ANGLO SAXONICA

Trees as Safe Havens in Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Matar's *In the Country of Men*

RESEARCH

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ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the portrayal of trees in Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006) in order to demonstrate the way these authors employ trees to reflect the exilic experiences of their characters. It looks at the symbolic function that trees play and demonstrates the central position they occupy in the two texts. Although the issue of exile has been thoroughly considered in Arabic literature in diaspora, in this paper, it will be examined from a new perspective by focusing on the representation of trees in the texts and highlighting how Faqir's Najwa and Matar's Suleiman turn to trees for solace at moments of desperation and despondency while in exile.

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KEYWORDS:
exile; trees; symbolism; Faqir; Matar; Arabic literature in diaspora

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Sadouni, Bouchra and Abu Amrieh, Yousef. "Trees as Safe Havens in Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Matar's *In the Country of Men*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 20, issue 1, art. 2, 2022, pp. 1–12. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5334/as.73*

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DOI: 10.5334/as.73

INTRODUCTION

From the earliest stories and legends, trees have carried layers of cultural symbolism, religious imagery, world's mythologies, individual histories and community memories. They played an important role in translating deep meanings about the human world through their metaphoric use in works of literature, art, folktales and oral traditions. As an archetype, trees are present in literary, religious, cultural, mythological, scientific and environmental studies.

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of Arab diasporic texts in which trees are centralised. An early example of such pieces of fiction is Tayeb Salih's short story, "The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid" (1962), in which 'the doum tree' is central and stands for traditions. Villagers in this story refuse colonial modernization and do not want to sacrifice this tree as it makes part of their culture and history. Another example is Nada Awar Jarrar who relates trees to the idea of home in her novel, *Somewhere Home* (2003). The major characters often recall images of pine, orange and vine trees whenever they feel homesick. The author also uses tree imagery in the description, such us the dying vine which reflects depression. Furthermore, Randa Jarrar (2016) uses an unnamed tree to symbolize roots in her short story "Him, Me, and Muhammed Ali". This tree was planted by the narrator's father and represents the only thing left by him, which is significant in the story. *In The Other Americans*, Laila Lalami (2019), similarly values a tree, called the 'Joshua tree'. It represents a symbol of memory for the protagonist who eagerly seeks to collect ashes of her late father. In *Bird Summons*, Leila Aboulela (2019) mentions several trees, though not centralizing them. The enchanting forest, which is full of all kinds of trees, seems to be more important as it helps characters undergo spiritual changes. In Fadia Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (2014) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006), trees are given strong voices to narrate different tales about exile.

Taking the diasporic experiences of Anglophone Arab writers like Faqir and Matar into account, the issue of exile surfaces strongly in their works. It is deeply embedded in the main characters' quotidian experiences and practices as both leave the motherland and turn to trees at critical moments in their journeys in exile to ease their pains of alienation, unhomeliness and dislocation. Researchers like Nadine Sinno (2014), Zuhair and Awad (2020) and Sadouni and Abu Amrieh (forthcoming) have already discussed the representation of trees in the works of a number of Arab writers such as Suad Amiry, Zena El-Khalil, Laila El-Haddad, Susan Abulhawa, Jad El Hage and Sinan Antoon. For instance, Zuhair and Awad (2020) discuss "how by paying special attention to the ways in which Abulhawa deploys images of trees in the novel [*Mornings in Jenin*], one will be aware of the socio-political and historical circumstances and conditions that show the Palestinians' agonies, miseries, and even happiness" (12). By chronicling the histories of four generations of a Palestinian family, Zuhair and Awad insists, *Mornings in Jenin* shows that just like the fifteen-hundred-year-old olive tree that occupies a central position in the narratives, Palestinians are connected to their lands despite their current dispersal and exile in the four corners of the earth (2020, 22).

In fact, exile as a concept has taken different forms throughout history. Folk tradition, for instance, saw the exile as a wise man, while the communist regime of the Soviet Union regarded the exile as a traitor (Shahram Afrougheh et. al 2013, 2). Also, in existentialism, all men are exiles in the universe (Shahram Afrougheh et. al 2013, 3). However, in the age of migration and displacement, scholars have examined exile from different angles, drawing particularly on postcolonial theories, traditions and precepts.

To begin with, one ought to start with Edward Said's intriguing definition of exile. In his essay "Reflections on Exile," Said offers some core ideas about the nature of exile and introduces it as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (2000, 180). Thus, Said's conceptualization considers the emotional dimension as it represents one's inevitable nostalgic feelings for home in a foreign land. In his article, "Nostalgia and Exile," Noël Valis (2010) defines exile as the "banishment" and "expulsion from one's home" (117). Valis's definition focuses on the geographical dimension since the state of exile for him requires being in a strange land. Yet, one can be exiled in his own country and experiences an internal exile. Said further clarifies: "The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons"

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(2000, 190). Here, Said contends that home also can be an exilic space at a certain point in time, depending on the psychological and the emotional state of the person.

