

'In the Country of Absences' Ancient Roman and Italian Colonial Heritage in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006)

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Italian Postcolonial Studies - One theoretical frame, several absences

Hisham Matar's first novel, *In the Country of Men* (2006), belongs to a small but growing literary corpus still waiting to be included in the debate on postcolonial literature that is closely related to the Italian former colonies in Africa. This corpus of texts finds its historical and cultural birthplace within transnational African diasporas, and is a product of the cultural movements that came about on the onset of the Italian colonies' decolonization processes.¹ Hence, these texts can be said to have anticipated and subsequently overlapped with the emergence of Italian postcolonial literature written in Italian, which is, nowadays, the main literary focus within Italian postcolonial studies.

In fact, most texts analyzed from the perspective of Italian Postcolonial Studies have been written in the last twenty years, in Italy and in the Italian language. This particular temporal and geographical scope, though fully legitimate, risks being too limited, since it takes into account only the literature produced in the language of the colonizer and published in the former metropolis, several decades after the beginning of decolonization. Still based on the Italian national context, this framework avoids confrontation with the diasporic literary production that shows some relationship with Italy's former colonies without using the Italian language, while at the same time does not pretend to insert itself into the Italian literary tradition. It is not only that Spivak's recent warning - about the 'death' awaiting all comparative literature that does not engage with non-European languages in a fully renewed framework of 'world literature' - remains unheeded; paradoxically, also mainstream English-language postcolonial and diasporic literature has scarcely been considered from this perspective.²

On the other hand, if one is to draw a first map of such a multifarious context, including the Libyan, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali diasporas, many diverse results might be discerned: most texts are engaged in the representation and the deconstruction of the diasporic experience; some texts are concerned with the critique

¹ It is a highly diverse assortment of texts, ranging from the works by Nuruddin Farah (a Somali author writing mainly in English), al-Sadiq al-Nayhum and Ibrahim al-Koni (both from Libya and writing in Arabic) - who all began publishing in the 1970s - to the recent novels by younger writers such as Hisham Matar, Nadifa Mohamed or Maaza Mengiste (all writing in English).

² This is the hypothesis that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003) revolves around.

of African postcolonial nationalisms; some texts, finally, recover memories of Italian colonialism in the attempt to reconfigure them.

In Hisham Matar's novel *In the Country of Men*, written in English, these three tendencies seem to be fused together in one single text. In fact, the narrator is a diasporic subject, Suleiman, who recalls his childhood and adolescence in postcolonial Libya, at the times of Gaddafi's regime. The novel is also based on a thoughtful reconsideration of Libyan past, which draws together the Roman Empire, the Italian colonialism and postcolonial authoritarianism in one single critique of power. Therefore, what the South African leading scholar Annie Gagiano has contended in one of the few full-length articles about the book³ – 'Matar's Libyan setting invokes a society from which Italian and earlier colonial powers have long departed' – does not appear to be completely true.⁴ The plot and the setting of the novel might initially confirm Gagiano's observation: the story is mainly set in Libya, in 1979, in a moment of peculiar recrudescence of Gaddafi's power, and Italian colonialism is never directly mentioned. However, the interpretation of Matar's novel as a diasporic perspective on postcolonial nationalism is not fully exhaustive. *In a Country of Men* also explores, although in a subtler way, the legacies of former colonial dominations in Libya and eventually manages to connect them to a more extensive political critique.

The 'country of men' as national allegory

The complex engagement of *In a Country of Men* with a broad scope on postcoloniality might be better defined by taking a closer look at the novel's plot. According to Gagiano's brilliant formulation, Suleiman is a young male child who is 'betrayed into betrayal': by manipulating his Oedipal resentment towards his absent father, who is a prominent political dissident, Suleiman is involuntarily involved in his temporary detention.⁵ After his father's release, Suleiman is sent to Egypt to study at Cairo University, starting a new life in the diaspora, but he is ultimately pushed to recall his painful experience as a child in order to elaborate its traumatic legacies.

