

Ahmad Matar's Fluctuating *Watan* Conception: An Interdisciplinary Study

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Abstract

Ahmad Matar is an exiled Iraqi poet who applies himself to the cause of freedom. Experiencing internal exile in homeland, Iraq, and external exile in the UK, Matar suffered the traumatic consequences of estrangement. Predictably, the search for *watan* (Arabic for home) is one of the motifs in his poetry. However, his conception of *watan* fluctuates throughout his works from the immanent to the transcendental, and back to the immanent. Although many studies addressed different aspects in Matar's poetry, very few investigated the poet's conception of home. The article aims to identify the poet's uncertainty concerning the concept of *watan* and explain the reason(s) for this oscillation through critical analysis of selected poems. The Individualistic approach of cultural psychology will be utilized to trace the poet's different *homes*. The philosophical approach concerning cultural identity and the meaning of home will also be used to investigate this fluctuation.

Keywords: Ahmad Matar, Arabic exile poetry, concept of home/land, identity, cultural psychology.

Introduction

Ahmad Matar is one of the most revolutionary Arab poets who has dedicated his entire oeuvre to the cause of freedom for the Arab world. His verse has triggered public outcry and inspired a wide range of readers in Iraq and all Arab countries. This is because poetry about injustice, oppression, deteriorating social conditions has gained more popularity since the second half of the twentieth century in the Arab countries. That era witnessed movements of national independence in the occupied Arab countries and series of political and sectarian conflicts and coups that ravaged the lives of the Arab peoples.

Iraq, for example, is one of the Arab countries stricken by successive military coups starting from Abdul Karim Qassim's coup and the declaration of independence in 1958. The political party that conducted the following coups was the Baath Party. The party was originally established in Syria, then spread its ideologies in other Arab countries especially in Iraq where it was acknowledged in 1952 (Aljazeera.net). According to 'Abd al-Hādī Ma'tūq al-Hātim, the Baathist Party dominated the political scene from 1963 to 2003. "The Baathists inflicted extreme violence and "showed hostility and conducted persecution campaigns against Iraqi civilians after the 1991 uprising leaving behind a path of destruction"

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(al-Hātim 2023)¹. To achieve political domination, "the party ... extensively depended on propaganda, indoctrination, sectarian discrimination, surveillance, terror practiced through its security agencies, and rewriting of history" (Ghena 2016, 101). Ray Salvator Jennings, country director for the United States Institute of Peace in Iraq, summarized the status of Iraq as a police state established by the Baath Party especially in the era of Saddam Hussein

The Baathist regime, especially under Saddam Hussein, eliminated freedom of association and expression and struck a false bargain of patronage and protection in exchange for the loyalty of a few. The state infiltrated nearly all efforts to create independent civic space while terrorizing even its most ardent supporters. (Jennings 2008)

Most advocates of freedom and human rights in Iraq at the time were subject to harassment, imprisonment, and probably assassination at the hands of Saddam's regime. These oppressive measures led to the expulsion of many Iraqis who abandoned their homeland and sought a new one in diaspora. Hana Khlaif Ghena suggests a prolonged connection between Iraq and exile, coining a new term "Iraxile" to highlight this association.

Looking for a word or a term that best illustrates the synonymity of Iraq as a country that is continuously pushing his people to opt for self- or forced exile and exile as geographical, cultural, and psychological displacement, I think of coining the word 'iraxile' which, in my opinion, best illustrates what Iraqis have been undergoing in the second half of the twentieth century up to the present time. (Ghena 2016, 100)

Many Iraqi poets went through this horrible experience of living in exile including Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Abdul Wahab al-Bayyati, Buland al-Haidri, Muzaffar al-Nawwab, and Adnan al-Sayegh. This problem has been recurrent in Arabic culture since classical times. Many classical Arab poets voluntarily and involuntarily left their countries. However, yearning for their home is a frequent theme in their poetry. Abū Tammām once said:

Let your heart love whomsoever,	نقل فؤادك حيث شئت من الهوى
[True] love is only to the first	ما الحب
How many are the places a person may love,	إلا للحبيب الأول
[Yet] his yearning is always to the first.	كم منزل في الأرض يألفه الفتى
	وحنينه
	أبدا لأول منزل

Adnan al-Sayegh is one example of the Iraqi exiles who were forced to leave Iraq in Saddam Hussein's era. Despite experiencing internal exile in homeland, al-Sayegh suffered the consequences of external exile. In his poem "Ḥanīn" (or Nostalgia), the poet expresses the dilemma of the exiled Iraqis who are torn apart between the impossibility of returning home which becomes a big prison and their inability to forget it.

In the shade of palms is my country surrounded by rifles	لي بظل النخيل بلادٌ مسورةٌ بالبنادق
How can I reach her	كيف الوصول إليها

After the road becomes to	وقد بعد الدربُ ما بيننا والعتابُ
o far, so is my blame [on her]	وكيف أرى الصحبَ
How can I see the friends	مَنْ غَيَّبُوا فِي الزَّنازِينِ
Who are [arbitrarily] imprisoned	
.....	أو سَلَمُوا للترابِ
Or buried deep	انْهَاحِ مَحَنَةً بَعْدَ عَشْرِينَ
It is an ordeal that after twenty [years]	أَنْ تَبْصُرَ الجِسْرَ غَيْرَ الَّذِي قَدْ عَبَرْتَ
You see the bridge different from that you crossed	السَّمَاوَاتِ غَيْرَ السَّمَاوَاتِ
The sky is not the same	وَالنَّاسِ مَسْكُونَةً بِالْغِيَابِ
And people are haunted by absence. (diwan.net)	

The poem is one of many written by al-Sayegh and other Arab exiles reflect the complicated relationship between the exiled poets and their homelands. At times, they show their inseparable attachment to the place. In other times, they seek another *watan* of different nature – concrete or abstract.

