

Family Affairs: Complicity, Betrayal, and the Family in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*

Lital Levy
Princeton University

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"Family Affairs: Complicity, Betrayal, and the Family in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*"

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Special Issue ***On Complicity and Dissent***. Ed. **Nitzan Lebovic**

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Abstract: This essay undertakes a comparative reading of the dynamics of complicity and resistance in two contemporary Anglophone novels, Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* (1990) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006). My analysis pursues three main lines of inquiry: the ostensible public/ private and political/ personal divides; loyalty and betrayal in the family; and the ambiguous status of the child as a witness and a political subject. I argue that in their respective portrayals of the protagonists' struggles against South African apartheid and authoritarian rule in Libya, both authors use the device of the child narrator to expose the tension between the family and the political world, pointing to the fallacy of separating the political from the personal. The two novels depict complicity not as a problem of individual morality in a standoff against the state's abuse of power, but rather as an issue that is deeply embedded in the psychology of family relations. As such, they lead us to evaluate both resistance and complicity through the lens of familial betrayal. Ultimately, Gordimer and Matar use the child narrator's partial understanding to reconsider the ethics of complicity, yet the two authors diverge in their political conclusions.

Lital LEVY

Family Affairs: Complicity, Betrayal, and the Family in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and Nadine Gordimer's *My Father's Son*

A house with green shutters and a single red towel on a clothesline: with such humble and seemingly banal images of ordinary life, Hisham Matar begins a wrenching tale of disaster, of the political repression that will descend like an avalanche upon a young Libyan family. In the pages that follow, we are granted exquisitely painful glimpses into the inseparability of complicity and resistance, love and betrayal, submission and defiance. Of course, nothing is as simple as it appears: green is the color of Libya's "people's revolution" orchestrated by Colonel Qaddafi, red the global symbol of leftist politics, and the flat in question is the secret headquarters of an underground cell of dissidents. To nine-year-old Suleiman, the protagonist of *In the Country of Men* (2006), this unfamiliar house signals the start of a mystery: What is his father, ostensibly abroad on business, doing in downtown Tripoli, where an earnest looking young man holding a typewriter follows him into the building with the green shutters?

As a novel that pins its questions of loyalty, betrayal, and complicity on the morass of family relations, and as a story that catapults a young boy violently into the "country of men," Matar's first book can be read in conversation with a somewhat unlikely interlocutor: Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*. Matar's book was published in 2006, but reconstructs the late-1970s Libya of his childhood; Gordimer's novel, her tenth, appeared in 1990 and chronicles the final years of South African apartheid. These two novels are the products of very different stages of a novelist's career (a debut novel versus a tenth novel), of different nation-based crises occurring in different global moments, and of different circumstances of publication, with Matar's book being written into an increasingly globalized literary marketplace for Anglophone fiction. Nonetheless, as I will show, their strong formal and thematic convergences allow us to comparatively evaluate the novelistic treatment of the family's relationship to state power under an extralegal "state of exception," to use Carl Schmitt and later Giorgio Agamben's term. As such, these two novels present an opportunity to examine two interconnected questions: first, how loyalty is tested in the confrontation between the family and the state; and second, how that test of loyalty is modulated by the child witness.

This essay will examine how Gordimer and Matar embed political struggle within familial dynamics of fidelity and betrayal. Through my readings, I will argue that in their respective portrayals of complicity, both authors use the child narrator to expose the fallacy of separation between the personal and the political. The two novels weave powerful representations of state violence with equally potent representations of its effects on the bodies and psyches of parents and children, on sexual relations between parents, and on the family's silences, secrets, self-distancing, and betrayals. Moving seamlessly between the macro- and the micro-levels, the public and private worlds, both narratives show us how the individual choices that constitute political complicity or dissent are inseparable from the matrix of intimate family relations: how familial love, loyalty, betrayal, and fear pull on the woof and warp of political commitment. When the parent's political resistance initiates a family crisis, for the child, complicity becomes a matter of familial protection and by extension, of self-preservation.

My readings will parse these multiple forms of complicity as they play out in tandem within the private life of the family and in the family's public confrontation with the state. Here I follow Mark Sander's view of multiple "complicities," as described by Nitzan Lebovic in his introduction to this issue (6-7). The two novels present different scenarios for how state violence reshapes intersubjective dynamics in the family, as well as the long-term implications for the protagonist's adult subjectivity; they also diverge in their gendering of the dynamics of complicity and resistance. I consider both their convergences and their divergences to argue that it is precisely *because* of the child narrator's innate lacunae and incomplete understanding that he/she becomes such a powerful tool for disarticulating the anatomy of complicity. Complicity with state repression is essentially an aporia: it is a logical response (self-preservation) to a profound, systemic illogic; but it is a logical response that ultimately serves to entrench rather than correct that illogic. Because it is an aporia, the child witness-narrator is the ideal device for its literary exposition.

Matar's novel is narrated retrospectively by the adult Suleiman, now twenty-four, through his mnemonic reconstruction of his nine-year-old self. Gordimer's novel alternates between the first-person perspective of fifteen-year-old Will and the third-person voice of an omniscient narrator; at the novel's close, the third-person voice is revealed to be that of the young adult Will, who has given us the story in the form of his first (unpublished) book. Both novels thus enjoy a split-age perspective that oscillates between experiencing, remembering, and reflecting. Thematically, both novels are centered on a

dissident father and his young son, and both begin with the son's accidental discovery—in Matar's story, of the father's clandestine political activity; in Gordimer's, of the father's extramarital affair with a white woman. Both narratives pursue the fateful consequences of this discovery, as children are compromised and the family is split apart. In both novels, the father's prolonged absences directly inform the son's evolving self-perception and his liminal position within the family structure. The novels also link dynamics of complicity and resistance to the young male narrator's emerging understanding of masculinity: the father who hovers between presence and absence becomes a haunting presence that the son must overcome in order to assume his place in the world. On the meta-thematic level, both novels engage literary interlocutors—Shakespeare for Gordimer and *A Thousand and One Nights* for Matar—to complete the integration of these thematic concerns with those of narrative and narration.

These novels thus demand a multilayered reading as social and aesthetic texts. First, in response to their explicit investments in their respective political moments, we should read them as historically situated, context-specific accounts of the struggle against an oppressive twentieth-century political system—be it 1970s Libyan authoritarianism or late 1980s South African apartheid; my own investment in a comparative reading follows Lebovic's observation concerning a critical plea for dissent that is grounded in solidarity between struggles (3-4). Second, through their formal engagements with canonical intertexts, both novels must also be read as retellings of archetypal narratives based on universal themes of familial betrayal and the struggle for power, with a line that runs straight back through *Hamlet* and Euripides. Indeed, both the father-son relationship as a primary locus of the political struggle and the moment of accidental discovery as the inciting incident are literary topoi as old as mythology itself. Finally, in both novels, the historical-social-situational and the psychological-archetypal-mythological are mutually constitutive: it is precisely through the tight, triple-stranded weave of literature (Shakespeare, the *Nights*), society (South Africa, Libya), and the subjectivity of the child narrator (Will, Slooma) that these novelistic dramas successfully depict twentieth-century social violence and its expression in family conflict. Finally, while both works are aestheticized social texts/political testimonies of a nation in crisis, they are also contemporary Anglophone novels written for a sophisticated global readership, by authors from different parts of the African continent.