If Suleiman's involuntary help in the detention of his father is a crucial moment in the plot, this might also confirm the existence of that deep intertwining of 'private and public destinies' which is also one of the theoretical grounds of Fredric Jameson's well-known hypothesis on postcolonial 'national allegories':

I will argue that, although we may retain for convenience and for analysis such categories as the subjective and the public or political, the relations between them are wholly different in third-world culture. Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*⁶

³ Six years after the publication of the novel, the only full-length academic articles about *In the Country of Men* – otherwise much praised by audience and press criticism – appear to be 'Migrating from terror: the postcolonial novel after September 11' by Margaret Scanlan, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46, 3-4 (2010), pp. 266-278, and 'Ice-Candy-Man and *In the Country of Men*: The politics of cruelty and the witnessing child' by Annie Gagiano, *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics*, 39 (2010), pp. 25-39.

⁴ A. Gagiano, 'Ice-Candy Man', cit., p. 27.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 35.

⁶ F. Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), pp. 65-88, p. 69, italics in the original.

Jameson's analysis has been often rejected by postcolonial theorists for its conflation of all 'third-world', or 'postcolonial', texts in one undifferentiated whole, represented by the rhetorical choice of 'national allegory'.⁷ Besides, Jameson seems to endorse postcolonial nationalism, which is a suitable perspective for his Marxist and anti-imperialist political position, but also implies an endless silencing of the other, either from a gender or a subaltern point of view.⁸ However, as Ian Buchanan has brilliantly argued, the textual occurrence of a 'national allegory' does not always reinstate a fully nationalist discourse.⁹ Matar's own anti-nationalist stance is quite evident: this is not only due to his harsh depiction of Gaddafi's brutal regime, but it is also exemplified by the eloquent words Matar has the grown-up Suleiman say at the end of the novel: 'Nationalism is as thin as a thread, perhaps that's why many feel it must be anxiously guarded'.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the author's anti-nationalist stance, the allegory of the nation permeates the structure of the whole novel, starting from the title: the 'country of men' – which is the definition chosen by Matar for Libya during Gaddafi's regime – is fully reflected in all the male characters whom Suleiman meets in his childhood. These men are either opposing or siding with the regime, thus representing all possible political positions within the nation. Suleiman's father makes no exception; rather, when in Suleiman's house his picture is replaced by a picture of the Guide of the Revolution,¹¹ he even loses his symbolic centrality within his family in favour of the patriarchal leader of the nation, definitively stating the allegorical relationship between family and nation.

This is another crucial episode within the novel, since it represents also the final and desperate attempt by Suleiman's mother to show the full obedience of her family to the regime. Although she does not succeed in avoiding the detention and the torturing of her husband, this choice still represents a full retrieval of agency by Suleiman's mother, initially represented as a depressed and alcoholic woman. Besides, this attempt is part of her progression towards centrality within the plot: this emergence of a female character is clearly meant to show and simultaneously deconstruct the gender issues that a nationalist ideology raises by creating a country which is exclusively a 'country of men'. However politically ambivalent this choice might be, it succeeds in showing the political dimension of Suleiman's Oedipal conflict: the son is resentful towards his absent father – though he is righteously siding with anti-Gaddafi resistance – while he feels empathetic towards his oppressed mother – who, however, shows her complicity with the regime in the attempt to guarantee the material survival of her family. In view of this analysis, the national allegory that is constructed by the text turns out to be fully

⁷ This objection was already made by Aijaz Ahmad in one of the first relevant replies to Jameson's article. See A. Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', *Social Text*, 17 (1987), pp. 3-25.

⁸ There are endless references to the criticism of nationalist discourses from the perspectives of gender studies and subaltern studies, among which it could be useful to note, respectively, the collection of essays *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, edited by A. Parker, M. Russo, D. Sommer & P. Yaeger, New York, Routledge, 1991, and *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* by P. Chatterjee, New York, Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁹ I. Buchanan, 'National Allegory Today: A Return to Jameson', in: I. Buchanan & C. Irr (eds), *On Jameson: From Postmodernism to Globalization*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2006, pp. 173-188.

¹⁰ H. Matar, *In the Country of Men*, London, Viking-Penguin, 2006, p. 230.

¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 90-91.

'non-nationalist', being instead a useful tool for both anti-nationalist and gender criticism.

Leptis Magna as a site of contested memory

If Matar's novel can be fully included in the postcolonial debate on national allegory, this does not directly entail that the novel also has specific ties with Italian colonial and postcolonial history and culture.