Ahmad Matar, the subject of this article, escaped to Kuwait, then, immigrated to the UK where he has been living in London until now (Aldiwan.net). In his voluntary exile, Matar resumed the mission he started earlier in Iraq then Kuwait, i.e., inciting Arabs to seek freedom. Almost all studies about Matar focus either on his political activism or poetic aestheticism. In "al-Naqd al-siyāsī fī shi'r Aḥmad Maṭar" (Or Political Criticism in the Poetry of Ahmad Matar), for instance, Wassan Murshid Mahmoud suggested that Matar's poems came as a protest against despotic regimes in Iraq and other Arab countries. Matar criticized such regimes and identified the negative consequences of their dictatorship, "though his poems reflect contradictory feelings of optimism and pain at the same time." However, in *'Anāṣir al-ibdā' al-Fannī fī shi'r Aḥmad Maṭar* (or The Elements of Poetic Creativity in Ahmad Matar's Poetry Kamāl Aḥmad Ghunaym discussed the poet's language, style, and aesthetic aspects. In *Dirāsah uslūbiyah min Dīwān Aḥmad Maṭar : namādhij mukhtārah* (or A Stylistic Study of Matar's Poetry: Selected Examples), Rashīdah Diyār examined phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic structures in Matar's poetry. Sarcasm, which is one of the main features of Matar's verse has been extensively studied by many. For instance, in "Al'jānb al-nafsī llskhryh fī al-shi'r al-'Arabī al-mu'āṣir : al-Māghūt, Maḥmūd Darwīsh wa-Aḥmad mẓr nmādhjā" (or The Psychological Dimension of Sarcasm as an Aspect in Contemporary Arabic Poetry), Fāṭimah Ḥusayn al-'Afīf explored the psychological aspect of sarcasm in Al-Maghout, Darwish and Matar's poetry. Also 'Abd al-Mun'im Jabbār 'Ubayd's *al-Tanāṣṣ fī shi'r Aḥmad Maṭar* (Intertextuality in the Poetry of Ahmad Matar) researched the various types of intertextuality in Matar's poetry including, Quran, Hadith, and Arabic poetry and prose.

Although the poet tried to minimize the effects of living in a foreign society by distancing himself from the dominant culture and focusing on the cause he left his country for, he encountered the problem of constructing a new homeland instead of the lost one. This issue of homemaking in Arabic poetry of exile represented an intriguing issue to the researchers. For example, Sebastian Guenther and Stephan Milich co-edited *Representations and Visions of Homeland in Modern Arabic literature*. In this book, the authors gathered articles about the diverse depictions of homeland in the works of some Arab writers. In

the light of the German term "heimsuchungen" which is etymologically divided into two words: heim meaning home, and suchungen meaning search - thus meaning search for home, Milich investigated a selection of poems by Abd al-Razzak Abd al-Wahid, Adnan al-Sayegh, and Rashid Husain. Studying each poet's challenge to construct his *watan*, Milich used this term to denote the poets' "dream of returning home or of finding a new home in exile" (Milich 2016, 117). He posited that "in contemporary Arabic poetry of exile, the home(land) has become the impossibility 'almustahil' par excellence" (Milich 2016, 117). It is, therefore, unsurprising that the experience of exile, difficulties of adaptation to the host country, nostalgia, yearning for homeland are some of the predominant themes in the literary output of Arabic poetry in diaspora. Mu'tazz Quṣayy Yāsīn studied exilic experience in Matar's verse. He classified Matar's estrangement into three phases: political estrangement, spatial estrangement, and due to both, introversion, and self-reliance (Yāsīn 1994, 47).

As a result of the poet's profound estrangement and alienation from his homeland and society, a satisfying feeling of safety and peacefulness developed within the poet, that is, introversion and self-reliance" (59)

Samir Itani compared the different concepts of belonging and homeland between the Lebanese poet, Said Aql, and Ahmad Matar. He argued that Matar has a profound and stable sense of belonging to Arab culture. He also indicated that the poet's concept of *watan* conforms to his cultural worldviews. However, in some point he considers *watan* the people not the place. Unlike Aql, Ahmad Matar who is driven by his Islamic background, sheds light on the discrepancy between the supposed function of homeland and the status quo in the militarized place where people are taken hostages by the tyrannical regime of Saddam Husein. Although the poet knows Iraq is no longer the safe and warm home, "he wants to make it better by reforming its political system. He does not want to substitute or remove it" (Itani 2020, 8). This is why the poet devotes a big share of his poetry to criticize despotism according to Itani.

This article, however, focuses on the fluctuation of Matar's conception of home as an understudied area in his poetry. It aims to contribute to the scholarship on the disastrous consequences of the poet's home loss. It attempts to explain how the poet as an exile creates a culture of his own in the foreign land instead of his native culture that fails to protect or help him achieve self-fulfillment. The article also explores the development of Matar's home conception over time. The different representations of home in the poet's works are illustrated from two different approaches, i.e., cultural psychology and philosophy. Thereupon, an overview of how the two approaches define the concept of home will be introduced in the following section.

1. Home from cultural psychology and philosophical approaches

In "Three Approaches to Cultural Psychology: A Critique," Carl Ratner highlights the three major trends in cultural psychology; namely, activity theory, the symbolic and individualistic approaches. "Activity theory explains psychology as grounded in practical cultural activities" whereas "the symbolic approach explains psychology as formed by collective symbols and concepts" (Ratner 1999, 1). The third trend is the individualistic approach, which, according to Ratner, "emphasizes individual construction of

psychological functions from collective symbols and artifacts" (1). This approach also assumes that "individuals 'co-construct' culture which the author defines as "the outcome of a negotiated interaction between an individual and social institutions-conditions" (1). This latter trend will be employed in this article as more relevant.

In his critique, Ratner refers to Unni Wikan's books: *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living* and *Tomorrow, God Willing: Self-made Destinies in Cairo* where Wikan posits that "individuals create their own cultural psychology out of conditions, and that their cultural psychology can be comprehended through the self-expressions of subjects" (10). However, she admits, "external obstacles constrain people, thwart their opportunities, and corrode their social relationships" (10). Another important critique Ratner cited is the work of Jaan Valsiner who co-worked with Cynthia Lightfoot in "Parental Belief Systems under the Influence: Social Guidance of the Construction of Personal Cultures". The authors combined both the symbolic and individual approaches in their article. As stated by Valsiner, "individuals construct a personal culture within collective culture. Culture is thus partly shared and partly personal. Since individuals contribute a personal element to culture, they "co-construct "culture" (10-11). "In other words, individual processes determine the effect that social life has on a particular person. Social life only affects someone to the extent that he lets it" (11). For this reason, the researcher believes it is possible that the individuals who experience internal and/or external exile can co-construct their own culture as the outcome of processes of selection from the cultures of their homeland and/or the host society. They select what suits the self-image from both cultures to maintain their psychological well-being.

According to Kendra Cherry's "Individualistic Cultures and Behavior", there is another important element that plays a key role in understanding people's behavior in a given society, i.e., the predominant attitude a given culture encourages its people to embrace - in this case- individualism or collectivism. For example, countries of Western Europe and North America are known for their individualistic cultures, which "stress the needs of the individual over the needs of the group. In this type of culture, people are seen as independent and autonomous." On the contrary, collectivist cultures favor group interests over the individuals' such as Eastern cultures. To measure how far a type of culture influences people's individualistic and collectivistic behavior, a lot of studies have been carried out. For instance, in "Individualism vs Collectivism in Different Cultures: A cross-cultural study," Abdel-Fattah E. Darwish and Günter L. Huber investigated the impact of culture on two groups of male and female students in Egypt and Germany. The authors found that individualism scores are higher in Germany than Egypt whereas Egypt scores of collectivism scores are higher than those in Germany. Hence, the study reinforces intercultural interventions in people's behavior, advocating that people should be viewed based on group membership instead of being assessed as "distinct individuals" (Darwish & Huber 2003, 53).