This paper relates the issue of exile to the portrayal of trees in the two texts. It looks at the way trees are employed to reflect the exilic experiences of characters, highlighting the concept of exile and its nature which could be psychological/territorial, internal/external or imagined/real. Through analysing the different images of trees, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: What role do trees play in the protagonists' exilic experiences? And how do they reflect a character's state of exile? By investigating how Faqir and Matar represent trees in their narratives, this study shows that trees are key motifs that critically unveil the protagonist's fears, hopes and anxieties.

"WOUNDED, YET STANDING": FAQIR'S *WILLOW TREES DON'T WEEP*

Fadia Faqir is a Jordanian-British writer. She was born and raised in Jordan but moved to Britain, where she obtained her MA in creative writing and PhD in creative and critical writing. She is currently teaching creative writing at Durham University. She published three novels prior to *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, namely *Nisanit* (1988), *Pillars of Salt* (1996) and *My Name is Salma* (2007). Her move to Britain is deeply embedded in some of her writings which is the case of *Willow Trees Don't Weep* that depicts the exilic experiences of a young woman.

Since its publication in 2014, Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* has widely attracted scholarly attention. For instance, Hussein A. Alhawamdeh (2018) reads the novel as an appropriation of Shakespeare whereby Faqir "reverses the Shakespearean dramatization of submissive and obedient wives and daughters to an autonomous and subversive Arab Jordanian woman" (19). In fact, the question of women in the novel has been broadly explored. For example, Aini Soraya, attempts to reveal gender relations between male and female characters and categorizes these relations into three types: 'male domination', 'discrimination towards women' and 'violence against women' (2016, 52). In another paper, Dallel Sarnou (2017) demonstrates "how the novel's protagonist re-considers the veil, home, and self-discovery" (155). Rizki Dewi Apriliani (2017) distinguishes two types of veil representation in the novel which includes the veil in the East, and the veil in the West (32). Furthermore, Amani Abu Joudeh and Yousef Awad (2019) argue that dress codes play an essential role in Faqir's novel (11). In this context, one may also argue that Orientalist representations of Arab and Muslim women in the harem focused mainly on seductive apparels, reinforcing the idea that the harem is a place of licentiousness and sexual fantasy. As Martin and Koda (2000) put it, "[i]t is clothing – so close of the body – that the West most joyously appropriated from the East" (11). Eventually, ideas of Eastern dress have come to be a part of Western dress, including caftans and djellabahs from North Africa (13). Another issue which has been approached in the novel is the question of identity. Majed Hamed Aladylah (2015) explores the "representation of narrative and cultural identities, resulting from crossing multiple borders" (224). Also, Ida Rosida Molalita (2016) discusses the process of identity formation for a Jordanian woman in her novel (41).

As the above review shows, recent modern scholarship has not spotted an appropriate light on the role of trees in the setting of exile. In the following paragraphs, the paper will demonstrate how the protagonist, Najwa, sees trees as a safe haven in her exilic adventures. Indeed, *Willow Trees Don't Weep* follows the journey of Najwa, a twenty-seven-year-old woman, to find her father and her true self. Ever since she was a child, Najwa suffered from the absence of the father, Omar, who left the country to join jihad in Afghanistan. Najwa lives in Amman under the control of her secular mother, Rannen. But Zaineb, her grandmother, tries to teach Najwa Islamic principles and tells her stories about Omar so that she keeps a good image of her father.

Raneen dies of cancer and Najwa arranges to send her grandmother to perform haj to the holy city of Mecca so that she can leave the country to look for her father in Afghanistan. In spite of the political chaos and the lack of security there, she is determined to go. Once in Afghanistan, she discovers that Omar joined "Global Jihad" in London, and this pushes her to travel to Britain. During this period, she struggles with feelings of exile and alienation, especially after Andy, a man she meets on the London-bound airplane, ends his relationship with her. Later, she meets Elizabeth, a loving and caring woman who lends her Herbert Edlin's book, *Trees*, and she starts

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learning trees' names and species. After a long journey, Najwa is able to find her father and her true self and becomes, at the same time, aware of the names of all British trees. This paves the way for her to assimilate in the British society. From the novel, one may say that Najwa's quest for self-discovery can be read in tandem with discovering the names of trees. In this way, trees play an integral part in Najwa's journey into wholeness and self-maintenance.