Indeed, the traces of the Italian colonial domination seem to be very scarce throughout the text. Linguistic remains, for instance, do not go further than the use of single Italian words such as 'grappa' and 'maestro'.¹² This does not merely reflect the sociolinguistic consequences of the Italian colonial administration's very meager interest in education in Libya.¹³ More specifically, it accounts for the author's particular representation of the presence of Italian language in Libyan society: even if devoid of any further ideological articulation – as single words do not show any syntactical extension – the residual permanence of some untranslated Italian words in a mainly English text is still manifest, working, thus, as a signpost for the memory of Italian domination.

There is, however, an important passage in the text, which sketches the memory of Italian colonialism in a richly elaborated and articulated way. This excerpt is also very relevant to the question of national allegory in the novel, and thus reveals to be crucial to the whole thematic development of the text. It is contained in the first part of the third chapter, which is centred on the depiction of the Roman archaeological site of Leptis Magna (always spelled as 'Lepcis Magna' by Matar, according to English phonetic rules). Suleiman visits it during a school trip led by Ustath Rashid, Kareem's father, who teaches at the university. As the reader knows from the previous conversation between Suleiman and Kareem, Suleiman envies his friend since Kareem's father seems to be much more caring for his son than Suleiman's own father. Immediately after the visit at Leptis Magna, Suleiman's Oedipal fantasies will even lead him to this bitter conclusion: 'At times I used to wish that Baba was more like Ustath Rashid'.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, his idealization of Ustath Rashid has been confirmed and enhanced during the trip by the teacher's pedagogical skills: 'Ustath Rashid's students were wonderfully jubilant; watching them I burned with anticipation to be at university.'¹⁵ This appreciation of high education will be fulfilled by Suleiman only in Egypt – that is, in the diaspora – and will later contribute to his reconsideration of his traumatic childhood from a due emotional and critical distance.

Hence, in Suleiman's eyes, Ustath Rashid fully embodies the concept of emancipated thinking: like Suleiman's father, he is a political dissident and, later in the novel, he is going to be publicly tortured and condemned to death. The gloomy shadow of repression is cast also on the section dedicated to Leptis Magna, with this menacing flash-forward: 'A couple of days before Ustath Rashid was taken I joined him, his students and Kareem on a day trip to Lepcis'.¹⁶ This anticipation is the only disturbing element in an otherwise festive atmosphere: 'A couple of girls were pulled up to dance.

¹² *Ivi*, pp. 37, 73.

¹³ M. Pretelli gives a detailed account of education in Italian colonies in his article 'Education in the Italian colonies during the interwar period', *Modern Italy*, 16, 3 (2011), pp. 275-293.

¹⁴ H. Matar, *In the Country of Men*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 25.

With eyes downcast they shook their hips and twirled their hands in the hair. Passing cars blew their horns. We were like a wedding party'.¹⁷ This manifestation of joy and happiness is not only due to the portrait of a young, festive crowd, which is mainly unaware of the massacres going on under Gaddafi's regime. In the following lines, the reader discovers that there is a specific cultural pride in postcolonial Libya, which is associated with its historical and archaeological heritage.

This collective glorification of Libyan heritage, which is also documented in many travel writings in the period between 2000 and 2010,¹⁸ appears to be in stark contrast with the official cultural policies of Gaddafi's regime. Gaddafi, in fact, highly disregarded Libyan heritage by claiming that it was 'imperialist', prolonging the European symbolic domination on the African land.¹⁹ The reasons for this conflict between Gaddafi's position and the diffused pride with regard to Libyan cultural heritage – exemplifying what Jameson called 'the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society' – might be easily retraced through Leptis Magna's history.

As a matter of fact, Leptis Magna is closely associated with the figure of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, native of the place, as Leptis Magna flourished precisely during his reign (193-211). This historical period became the site of a complex political contestation only several centuries later, from Italian colonialism onwards. As a matter of fact, the exploitation of the cult of *romanità* ('being like the Romans') led the Italian colonizers to justify their presence in Libya using purely ideological arguments, among which the need to protect the Roman archaeological sites from the negligence of the natives.²⁰ The figure of Septimius Severus acquired a radically different political meaning during the first decade of Libyan independence, when his statue, located in one of Tripoli's central squares, became – as Frank Golino noticed as early as in 1970 – 'a symbol of national identity in post-independence Libya'.²¹ Golino mainly refers to the period of decolonization prior to Gaddafi's *coup d'état*, under King Idris (1951-1969). After 1969, this national and anti-colonial pride, celebrating a Libyan-born emperor (in analogy with *King Idris*), was manipulated again by Gaddafi's own nationalist discourse. In his ostensible identification with the Libyan anti-colonial hero Omar Mukhtar (1862-1931),²² Gaddafi pursued an anti-colonial propaganda, which individuated the enemies of

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 25.