Urbanization and education play a major role in changing people's self-conceptions. In their "Individualism Versus Collectivism: A Comparison of Kenyan and American Self-Concepts", Vaunne Ma and Thomas J. Schoeneman noted that people of collectivist cultures represented by the Kenyans in the study, define themselves "with more social components" than people from individualistic cultures. On the contrary, the Americans, as representatives of the individualistic cultures, usually define themselves in

more “nonsocial self-conceptions”. However, Ma and Shoeneman found that Kenyan university students show individualistic responses in the questionnaire whereas “traditional Kenyans responded with social categories of occupational and kinship roles”. Thus, “sociocultural factors of urbanization, education, and Westernization appear to correlate with individuated (nonsocial) self-conceptions” (Ma & Shoeneman 1997, 261). Therefore, intellectuals and highly cultured people, including men of letters like Ahmad Matar, are more likely to adopt an individualistic behavior even if they belong to a collectivistic culture.

Concerning individual’s identity as a reflection of their constructed culture, several studies proved that migration could change man’s identity. Paul White in “Geography, Literature and Migration” postulated that migrants’ identity is vulnerable to change owing to the events they go through - perhaps even before migration. The author called these changes realignments, which “may both precede migration...and ... may also occur as a result of movement to a new location” (White 2003, 2). White’s study supported the argument that “since we all continually refine our self-identities throughout our life-course it may be more truthful to say that migration intervenes in that process of renegotiation as a lasting force, rather than as a single event (15). Consequently, exiles, migrants and expatriates are vulnerable to identity evolution where their identity transforms during the process of adjustment to the new society they migrate to.

Regarding the philosophical conception of home, many studies scrutinize the main constituents of home and the consequences of lacking one of these constituents. For example, James A. Tuedio’s “Thinking about Home” focused on how people generally attribute their sense of safety and security to home. Tuedio deconstructed this relationship by assuming that the lack of safety and security “will reflect a disruption of home and a rupture of trust that strikes like an earthquake to unsettle the taken-for-granted security of our inner sanctum” (Tuedio 2002, 3). Such disruptions will lead to “deterritorialization”- which means the “movement or process by which something escapes or departs from a given territory, where a territory can be a system of any kind: conceptual, linguistic, social, or affective” (Patton 2012, 208)- of the taken-for-granted concept and generate “a new (uncanny) sense of home based on rejection, disruption, and the breakdown of expectations” (Tuedio 2002, 3). In other words, when one loses their sense of safety and security in homeland, they will attempt to develop a new meaning of home that would fill in the gap stemming from the lack of these elements.

This process of homemaking is inevitable for individuals to give meaning to their lives according to Iris Marion Young. In her book *Intersecting Voices*, she elucidates that “Giving meaning to individual lives through the arrangement and preservation of things is an intrinsically valuable and irreplaceable aspect of homemaking” (Young 1997, 4). She further elaborates how our identities are influenced during this process. Young believes that through “a process of sedimentation”, our surroundings which form our home materialize our identity where the practice of “creative preservation” endows “things with life meaning” (4). It supports our “longing” for a “settled, safe, affirmative, and bounded identity,” and “also serves to inspire a dynamic cultivation of identity, which in turn contributes to promoting an affirmative yet “fluid and shifting” context for living” (4).

Tuedio also highlights another aspect of home-making process where two opposing tendencies are in action; that is, people's wish to have a physical home and their desire to "go beyond these structures" and be free. He calls this aspect the interaction between our sense of "immanence and transcendence" (Tuedio 2002, 5). Transcending "the trappings of immanence" in what people define as home, "can only be framed within an awareness of strangeness, otherness, alterity, or the wild" (5). Based on this view, if transcendence is optional to the sojourners who voluntarily wish to be away from the immanent sense of home, it is inevitable to the exiled. This is owing to the latter's sense of multiple dislocation whether in their homeland or the host country. Relating to this ongoing "dialectic/dialogue" between immanence and transcendence, Tuedio draws attention to our need to "a sense of home that sustains equilibrium and balance, not sameness, because the creative demands of dynamic cultivation require us to ground our identity in things, people and places whose meanings change through time" (6).

In "Spheres Theory: Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space," Peter Sloterdijk construes human evolution to what he terms insulation/island-making which helps people distance themselves from the surrounding milieu.

Human evolution can only be understood if we also bear in mind the mystery of insulation/island-making [*Insulierungsgeheimsis*] that so defines the emergence of humans: Humans are pets that have domesticated themselves in the incubators of early cultures. All the generations before us were aware that you never camp outside in nature. The camps of man's ancestors, dating back over a million years, already indicated that they were distancing themselves from their surroundings. (Sloterdijk 2009)

This tendency to isolate oneself from the outside world could be credited to the people's inclination to defend themselves from being impacted by this world. In this view, if somebody feels estranged in their homeland, they refrain from clinging to their spatial home in favor of a transcendental one.

Thereupon, people's culture is not imposed on them. Rather, it is co-constructed for they allow what they prefer from the host culture. Even if a person belongs to an individualistic culture, they could become more collectivistic if they live in a collectivist society and vice versa. Urbanization and education are two important factors that could make people adopt individualistic behavior even though they belong to a collectivistic culture. In addition, not only could an individual's culture be susceptible to change but also their identities are inclined to change for the same reasons. Of these reasons is moving to another culture especially if it is imposed on people, i.e., at times of war or political and economic crises. In this case, individuals question the conventional bond between safety and security on the one hand, and homeland on the other. In other words, the concept of home is deterritorialized out of the interaction between the immanent homeland and the transcendental concept of home. During this process of "homemaking" where these two forces are interacting, the individual's concept of home undergoes a series of changes to reach adjustment exactly like their co-constructed culture and identity.

Relating to Ahmad Matar, he reveals the non-stopping internal conflict illustrated in addressing different themes such as estrangement in homeland, exile, and homesickness. In *Representations of*

'Home' from the Setting of 'Exile': Novels by Arab Migrant Writers, Asmaa Mohamed Naguib highlights this inward fight within the migrant writers.

For the migrant writer, the concept of home takes shape as a result of interaction between the past and the present, with memory playing a powerful role. It is created as a result of various forces in tension that include personal and national experiences, the context within which migration from the traditional home place occurred, ideological allegiances and identity politics. (Naguib 2011, 2)

The following section sheds light on a selection of poems relevant to these themes to explore the poet's attitude in homeland and exile as well as his own way of dealing with his internal conflict concerning his perception of *watan*.