Given their compelling parallels, what can we glean from a comparative reading of the two works? Against the backdrop of state oppression, how do questions of authority, power, and loyalty play out in the family, either in concert with or opposition to the parents' political commitments? How do children become implicated in state coercion or, alternatively, find their way into the resistance? I am especially interested in *betrayal*—both personal and political—as the psychological lynchpin of each work. These two works depict the contested loyalties of sons, mothers, and fathers in the face of the father's political dissent. Loyalty, we see, is a malleable concept that runs both ways vis-à-vis complicity and resistance: loyalty to a father's political commitments may lead a character in the direction of resistance, while familial loyalty understood as preservation of life may lead a character to comply with the oppressive regime. Furthermore, the conscious, self-critical capacity for loyalty is never far from its undertow, the pull of betrayal. As such, in these fictions, complicity itself is hardly atomized as a question of individual morality in a standoff against the power of the regime and society. Rather, as I will illustrate, it is fundamentally embedded within the psychology of family relations, encompassing *both* the need to protect and the desire to betray. Finally, the two novels raise a host of questions about the status of the child as witness, as political subject or agent—about whether the child ought to be considered a political actor, despite being a subject still in formation. My analysis begins now by considering questions of betrayal and agency within the primary social unit in which the child's subjectivity is formed: the family.

My Son's Story: Betrayal, Resistance, and a Struggle for Agency

Betrayal is the hook of *My Son's Story*, whose opening scene brings us to a movie theater where fifteen-year-old Will, the son of colored parents "Sonny" and "Aila," unexpectedly finds his father in the company of a white woman—a life-changing discovery. The woman, Hannah Plowman, is a human rights worker who had assisted Sonny during his detention as a political prisoner; after Sonny's release, their acquaintance blossoms into a protracted love affair. Sonny rationalizes his infidelity by telling himself that he "needs" Hannah not only for emotional support but as a confidante and comrade in the political struggle, believing his wife Aila's consciousness to be limited to the home and workplace. After the encounter, Sonny makes Will an accomplice to his secret. Will reluctantly goes along with the deception: "And so there was complicity between us, he drew me into it, as if he were not my father (a father would never do such a thing). And yet because he was my father how could I resist, how could I dare refuse him?" (Gordimer 27). That Will should name what is between them as "complicity" rather than

love, loyalty, or understanding ought not to be underemphasized, as the rest of the narrative will play out on a tense fault line between loyalty to the political cause and betrayal of the family.

The novel is concerned centrally with both Sonny and Will, and Will's evolving sense of self; the narrative voice alternates between Will's first-person accounts and sections about Sonny narrated in the third-person. In the first-person-voiced sections, the adolescent Will narrates his story with a high level of awareness tempered by teenage disaffection, stating outright: "But at fifteen you are no longer a child" (Gordimer 17). No longer a child, but not yet an adult, Will is explicitly tasked with adult responsibility as the guardian of his father's secrets; yet this clandestine knowledge immobilizes him, leaving him seething, resentful, and politically passive. As Linda Weinhouse writes, "Will's journey towards recognition begins when he 'recognizes' his father's absence and becomes his accomplice in deceiving his beloved mother" (74). Over the course of the novel, as he progresses toward adulthood, Will acquires ever-expanding insight into the political struggle, its human toll, and his own family's sacrifice.

Sonny and Aila are self-made, working-class professionals who are confined to their liminal "colored" status even as widening cracks in the apartheid regime begin to strain those limits. Sonny's political career is catapulted by a spontaneous act of resistance: in a defiant move, he decides to lead the black schoolchildren whom he teaches across the veld that separates them from white Johannesburg. Before long he is inducted into the ranks of the opposition, and quickly emerges as a rising star. He then disappears from the family for prolonged periods, pursuing both underground political work and his love affair with Hannah. Following a botched suicide attempt by Will's sister, Sonny brings Will even deeper into his secrets: "Only to Will could he find some way of indicating where he could be found if something happened. Like the Security Police, Will would be in on it; Will already was in on the mystery of his absences. Will could not evade being drawn in further" (Gordimer 76). Whereas Sonny convinces himself of success in his subterfuge with Hannah, turning a blind eye to the explosive substratum coursing through his family, his wife and daughter see through his deception and respond by surreptitiously asserting their own political agency. After recovering from her suicide attempt, Baby becomes a militant revolutionary and is exiled to a neighboring African state; unbeknownst to her husband and son, Aila follows her daughter's lead by working locally for Baby's organization. Aila is eventually arrested on charges of hiding weapons in the family home. If in Matar's novel, nine-year-old Slooma is an outsider in the "country of men" by virtue of his youth, in Gordimer's book, Will becomes an outsider in his family because he, seemingly alone, has declined a life of political struggle, perhaps paralleling Gordimer's own anomalous status as a white writer affiliated with the black struggle (Weinhouse 67). By the novel's end, Hannah has abandoned Sonny to take up a U.N. position in a neighboring state, Aila joins the ranks of South African dissidents in constant movement abroad, and Will maintains an uneasy peace with his father, whose erstwhile stardom in the resistance has faded. The family structure has broken apart and left both men psychologically isolated; in a bitter denouement, white vigilantes burn the family house to the ground.

Unlike some of the betrayals we will see in Matar's novel, betrayal in *My Son's Story* does not take the form of complicity with the regime, and does not bring about the downfall of a comrade or family member. Instead, it is confined to the family sphere; yet it is imbricated all along with the father's political work. As Liliane Louvel notes, "From Will's perspective, Sonny's betrayal is not only his affair with Hannah but his absence from the family, which leads to the split up of the family" (28). Crucially, Sonny is absent and Will is present during the two most critical moments of the family's story: Baby's attempted suicide and Aila's arrest. On the night that white officers come to the family home to arrest Aila, Will opens the door to them assuming they are seeking Sonny, who, unbeknownst to the family, is on a holiday tryst with Hannah. After Aila is taken into custody, Will races to Hannah's flat seeking Sonny, to no avail. He relates: "I went to kill him that night./ I was the one who opened the door to her jailers. I was the one who could have died" (Gordimer 190). This patricidal rage is motivated also by the suppression of Will's own agency as a political actor. Nearing the end of the book, he unleashes his repressed rage upon Aila in a diatribe that veers between reproach and self-blame:

Why must I be the one excepted, the one left behind, left out, why is it assumed—by you, by him, by Baby, everyone—I haven't any part in the struggle ... And now you, you, when I can act like the rest of you, when I can face them in court and tell them they're liars, liars, those thugs who've been let into our house—and I let them in, I'm the one who's let every kind of destruction into our house, I'm always there, handy, Will is going to do it, well-named, he'll do it ... (Gordimer 234-235)

There is no doubt that Sonny's absence has shaped Will's subjectivity in ways both constructive and destructive, contrastively defining him as the one who is at once "always there" (at home) and yet "left

behind" (in the political world). Playing the foil to his father—and alternatively, sometimes imitating him—has castrated Will, such that his Oedipal rage appears almost over-determined. At the same time, political, sexual, and even *authorial* agency are conjoined in this novel's economy. Midway through the novel, Will declares: "I have a little girl of my own...She's a nice enough little thing...I sleep with her at her place...or sometimes in the room a friend of hers lets her./ Just like Dad. My sex life has no home." As to the girlfriend's suggestion that they move in together, Will reasons, "But I can't leave my mother alone, and because my mother counts on me to be there with him when she's away, I can't leave him" (Gordimer 169). Claiming his sexual agency, Will becomes "just like Dad," belittling his girlfriend (whom he identifies in the same passage as "intelligent" and "progressive") as a "little girl" of his own—one who even has "about the same build as my mother." Thus, in claiming his sexual agency, Will mimics his father by choosing a girlfriend who obviously replicates his mother yet who also stands in doubly for Hannah, the secret lover who refutes domestic sexuality.