¹⁸ A bibliography of tourist accounts about Leptis Magna can be found in Jason Burge's blog: 'Leptis Magna, Jewel of Libya', *The Wrec Room*, <http://wrecroom.wordpress.com/2012/02/02/leptis-magna-jewel-of-libya> (3 November 2012).

¹⁹ As there is scant reference to Libyan archaeological heritage in Gaddafi's public speeches, hints of the cultural policy of the regime might be found only in the articles issued during 2011 Libyan war, such as M. Gumuchian, 'Libya's Roman sites unscathed by unrest so far', *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/27/us-libya-protests-heritage-idUSTRE71Q0M520110227> (3 November 2012) and C. Higgins, 'How Gaddafi toppled a Roman Emperor', *The Guardian online*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2011/nov/28/libya-muammar-gaddafi> (3 November 2012).

²⁰ M. Munzi, 'Italian archaeology in Libya: From colonial *romanità* to decolonization of the past', in: M. Galaty and C. Watkinson (eds), *Archaeology under Dictatorship*, New York, Springer, 2004, pp. 73-108.

²¹ F. Golino, 'Patterns of Libyan National Identity', in: *Middle East Journal*, 24, 3 (1970), pp. 338-352.

²² Gaddafi's appropriation of the historical figure of Omar al-Mukhtar began soon after the 1969 revolution, with the institution of a public holiday, the Martyr's Day, on the day Omar al-Mukhtar was sentenced to death by the Italian colonial justice (17 September 1931). Like Septimius Severus, also Omar al-Mukhtar's memory was contested by political dissidents, which did not identify with 'an extravagant ruler clinging to power who has enriched his family and his entire clan by impoverishing others' (E. Suponina, 'Gadhafi and

Libya exclusively outside its national boundaries, resorting to the anti-colonial past in order to challenge the present-day aggressiveness of 'neocolonial powers'. This allowed Gaddafi to present himself as the champion of independent Libya and to legitimize the repression of internal enemies, in order to promote social and national cohesion against external threats. As a collateral effect of his trans-historical and metaphorical equivalence between the Roman Empire and the Italian colonial administration – also favored by the Fascist colonial recovery of the Roman imperial rhetoric, or *romanità* – Gaddafi's ideological attacks on Italian colonial domination indirectly brought him also to the dismissal of Roman classical heritage.

In this context, the celebration of Leptis Magna that occurs in Matar's novel is primarily aimed at the deconstruction of Gaddafi's nationalist ideology, but it also forcefully implies a reconsideration of Libyan history in the light of a Braudelian *longue durée*. In fact, the textual politics enacted by Matar's novel initially seems to resort to pre-Gaddafi nationalism, through the embracement of collective national pride of Libyan heritage; later, the novel deconstructs even this move through Ustath Rashid's own ideological position. This rhetorical shift is particularly evident in this repartee between teacher and pupils:

"The city of Lepcis Magna was founded by people from Tyre..."

"LEBANON."

"Yes – very good – modern-day Lebanon. Subsequently it became Phoenician, then, of course, Roman, when it was made famous by its loyal son, Emperor Sep..."

"SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS."

"Yes, our Grim African, both a source of pride and shame."

"PRIDE PRIDE."

"Well, if you insist".²³

Ustath Rashid's understatement towards the unanimous replies of his pupils represents an ironical, individual and, above all, *dissenting* stance against the collective and imperious response of a nationalist community. In this way, Ustath Rashid reacts against the manipulation of historiography which is essential to any ideological discourse which wants to show the importance of the historical past in the present: by qualifying Tyre as 'modern-day Lebanon' and reminding that Septimius Severus was 'our Grim African, both a source of pride and shame' – against the insistence on (national) pride by his pupils – Ustath Rashid succeeds in deconstructing the purely ideological reconstructions of history which are peculiar of any kind of nationalism. In this way, he shows that nationalist historiographies do not provide truly critical approaches to their objects of analysis.²⁴

the "Lion of the Desert", *Oriental Review*, <http://orientalreview.org/2011/09/19/gadhafi-and-the-lion-of-the-desert> (5 November 2012)).