Matar's fluctuating concept of home

Relating to the concept of *watan*, a reader can effortlessly observe that it is one of the recurrent words Matar uses to refer to different homes as will be explained shortly. In his early works, for example, *watan* is synonymous to the poet's homeland, Iraq. At the time, the immanent and the transcendental meanings of home were identical. Perhaps this aroused from the poet's youthful hope that some political reformation might happen. Ironically, Iraq witnessed a series of coups starting from 1958 to 1979 when Saddam became a president. Under his rule, there were real concerns about human rights especially those relating to freedom. Such lack of freedom made the poet experience some divergence between the immanent homeland and the transcendental home, leading to Matar's growing sense of estrangement in homeland. Fāṭimah Ḥusayn al-'Afif (2016, 2445) argues that Matar's and other Iraqi writers' sense of internal exile arises "because they lose all their rights of being citizens in their homelands which brought about the emergence of their sense of estrangement through a discourse replete with grief and condolences, and not without being sarcastic about the circumstances". Syrine Hout explains people's crisis of internal exile through drawing a comparison between feeling at home and being in exile whether internal or external.

Feeling at home is associated with freedom, a sense of belonging and personal dignity, wherever and whenever these may be found and enjoyed. Exile, by contrast, is a state of cognitive and emotional dissonance whether generated by war and political/sectarian division in one's own nation or induced by physical uprootedness abroad". (Naguib 2011, 39)

Predictably, Matar had a love-hate relationship with his country. As an individual who was brought up in a collectivistic culture, he favored the good of his society over his own. However, he found that he would do no good either for himself or his country if he would be killed or imprisoned. Further, Matar was infuriated by his people's silence, timidity, and indifference to his sacrifices. In reaction to this, Matar had a growing sense of estrangement in his own *watan*. Such estrangement grew even more when he escaped to Kuwait. In his early works, the poet highlights the negative aspects in his own homeland such as Iraqi regime's despotism and corruption, and Iraqis' submission, cowardliness, and despair.

Psychologically speaking, Matar subconsciously wanted to reveal the corrupt homeland perhaps to justify his renunciation of that detested place. However, renouncing homeland represented a big challenge to the poet because his affiliation to his family and Arab cultural heritage was deeply rooted within him. What made the poet overcome this dilemma was what he learnt from both his family, especially his mother, and Islamic cultural heritage that freedom is more precious than anything, including home.

This complicated relationship is perceived in "I Love You" published in *Lāfītāt I* (1984). In this poem, the poet elucidates how he, out of love, dedicates his life and career to his country. In return, he receives nothing but suffering, persecution, and humiliation. Until then, the concepts of homeland and home, i.e., the immanent and transcendental are still inseparable.

O my home,	يا وَطَنِي
You fell too short for my features	ضَيِّقَتْ عَلَى ملامحي
So you dwelt in my heart.	فَصِرْتَ فِي قلبي.
You were a punishment to me	وَكُنْتَ لي عِقوبة
Though I committed no sin except you!	وَإِنِّي لَمْ أَقْتَرِفْ سِوَاكَ مِنْ ذَنْبٍ!
You cursed me	لَعَنْتَنِي..
And your name was my curse in derogatory speech.	وَاسْمُكَ كَانَ سُبَّتِي فِي لُغَةِ السَّبِّ!
You beat me	ضَرَبْتَنِي
And you were the beater and the beaten part (in me).	وَكُنْتَ أَنْتَ ضَارِبِي .. وَمَوْضِعَ الضَّرْبِ!
You expelled me	طَرَدْتَنِي
And you became my step and road.	فَكُنْتَ أَنْتَ خُطَوَاتِي وَكُنْتَ لي دَرَبِي! (Matar 2011, 28)

Matar, here, undergoes a dissociation process between the immanent homeland and transcendental home as Iraq is represented as the torturer and he the tortured. In other words, the more Iraq distances the poet, the more it destroys its position as a home to him. In the following lines, Matar recalls the classical metaphor of a woman to describe Iraq to reveal his sickly love to homeland. He addresses that woman/Iraq whose love is so overwhelming that he becomes utterly paralyzed before her. The poet describes the great suffering Iraq causes to him as crucifixion. Yet, he declares his absolute and unshaken love for her by not blaming her for his misery. Rather, he implores God to forgive her for crucifying him, reminding her that it is enough to let him love her as it will lead to his impending doom. This act of self-sacrifice might involve a Christian implication pertaining to the Christ's sacrifice to save humanity out of love.

When you crucified me	وَعِنْدَمَا صَلَّبْتَنِي
I became, in my love,	أَصْبَحْتُ فِي حُبِّي
A miracle	مُعْجِزَةً
Where my heart fell dead for the sake of my heart!	حِينَ هَوَى قلبي .. فِدَى قلبي!
O my killer,	يا قَاتِلِي
May Allah forgive you for crucifying me!	سَامَحَكَ اللَّهُ عَلَى صَلْبِي.
O my killer,	يا قَاتِلِي
It is enough to kill me	كَفَاكَ أَنْ تَقْتُلَنِي
	مِنْ شِدَّةِ الْحُبِّ! (28)

Out my deep love!

Other poems such as “Circles of Fear,” “Burn My Boats in This Foreign Land”, and “The Clock”, tackle how the Iraqi regime has turned Iraq into a police state where the Iraqis are all monitored. At the time, people were intimidated, summoned to investigation, sometimes tortured, and even killed for false allegations. In “Circles of Fear,” published in *Lāfitāt 1* (1984), the poet demonstrates Iraqi citizens’ obsession with fear of being monitored. He attempts to debunk the lies of the regime’s propaganda concerning freedom in Iraq.

In the age of freedom
My fingers are afraid of my nails
My notebooks are afraid of my poetry
And my eyes are afraid of my sight!
I started thinking of escaping
From my body
But I

فِي زَمَنِ الْأَحْرَارِ
أَصَابِعِي تَخَافُ مِنْ أَظْفَارِي
دِفَاتِيرِي تَخَافُ مِنْ أَشْعَارِي
وَمَقَلَّتِي تَخَافُ مِنْ إِبْصَارِي !
فَكَّرْتُ فِي التَّفَكُّيرِ بِالْفِرَارِ
مِنْ بَدَنِي
لَكِنِّي ..
خَشِيتُ مِنْ وَشَايَةِ الْأَفْكَارِ (47)

was afraid of the slander of my thoughts

Using his favorite tools: irony and exaggeration, the poet depicts how the Iraqi citizen, the speaker, is afraid of being monitored by everything. Each part of their body is worried that the neighboring part might slander about it. The speaker’s intimidation extends to the abstract world where the citizen fears their thoughts’ talebearing.