Throughout the course of events, Najwa's relation with trees surfaces strongly. In Amman, she is surrounded by trees and spends long hours in the house garden. On one occasion, she says: "I sat with my mother under the lemon tree. 'Why did he abandon us, leave us like this, fending for ourselves'" (Faqir 2014, 11). These questions, which come across Najwa's mind while being under the tree, foreshadow the beginning of her journey to find her father. This evokes the association between trees and the protagonist's search for her father and identity-quest as will be further explained in the coming paragraphs. Najwa also shows an admiration for trees and nature as the writer states: "Looking through the window, I wondered what tribes, animals and trees behind the horizon" (Faqir 2014, 34). The quote probably foretells her journey in which she crosses borders and meets new people. Her wonder about the 'trees' and 'animals' that live 'behind the horizon' symbolizes her obsession with trees and her curiosity about life outside Jordan. In another instance she declares: "I love the Jasmine outside" (Faqir 2014, 87). All these episodes demonstrate Najwa's exceptional attachment to trees which later affects and shapes her life in exile. One may deduce that the garden around Najwa's house and the green environment of Amman in which she has been raised contribute to a large extent to shaping her conception of trees, which helps her overcome estrangement feelings during her peregrinations.

Najwa starts her long journey to find her father right after the death of Raneen, which marks a shift in her life. Leaving Amman, mixed feelings of danger, alienation and apprehension dominate her. In Pakistan, she tries to overcome the sense of displacement through limiting her thinking to the new trees she discovers in this foreign land. Despite her feelings of fear in a strange country, she never hides her affection for trees. For example, when she takes a taxi to the mosque in Peshawar, Najwa wonders: "the gardens were full of blossoming trees. 'How beautiful, those yellow, white and purple flowers!'" (Faqir 2014, 86). This illustrates the relation between trees and her journey of self-discovery. She is intent to know the names of these trees in a way to "conquer" her surroundings and hence to create a sense of familiarity that enables her to settle down.

Najwa's interest in trees and their names may reflect her effort to familiarize herself with the new environment. Besides, it designates an attempt to surmount the sense of estrangement. This image is stronger when Najwa feels at peace just because she thinks of trees. She recalls the anxious moments at Peshawar Mosque: "I took a deep breath and begun counting trees, something my grandmother had taught me to do whenever I was under pressure. Pine, acacia, carob" (Faqir 2014, 94). This quotation exemplifies Najwa's unique relationship with trees as she finds them comforting and soothing. Whenever she senses a danger, she counts trees, and effectively she overcomes fear. They represent a source of comfort and solace in her exile. Dallel Sarnou (2017) elaborates: "Najwa's home was not Amman, neither Peshawar not even Durham where she ends residing. Najwa was looking for an emotional home where she could be re-territorialized after being exiled in all the places she went to" (158). It can be inferred at this point that trees provide Najwa with the same peace she enjoyed back home, and this helps reduce her feelings of alienation and dislocation.

Since her childhood, Najwa's grandmother had shown her the role of recalling trees' names to achieve peace of mind. Zaineb says: "'Recite the names of all the flowers, birds and trees I have taught you, and exhale after each one!'" (Faqir 2014, 108). The quote reveals that Zaineb's role in planting positivity in Najwa's behaviour largely depends on conjuring up images of trees. Then, Najwa responds: "Jasmine, carnations, daisies, tulips, lilies, orchids. Breath out! Sparrows, pigeons, blackbirds, nightingales. Breath in! Carob, lemon, orange, pine, cypress, eucalyptus. Air rushed out of my lungs" (Faqir 2014, 108). This passage demonstrates the process that Najwa undergoes to regain tranquillity and repose. In fact, recent studies in behavioural and social sciences have shown interest in the influence of trees and the environment on the mental and physical health of humans. Hartig Terry et. al (2011) argue that:

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> "[t]rees and forests affect human health in a variety of ways… For example, surveys in numerous countries have found that many people like to visit natural areas such as forests, and that they do so to relax and ease feelings of tension" (128). In the novel, trees have a remarkable effect on the psychological state of humans. For Najwa, all she has to do is to imagine trees and name their different species to recover from stress.

This effective method becomes Najwa's weapon to defeat the state of exile and its repercussions. For instance, when she is in Afghanistan, she feels alienated and out of place. Describing her first night in Afghanistan, she says: "My heart was pounding. I took in my surroundings. Where was I? A reel of the past few months run through my mind's eye… I sat down, *jasmine, vine*. I breath out!" (Faqir 2014, 113). The quote strongly demonstrates Najwa's feelings of loss, fear and dislocation in her exile. As Said reminds us, "an exile is always out of place" (2000, 186). Yet, when she recalls her grandmother's advice on how to overcome such a situation of constant anxiety, she effectively surpasses panic and apprehension. Describing the process of the psychological restoration, Hartig et. al (2011) explains that "a scene with moderate and ordered complexity, moderate depth, a focal point, and natural contents such as vegetation and water would rapidly evoke interest and positive affect, hold attention, and thereby displace or restrict negative thoughts" (150). The quote illustrates the impact of nature in eliminating negativity. In Najwa's case, trees become the natural source of positivity and relaxation.