²³ H. Matar, *In the Country of Men*, cit., pp. 25-36.

²⁴ Although involuntarily, Suleiman too briefly endorses a nationalist point of view, when Mr. Calzoni, the owner of an Italian restaurant in Tripoli (whose Italian name is misspelled by Matar as 'Signor Il Calzoni'), asks him: "Look how beautiful your country is, Suleiman. Now it's mine too, no? I am also Libyan, like you. I speak like a Libyan, no?" (p. 20). Suleiman's reply is an involuntary reprise of postcolonial nationalism, rejecting Libyan citizenship to an Italian migrant (just as Gaddafi had done in 1970, albeit more violently, with his expulsion of about 20000 Italians): "No", I would say just to make him laugh' (p. 20). Although the sketch is meant here to be a grotesque intermezzo, Matar casts another shadow of Italian colonialism – and of its postcolonial response – on Gaddafi's Libya.

If Ustath Rashid embodies a need for cultural and political demystification, this, however, does not only concern different forms of Libyan postcolonial nationalism: otherwise, his stance would indirectly reinstate that Italian colonial discourse which linked the Libyan heritage more to the Roman/Italian traditions than to its colonial history (or histories). Conversely, Ustath Rashid seeks a critically equilibrated reassessment of the cultural heritage of Leptis Magna: his definition of Septimius Severus as 'our Grim African, both source of pride and shame' represents a partially unprecedented position in the Libyan cultural debate, shifting away from nationalist manipulations and looking for a truly critical assessment of Libyan history.

Re-assessing memories, re-assessing novels

Ustath Rashid's task of cultural and critical revision of Libyan history is interrupted by his murder. However, his mission is to be partially fulfilled several years later by Suleiman, while being in the diaspora: thanks to his university studies in Egypt, Suleiman develops his own political and cultural consciousness, which brings him to eventually endorse Ustath Rashid's cultural project.

In any case, it is in Leptis Magna that Suleiman starts his *Bildung*, by discovering that the real nature of this archaeological site is neither imperial power nor its postcolonial nationalist counterpart. It is 'absence': in Leptis Magna '[a]bsence was everywhere.'²⁵ 'Absence,' in fact, is a key word for the understanding of the whole text: the absence of the father, which characterizes Suleiman's particular version of the Oedipus complex, is complemented by the absence of (meaning of) history in its ideological nationalist versions. Later, when Ustath Rashid is publicly hanged, absence dominates also at the moment of his death: 'Something was absent in the Stadium, something that could no longer be relied on'.²⁶

In the light of the latter quotation, the main reason for Matar's emphasis on 'absence' might be individuated in the fact that absence is a rhetorical feature of the narrations of traumatic experiences, representing 'loss'.²⁷ As a matter of fact, in his blending of personal and political experiences, Matar describes absence and trauma in multiple ways: through Suleiman's own traumatic experience and through Ustath Rashid's teaching, the trauma of the victims of Gaddafi's repression can be eventually associated with the trauma of former imperial and colonial (thus, both Roman and Italian) dominations.

²⁵ H. Matar, *In the Country of Men*, cit., p. 26.

²⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 196-197.

²⁷ In 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry*, 25, 4 (1999), pp. 696-727, Dominick LaCapra has convincingly argued that 'absence' and (traumatic) 'loss' are two radically different conditions. Moreover, '[w]hen absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted' (p. 698). However, the rhetorical overlapping of 'loss' and 'absence' in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* is due to a 'political utopia' which explicitly refuses to engage in the 'quest of a new totality or fully unified community': the latter image, as mentioned earlier, is fully staged and deconstructed through the unanimous replies of Ustath Rashid's pupils, which constitute a clear metaphor for nationalist communities. In Matar's novel, therefore, 'absence', though in an ambivalent way, has still a political meaning that exceeds a mere 'rhetoric of absence' and aims to a 'working through the past', which is not 'foreclosed' and 'aborted' at all. His novel seeks rather to engage with a longer history than it might be initially expected, in order to *disclose* present and future by demystifying them.