The authorial aspect of Will's struggle for agency emerges at the novel's conclusion. We see, for instance, how the novel stages its questions about agency through a series of reversals that are articulated ironically through the use of proper names, pronouns, and finally, a dialogue with Shakespeare. "Sonny," of course, is both the father of the family and a local political leader; Will's older sister, who abandons the family home for a life of armed resistance, is known to us only as "Baby," while "Will" (who lacks agency or "will") is named by Sonny for the English bard whose complete works, bound in fake leather, are the object of Sonny's singular devotion. Shakespeare speaks throughout novel on both the diegetic and paratextual levels.

For Karin Möller, "The novel's Shakespearean framework, with its uneasy overtones of confrontation and jealousy involving parent and child, possessor and dispossessed, writer and fictional character, consciously plays on the multiple signification of *authority*, ranging from connotations with origin to those of prerogative and power" (162). Shakespeare stands behind Sonny's intellectual awakening and liberation, and as such, represents the first stage of his political transformation. Throughout the book, Sonny quotes Shakespeare to Will. Will returns the favor, cannily turning the schoolmaster's lessons against him: "For I don't know how long we believed my mother didn't know. He and I. We were so clever; he made us such a good team, a comic team. What a buffoon he made of me, his son, stumbling along behind, aping his lies. Poor Tom to his Lear (I should have told him that, sometime, it's the sort of sign he'd appreciate that my education hasn't been wasted)" (Gordimer 51-2). Shakespeare returns in the novel's conclusion, in which Will—now a young adult—reveals himself to be a writer and exposes the narrative we have just read as his first manuscript, "that I can never publish" (Gordimer 256). In the novel's final pages, Will finally asserts his primacy over Sonny, proclaiming not only that it is now "his time" with both "women" and "politics," but that he will be "the one to record, someday" what his family members did for the resistance. Yet even as he metaphorically completes the long-desired patricide, he recognizes Sonny's role in his formation as a writer. After offering the reader a poem, ("It's not Shakespeare; well, anyway...") he returns to Sonny: "What he did—my father—made me a writer" (Gordimer 256). In other words, it is Sonny's actions, at whose heart lies the betrayal, that made Will a writer (Weinhouse 70).

It is here that the novel's paratextual elements converge, bringing together its dual metanarratives of the Oedipal struggle, on the one hand, and of writing-as-agency, on the other. The ambiguity invested in the first person of this novel and subsequently, in its narrator, has been insightfully analyzed by Linda Weinhouse. Will claims to have written the book, but the book's title, "My Son's Story," signals the doubling of Will and Sonny, son and father, that pervades the entire narrative. Is the novel actually authored by Sonny, in the voice he imagines for Will (as Weinhouse suggests); or is "Son" here a play on "Sonny"? The book's opening lines, "How did I find out?/ I was deceiving him," while presumably spoken by Will, can also be read bi-directionally, since "the novel deals obsessively with the betrayal enacted by the father"; indeed, Gordimer continues the mirroring a few lines later when Will questions *who in fact is discovering whom* in that moment of recognition in the cinema (Weinhouse 69). Weinhouse further points out that the book's epigraph, from Shakespeare's Sonnet 13, "reinforces the [aforementioned] ambiguity: 'You had a father; let your son say so.' In the context of the sonnet it is clear that a father's story can only be told by his son, but this narrative has its origin in the absence of the father" (70). Weinhouse reads the novel, ultimately, as "the story of a son who becomes a man and a writer in response to his father's absence and a son's need to make his father present in words" (75). Literature, in short, is very closely bound up here with personal and political agency. In Matar's novel, as we will soon see, literature and books will have a more ambiguous role.

In the Country of Men: A Childhood between Secrets

Because Will is already an adolescent—by his account, “no longer a child”—at the novel’s opening, Gordimer is able to follow his maturation into adulthood continuously, without fissures or gaps in the narrative. As demonstrated, in many ways the narrative follows the classic and even archetypal storyline of the son’s expropriation of male agency through metaphorical patricide. At the novel’s end, Baby and Aila are in exile; Will remains with his father in South Africa, and, in his own self-estimation, has superseded his father. Although the family structure has dissolved, Will has achieved his independence and even a sense of dominance.

Matar tells us a very different story, and his protagonist ends up in adulthood in a very different place, expatriated and emotionally adrift. Matar was born in 1970 in New York City, while his father, Jaballa Matar, was serving as Libya’s representative to the United Nations; upon returning to Libya in 1973, the elder Matar joined the political opposition. The family escaped to Cairo six years later, when Hisham was eight years old. In 1990 Jaballa was kidnaped and extradited back to Libya, where he was imprisoned and tortured; his fate remains unknown, but he is presumed dead. Matar has continued to explore the circumstances of his childhood in his subsequent publications, especially his second novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011) and his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *The Return* (2016), which details his return Libya following the collapse of Qaddafi’s regime and his search for answers about his father’s fate. In his memoir, Matar alludes to many of the same facets of life in the Qaddafi era that he represents in his novels:

Revolutionary Committees were set up to punish dissent. They monitored every aspect of life. Critics of the dictatorship were executed. The Committees hanged students in front of Benghazi Cathedral and from the gates of the universities. Traffic was diverted to ensure that commuters saw the dangling corpses. Books and musical instruments that were deemed “anti-revolutionary” or “imperialist” were confiscated from shops, schools, and homes, piled high in public squares and set alight. Intellectuals, businessmen, union organizers, and students were shown on television, sitting handcuffed on the floor, dictating confessions to the cameras. (*The Return* 33)

Despite the clear autobiographical convergences, Matar asserts that *In the Country of Men* (2006) is a work of fiction and that the parallels to his biography are metaphorical (Moss; Elliott); he characterizes the story as the adult Suleiman’s attempt to “mend the fracture” between past and present at “the point at which his personal narrative had been amputated” (Gana; Kearney 127).

Meditative and lyrical, *In the Country of Men* recounts nine-year-old Suleiman’s final summer in Libya, detailing how his small world is torn asunder. His father’s unexpected appearance in the square is not the only secret that will haunt the book; the family home is also the site of another terrible secret, the young mother’s alcohol dependence—a condition that is not only psychologically destructive but illicit in Libya, an Islamic country where alcohol is strictly forbidden. It is between these two houses, these two secrets, that we follow Suleiman’s premature initiation into the world of men intimidated by the book’s title: a world of power, coercion and dependence with a hollow core of shifting loyalties and political expediencies. Six years separate the ages of our two novels’ young protagonists. In Matar’s novel, the child is tacitly entrusted with his mother’s secret but he is (unsuccessfully) shielded by his parents from the real meaning of his father’s absences, from the knowledge of his father’s political activity, and from the extent of his father’s torture at the hands of the state. This pretense of protection only exacerbates his confusion and ambivalence. As it moves between the two secrets, the novel offers devastating insights into the psychology of the regime and its subjects, constructing an anatomy of complicity. Quietly, through a series of interactions between Suleiman and others, we observe how the regime exercises and protects its power through the play of coercion and seduction. We recognize its calculated instrumentalization of fear and protective instincts. Above all, the book becomes an exposition of political power at play in the extended domestic sphere: among neighbors, among children, and within the family. Through these other “countries” of children and the family, we are made privy to the many individual choices, the drops that collect to form a pool of complicity submerging virtually all the characters, children and adults alike. Matar’s use of a child narrator invests his portrayal of these discrete acts of individual volition with chilling credulity.

