Islam and outlawed by the government—and the liminal space it

opens up provide her with more than just an emotional escape and release. In the liminal space, Najwa may successfully push back against social expectations that she has attempted to take on in the past as well as exercise a part of her personality that she has been forced to suppress.

Matar represents the interiority of the Dewani house as multilevel; for Najwa and Sulieman, only when they physically retreat into the most private rooms of their home can their inner lives—their emotions, latent desires and anxieties, and psyches take on the prominence with which Matar discusses them at these moments. In the domestic space, Najwa and Suleiman may acknowledge and experience the transcendent in a way that their precarious, disrupted daily lives can otherwise not accommodate. Like Rifaat before him, Matar represents this liminality as both endogenous to the space of the Arab and North African home and dizzyingly, tantalizingly rich with meaning and the potential for meaning. Although Matar's handling of the domestic space does indeed echo Rifaat, I argue that, as an English-language novel, the function *ITCOM* performs via its representation of interior spaces builds upon what Rifaat achieves in "My World of the Unknown." As has been previously stated, Matar's representation of the Dewani house interrupts the reigning characterization of Oriental spaces—especially private and domestic spaces. By homing in on the Arab North African phenomenological response to and experience of the home, however, Matar successfully carries the themes and aesthetic of Twentieth Century Arabic-language writers such as Rifaat into Western Canon. The remarkable product of this cross-cultural exchange is a novel that manages to be as accessible to its Western audience as it is faithful to and conversant with Arab North African literary traditions.

Conclusion

Hisham Matar closes the first chapter of *The Return*, his most recent work to date, with the gut-wrenching recollection of how, while walking through Manhattan shortly before his return to Libya after decades in exile, he “crossed over a grille in the sidewalk. Beneath it, there was a room, barely high enough for a man to stand in and certainly not wide enough for him to lie down.” (Matar 15). “Without knowing why,” he continues, Matar “found myself on my knees, looking in. No matter how hard I tried, I could not find a trapdoor, a pipe, anything leading out. It came over me suddenly. I wept and could hear myself,” (15). The parallel that Matar draws between the “room” beneath the sidewalk and the cell in Abu Salim prison that his father almost certainly lived out the remainder of his life inside speaks to Matar’s preoccupation—obsession, even—with documenting physical space and its profound, overwhelming effect on human life. While this obsession colors both of his novels and his memoir, *I TCOM* sees Matar imbuing the Arab North African home with a richness of meaning unparalleled among representations of this space in the Western canon. Despite the West’s centuries old interest in representing and consuming representations of Arab and North African life, especially private life. While the origins of these narratives may be centuries-old, rooted in imperial-erotic fantasy and wishful ignorance, contemporary audiences are inundated with much of the same politically-motivated misinformation. Similarly, the looming mental image of the harem continues to dominate perceptions of Arab and North African spaces and lifestyles.

Matar's representation of the Dewani home in *ITCOM* elegantly discredits these Orientalist notions and provides a much-needed alternative—a vision of the Arab and North African private space rooted in the Arab and North African experience. Necessarily, Dewani home is where the political, social, and familial life converge. From behind the barrier of the house walls, Matar provides his characters with the safety needed to perform an authentic political commentary and provides his readership with a nuanced and deeply humanistic portrait of life in Tripoli, Libya during the early years of the Qaddafi regime. The privacy of the home also acts as a threshold to the liminal space, where Sulieman and Najwa are permitted to connect with and participate in their own humanity to an extent that their repressive police state has otherwise made impossible. Much like 20th Century Egyptian author Alifa Rifaat, Matar represents Arab North African house as drenched with meaning, a space whose very architecture can reflect and amplify the experiences, desires, spirituality, and imagination of the individuals who live inside it. As meaningful as Rifaat's exploration of the private space is, the fact that *ITCOM* sees a Libyan writer embodying the phenomenological value of the Arab North African home for an Anglophone audience is simply unprecedented. Without ever veering into self-Orientalization, Matar manages to subvert the language of harem narratives—dark bedrooms, lonely women, and a palpable sense of tyranny—destroying the insidious project of these narratives and Orientalism at large, the domination and dehumanization of “the Other” (Said 21). The result is not only a brilliantly crafted novel, but one that shifts the emphasis of oft-imagined interior spaces from how they exist in the Western imagination to the Arab North African imagination and experience for Anglophone readers.

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