“Burn My Sailboats in This Foreign Land”, in *Lāfitāt 2* (1987), also explains how Iraq becomes an exile from the poet’s perspective for it loses its basic features; namely, safety and security. During that period, Matar decided to leave Kuwait which he considered a kin-*watan*, after he resigned from al-Qabas journal because his poetry was intolerable to the Kuwaiti authorities. This intensified the poet’s misery after losing his second home. The poem demonstrates Matar’s grief for home loss and his determination not to give up his freedom regardless of the price.

I raised the sails of tears
In the secret and public seas
I will not return
So burn all my sailboats in this foreign land
And throw the oars
And pin time onto the (place of our) meeting
And take my heart
If you accept a cheap price!
However, I have a home
Whose face was smeared with the fellows’ blood
So it was lost
And made me lost (as well).

أَطْلَقْتُ أَشْرَعَةَ الدَّمُوعِ
عَلَى بَحَارِ السَّرِّ وَالْعَلَنِ:
أَنَا لَنْ أَعُودَ
فَأَحْرِقْ فِي غُرْبَتِي سَفْنِي
وَارْمِ الْقُلُوعَ
وَسَمِّرْ فَوْقَ اللَّقَاءِ عِقَارِبَ الزَّمَنِ
وَاخْذِي فُؤَادِي
إِنْ رَضِيتَ بِقِلَّةِ الثَّمَنِ!
لَكِنْ لِي وَطَنًا
تَعَفَّرَ وَجْهُهُ بِدَمِ الرِّفَاقِ
فَضَاعَ فِي الدُّنْيَا
وَضِيعَنِي (88-9)

Thus, Iraq became no more *watan* to the poet, in the immanent and transcendental levels of meaning, rendering him home-less as a result. The sense of uprootedness created an identity problem for Matar because he lacked a belonging to a concrete place, let alone his sense of safety and security. Nonetheless, when the poet moved to London, the poet showed no sign of regret about leaving his country. On the contrary, he maintained the same line of criticizing the autocratic practices in Iraq and the Arab World in general. Therefore, an abhorred picture of Iraq recurs throughout Matar's exile poetry. In "The Clock", from *Dīwān al-sā'ah* (1989), for example, the poet believes that even the clock reminds him of the persecution people suffer in every corner in the Arab countries. One of the hands of the clock is personified as a fugitive who is running, and the two others are pursuing him.

A narrow circle	دائرة ضيقة
And an indicted fugitive	وهارب مدان
Before and behind him two detectives are chasing him.	أمامه وخلفه يركض مخبران.
This is what life is!	هذا هو الزمان! (316)

Since his stay in Kuwait, Matar underlines one of the recurrent motifs in his poetry, i.e., freedom. Based on his conservative upbringing, the poet repeatedly reiterates his idolization of freedom as a redeeming value of life. In "A Tear over the Corpse of Freedom", in *Lāfītāt I* (1984), Matar explains why he lives in exile. As a poet, he does not accept any false claims that may humiliate poetry or betray his readers. He implicitly condemns his fellow writers who conform to the instructions imposed upon them.

I do not write verses but rather they write me	أنا لا أكتب الأشعار فالأشعار تكتبني،
I want to be silent to live but what I see oblige me to speak	أريد الصمت كي أحيأ، ولكن الذي ألقاه ينطقني،
And find nothing but sadness over sadness over sadness.	ولا ألقى سوى حزن، على حزن، على حزن،
Do I write I am living in my coffin?	أأكتب أنني حي على كفني؟
Do I write I am free and even the alphabet is utterly enslaved?	أأكتب أنني حر، وحتى الحرف يرسف بالعبودية؟
I have buried a beauty the Arab countries call sabotage,	لقد شيعت فاتنة، تسمى في بلاد العرب تخريباً،
Terrorism	وإرهاباً
And blasphemy,	وطعنا في القوانين الإلهية،
But its name, I swear,	ولكن اسمها والله...،
Its original name is "Freedom".	لكن اسمها في الأصل حرية. (33)

Utilizing a series of rhetorical questions, Matar emphasizes that writing poetry to hail freedom in a country that lacks it is equivalent to living in a coffin. Out of his moral obligation towards himself and his readers, the poet does not accept any compromises concerning his freedom. He identifies how Arab countries consider freedom synonymous to chaos and violation of divine laws. Consistent with this logic, the more the people enjoy freedom, the more they are inclined to undermine the state/ regime. On the contrary, Matar believes that this value is the root of all good. Although he knows that rebelling against authority is costly in despotic countries, he urges his fellow Arabs to exercise freedom and willingly accept its consequences.

Therefore, the beautiful sense of *watan* turns into hatred of this homeland for the ruler spread his ideologies in all its corners. *Watan*, then, is usurped of its real

meaning. Instead, it becomes synonymous with exile, imprisonment, death, orphanage ...etc. (Yassin 1994, 56)

Matar's consistent devotion to freedom became more vibrant in London. He published *Lafitāt 2* in January 1987. However, the murder of his friend Naji al-Ali, the Palestinian political cartoonist in August 1987 represented a traumatic experience which rendered him paralyzed for almost a whole year. However, the year 1989 witnessed the publication of three collections by Matar, *Lāfitāt 3*, *Innī al-Mashnūq a'lā*, and *Dīwān al-sā'ah*. The poems in the three collections reflect the poet's unfading enthusiasm and perseverance to continue the road he started with his friend. However, some poems reveal Matar's perplexity. In "Freedom" from *Lāfitāt 3* (1989), the poet advocates that a person will never be free unless they exercise it even if they were imprisoned.

When he was taken as a prisoner

حينما اقتيد أسيرا

A tear popped out

قفزت دمعته

Laughingly (saying):

ضاحكة:

Here I am free at last.

ها قد تحررت أخيرا. (113)

Perhaps because Matar realized that his exile would be for the rest of his life, he became more determined to substitute his immanent *watan* with another even if it were transcendental. It was unsurprising that he chose freedom to which he devoted his life as his first transcendental *watan*. In "Down with Homeland" from *Lāfitāt 3* (1989), he subverts the repetitive slogans people hold about their *watan* or homeland. In the autocratic countries, authorities convince the citizens to give up their rights and even sacrifice their lives for what they claim is the best for their countries.

My father (is) homeland

أبي الوطن

My mother (is) homeland

أمي الوطن

Our greatest concern is love of homeland

رائدنا حب الوطن

We die so that our homeland lives

نموت كي يحيا الوطن

.....

.....

Which home?

أي وطن؟

The home of exile

الوطن المنفي..

Or homeland?

أم الوطن؟!

Or the humiliated hostage?

أم الرهين الممتهن؟

Or our prison imprisoned outside the (limits of) time?