Suleiman, known affectionately by family members as Slooma, lives a cloistered, materially privileged but emotionally attenuated existence as the only son of a young mother, Najwa (“Mama”) and a cultured but aloof father, Faraj (“Baba”). Set in Slooma’s insular world, the novel’s events transpire primarily at home with his family or just outside, on the street with the neighborhood children. In contrast to the upwardly mobile working-class parents of Gordimer’s novel, Baba is a prosperous businessman whose political co-conspirators include a university professor and the son of a prominent

judge. Like Sonny, however, Baba is also repeatedly identified as an avid reader. The black hole in young Slooma's developing psyche is his intimate yet distorted relationship with his depressed, emotionally unstable mother. During Baba's frequent business travels, Mama seeks refuge from her loneliness and depression in alcohol. When at home, Baba appears emotionally remote from Slooma; father and son share but one activity, a weekly walk to Friday prayers. Nonetheless, Slooma reveres Baba and daydreams of taking his place by Baba's side as his equal. As we soon learn, Baba is engaged in clandestine opposition activities in collaboration with the family's close friend and neighbor Professor Ustadh Rashid, a gentle intellectual whose emotionally and intellectually precocious twelve-year-old son Kareem is also Slooma's best friend and role model. Other members of the political cell include the ebullient but capricious Moosa—son of a reserved and highly respected Egyptian judge who will later become Slooma's legal guardian—and Baba's assistant, Nasser, who we learn is the young man with the typewriter spotted by Slooma in the novel's opening scene.

The dominos begin to fall with Ustadh Rashid, who is arrested by the secret police in full view of his son and the neighborhood children. Rashid's interrogation, and later, his execution before a frenzied mob, are broadcast live from the country's brand-new basketball stadium; these ghastly events are witnessed by Slooma, Mama, and Moosa in the family's living room. Soon after Rashid's arrest, Baba is also arrested and tortured. His life is saved by Mama, who begs the neighboring regime loyalists to intercede. We come to understand that under interrogation, Baba cooperates with the authorities, and is released; shortly after his return, Mama persuades him to send Slooma to Cairo, where he can "thrive away from the madness" (Matar, *Country* 228).

In the long term, their choice proves questionable: Slooma will not see Libya or Baba again. Despite the economic and political hardships at home, Slooma's childhood friends seem to flourish as young adults, whereas Slooma, who grows up in Cairo, is melancholic, lonely and reclusive. Reduced to penury by the state's punitive economic "reforms," Baba goes to work in a factory. After many years, Baba is arrested once more, this time for reading a book called *Democracy Now*—ironically, the sole volume the nine-year-old Slooma had previously rescued from burning—to his coworkers, whereupon Mama relapses into alcoholism. Shortly after his second release from prison, Baba suffers a fatal heart attack. The story concludes as the adult Suleiman is reunited with Mama, after a fifteen-year separation, in a bus station in Alexandria.

While the novel's backdrop comes together in the excesses of Qaddafi's "people's revolution" and the violent repression of pro-democracy dissidents, the narrative's psychological center of gravity powerfully zeroes in on Slooma's troubled relationship with his mother. When Najwa was a girl of fourteen, her brother encountered her in a café holding the hand of a boy. He swiftly denounced her to the family, leading to confinement in her bedroom and then forced marriage to a stranger nine years her elder. As she tells Slooma, despite her efforts to prevent a pregnancy, "Nine months later, I had you" — sealing her entrapment in an unwanted marriage and sentencing her to "life imprisonment" (Matar, *Country* 14, 171). During her nightly alcohol-fueled soliloquies, Mama repeatedly returns to the source of her trauma, compulsively revisiting her bitter disappointment and rage and confiding them to her ever-attentive son. In her retellings, Mama sardonically refers to her family's male elders as "the High Council," echoing the "revolutionary councils" then terrorizing the Libyan populace. With her evocation of imprisonment and the "council," she conflates patriarchy and authoritarianism, and by extension, private and public abuses of power in the family and the national arena. Yet when sober, in Baba's presence, she passively reconciles herself to the marriage "she had resisted and now could not live without", acting the part of the devoted wife and mother (239).

By day, Mama has no recollection of her nocturnal revelations; when Slooma reprises them, she swears him to secrecy. She alternates between treating Slooma as a surrogate companion and even a would-be savior, telling him "One day you will take me away on your white horse," and as a puerile minor with limited comprehension of the adult world, who requires sheltering from the painful events unfolding in full sight (Matar 12). Baba, for his part, customarily takes leave of the family by pronouncing Slooma the "man of the house" in his absence, possibly intimating to Slooma some knowledge of Mama's condition. And in fact, when Baba is away, Slooma maintains an anxious vigil over Mama, ever mindful of the un-extinguished cigarettes and open gas taps that accompany her inebriation. In tandem with Mama's nocturnal-diurnal oscillations between drunkenness and sobriety, Slooma himself alternates between rescue fantasies in which he delivers the fourteen-year-old Mama from her family's clutches and deep "morning-after" resentment toward her. The result of these extreme, disorienting shifts render Slooma intensely ambivalent toward Mama and confused about her relations with Baba. They also play into his inchoate understanding of masculinity, which is a source of intense attraction and fascination, on the one hand, and of repulsion on the other. He dimly sees Baba as a threat to

Mama, vaguely sensing when glimpsing them in coitus that all is not as it should be. Near the novel's end, Slooma awakens from a nightmare, searches for Mama and upon finding her asleep on the couch, lies directly atop her—a posture with blatantly Oedipal connotations. Yet while Slooma is tacitly tasked with caring for his mother, following Baba's disappearance it is his father whom Slooma believes (this time mistakenly) to need his protection. In short, the cognitive dissonance of being burdened with adult responsibilities yet treated like a child generates high levels of uncertainty. That Slooma's fundamental, innate understanding of the order of child-parent relations has been so powerfully distorted will leave him ripe for manipulation by agents of the state. As I will demonstrate, it is when his damaged subjectivity intersects with the workings of power in the authoritarian state and society that the novel's central questions of betrayal and complicity reach their full expression.

"The Faithful": Loyalty, Betrayal, and Complicity

Complicity in *My Son's Story* involved a collusion between father and son to "protect" the mother through deception, against a backdrop of heroic political resistance by both women and men. In Matar's novel, complicity implicates every character in the book and is both personal and political—or perhaps more accurately, it transcends and destabilizes the personal/political distinction. In this novelistic world, resistance is coded male, but it is not entirely heroic. Realism, pragmatism, and perseverance are coded female, and this gendering has enormous significance for the relations between Slooma and each of his parents. The central enigma of *In the Country of Men* concerns Slooma's own acts of complicity with the authorities who are persecuting the male adults most beloved to him. Slooma is younger, more naïve, and more psychologically damaged than his counterpart Will, and thus his actions (I hesitate to say his "choices") necessitate deeper probing. To analyze Matar's psychological portrait of complicity and resistance in Qaddafi's Libya, I will parse the multiple factors that dynamically inform young Slooma's thoughts, feelings, and ultimately, his actions. These include the question of children's partial understanding, their innate need for affirmation and acceptance from both peers and adults, and their concomitant desire for self-validation, which for Slooma fundamentally entails the development of a moral self. Finally, there is the child's fear of abandonment or loss and related psychological need not only for protection, but to protect the endangered parent.