The main link between these different historical experiences is constituted by Leptis Magna itself. The contested memory of this site works as a prism for the different political positions that have been assumed in postcolonial Libya and in the Libyan diaspora. Although Hisham Matar repeatedly argued, in several interviews and articles, that with *In a Country of Men* he did not want to write a political novel,²⁸ the textual politics is nevertheless very articulated, both with regard to the deployment of national allegory and the mobilization of different kinds of collective memory.

In the wake of this analysis, the critical reception of the novel in the Italian context seems to be quite misleading: while celebrating *In a Country for Men* for the literary awards it has received around the world,²⁹ most of the Italian reviewers resorted to Hisham Matar's interviews for stating the distance of the novel from political issues, emphasizing, on the other hand, the importance of the 'domestic drama'.³⁰ Nonetheless, if interpreted through the lens of Jameson's national allegory, even domestic drama, in postcolonial and diasporic texts, acquires a political relevance. In addition to this, the description of Leptis Magna further specifies the political dimension of the text, by connecting it to the long history that goes from Roman imperial domination to Libyan independence, passing through Italian colonialism.

This narrative articulation of a Braudelian *longue durée* is much in line with the broad geographical and historical framework of world literature: whereas Spivak calls for an engagement with non-European languages and cultural traditions, a text written in English and purportedly belonging to the transnational English-speaking mainstream could also help in the transnational reframing of postcolonial readings.

Keywords

Roman Libya, Hisham Matar, national allegory, Leptis Magna, postcolonial nationalist historiography

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²⁸ One of the most notable interviews appeared in the *Guardian*, S. Moss, 'Love, loss and all points in between', *The Guardian* (29 June 2006); here, however, Matar's description of his own work shows an attitude which is far more complex than a simple disengagement from politics: "'I would have liked to write a book which had nothing to do with politics [...]. I'm not really interested in politics, but *politics was part of the canvas*. I had to say something about it, otherwise *all the different forces that are shaping these characters would be abstract*'" (italics by LM).

²⁹ S. Renzini's review, 'Vince "Nessuno al mondo" di Hisham Matar: il "von Rezzori" al romanzo dell'esilio', *L'Unità* (29 May 2007), celebrated the awarding of the Florentine literary prize 'Gregor von Rezzori' to the novel. L. Sampietro's review, 'Alto tradimento in Libia', *Il Sole 24 Ore* (2 September 2007) recalled that *In A Country of Men* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Italian award 'Premio Ennio Flaiano per la narrativa internazionale'.

³⁰ L. Sampietro, 'Alto tradimento', cit., p. 35.

RIASSUNTO

'Nel paese delle assenze': l'eredità coloniale romana e italiana ne *In the Country of Men* (2006) di Hisham Matar

L'esordio letterario dell'autore di origini libiche Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men* (2006), appartiene a un corpus letterario diasporico e transnazionale che non è stato ancora adeguatamente approfondito nell'ambito della critica postcoloniale italiana.

Il romanzo di Matar, ambientato in Libia nel 1979, durante il regime di Gheddafi, non presenta un confronto diretto con le eredità storiche e culturali del colonialismo italiano nel Paese; vi sono, tuttavia, alcune peculiarità tematiche che – contrariamente a quanto sostenuto dalla critica accademica che fino a oggi si è occupata del testo – meritano di essere analizzate nell'ambito della storia coloniale e postcoloniale della Libia.

Tra queste, spicca la descrizione del sito archeologico, ubicato in territorio libico, di Leptis Magna: il protagonista del romanzo, Suleiman, e il docente universitario Ustath Rashid collaborano efficacemente nella decostruzione delle storiografie nazionaliste che hanno inteso occuparsi anche del passato remoto della regione libica, ovvero della sua appartenenza all'impero romano.

Ciò che Suleiman e Ustath Rashid portano alla luce è un'eredità traumatica –pertinente tanto all'epoca di Settimio Severo e al colonialismo italiano, quanto al regime nazionalista postcoloniale di Gheddafi – che nessuna storiografia, coloniale o nazionalista, è stata in grado di elaborare in modo compiutamente critico.