أم سجننا المسجون خارج الزمن؟! (127)

The poet questions which *watan* people may love and be ready to sacrifice their lives for. He wonders whether they mean the exile they live in, i.e., their countries, which suffer under dictatorship. Matar here attempts to illuminate those who are blinded by fake patriotism that a home should be free and should make its citizens free too. Then he draws their attention to the fact that such "imprisoned" homelands cannot be considered *watan* if they do not provide them with "a voice", "a drop of feelings" and "a little piece of thinking without fear". In other words, Matar outlines the main rights a home should guarantee to its people, namely, freedom of speech, promotion of humaneness, and free thinking. If it offers none, the poet is ready to give it out for free. In the following lines, the poet redefines *watan* as "us", the people. He

believes that the citizens are responsible for honoring and securing their home. Also, part of their responsibility is to make their *watan* respected among other nations and free from any internal or external power that may represent a threat to its sovereignty.

If we perish, dust and rottenness remain	من بعدنا يبقى التراب والعفن
We are the (real) home!	نحن الوطن !
If we perish, livestock and manure remain	من بعدنا تبقى الدواب والدمن
We are the (real) home!	نحن الوطن !
If it is not honored and secured by us,	إن لم يكن بنا كريماً آمناً
If it is not respected,	ولم يكن محترماً
If it is not free,	ولم يكن حراً
May we not live, or may home do!	فلا عشنا.. ولا عاش الوطن! (128)

Again, the poet favors this transcendental home, freedom, over the spatial, Iraq. However, this time he indicates that man is more important than the place because the people, the relationships among them, and the memories they share are the tenets that give the place its significance.

However, some poems apparently show that Iraq is still present as a home/homeland, perhaps because the poet was not used to the shift from the immanent to the transcendental. For example, "The Stranger" from *Innī al-Mashnūq a'lā* (1989) relates to Iraq as a home. The speaker/poet feels estranged in his own country where silence, sadness and intimidation occupy every corner. However, freedom is described only as an important value, which helped him to maintain his individuality, self-esteem, and role as a poet.

Everything in my country	كل ما في بلدي
Fills my heart with dejection.	يملأ قلبي بالكمد.
My country is a foreign land body and soul	بلدي غربة روح وجسد
An infinite foreign land.	غربة من غير حد
A foreign land that has millions	غربة فيها الملايين
Yet has no one.	وما فيها أحد.
Unending estrangement	غربة موصولة
Starts from the cradle	تبدأ في المهد
And has no return from forever	ولا عودة منها .. للأبد (330) .

Though the country has millions of fellow Iraqis, the poet feels lonely. Such loneliness might be attributed to Matar's feeling that the Iraqi citizens lack his revolutionary spirit to get rid of despotism. Consequently, the country turns into "an infinite foreign land", aggravating Matar's sense of estrangement.

The poem is also no exception to Matar's oeuvre in viewing poetry as a life-giving force that enhances his high self-esteem and protects his own being for Matar has a romantic belief in poetry as a powerful means of change. He, therefore, does not allow the slightest change in his verse to safeguard his works from any kind of censorship. Since he was in Kuwait, he has always been ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of his freedom. Ḥamzah 'ulyān, the head of Information and Studies Center at al-

Qabas newspaper, declared that “the poet, Ahmad Matar, refused to change a full-stop or a comma. The poem is either published as a whole or deleted as a whole” (Marzūq, 2018).

The most outstanding element in this poem is that it witnesses a second paradigm shift concerning the poet’s conception of *watan*. Matar pleads poetry to substitute his native homeland. That is, the poet favors poetry, as a transcendental home, which always supports him, over the immanent one that fails him. Although his plead indicates that the place still symbolizes a home, it implies the poet’s pursuit of a more reliable home than the spatial one.

O poetry, it has been too long.

My exile has killed me, o poetry,

So be my home.

Save me from a country that no sound is heard in

Except the sound of silence!

Its dead people fear death

And tombs spread everywhere taking the shape of homes.

أَيُّهَا الشَّعْرُ لَقَدْ طَالَ الْأَمَدُ
أَهْلَكْتَنِي غُرْبَتِي ، يَا أَيُّهَا الشَّعْرُ ،
فَكُنْ أَنْتَ الْبَلَدُ .
نَجِّنِي مِنْ بَلَدَةٍ لَا صَوْتَ يَغْشَاهَا
سِوَى صَوْتِ السَّكُوتِ !
أَهْلِهَا مَوْتِي يَخَافُونَ الْمَنِيَا
قُبُورٌ انْتَشَرَتْ فِيهَا عَلَى شَكْلِ بَيْوتٍ (Matar 2011, 331)

The poet openly declares his new *watan*, i.e., poetry in “The Commencement,” from *Lāfitāt* 4 (1993). He shows his contentment about the power poetry grants to poets. He implicitly compares himself to the Arab rulers whom he called sultans.

My pen is the flag of my rule

And my country is a paper

And my audience are millions dissident letters

And my borders are boundless.

قَلَمِي رَايَةُ حُكْمِي
وَبِلَادِي وَرَقَهُ
وَجَمَاهِيرِي مِلَايِينَ الْحُرُوفِ الْمَارِقَةِ
وَحُدُودِي مُطْلَقَهُ . (141)

The poet’s description of his own kingdom suggests that he owns the whole world where the earth is his “pair of shoes”, the sky his “gown” and the sun “a lily” in his buttonhole. He is, therefore, proud that poetry makes him “the Sultan of all sultans” to whom “the sultans of small countries” are inferior.

In another poem entitled, “Destiny” from *Lāfitāt* 4 (1993), Matar explains why he writes poetry. Although he believes in the reformatory and revolutionary role of the poet, he admits here that he writes poetry to guard his own conscience.

I do not write my verses

To gain people’s applause or to escape from the criticism

Or to weave from linen clothes for the naked

Or to rescue the refuge seeker

Or to enrich the poor

Or to release the captive

.....

Indeed, I write poetry to defend

My own conscience.

أَنَا لَا أَكْتُبُ أَشْعَارِي
لِكِي أَحْظَى بِتَصْفِيْقِي وَأَنْجُو مِنْ صَفِيرِ
أَوْ لِكِي أَنْسَجَ لِلْعَارِي ثِيَابًا مِنْ حَرِيرِ
أَوْ لِفُتُوهِ الْمُسْتَجِيرِ
أَوْ لِإِغْنَاءِ الْفَقِيرِ
أَوْ لِتَحْرِيرِ الْأَسِيرِ
.....
إِنَّمَا أَكْتُبُ أَشْعَارِي .. دِفَاعًا
عَنْ ضَمِيرِي! (162)

However, Matar's oscillation concerning home conception reappeared once more when he feels that whether freedom or poetry is enough to fill the void in his own soul that was once filled by his homeland/home, Iraq. Ironically in the same collection, a third transcendental home appears in "The Lasting State," where Matar states that he has "no homeland", "no shelter/ or hide/ or house". His surrounding, i.e., exile, is "a barren wilderness". Nevertheless, the poet has a high self-esteem fostered by his hope that rests on his profound faith in himself as an advocate of freedom. Thus, the poet's third home is his own self which also acts like a center around which the whole universe revolves.