In the novel, Slooma and the other children possess a basic level of political knowledge, enabling them to mimic the state's power structures and mechanisms of repression in their play. Slooma, however, does not comprehend the situation's complexities or the ramifications of his own actions. This partial understanding and confusion are manifested in a sequence of scenes, beginning when Mama and Moosa preemptively burn all of Baba's books and papers, continuing with their insertion of an oversized portrait of Qaddafi into the family home, and culminating in two scenes in which Slooma cooperates with agents of the state. These perplexing scenes become determinative for Slooma's self-image, carrying over into the final, adult-narrated portion of the novel.

As was the case with Gordimer's novel, here too, betrayal is the story's "hook." Complicity is always, in some way, a betrayal; but in Slooma's world, as we learn, so is resistance. Here, both fidelity and betrayal operate at multiple levels and affect every character, children and adults alike. As Slooma attempts to make sense of his senseless world, discovering himself in the process, he comprehends complicity and resistance as direct manifestations of loyalty and faithfulness; as derivative of the fundamental, innate qualities of character that, for Slooma, define a person's essence. Throughout the novel, Slooma tries not only to make sense of the events happening around him but also to sort out a basic moral code, with scant input from his adult caregivers. As he observes and reflects, he develops a lexicon and a set of guiding questions. The first word that guides him is "faithful"; the second is "betrayal." "Who are the faithful," Slooma asks in a feverish state; "How do you become one of the faithful?" (Matar, *Country* 54). He begins to understand faithfulness both intuitively, as an intersubjective expression of personal loyalty, and in a religious sense, through the language of Islamic teachings. Slooma watches from home as Ustadh Rashid is brutally interrogated on live television. When asked to confirm Baba among a list of co-conspirators, Ustadh Rashid clearly answers, "No." Slooma immediately recognizes the meaning of this action: "I knew that this was the opposite of betrayal" (115). Gradually, he connects the dots between acts of betrayal or conversely, of faithfulness, among children, family members, fellow dissidents, and citizens of a nation state, or what Mark Sanders calls "narrow" and "general" forms of complicity, and questions what makes some people fundamentally more "faithful" than others (Clingman 282).

Not long after Ustadh Rashid's arrest, as the fragile threads of Slooma's home life unravel, Slooma discovers his own susceptibility to the pleasures of power and of submission as well as his innate need for acceptance and validation. In short order, he betrays and humiliates his best friend Kareem, violently

stones a local beggar, divulges the location of the cell's secret headquarters (where Nasser, his father's assistant, is in hiding), and even supplies the loathsome agent casing his home with names and with one of Baba's books. Why, we wonder, does this sensitive, intelligent child engage in these destructive (and self-destructive) acts? As he narrates these events in turn, Slooma registers his emotions, for example, "feeling a dark, unstoppable force gain momentum", but does not explain what is propelling him, nor does he offer post factum reflections (107). After betraying Kareem, he drifts into a protracted mea culpa of self-recrimination and remorse, his consciousness bifurcated into I and you, interrogator and accused, in a pathetic imitation of the language of the regime: "You betrayed him...Why, Suleiman? Why did you do it?...You are a terrible person. You thought you were good, always believed it, but the truth is that you are a traitor./ Traitor! Traitor...And why did you betray him? Could you say why? ...You even enjoyed it; admit it" (110-112). And yet, remorse notwithstanding, he will soon betray an adult to the authorities—an infinitely more consequential action. This time, it is only for us to ask "Why, Suleiman?" The absence of an explanation requires us to do the work of introspection on behalf of the character.

The first action in this sequence, Slooma's betrayal of Kareem, appears to be the proverbial Pandora's Box whence his inner demons are released. But here too, Mama plays an integral role in the background. Following the arrest of Ustadh Rashid, and in shocking violation of the close friendship between the two families, she warns Slooma to keep a distance from Kareem, advising him that "It just isn't good for you to be close to all of his sadness. Grief loves the hollow; all it wants is to hear its own echo" (Matar 40). Never mind that this advice is highly ironic coming from a mother who envelopes her son in her own sadness and resentment, who hears her own grief echoing in him; this is hardly the lesson in courage or empathy that would gird Slooma with functional, much-needed emotional intelligence, yet it is perhaps not entirely surprising given Mama's disillusionment and realpolitik. Crucially, however, the incident with Kareem directly follows another charged episode in which Mama and Moosa, anticipating a search of the family home, preemptively burn Baba's book collection while Slooma watches in confusion and dismay. The sequencing of events suggests that in his misplaced aggression toward Kareem, Slooma is acting from a deep need to reassert a sense of control and understanding. Earlier, when Slooma asks Mama and Moosa point-blank, "Why do the Revolutionary Committee want to search our house?" he is met with typical deflection: "Children aren't supposed to know these things"; Slooma's sequence of betrayals begins after even his friend Kareem calls him a child (Matar, *Country* 93-4).

Immediately following the traumatic episode of book burning, to which Mama and Moosa seem to take a shockingly sanguine approach, Slooma breaks down crying and yells, "Why did you burn Baba's books?...Baba loves his books." To this, Mama responds once again by deflecting his question, this time accusing *him* of complicity:

For a moment neither of them spoke. I sensed guilt in their silence. Then Mama said, "It's not like you didn't participate." I must have looked at her in horror because she said, "I saw you standing there, watching Moosa working the fire," then turned to Moosa for confirmation. (98)

Is passive observation, coupled with a failure to intervene, tantamount to participation? To invoke Stephen Clingman's words, "complicity...enfolds everyone more as a horizon of involvement than a certain version of it, and is built into the very notion of involvement itself" (283). That is: to be involved is always, inevitably, to be complicit. Clingman further questions whether active or passive forms of perpetration "are the same kind of thing, or exist along the same continuum...perhaps not all complicities are variations on the same theme" (289). Slooma does not reflect further on this episode, but both Mama's statement and Slooma's silence reverberate throughout the novel. Was Slooma complicit in this act? How could he, a child whose thoughts and opinions are endlessly patronized and dismissed by those very adults, have stopped them? Certainly, Mama's insinuation of his complicity subliminally communicates to him that he is already incriminated, tainted by guilt. This indictment would seem to confirm Slooma's prior and mounting self-perception of being *irresolute*—a feeling he expresses throughout the book, for example when pondering his failure to act after witnessing intercourse between Mama and Baba and wondering if Mama "needed my help." At that earlier moment, he concludes: "And what a failure I proved myself to be. A failure for lacking the courage—or whatever it is that enables people to act quickly, decisively and without doubt—to rise to the occasion, *to prove myself one of the faithful*" (87; my emphasis). Of course, his inability to act arises directly from the confusion of a young boy witnessing adult affairs he cannot comprehend, but he misattributes it as a character flaw. This flaw seemingly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, resulting in a grown man who is endlessly playing out an unpayable debt to the past. It should not go overlooked that Slooma's formative moment of self-recognition as a "failure," which is actually a kind of fatal misrecognition, is embedded in his distorted

relationship with Mama, which placed unbearable pressures upon his young psyche. In his subsequent acts of betrayal, then, is he compulsively acting out a script in which he has already cast himself as passive and cowardly? Or is he simply finding an outlet for the repression he has endured?

