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Ibrahim al-Koni's Cosmology of the Desert in Three Movements

Ibrahim al-Koni, *New Wan, Saharan Oasis*, trans. William M. Hutchins, Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas Austin, 2014, 166 pp., \$21.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780292754751. [Originally published in Arabic as *Wan al-ṣaghīr*, 1997].

Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Puppet*, trans. William M. Hutchins, Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas Austin, 2010, 129 pp., \$16.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780292723351. [Originally published in Arabic as *al-Dumā* in 1998].

Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Scarecrow*, trans. William M. Hutchins, Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas Austin, 2015, 128 pp., \$21.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781477302521. [Originally published in Arabic as *al-Faṣṣā'* in 1998].

Ibrahim al-Koni (b. 1948) is probably the best known Libyan author writing in Arabic these days. A prolific writer, he has published over 80 works—novels, essays, and short story collections—which have been translated into over thirty different languages. Born in Ghadames Oasis in the Fezzan region of Libya and raised in the Tuareg culture of the area, he learned Arabic at the age of twelve. He studied literature and arts at the Gorky Institute in Moscow before moving around several European capitals to finally settle in Switzerland where he has lived since 1994. Despite his absence from the desert his literary work remains closely connected to the landscape and tradition he grew up in.

The three novellas under discussion here were written during a two-year period, and were published in English translation out of sequence over five years. Although each work is distinct, reading the trilogy in the order they were originally written provides a productive framework for engaging with the philosophical questions al-Koni raises. Although the works do not rely on character and plot development as narrative strategies, they do construct an epistemology based on mythology and metaphysics that develop diachronically. At the same time, as we move through the works one perceives a shift from poetics and philosophy to a more traditional novelistic structure in which character and action are foregrounded.

The desert for al-Koni is not geography, but rather a metaphysical space in which a whole system of knowledge has yet to be discovered. In an interview, al-Koni discusses how his work is an attempt to examine the lost dimension that exists in the desert, that is the *barṣakb* or isthmus between total freedom and existence, between life and death, which,

according to him, only happens in the desert. Like saints and philosophers before him, the desert is a place where one questions one's own existence, "to be or not to be"—not in relation to time and place, but rather to a world which is able to deny you. It is "a shadow of a place, one with no water," but one "that is also so alluring it can make your soul bloom." This, al-Koni claims, is why desert people, as he calls them, are so spiritual.¹

Trouble begins in the encounter between the spiritual and the one who no longer lives by the ethos of nomadic life, i.e. the laws of the spirit world. In simple terms, this "oasis" trilogy traces the development, flourishing, and destruction of a community that shifts from nomadic space to settled, almost eerily observing the model of nomadic and striated space theorized by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and where we follow an unequivocal path from the nomadic spirit to the corrupt body.² This plays out in a very provocative way on the literary level, as well, in which the first volume, *New Wam*, is less character driven and more poetic, able to capture the rhizomatic nodes that constitute nomadic life than the subsequent two. As nomadic culture settles into oasis living, the tension between the spirit world, who have always been in control of how leaders interpret and as such react to the world, becomes dominated by other materials like gold, for example, that start to restructure the connective tissue of social, economic, and political life. Material wealth, both the necessity of it and its value vanquishes, recasting the system of leadership to consolidate power. By the third volume, *The Scarecrow*, tyranny prevails and the hero Ahallum has succumbed to complete blindness. The nomadic peoples' relationship with the spirit world was one based on an ancient agreement between the people of the spirit world and Grandfather Mandam, who descended to the earth "in the time when rocks were moist" (2), in which,

they told their guest that they were the desert's masters and that if he wished to enjoy living in their kingdom, he had to obey their Law and accept a covenant whereby the son of the desert lands would become lord of these lands but leave the affairs of the spiritual worlds to the inhabitants of those worlds. (3)

The corruption of this agreement was immediate—the result of Mandam's curiosity—and his descendants, the desert dwellers would bear the consequences.

Socratic Dialogue as Narrative Strategy

In developing a novel outside of a theme of human relations it begins to feel like we are participating in a Socratic dialogue, not to find out what happens, but rather in a cooperative search for universal truths, which, in the context of the trilogy are those that can be elicited from the environment of the desert and nomadic life. Likewise, because these are fictional works, the narratives have no recourse to rational discourse and can lean on the side of poetics. The quest for truth might be found in an interpretative dialectic of desert people whose rationales have come under pressure with the (com)promise of settled life in the oasis.

To take the Socratic setting further, the virtues it may fashion (patience, tolerance,

¹ Ibrahim al-Koni interview: "In the Desert We Visit Death," <www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8sMbKQ-HEE>, (accessed 1 April 2017).

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

attentiveness, thoughtfulness, and civility) and the time it designs (the spaces of contemplation) are those that are required to embrace the literary capacity of these works. Reading these texts calls for an approach much different than what one may be used to, and not so much because of the foreignness of the characters or place. The approach is more akin to listening to music or viewing a piece of visual art without the note-card explanation or liner notes, arriving, perhaps, at unfamiliar literary territory. Early on in the first volume, *New Wam*, the elders, after interpreting the migratory patterns of a flock of birds, advocate for the tribe to move on as well, to migrate in search of a new oasis. The leader, a reluctant one at that, disagrees. The songs that he heard in the valley of the retem trees contravened their interpretations. In that valley, he heard a bird's song, in which "the bird's voice modulated."