Why this universe is crawling
Over my eyelashes then?!

And why homelands are searching
in my soul's estrangement for a home?!

And why all distances gave me their command
And all time gave up its age?!

مَا لِهَذَا الْكَوْنِ يَجْبُو
فَوْقَ أَهْدَابِي إِذْنَ ؟!
وَلِمَاذَا تَبْحَثُ الْأَوْطَانُ
فِي غُرْبَةٍ رَوْحِي عَنْ وَطَنٍ ؟!
وَلِمَاذَا وَهَبْتَنِي أَمْرَهَا كُلَّ الْمَسَافَاتِ
وَأَلْفَى عُمْرَهُ كُلَّ الزَّمَنِ ؟! (165)

The poet's self, therefore, is the only home and all other homes seek refuge in it to save them from being exiled. His own self is not confined by either a place or time because he has full control over all distances and time no longer counts its years. Perhaps, the poet here hints at his popularity among a wide spectrum of Arab writers. He might also refer here to the immortality of his poetry that will outlive time. Then, Matar reveals that the reason for this attitude is also hope, which makes exile a familiar land and/or a travel companion. In other words, he does not experience exile or feel homesick simply because he carries his own home wherever he travels.

I am a state by myself
As long as I have hope.
This state is purer and more civilized
And will remain
When other states perish.

أَنَا وَحْدِي دَوْلَةٌ
مَادَامَ عِنْدِي الْأَمَلُ.
دَوْلَةٌ أَنْقَى وَأَرْقَى
وَسَتَبْقَى
حِينَ تَفْنَى الدُّوَلُ ! (165-166)

The theme is also repeated in *Lāfītāt* 5 (1994) in "This Is Home" where he blames his spatial home, Iraq, for his long banishment. He also condemns the cruelty of his "beloved home" that forces him to experience the pain of exile twice.

My beloved home!
I do not remember from its love except my humiliation!

My beloved home was my exile
And it did not stop.
Rather, it banished me to exile
And from exile it expelled me again!

وَطَنِي حَبِيبِي
لَسْتُ أَذْكَرُ مِنْ هَوَاهُ سِوَى هَوَانِي !
وَطَنِي حَبِيبِي كَانَ لِي مَنْفَى
وَمَا اسْتَكْفَى
فَالْقَانِي إِلَى مَنْفَى
وَمِنْ مَنْفَايَ ثَانِيَةً نَفَانِي ! (192)

In the second part of the poem, Matar exquisitely combines all his three other abstract homes: his own self, poetry, and freedom respectively as a unified *watan* of his own making.

My home is here.
My home is: (me)

وَطَنِي هُنَا .
وَطَنِي: (أَنَا)
مَا بَيْنَ خَفَقِ فِي الْفَوَادِ

Between a heartbeat,
a paper under the ink (of a pen)
and a word over the tongue.
My home is: my freedom
Not the dust or the construction.
I do not defend a concrete entity.
Rather I defend my own being.

وصفحة تحت المداد
وكلمة فوق اللسان .
وطني أنا: حريتي
ليس التراب أو المباني .
أنا لا أدافع عن كيان حجارة
لكن أدافع عن كياني ! (192)

Thus, the poem reflects Matar's relentless pursuit of home. In this poem, he attempts to elaborate the reason for being as nostalgic as other exiled people. Holding hope, he believes, is the reason for this, but in fact he is calm and collected because of his strong self-esteem that helps him transcend estrangement in a territorialized home and establish a deterritorialized one.

However, in the same collection, "A Shattering Banishment" reflects the poet's inability to adapt to exile. He attempted to recompense the loss of Iraq, the immanent home, through frequent processes of homemaking yielding three transcendental homes: freedom, poetry, and his own self. In the poem, Matar announces his failure to make a *watan* that would fill in the gap of losing his immanent homeland. This feeling results in a profound sense of loss and homesickness. Addressing God, he complains about his long banishment.

O my Lord, my banishment prolonged
And despair exhausted my stubbornness
And in my heart
Longing overflowed until
Longing remained and my heart did not.
I am a dead living
Without life or resurrection
And I am a rubber thread bound
To a dual unilateral side.
The nearer I get
The more distanced I become in this nearness!

رب طالت غربتي
واستنزف اليأس عنادي .
وفؤادي
طم فيه الشوق حتى
بقي الشوق ولم يبق فؤادي !
أنا حي ميت
دون حياة أو معاد
وأنا خيط من المطاط مشدود
إلى فرع ثنائي أحادي .
كلما ازدت اقتربا
زاد في القرب ابتعادي ! (206)

To reflect his absolute despair to obtain his transcendental home, i.e., the Utopic Iraq, Matar begs for a home "even in a dream". The more painful is that this shattering banishment exposes that all his efforts of homemaking are fruitless. He reaps nothing but the gluttony of his enemies.

I lost my age while running	ضاع عمري وأنا أعدو ..
And no one appears to me except the enemies.	فلا يطلع لي إلا الأعادي
And I supplicate,	وأنا أدعو
Yet nothing visits me but the rivals.	فلا تنزل بي إلا العوادي .
Every eye that stared at me,	كل عين حدقت بي
I thought, intended to hunt me down!	خلتها تنوي اصطيادي !
Every hand that waved to me,	كل كف لوحث لي
I thought, intended to arrest me.	خلتها تنوي اقتيادي ! (206)

The poet, further, admits the destructive impact of exile, which “eats him up” and only hunger is his provision. He also declares he cannot stand this exile anymore. Surprisingly, the last two lines in which he implores Allah to spare him from his country, infer that the poet does not give up his immanent home completely. This nostalgia is directed to his homeland to which he repeatedly reveals his repugnance.

In “al-Ḥamīm” (Arabic adjective for intimate or noun for scalding water) from *Lāfītāt* 6 (1997), the poet uses this title perhaps to reflect the contradictory feelings he harbors for his country. Although it represents an intimate part of him, it is also the cause of his suffering.