Father Figures: Masculinity and Complicity

It is during this fraught time following Rashid's arrest, while Baba is in hiding, that a Revolutionary Committee agent stakes out the family home. Grooming Slooma—allowing him to handle his gun, giving him Baba's mints—and simultaneously dangling Mama's secret before him, the agent Sharief successfully manipulates him to the extent that Slooma, despite his initial suspicions, transfers his ideals of manhood from Baba and Ustadh Rashid to Sharief. He sees in Sharief a masculine quality of "heaviness" he previously associated with Baba and other male role models, and describes Sharief as "loyal" (Matar, *Country* 142, 156). Not long after, Slooma is on the phone with Nasser, who desperately wants to convey a message to Mama, but is aware that the line is tapped. Slooma, too, knows he should not be speaking to the shadowy third person on the line, who even chuckles and interjects himself into the conversation. Despite Nasser's pleas for him to hang up, in an intensely fraught moment—arguably the psychological climax of the book—Slooma submits to the wiretapper's requests for information by identifying the house with the green shutters and red towel, leading to Nasser's death and possibly even to Baba's capture. Notably, he does not reflect upon this critical episode either in its aftermath or later, in the adult-narrated section of the book.

Eventually it is Mama who swallows her pride, bakes a cake, and begs the detested loyalist neighbors to intercede on Baba's behalf. Specifically, she accesses the favor of the regime by appealing to the wife of the secret police (*mokhabarat*) agent next door, who commiserates with Mama about the foibles and follies of men. While Mama's act is a betrayal of the principles for which Rashid and Nasser have given their lives, it is also the act that saves Baba. Here we must remember that Mama's betrayal by her brother is the original sin that underscores every act of betrayal in the story and that establishes its crucial parallel to patriarchy, indeed suggesting that patriarchy may be the original form of authoritarianism. However, Mama's history also serves to underscore the point that, in betraying a political cause she never supported to begin with, she not only rescues her husband but also restores the stability of the family, sparing her son the doubly terrible fate of becoming bereft of his father and bearing the stigma of being the son of a "traitor." In this instance, then, her act of complicity can be construed as pragmatic and merciful, an ethical gray area that vivifies Clingman's suggestion (following Sanders) that complicity "is a mode, if not a foundation, of ethical engagement whose results, depending on the range of affiliation it promotes, may be self-contradictory. We live in that state of ethical oscillation" (283). And yet this is not the interpretation that follows Slooma into adulthood. Watching Mama grovel before the neighbors, the young Slooma does not voice his thoughts or feelings, but he seems to signal his discomfort by refusing to eat the cake. Looking back on the visit, however, the adult Suleiman reveals that in the face of authority, he can still "feel the distant reverberations from that day, my inauguration into the dark art of submission. Perhaps this is why I often find a shameful pleasure in submitting to authority" followed by "a sense of self-loathing" — echoing his earlier admission of the *schadenfreude* of betrayal (Matar, *Country* 159; 112).

Interestingly, Slooma's most unequivocal demonstration of agency in the story takes place directly following this episode, when he runs back to the agent Sharief to give him the names of Baba's co-conspirators as well as *Democracy Now*, the sole volume he had rescued from Mama and Moosa's burning of Baba's books. The transfer of the book, which he had saved out of instinctive loyalty to Baba, seems to signal his complete surrender to the forces of the regime and transfer of loyalty (or identification) to Sharief. By then, however, the information is irrelevant and Sharief uninterested in both the names and the book, telling him: "Your father was very cooperative, melted like butter" (179). Now it is Baba who is marked and tainted by the aura of betrayal. Baba is released and returns home battered and bloody, unrecognizable to Slooma, yet what makes it impossible for Moosa to look at Baba is not his grotesquely wounded body but "the betrayal in his eyes" (208). By contrast, Ustadh Rashid, who has epitomized resistance, dies an abject death by public hanging, begging his executioners for mercy and then urinating and vomiting as he hangs from the rope. Condemned to death by the country of men, as he spots the hanging rope he is seen "pleading like a guilty child" while the frenzied mob shouts *Hang the traitor* (186-7). In this case, it is Slooma who, watching impassively from his living room, determines, "He didn't cry honorably, he cried like a baby" (185). Resistance, it seems, is not glorious, beautiful, or even dignified.

Why does Slooma conspire with the voice on the phone, or with Sharief? Has he been coerced, seduced, or simply confused into complicity? Or as Anne Gagiano suggests, is he "betrayed into betrayal"

(35)? Doubtless, the answer comprises some combination of all these explanations. Broadly speaking, of course, the damaged circumstances of his family relationships amplified by the grotesquely distorted political environment have left Slooma profoundly confused about his identifications with adult role models and the natural order of betrayal, protection, and trust. More immediately, there is the indignation of being constantly belittled by those around him as a child whose questions need not be answered, who does not need to know the truth. During Slooma's first encounter with Sharief, Slooma initially states twice in short succession, "I knew he was lying." His attitude begins to shift, however, the moment Sharief answers Slooma's questions: "'Is Ustath Rashid a traitor'? I asked. / 'Yes,' he said without hesitation... Unlike Mama and Moosa, he answered my questions. He didn't treat me like a child" (Matar, *Country* 130). A third explanation involves Slooma's protective instincts, which he transfers from Mama to Baba following Baba's arrest. Sharief demands that Slooma provide him with names under the guise of exculpating Baba, while using Mama's secret as additional leverage. In this interpretation, "Suleiman begins to enter into betrayal activities (against Nasser and Kareem, and even potentially against his father) as an only partially realized measure to protect his mother" (Kearney 143). Finally, there is the ineluctable backdrop of authoritarianism that surrounds Slooma with its ceaseless propaganda and unrelenting pressure. Indeed, after Baba's return and recovery, Slooma lies in bed listening to the radio and hears Qaddafi declaiming, "Revolutionary forces...have the right to use terror to eliminate anyone who stands against the revolution." Hearing the meaningless, senseless roar of the crowd in response, Slooma recounts that he "longed for the voice of the Guide to return" — implying that Qaddafi's voice offers Slooma a stable, reassuring—even fatherly—presence (Matar, *Country* 217). How can Slooma long for the voice of the man ultimately responsible for the arrest and torture of his beloved Baba? Does this moment capture the regime's psychological victory over the entire family following Baba's capitulation, or is it yet one more painful illustration of Slooma's state of confusion, navigating the conflicting messages of his public and private worlds? Perhaps more than any other scene, this brief and subtle moment in the narrative epitomizes how the regime succeeds in securing the total submission of its subjects.