This scene of whispering the names of trees is a recurrent image which appears several times throughout the novel. Indeed, trees provide Najwa with a source of relief and help her forget that she is in exile. Najwa confirms: "Trees, windows, roads and the water gleamed in the purple dusk. The sound of leaves, catkins and nettles crushing underfoot *comforted* me" (Faqir 2014, 260, emphasis added). The last line represents a clear confession on how trees are a source of solace for the protagonist. She finds in them her inner peace and tranquillity that makes her forget, albeit momentarily, her relentless state of exile. On the effect of the green nature on human's psychology, Kjell Nilsson et. al (2008) comment that "[r]ecent studies on these salutogenic effects of the green environment have shown that nature can lower stress levels, restore powers of concentration, and alleviate irritability" (8). This, probably, justifies the author's choice to portray trees as a source of comfort and tranquillity.

In Britain, Najwa is "[a]lone in London, without any leads, contacts or friends" (Faqir 2014, 181). This may illustrate an advanced state of exile for the protagonist. Faqir's representation of Najwa's feelings in exile echoes Said's words: "Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid or secure" (191). Similarly, Najwa is no more 'satisfied', 'placid' or 'secured', but rather, a lonely woman in a strange land where she has no friends or relatives. To surmount all these mixed feelings, which all come as a result of being in exile. Najwa, again, recalls her grandmother's advice. She says: "this time I would be arrested. I held my breath, counted to seven and recited the names of trees" (Faqir 2014, 172). Significantly, she uses the word "recite," indicating a state of rapture and joy. This helps her overcome the state of endless anxiety. It is only when Najwa thinks of trees that she seems to cope with her sense of estrangement in the foreign countries she visits. Thus, by conjuring up trees from her homeland and placing them alongside with the trees she sees in Britain, Najwa forges a transnational identity that reflects her status as a person who crosses national and cultural borders.

Another strategy for Najwa to stabilize in exile is to study the different species of trees. One example is when she learns from the taxi driver about the trees of Peshawar in Pakistan as stated previously. Also, when Najwa is seen reading a book on 'Britain's endangered wildlife'. She reads: "151 species of plants and vertebrates 'in serious danger of extinction' and another 328 species 'threatened'" (Faqir 2014, 216). This incident takes place in London after Andy jilted her. She seems to compensate the feeling of being alone in exile by learning about British trees. Towards the end of the narrative, she meets Elizabeth, the sister of her father's cellmate. She lends her Herbert Eldin's book, *Trees*. At this point, Najwa starts a new trip of discovering the British flora. This comes hand in hand with her new discoveries concerning her father. Omar's cellmate reveals various facts about Najwa's father: how he joined "Global Jihad", how he ended up in prison and how much he loved his daughter and felt remorseful for leaving Jordan. Accordingly, it can be deduced that there is a link between Najwa's knowing herself and knowing trees. The more trees she is able to name, the more she knows about her

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family history, her father and certainly herself. Discovering facts about her father can be read in tandem with learning new species of British trees, which helps her both to stabilize and know herself. Najwa begins studying British trees and rapidly recognizes some of them. She says: "I recognized the serrated leaves and red berries of an alder tree" (Faqir 2014, 251). In fact, Najwa's gradual success to learn about British trees symbolises a gradual way of assimilation in a foreign country and getting rid of the constraints of exile.

Feelings of fear and estrangement gradually disappear as Najwa is now preoccupied with her lessons on trees. In another instance, Najwa is seen reading from the book and suddenly stops by a captivating tree standing at the shore. She appears hangry to know more about this tree. She recounts:

> 'Alder, beech, birch, cedar, cherry, juniper, oak, poplar, rowan, willow.' On the other shore stood a tree with light green leaves that looked like a woman with her hair down [...] The book said that it was a weeping willow, but there was nothing sad about it. The white sap clung to the soil, and the leaves swayed happily. (Faqir 2014, 252)

The quote embodies Najwa's insistence to know about British trees. The first two lines reveal her progress in recognizing more species. Additionally, her attraction to the willow 'in the shore' represents her curiosity to know more about trees. Although the 'book said that is was a weeping willow', she decides to see everything positively as she says: 'but there was nothing sad about it'. According to Michael Ferber, the willow is a symbol of mourning (1999, 234). Yet, the quote paints an image of a strong woman who sees the willow as a strong and a happy tree. Similarly, Hussein A. Alhawamdeh (2018) argues that "In Faqir's novel, the willow trees do not weep, nor are they taken as a symbol of the loss [...] The willow trees, in Faqir's fictional narrative, are solid and empowered like the female protagonist, Najwa" (7). Because trees make her calm and relaxed, she describes its leaves as swaying 'happily'. This reveals the role of trees in changing her conception of life in exile. Learning everything about trees facilitates Najwa's process of settlement in Britain as getting knowledge about British flora familiarizes her with the city of Durham and other English cities and reduces her alienation and sense of strangeness.