When I read its name, pupils get dark.	حين أطلع اسمه .. تنظفيء الأحداق
When I write its name, papers get burned.	وحين اكتب اسمه .. تحترق الأوراق
When I mention its name, its taste stings me.	وحين اذكر اسمه .. يلذعني المذاق
When I withhold its name, I feel choked.	وحين اكتم اسمه .. أحس باختناق
When I broadcast its name, horizons shrink.	وحين انشر اسمه .. تنكمش الآفاق
When I conceal its name, concealment gets concealed	وحين أطبق اسمه .. ينطبق الإطباق
With grief because of it, for it, without it, in it and with it.	يالأسى منه، عليه، دونه، فيه، به
How difficult it is	كم هو أمر شاق
To carry (the burden of) Iraq!	أن أحمل العراق (227)

The persisting question arising here is, “Why do people yearn for places they left?” In “Is Our Definition of Home Evolving” Oona Strathern (2017) offers an answer. She refers to Michael Lehofer’s view about who suffers homesickness and who does not.

Michael Lehofer points out that people who suffer the most homesickness are, contrary to what we might instinctively believe, the ones that have the least bonding to a place, who don’t have a strong sense of a home. If you are bonded to a place or a people and have a strong idea of where home is, you will not get so homesick when you are away from it because you have the inner security and sense of that place that you take with you.

This rationalizes why Matar’s depiction of home varies from concrete and real homeland, i.e., Iraq, to a mere abstraction, i.e., freedom, poetry, and his own self, and then to Iraq again. Experiencing this yearning for homeland seems to be common among exiled Arab writers. Edward Said explains the reason why the exiles are eager to establish a transcendental home instead of their immanent ones. He believes that since they “are cut off from their roots, their land, their past...exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to

reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves a part of triumphant ideology or a restored people." That "triumphant ideology" is intended to reassemble their fragmented history "into a new whole" (Said 2000, 177). Asmaa Mohamed Naguib draws the conclusion that the cases of her study, the four exiled Palestinian novelists, namely Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Anton Shammas, Randa Jarrar, and Suzan Abulhawa, are preoccupied with "the immediate political conflict and the critique of the nation" more than "their experience of migration," which is "the cause of their displacement in the first place" (Naguib 2011, 197).

Noteworthy is that in his later poems, Matar does not focus on the defects of Iraq. Instead, he illustrates the negative consequences of his banishment from his country. This changing attitude of the poet is attributed to his sense of being dislocated. Paul White explains such fluctuation as a likely consequence of migrant's sense of dislocation. White indicates that "ambivalence towards the past, the present" is a common feature among the migrants. They usually think of which one is better: "now" or "then" (White 2000, 2). They are also skeptical about "the future: whether to retain a 'myth of return' or to design a new project without further expected movement" (3). White suggests that long-term experience of migration is a very crucial and powerful element that leads to a subsequent change in migrants' identities.

Through time the identity of migrant groups and individuals changes, not simply because the people involved age, but because the experiences undergone progressively build up to influence the evolution of identities. (4)

This oscillation can also be ascribed to the complicated link between what Naguib calls the personal and political experiences "whereby the ideological stance on issues of nation and nationalism cannot be easily isolated in an assessment of the cultural product at the site of migration" (Naguib 2011, 3). Edward Said suggested a relationship between exile and nationalism. In such a relationship, the latter protects the exiled from the catastrophic consequences of the first.

We come to nationalism and its essential association with exile. Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, and a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs, and by so doing, it fends off exile, and fights to prevent its ravages. (Said 2000, 176)

Thus, Ahmad Matar, despite living in the UK, keeps Iraq in his heart and mind; something that has made him live in London in isolation from the host society and the migrant Arab community. In an interview with Fā'iq Munīf, Matar emphasizes that,

I am in Britain, a sovereign country, not happy because I am away from the groans of the tortured, because I carry their groans in my blood. The homeland that expelled me could not take itself out from me and I neither love to let it go nor will do.
(Marzūq 2018)

Hence, the poet who has been devoting both his entire life and poetry to advocate the cause of freedom in Iraq and the Arab World has always been influenced by the political turmoil in the region since their independence in the second half of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Thereupon, Ahmad Matar had an individualistic behavior since he was in Iraq. In the beginning, he did not attempt to conform to the collectivistic attitude of his fellow Iraqis, especially in dealing with autocracy. Instead, he behaved according to his individualistic tendency to rebel against all sorts of persecution and injustice, fight for his own freedom, and incite his people to reject tyranny. Denied his rights as a citizen, Matar preferred exile to living in his "beloved" homeland. The experience of exile reinforced his sense of autonomy and individuality for he had to depend on himself to secure a decent life for his family and to focus on his mission to urge Arab fellows to reject oppression and seek freedom.

Although the host society, the UK, is almost non-existent in Matar's poetry, its influence might be viewed in reinforcing the poet's individualism. As an individualistic society, it promotes autonomous self-conception among its people. Ahmad Matar, as a rebel from a collectivistic culture, felt that his independence, freedom and cultural identity were all preserved in this diverse society. He did not appropriate the individualistic behavior from the English society but no doubt it was fortified in the cosmopolitan country.

When exiled Arab writers whose works emotionally confine the meaning of *watan* to their homelands, Ahmad Matar reconstructs the term and redefines home according to its postmodern meaning, i.e., transcendental home. He chose the most precious things he has, namely, freedom, poetry, and his own self as homes for he cannot endure life without any of them. However, prolonged banishment from homeland and getting old seem to force him to reconsider the long detachment from homeland. For this reason, Iraq reappears in his later works as *both homeland and home*. This fluctuating attitude is a normal phenomenon among exiles. In these poems Iraq seems to be unattainable without much information about it or its attributes. It is only mentioned by name and this name embraces all the memories, nostalgia, warmth, safety, security and all what the concept home means.

تذبذب مدلول الوطن في شعر أحمد مطر: دراسة بينية لقصائد مختارة

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الملخص

أحمد مطر هو شاعر عراقي منفي نذر نفسه لقضية الحرية لمروره بتجربة النفي، فقد عانى من إحساس الاغتراب الداخلي في وطنه الأم - العراق - كما عانى أيضاً من النفي الخارجي في المملكة المتحدة، ومن البديهي والمتوقع أن يكون البحث عن وطن هو أحد التيمات المكررة في شعره، إلا أن القارئ يلاحظ أنه ثمة تذبذب في مدلول الوطن عند الشاعر من الحسي للمعنوي ثم العودة للحسي مجدداً، ويهدف المقال إلى توضيح تلك المفاهيم المتباينة لمعنى الوطن والأسباب التي أفضت إلى هذا التقلب وذلك من خلال تحليل نقدي من منظور علم النفس الثقافي وتحديد المنهج الفردي في هذا العلم وعلم الفلسفة، ومنظور ما بعد الحداثة في تعريف الهوية ومفهوم الوطن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أحمد مطر، علم النفس الثقافي، مدلول الوطن، الهوية، شعر المنفى..

Endnotes

¹ All translations of Arabic references including poetry in this article are done by the author.

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