Mothers: The Gendering of Resistance

Having scrutinized complicity in relation to the (male) child protagonists of the two novels, I turn now to the gendering of complicity and resistance in relation to their novels' depiction of parents. The novels take divergent positions in their gendering of resistance, with important implications for their child protagonists' respective outcomes. In *My Son's Story*, both men and women are full-fledged political actors. Aila and Baby find their own way into the resistance without the intervention of Sonny; Hannah leaves Sonny after she ascends to a prominent position in a U.N. commission. Despite his loyalty to Aila, Will, like his father, convinces himself that Aila remains unaware of Sonny's infidelity, and misses the signs of her politicization. Over the course of the novel, Will's rivalry with Sonny also deflects our own attention from Aila's political agency, which finally explodes into Will's consciousness (and, by extension, the reader's) with her unexpected arrest. Although Will and Sonny conspire once again to "protect" Aila, this time by planning for Sonny to falsely confess to the police that it was he who had hidden explosives in the yard, Aila preempts them by signing a statement taking responsibility. "It was my mother who had talked under interrogation. / I know why she did. It was to be sure neither her husband nor I would be held responsible," Will tells us; and at the same time, Aila refuses to provide any names of conspirators under interrogation (Gordimer 205). Sonny is stunned, not knowing how it happened: "How, without his having noticed it, had she come to kinds of knowledge that were not for her?...Whom did she know whose names she couldn't reveal? What was Aila doing, all those months, without him?" while Will, for his part, feels "elated": "She was in prison and she was free, free of him, free of me," then quickly corrects himself: "What nonsense. / She was shut in there" (205). The circle of inversions is completed when it is Hannah, ultimately, who finds out where Aila is being held and smuggles notes between Aila and her family. By the novel's end, on the level of political resistance, Sonny and Will have been eclipsed by the female characters.

In Matar's novel, by contrast, while complicity taints everyone, there seems to be scant possibility of a political resistance that is not male-gendered. In fact, Matar's novel offers a far more skeptical view of the resistance/complicity dichotomy, which seems to emerge directly from Mama's prior experience with her own family. Despite Mama's eventual submission to her marriage, her immediate family's betrayal leaves her deeply disillusioned and coldly clear-eyed about the social world, disabusing her of any belief in the utility of personal or political resistance. Throughout the novel, she disparages Baba's clandestine activities as naïve and reckless, counseling submission and acquiescence ("it's their time not ours"); discussing student protestors murdered by the regime, she avers, "They weren't standing

for me" (Matar, *Country* 95, 209). Her cynicism comes to the fore in her revisionist reading of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Matar's main literary interlocutor. Mama intersperses the retellings of her own story with disparaging references to Scheherazade as a "coward who accepted slavery over death" (15, 128). The blatant irony is that Scheherazade parallels Mama's own position as the captive-qua-nocturnal storyteller; Mama projects her domestic situation onto Scheherazade as a form of transference and denial. Slooma, for his part, calls Scheherazade "one of the bravest people that had ever lived. It's one thing not to fear death, another to sing under its sword" (66). Mama also uses references to the *Nights* as a kind of private code with Slooma (124). To Mama, Scheherazade personifies yet another agent of betrayal, leading her to forswear even the liberating potential of literature: "But, in the end, it was they [the High Council] who won. My arsenal of literary characters shrank rapidly from then on, even Scheherazade would betray me. Now I am unable to read anything longer than a poem or a newspaper article. Books demand too much trust" (172). Here it must also be mentioned that the chief architect of Mama's betrayal is none other than her supposedly liberal brother, a former poet and playwright. Mama's innate distrust of books must be linked to her betrayal by the most literary member of her family; it also suggests the possibility that the book-burning scene may be something more than a protective political measure. That said, Mama's position is especially striking when read against Matar's later memoir, where again and again, *resistance* is tied to the literary intelligentsia. Not only that, but Matar suggests that creating and consuming literature in Qaddafi's Libya was intrinsically an act of political resistance:

To be a Libyan artist in Libya was heroic. The country, its politics and social dogmas, thwart every possible artistic instinct. The perseverance of men like Ahmed [his interviewee] is astonishing. In 1978, when he was in his early twenties, he was amongst the large group of authors who were incarcerated. The regime had set up a trap. It invited young literary talent to take part in a book festival, then arrested them. (*The Return* 102)

If this is the case, it would seem Mama rejects literary resistance almost on principle, since from her perspective, even this form of resistance has been contaminated by patriarchy. This is a far cry from Shakespeare's role in Gordimer's novel; as we have seen, Shakespeare plays a complex, structural role, complicating the question of agency and discovery, but it is never in question that Shakespeare, as a synecdoche for literacy more generally, spurs Sonny toward self-realization and into the resistance.

Unlike her Libyan counterpart Najwa, Aila is oppressed not by overt structural patriarchy but by the covert gendered norms that lead her politicized husband and later, her son, to mistake her silence for quiescence. As such, "When she [Aila] sheds the protective coloring of her housewifely role and appears as a revolutionary, her husband and son are forced to reconsider the significance of her silence" (Möller 164). Indeed, Aila reasserts her agency as a political actor through the half-suppressed knowledge of Sonny's betrayal. Yet as Homi Bhabha notes, this is not a "displaced symptom" of her oppression or a "fatal return" of that knowledge. Rather, by obscuring the intent behind her choice, by allowing her to dwell (even after her arrest) within her stillness and silences, the narrative bespeaks Aila's liminality as a colored woman in the apartheid regime (Bhabha 149). Aila's arrest also shatters the presumed barrier between the intimate, private, family life that supposedly defines her and the public sphere that is associated with Sonny. After all, Aila has hidden the weapons within the family home; and it is the family home that the Afrikaners target in their destructive act of revenge. Bhabha identifies Aila's stillness, "the gaps in her story, her hesitation and passion that speak between the self and its acts" as "moments where the private and public touch in contingency." In so doing, Bhabha also shows how the "public sphere," as "the very 'place' from which the political is spoken...becomes an experience of liminality which question[s], in Sonny's words, what it means to speak 'from the center of life,'" i.e. the private experience of the family (149). Yet if Aila's concealment of explosives in the house bespeaks the liminality of the domestic space as an arena of political resistance, the opposite seems to hold in Matar's novel when Mama and Moosa, under duress, introduce an oversized portrait of Qaddafi into the family living room—the same room where they are spectators to the execution of Ustadh Rashid. Like resistance, complicity in the family also collapses the public/private divide.

Divergences: Considering Politics and Justice

In short, whether examined in relation to the individual protagonist, the family unit, or society at large, complicity is hardly isomorphic in Gordimer and Matar's respective works. In both novels, the child protagonists take on the political positions espoused by their parents; but in Gordimer, resistance is unambiguous and all-consuming, to the extent that the question at hand is why Will does not join the struggle. As we have seen, in *My Son's Story*, the complicity between Sonny and Will has profound ramifications for each member of the family, including Aila and Baby, and leads to the dissolution of the

family structure; but Sonny's betrayal of Aila through infidelity does not lead any of the characters toward political betrayal. To the contrary, Baby works through her familial trauma by deepening her political commitment, becoming a revolutionary. As such, we are not afforded the opportunity to see how political complicity affects the relationship between individual family members. By contrast, in Matar's novel, a second conflict plays out at home between Baba's imprudent idealism and Mama's protective realism. Furthermore, *In the Country of Men* demonstrates how a deep substratum of patriarchy coupled with an intensely coercive political environment creates the perfect storm for collective complicity on a grand scale. The betrayal of Najwa is not incidental to the more proximate dilemmas of the novel: Slooma's violent induction into the political world of men is preconditioned by his awareness that his very existence is quite literally predicated on that original act of betrayal, his mother's betrayal by her kinsmen. The incompatibility between Slooma's identification with Baba as his male role-model, and his proximity to Mama's suffering from male patriarchy, augment the other conflicts that paralyze him emotionally as he reaches maturity. Although it is never suggested that the adults in his life know, much less hold him accountable for, his acts of complicity during Baba's arrest, the narrative subtly implies that unresolved guilt may also have contributed to the adult Suleiman's emotional self-distancing, largely severing his relationship with his family and his past. In short, Gordimer posits continuity between the family and its political commitments, whereas Matar revises the relation between the family and its political position. Let us not forget that it is Baba's later reentry into politics that occasions his second arrest, Mama's relapse, and Baba's eventual death.