The concluding paragraph in the novel is quite telling. It paints an image of a fully integrated young woman whose life in exile has become easier as she got familiar with British trees which substantially defuse her sense of estrangement in a foreign country. We read:

> After months of studying British trees, and much quizzing by Elizabeth over many dinners, I had begun to recognize them. The one I was standing under a Himalayan birch. I could tell by the lenticels. The white bark was wrapped around the trunk like bandages. 'Wounded, yet standing,' she'd said. (Faqir 2014, 276)

Britain is no more a strange land. Najwa does not feel dislocated, but rather "liberated" by the newly-discovered "spaciousness" (Faqir 2014, 276). She spent months of hard work to familiarize herself with the British flora in order to overcome the lethal sense of exclusion that naturally comes with exile. Through naming the British trees, recognising their histories, and identifying their migratory routes, Najwa now stands on solid grounds that facilitate her integration into Britain's multicultural tapestry. There is even a similarity between the 'Himalayan birch' and Najwa. They are both strangers and injured: The birch comes from the Himalayas and Najwa comes from Amman. Elizabeth comments: "'Wounded, yet standing'" (Faqir 2014, 276). Najwa is also injured. Her hidden wounds are caused by the absence of the father, the death of the mother and being far from home. Despite these injuries, she is 'standing' as she has already made her way into conquering feelings of alienation and estrangement. Again, this delight and satisfaction which is the result of studying British trees come at a time when she finally meets her father. Now that she finds him, she finds herself and also becomes able to recognize most of the British trees. This illustrates the link which the author draws between Najwa's knowing trees and knowing herself. In her peregrinations, Najwa finds peace and solace in trees as they ease her sense of dislocation and help her find a niche for herself in Britain's social and cultural spaces. Trees, then, are seen as safe havens from displacement, alienation and exile. In like manner, Matar presents trees as a source of relief and peace of mind, in which the protagonist surmounts the feelings of his imagined exile.

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"A TREE FROM HEAVEN": MATAR'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF MEN*

Hisham Matar is a Libyan-American writer and essayist who lives in London. He was born in the United States but moved to Libya with his family when he was three years old. Because of the political chaos during Al Gaddafi's rule, he was forced to move, again, to Egypt. He studied in London, where he currently lives and writes. He published several books: *In the Country of Men* (2006), *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011), *The Return* (memoir, 2016), *Il Libro di Dot* (2017) and *A Month in Siena* (2019). The displacement process which he underwent seems to affect his writing as the novel follows the life of a Libyan boy who is forced to move to Egypt. In fact, several autobiographical elements are clearly inserted in the narrative. John C. Hawley (2017) confirms that the plot "repeat[s] Hisham Matar's own story with variations, additions, and subtractions" (260). Generally speaking, the novel explores powerful themes of exile, home, revolution, dictatorship and patriarchal rule.

In the Country of Men is Matar's first novel, and it has received remarkable attention since its publication in 2006. Annie Gagiano (2010) conducts a comparative study based on the technique of narration in *Ice Candy Man* and *In the Country of Men*. She focuses on "how each of the children is ineluctably affected by what she or he witnesses" (25). John C. Hawley (2017) examines some autobiographical aspects in the novel (204), masculine and feminine binary (208) and mourning and melancholy in relation to psychoanalysis (213). Lorenzo Mari (2013) analyses the novel from a postcolonial perspective, focusing on the question of nationalism and historiography (2013, 14). Lital Levy (2019) compares *In the Country of Men* to Gordimer's *My Son Story* in relation to "the dynamics of complicity and resistance" (296). Margaret Scanlan (2010) discusses "'revolutionary violence'" in the novel from a postcolonial point of view (266). In her recent published book, *The Libyan Novel: Humans, Animals and the Poetics of Vulnerability*, Charis Olszok (2020) looks at the depiction of animals and insects in the text. She suggests: "*In the Country of Men* opens with reference to Tripoli's 'every person, animal and ant', conveying an imaginative, creaturely collective" (199).