...Then all the jinn in his heart awoke. They listened, reveled and entered ecstatic trances, carrying him off through time to return to him what time had taken. They didn't restore to him the harsh, lethal memory that lights a fire in the heart but never brings back what has passed. Instead they spirited him off to a space where space does not exist. Then he found himself in a time where time does not exist; a space that has not yet become space and a time that has not yet developed into time.... He remained in the world of the jinn for a period. He stayed suspended in a void devoid of all the characteristics of the void, hovering in a space lacking the special qualities of space, soaring in a time that gave birth to no one and that swallowed no one, because it was a time that had not yet been born. (22)

While it is not uncommon for al-Koni to use allegory and myth to literary affect in his work, his engagement with the spirit world in this trilogy is more akin to cosmology than literary symbolism. The interventions of the spirit world are neither one-sided nor predictable, and as such, provide an opportune space for a literary interlocutor like al-Koni to experiment with versions of this ontology.

These texts require a patience and reading practice that privileges narrative over story, and to open up the senses to the discreet motions of a gesture, like the rolling of a pebble under a foot, one that refers to a particular character, but may also prompt us to slow down our reading and re-connect our bodies and minds to both the earth and the text. During that deceleration, we are able to probe the contours of the texts in ways that plots and well-defined characters often disrupt with the anxieties and tensions that make them so compelling to read. The lack of psychology allows the Oasis trilogy to provide different pleasures, such as aesthetic and cosmic ones. Whereas novels are able to provoke empathy and sympathy for all sorts of characters by providing contexts we are not normally privy to outside of fictional space, the characters of these texts are relatively flat, and as such we do not feel much attachment toward them. They become, to a certain extent, caricatures. Yet, there is a richness to their lives despite their one-dimensional representation, a complexity that is intertwined with the desert, not as geography, but as cosmology that connects human beings with the elements and the spirit world in a literary concert.

Understandably, the allegory of power and the contrast of nomadic and settled life can easily overwhelm our reading, but it would be a shame to reduce the trilogy to a socio-political treatise, a literary appendix to Ibn Khaldun's scrutiny of the shift from nomadic life to sedentary life, or as a parable of tyranny. Al-Koni writes with an exquisite touch, beginning the series with the words: "For as long as he could remember he had listened for

counterpoint in the bird's song." As readers of al-Koni, we must listen for the counterpoint of his language, and as such, the novels. Without listening, the texts may be read as anthropology or politics, but then we might not hear the song.

Reading in Translation

We are fortunate to have quite a number of al-Koni's work translated into English. I have found the translation of *The Bleeding of the Stone* to be highly productive in an Arabic literature course.³ The story is compelling and also one that many students feel strongly about, often writing their papers on it through the lens of environmentalism, post-industrialization, and/or post-colonialism among other frameworks. I cannot imagine the same would be true for teaching the Oasis trilogy, which, as noted above, lacks a plot and character-driven narrative (though both exist), and I commend the University of Texas Press for issuing these translations nonetheless. At the same time, this raises some issues related to reading literature in translation. Firstly, one must praise and commend the translator William Hutchins for his work. The readings are smooth and very beautiful at turns, except for an occasional word choice. There is one misgiving I harbor that affects reading in translation—the introductory essay. Hutchins provides in the first two texts, *New Waw* and *The Puppet*, short introductions to al-Koni and his works with brief literary analyses of the works. *The Scarecrow*, meanwhile, is introduced by a rather long explicative essay entitled "al-Koni's Demons," one that would be much better served in a literary journal or essay outside of the publication of the translation. Placed before the reading of the novella itself, it appears initially to create the link between the first two volumes and this third one (which, for one thing makes a strong case for publishing the three translations together in one book). Yet, the essay diverges from this mission and attempts to help readers navigate the world of the jinn and the dividing line between them and humans, while also diving into some of al-Koni's other works so that we may make sense of his depictions of these kinds of characters. The essay, in the end, utterly confuses, and effectively detracts from the literary quality of the work. It may even deter a potential reader because one is made to feel the text is impenetrable without these key notes.

While context is useful for creating an atmosphere to enter into a work, an overly explicated interpretation takes away from the pleasure and exploration of the text on one's own. Hutchins's insights are welcome, but from the perspective of the world market of literature, it suggests that the trilogy cannot or should not be read outside of an academic and/or classroom experience. Minor literatures already have a hard time reaching the global market, so, to exoticize them even more seems prejudicial and deprives readers the pleasure of immersing oneself in the cosmology of the desert and nomadic peoples to discover it for oneself.

Alexa Firat
Assistant Professor of Arabic
Temple University

³ Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Bleeding of the Stone*, trans. May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley (New York and Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2002).

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