In contemplating these divergences, we must account for important structural differences between the authoritarian regime in Libya and the apartheid state in South Africa, not to mention the differences between the two authors themselves. The most meaningful difference is that on the national level, complicity and collusion are well attested in Matar's novel by the wild jubilation of the spectator mob during Ustadh Rashid's hanging, suggesting that Qaddafi's repression of dissent was widely supported by the Libyan public. Additionally, the authors themselves offer radically divergent political self-presentations. Gordimer calls herself a "white South African radical" (Clingman 286). On the other hand, Matar, whose father and grandfather were both figureheads of the Libyan resistance, claims in an interview that he is "not interested in political resistance, although I am deeply interested in justice. Justice...is apolitical...I may even go so far as saying that justice is...aesthetic. Therefore what preoccupies me in my work is the art itself. ... I refuse for my work to serve anyone or anything but itself" (Gana; Kearney 125). Matar's point seems to foreclose the possibility of political resistance as a tool of justice, even perhaps suggesting its futility (Mama's point of view in the novel), yet it also presumes a clean separation between art and politics and the possibility of art as autonomous—contentious claims, to say the least. If, as Liani Lochner suggests, we as individuals "achieve social identity only through subjection to the dominant discourse" and to the "ruling ideology" then the two novels lead us to opposing conclusions, ending respectively with Suleiman's submission to the lingering traumas of his childhood, on the one hand, and with Will's assertion of autonomy and his self-actualization as a scribe of the resistance, on the other (Gordimer 103, 105). Yet despite these significant differences, in both novels the family serves as the primary site in which the tensions between complicity and resistance are tested and through which the young narrators will reconstitute themselves as autonomous subjects.

Conclusion: Complicity and the Child Witness

What, then, can we say about the complicity and innocence of children as narrators, witnesses, and political agents in these two literary works? The scholarly research on child witnessing, based primarily in psychology and legal studies, focuses heavily on the issue of suggestibility during testimony. But the contemporary novel itself is rife with child witnesses of trauma, and in prose narrative, children are able to narrate their perceptions of events in real time, thus circumventing questions of memory and suggestibility and necessitating a different approach. Further, as Dori Lauber explains, the detailed memories of a child witness can sometimes appear as "discrete islands of precocious thinking" that belie their young age (76). This is certainly the case in fiction.

Early in the novel, Kareem presciently remarks to Slooma, "Children are useless in a war" (Matar, *Country* 27). As we have seen, this is not entirely true; while children may be useless as fighters, they can be made very useful indeed as informants. As characters in the novels, and most likely as actors in the social world as well, it is precisely the intensity of their protective desires and their need for acceptance and recognition that render children so vulnerable to exploitation during conflicts. In her study of Matar's novel and Bhapsi Sidhwa's 1989 *Cracking India*, a powerful novel about Partition narrated by a young girl, Annie Gagiano writes, "The children who 'report' on these processes in the

novels do vital witnessing work" through descriptions conveyed with special "affective intensity" (32). But as Gagliano aptly recognizes, the role of these child narrators teeters between that of witness and accomplice: "Both novelists disquietingly indicate the vulnerability of 'innocent' children to cruelty, not only as its victims, but by showing how children in disturbed environments may themselves become perpetrators, contaminated by or mimicking its violence" (36). As perpetrators, these children are severely traumatized, and much of their behavior can be traced back to the source of the trauma, whose effects are indeed "most psychologically disruptive when the perpetrator of the trauma is at the same time the adult on whom a child relies for love and protection" (Van der Kolk 16; Kearney 129).

What we see in these novels is not a sociological statement about the innocence or guilt of children in situations of conflict, but rather a representation of two distinct factors: one, the implications of trauma on the child narrators, and two, the gap between their naïve consciousness or self-understanding and the damaging information they supply, whose political implications can far exceed their partial understanding. Certainly, this gap is much wider in the case of Matar, but even in Gordimer's work, the adolescent Will is not always as perspicacious as he believes himself to be. Furthermore, because both Gordimer and Matar's novels employ a mix of child- and adult-perspectives in their narration, we are also privy to the gaps between the child's awareness in the moment and his later, retrospective understanding in looking back as an adult. The child narrator's consciousness thus becomes the medium that exposes the tension between the family and the political world, where the public intervenes in the private. On the other hand, the child narrator as *witness* exposes the private cost of political dissent and the functions of complicity, both within the family and as a tool used by coercive regimes to secure their subjects' submission.

However, the two narratives' split temporality and focalization also open the possibility of a different reading of these texts centered not on the child but rather on the "retrospective" adult. In light of their oscillations between the subject's perspective as a child *in media res* and as an adult looking back at his childhood self, could these novels potentially be read as confessions and their adult narrators as "confessional subjects," to use Michael Lazzara's term (142)? If so, what is the ethical responsibility of the adult narrating subject: is it bound up simply in the act of narration itself? Is it to retroactively assume responsibility for the complicity of the childhood self, or perhaps to offer an explanation for the complicity of the parents (as per Matar's novel), or to forgive the dissident father's abandonment of the family and sexual betrayal of the mother (as per Gordimer)? I pose these questions in order to suggest interpretive possibilities beyond those that have been the focus of my own reading here.

As Lebovic states, "The literary imagination allows for more sophisticated and complex understandings of complicity and dissent, beyond mere divisions between apolitical and political, and even between complicity and dissent itself" (7). *My Son's Story* and *In the Country of Men*, acclaimed novels published over twenty-five years apart, both illustrate this observation to the tee. Through their child witness-narrators, they demonstrate how political resistance and complicity become entangled with and inseparable from intimate acts of familial loyalty and betrayal. The novels powerfully demonstrate both the high stakes of resistance for children caught up in the consequential political fallout as well as the long-term psychological costs of complicity *and* resistance. By following the depiction of complicity in these narratives, we have seen its highly variable manifestations as well as a drastically different set of political outcomes. Ultimately, both authors use the child narrator's partial understanding and semi-innocence to reevaluate the ethics of complicity, yet they diverge in their conclusions. Whereas Matar's novel pits family loyalty and betrayal directly *against* the politics of resistance, essentially conflating political complicity with preservation of the Libyan family's life, Gordimer takes a more equivocal position. Gordimer's narrative mobilizes *both* parents and children as conscious political actors, eschewing a stark, polar identification of certain characters with either resistance or complicity, and blurring the lines that would delineate resistance as self-sacrifice or complicity as self-preservation. The complicity of children, bound up with love for parents and intertwined with ingrained deference to adult authority, is not the complicity of adults; nor is the agency of children akin to the agency of adults. But to consider the complicity of children is to reconsider the assumption that both complicity and dissent entail the conscious ethical choices of autonomous political actors taken in the face of injustice and wrongdoing.

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Author's profile: Lital Levy is associate professor of comparative literature at Princeton University, where she teaches courses in Hebrew and Arabic literatures, critical theory, and Jewish studies. Her research encompasses literature and film from Israel/Palestine, the 19th and 20th-century intellectual history of Arab Jews, the interface of Jewish writing and world literature, and comparative non-Western cultural modernities. Her award-winning 2014 book *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton University Press) investigated the cultural politics of Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism and translation. She is currently working on two book projects: an intellectual history of Arab Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries, and a study of temporality in the culture of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. E-mail: <lital@princeton.edu>