The above review shows the different subjects explored in the novel from different angles. This analysis contributes to previous scholarship by examining images of trees which have not been given attention. As the analysis of this novel shows, Matar's representation of the mulberry tree is intricately-linked to the exiled narrator's memories of childhood in his homeland. More specifically, the novel focuses on the psychological exile that the protagonist endures in homeland before he eventually leaves Libya to Egypt. The novel captures the secret lives of characters involved in a resistance movement that fights for a better Libya during Al Gaddafi's early years of rule. It is told from Suleiman's perspective, a boy of nine years. His alcoholic mother was forced to marry his father at the age of fourteen. Suleiman spends most of his time looking after her, especially when his father leaves the country to import *trees* and animals, or when he is occupied with the resistance movement. Having been given more than he can bear (his mother's alcoholism, his father's absence and the chaotic situation in Libya), Suleiman often goes to the mulberry tree which becomes a refuge for him. Eventually, his father and one of the neighbours are arrested. The neighbour is publically executed, while the father is tragically tortured by Al Gaddafi's military regime and released later. At the age of fourteen, Suleiman is sent to Egypt due to the deteriorating political turmoil and the instable social situation in Tripoli. He studies there and becomes a pharmacist, but he never returns to Libya. Later, his father is arrested again and killed while his mother goes back to alcohol for solace.

Suleiman lives in the mulberry street neighbourhood in Tripoli. Apparently, the neighbourhood is named after the mulberry trees which once covered the whole era. He states: "We called ours Mulberry because there used to be an orchard of mulberry trees here, the last one remaining was next door in Ustath Rashid and Auntie Salma's garden" (Matar 2006, 34–35). Of the whole orchard, only one tree survives. This probably comes as a result of the urbanization drive that took place in Tripoli during Al Gadhafi's reign to make way for houses and residential complexes. In her study, "A Critical Evaluation of Libya's Urban Spatial System between 1970 and 2006," Salma Mohammed Salhin (2010) argues that there was no protection for the agriculturally and ecologically valuable areas under the urban development plans (185). She points out: "The impact of urban growth on the agricultural area which surrounds Tripoli was huge and had several local implications, in addition to its direct and indirect effect on decreasing the size of the fertile farmland and damaging the ecological balance of the city" (2010, 240). Hence, the act of

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importing trees by Suleiman's father can be seen as a kind of resistance to Al Gadhafi's urban planning since Faraj opposes Al Gadafi's rule and makes part of the revolutionary movement in Libya. In fact, there is a link between political movements and trees. Zuhair and Awad (2020), for instance, argue that "people who have been evicted from their lands and displaced, trees inspire them to resist constant attempts to uproot them and annihilate their collective identity and memory" (21).

The mulberry tree gradually emerges to be an important motif and bears a deep symbolism throughout the narrative. From the book cover of Dial Press Trade edition (2008), it can be inferred that the tree is important within the structure of the plot. The cover shows a picture of a tree, probably the last surviving mulberry tree in the neighbourhood, with two boys standing under its huge branches. Also, the book cover of the Penguin edition (2006), exposes an image of ambiguous designs which look like buildings. There are also some red fruits here and there which represent berries, Suleiman's favourite fruit. Hence, from the two book covers, one may say that the mulberry tree occupies a central position in the narrative.

In fact, the protagonist spends a long time sitting under/around this tree. It represents his escape, it is where he finds happiness. Suleiman lives a kind of a miserable childhood as he is emotionally separated from Faraj, his father. Faraj plays the role of the tyrant patriarch who does not care about his wife's or his child's emotions. Several times, Suleiman's heart has been broken because of his father's hurtful words. Also, the political situation in Libya makes the protagonist's life unstable. Under these circumstances, Suleiman finds himself internally exiled. Although he spends his childhood in his own country, and he is surrounded by his family, he enters a state of a psychological exile. Said (2000) proclaims: "[I]n a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation" (2000, 183). This is exactly what happens to Suleiman. He feels that he does not fit in the society where he lives and cannot cope with the harsh reality.

Famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish says: "Exile is more than a geographical concept… You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room" (cited in Shatz 2001). As such, Suleiman is exiled in his own home. His exile is brought on by his parents' literal and metaphorical absence among other things. He sees himself as an outsider who has no access to the social or political life. At this point, the mulberry tree comes to Suleiman's rescue as it represents the only safe place in which this child, who feels alienated and isolated, finds happiness and satisfaction. Once, Suleiman says: "I ran down the staircase to the garden and walked under the shade of the small fruit trees, digging my toes into the cool earth then flicking my feet ahead with every step, imitating Baba's walk" (Matar 2006, 47). This quote demonstrates how being among trees compensates, to some extent, the absence of the father.

Also, he describes the pleasure that he feels by climbing the tree:

> Each berry was like a crown of tiny purple balls. They reminded me of the grapes carved into the arches of Lepcis. I decided that mulberries were the best fruit God had created and I began to imagine young lively angels conspiring to plant a crop in the earth's soil after they heard that Adam, peace and blessings be upon him, and Eve, peace and blessings be upon her, were being sent down here to earth as punishment… I plucked one off and it almost melted in my fingers. I threw it in my mouth and it dissolved, its small balls exploding like fireworks. I ate another and another. (Matar 2006, 47–48)

The quote above demonstrates Suleiman's feeling at the top of the mulberry tree, his secret kingdom. He sees the tree and its fruits as a magical place, and he describes its berries as 'a crown'. When Suleiman climbs the tree, he inevitably overlooks his reality, his father's absence, his mother's alcoholism and all the political problems that affect his life despite his young age. Indeed, the mulberry tree is a panacea for all his pains and woes. As such, it becomes a refuge where he feels safe; for Suleiman, it is an earthly paradise since he imagines himself in heaven surrounded by 'young lively angels'. Thus, it can be said that the mulberry tree improves Suleiman's psychological state. Indeed, Kjell Nilsson et. al (2011) emphasise the role of trees and nature in improving humans' mental health. He explains: "natural elements such as forests, parks, trees and gardens are known to provide opportunities to enhance public health

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and well-being … activities in natural outdoor environments are intuitively known to be good for mental and physical health" (3).

The mulberry tree is said to have various mythological significations and religious connotations in different cultures and nations. In ancient China, people worshiped trees; the mulberry was one of the most important trees that people climbed to get to heaven (Webster 2008, 4). Like the ancient Chinese, Suleiman climbs the tree to reach his paradise. He transcends the physical world to experience life in the spiritual world. The mulberry tree gives him this opportunity to have another life that is different from the one in the material world. Also, it can be seen from the quote that Suleiman is unified with the tree and its fruit. Picking one berry, which 'almost melted in [his] fingers' makes them one. At this point, one can say that the boy is experiencing a romantic moment of rapture since he feels the pleasure, tastes the sweetness of the berries, merges with the tree, imagines paradise and finally transcends to the spiritual world. Therefore, it can be inferred that the tree represents the boy's safe space to which he belongs, as he does not fit in the real world. Similarly, this tree fills the void inside Suleiman and makes up for his feeling of loneliness by creating a magical home for him.

The previous quote describes Suleiman's hell and heaven, and metaphorically, the way he gains and loses paradise. The boy goes through a romantic journey, leaving the society (the material world), to the tree (the natural world), to achieve transcendence (the supernatural world). Suleiman's romantic journey ends with a fall as he goes back to the real world that symbolises hell after experiencing transcendence at the top of his earthly heaven. He says: "when I reached the ground I almost lost my balance" (Matar 2014, 48). This shows the last phase of his transcendence experience. When he was at the top, he says: "The mulberries were so ripe I could see now that many more had fallen on the other side of the wall. Armies of ants, I thought, were probably gathering to eat them" (Matar 2014, 48). These lines evoke his own destiny. Like the berries which will be eaten by ants, he will be disturbed by society when he climbs down leaves the tree. The mulberry tree, then, helps him forget the fatigue of life. As Hartig et. al (2011) succinctly put it, "people who become fatigued by life in a large urban agglomeration 'need at least periodically a complete recreation in nature, among green forests, rivers, and lakes'" (138). The mulberry tree is Suleiman's sacred and secret retreat.

Suleiman's relationship with the mulberry tree grows stronger. He always confirms that "mulberries are from heaven" (Matar 2006, 56). He also wants to learn everything about the mulberry tree as he says: "I was hoping he [Moosa] would take me into Baba's study and look up some fat book, and we would learn all there is to learn about mulberries" (Matar 2006, 56). However, his wish did not come true. Moosa even tries to undermine the value of the mulberry tree. However, Suleiman confidently insists:

> They [mulberries] are the angle's gift. They are a heavenly fruit never intended for this earth, but angles went behind God's back even though they knew He's the Allkowing and they knew He's the Allseeing because they love us. They risked everything, Moosa, everything, to give us a taste of heaven in this life. (Matar 2006, 59)

This passage reveals the boy's strong conviction about the mulberry tree and how he sees it as a piece of heaven. Although he is a child and his words seem irrational, the passage deeply reflects what he really feels inside. As have been argued, the tree becomes a safe refuge that makes him feel alive. This is evident when he says that angels want 'to give us a taste of heaven in this life'. What he means here is that this tree and its berries help him forget his harsh reality and offers him a heavenly peace.

Trying to calm his mother when she undergoes a panic attack, Suleiman wishes that she could taste some of the fruits from the mulberry tree. He kindly says:

> "'Did you know how hard the angles worked and how they risked everything to give us mulberries?' I said to make her better […] 'And all because they knew how hard life was going to be for us here on earth […] they are the angle's way of making us patient" (Matar 2006, 82).

The quote represents a direct confession that the berries from his favourite tree make him 'patient' in a life full of obstacles and hardships. He is entirely convinced that the tree's fruits come from heaven as tasting these fruits take him away from the ugliness of life into a safe

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place in paradise. He constructs a myth about the source of the berries. Olszok (2020) argues that Suleiman "constructs his own mythology concerning the neighbourhood's last mulberry tree, which he inserts into the Qur'anic story of Adam and Eve" (217). She believes that the boy re-appropriates religious stories as he invents his own myth, that is based on the fall of Adam and Eve as narrated in the holy Qur'an. She maintains:

> [H]e [Suleiman] inserts the liberating power of fairy tale into the grim determination of myth, imagining nature as complicit with fallen humanity, providing it with a fruit that can flourish in the 'country of men' and watched over by a benevolent God rather than an omnipresent leader. Thereafter, mulberries provide an antidote to fear. (2020, 218)

The quote explains the way Suleiman constructs his own myth that is drawn from Islamic traditions. According to Olszok, the boy adds a childish touch as he 'inserts the liberating power of fairy tale' into his fable of the berries that provide an 'antidote to fear'.

Not only does Suleiman tell his mother about his myth and the secret of this tree, but he also speaks to his father about it. After being severely tortured by Al Gadhafi's regime, the boy invites Faraj to the garden to share with him the delight of being under the tree (Matar 2006, 210). The boy collects some berries and tells Faraj about his myth: "'Mulberries, Baba, mulberries. The angles stole them from Heaven to make life easier for us. They are the sweetest thing'" (Matar 2006, 211). Again, Suleiman draws the reader's attention to the role that these fruits play 'to make life easier'. For the boy, the mulberry tree becomes a remedy for all the pains he feels in his imagined exile. He resorts to the tree to compensate the emotional emptiness that his father's absence has left in him. Surprisingly enough, the tree witnesses the re-union of the boy and his father who suddenly lets go some of his tyranny and patriarchal arrogance. The tree seems to have a magical power as it does not only offer peace, but it also makes his father a more lenient and compromising figure. In Hindu mythology, the mulberry is "a wish-granting tree" (McElro 2020, 137). This is exactly what happens for the boy as his childish wishes come true thanks to the magical power of the mulberry tree.

Sadly, at a time when Suleiman overcomes his imagined exile, he literally experiences a real exile. He is now forced to move to Egypt as the political situation in Libya deteriorates. He laments the loss of home: "I suffer an absence, an ever-present absence, like an orphan not entirely certain of what he has missed or gained through his unchosen loss… Egypt has not replaced Libya. Instead, there this is void, this emptiness" (Matar 2006, 232). The quote painfully portrays Suleiman's feelings of loss, emptiness and dislocation. He is now in a real exile; to add insult to injury, the mulberry tree is no more there to provide him with the peace and comfort it has given him during his childhood. In fact, and once in Egypt, trees disappear from the narrative. This probably designates the protagonist's state of rootlessness. The absence of trees in the post-Libya narrative illustrates Suleiman's state of exile and disconnectedness. All he possesses now is his strong memory, which is able to recall every single detail about the mulberry tree. King (2008) argues: "Instead of being able to touch the memories, in terms of physical objects in space, what the exile has to rely on is the feeling, the pure remembrance as an internal object of consciousness" (67). Suleiman does exactly that; he relies on his memories at the centre of which the mulberry tree.

CONCLUSION

Since his childhood, Suleiman has suffered from the absence of his father. Yet, this absence is emotional, unlike Najwa's father who is literally absent. On the one hand, Najwa starts a physical journey from Amman stopping by several cities in order to find her father. During her peregrinations, she finds a safe haven in trees which provide her with a sensation of comfort and assurance. On the other hand, Suleiman also decides to begin a journey to find his father, Faraj. However, his journey is a spiritual one as Faraj lives with the protagonist. But Faraj's tyranny and cruelty make him emotionally distant. As a result, Suleiman lives in an imagined exile unlike Najwa who experiences a real exile. He is exiled within his country as he feels that he does not fit in the family or the neighbourhood in which he lives. He finds a refuge in the mulberry tree which fruits make him patient and help him forget, albeit temporarily, the ugliness of life. If

Najwa finds peace in trees to endure the psychological challenges of exile, the mulberry tree also offers solace and comfort for Suleiman. In both cases trees are spiritual healers.

To conclude, it can be deduced that it is advantageous to read diasporic literature from the lens of trees. Tracing the representation of trees in both novels helps unveil each protagonist's fears, hopes and anxieties in their different exiles. Through the use of trees in their novels, Faqir and Matar offer an (in)direct commentary on different issues in life because they are politically, socially, culturally and religiously charged.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Sadouni, Bouchra and Abu Amrieh, Yousef. "Trees as Safe Havens in Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and Matar's *In the Country of Men*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 20, issue 1, art. 2, 2022, pp. 1–12. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5334/as.73*

Submitted: 10 November 2021
Accepted: 01 February 2022
Published: 16 February 2022

Anglo Saxonica is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.