



Escaping Tradition, Finding Identity: Al-Koni's Nomadic Protagonists

الهروب من التقاليد، البحث عن الهوية: أبطال الكوني الرحل

Lecturer

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Abstract:

This paper examines how al-Koni employs the Saharan desert as a setting and symbol in his works. Through characters that escape traditional communities to isolate themselves in the desert, al-Koni suggests the desert provides space for spiritual and identity exploration outside of social constraints. Analyzing novels like *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the paper shows how al-Koni's protagonists undergo self-discovery journeys in the desert, often following Sufi philosophies of solitude, Nature worship, and unveiling spiritual truths. The desert emerges as a metaphor for liberation, self-knowledge, and transcending norms. Al-Koni's eco-friendly Sufi imagination is a means of rebuilding Tuareg heritage outside rigid structures.

Keywords: desert literature, Saharan symbolism, Tuareg identity, self-discovery, solitude, Sufism.

ملخص:

تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية في كيفية توظيف الكوني للصحراء الصحراوية كإطار ورمز في أعماله. من خلال شخصيات تهرب من مجتمعاتها التقليدية لتعزل نفسها في الصحراء، يقترح الكوني أن الصحراء توفر مساحة للاستكشاف الروحي والهوي خارج القيود الاجتماعية. بتحليل روايات مثل "غبار الذهب" و"نزيف الحجر"، تُظهر الورقة كيف خاض أبطال الكوني رحلات اكتشاف الذات في الصحراء، متبعين غالبًا فلسفات صوفية في العزلة، وعبادة الطبيعة، والكشف عن الحقائق الروحية. تبرز الصحراء كاستعارة للتحرر، ومعرفة الذات، وتجاوز الأعراف. يُعدّ خيال الكوني الصوفي الصديق للبيئة وسيلة لإعادة بناء تراث الطوارق خارج الهياكل الجامدة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب الصحراء، الرمزية الصحراوية، هوية الطوارق، اكتشاف الذات، العزلة، التصوف

Introduction

The desert has long captivated authors as a vast setting ripe with symbolic possibilities. In the works of Ibrahim al-Koni, the Saharan desert occupies a uniquely central role, providing not just a backdrop but a dynamic landscape that shapes identity, culture, and spiritual understanding. Through solitary characters who isolate themselves in the desert's emptiness, al-Koni suggests this space allows escape from constraints to evolve selfhood freely. His fiction crafts the desert as a complex mirror that both preserves vanishing traditions and enables identity reinvention far from social norms.



This paper analyzes how two works—Gold Dust and The Bleeding of the Stone—employ the desert to portray such journeys. Both feature protagonists like Ukhayyad and Asouf who leave communities behind, seeking self-discovery through solitude in nature's vast wilderness. Al-Koni establishes intricate human-animal bonds that symbolize mystical union, dissolving boundaries between realms of being. Throughout, the author incorporates key ideas from Ibn Arabi's Oneness of Existence philosophy. Exploring themes like nomadic identity, ascetic detachment, and eco-Sufism, this analysis aims to demonstrate how al-Koni's representations reflect mystical consciousness through desert settings and relationships.

For al-Koni, the Sahara represents more than a physical landscape—it is a metaphysical space conveying Sufi insights into unity, emptiness, and transcendence. "I have always been interested in the problem of the unity of creation," he says, "and indeed of the unity of the creation and the creator." Seen through this lens, his desert functions as the backdrop for themes of harmonizing divides through erasing human constructs. Characters achieve liberation and self-knowledge by escaping societal divisions. The desert here invites solitude conducive to unmasking constructions obscuring inner truth.

Echoing Ibn Arabi and the primacy of heart perception, al-Koni depicts the desert innate ability to cleanse souls through confronting hardships with patience. Trials purge souls to perceive via the qalb what intellect cannot grasp. Characters experience unveiling through confronting forces embodying God's Names and Attributes in al-Koni's highly Ibn Arabian projection. The desert hence unveils life's deeper puzzles as a space of divine witnessing where beings exist not as separate entities but as faces of the One.

Al-Koni's eco-minded outlook is also profoundly inspired by the natural world. Relationship between Asouf and the waddan establishes a sacred bond redolent with divinity through their mutual dependence for survival. Refusing violence against the divine creature representing the mountain region, Asouf models non-harming in harmony with nature. His willingness to sacrifice highlights care for other lives inherent to al-Koni's philosophy.



Through depicting journeys of self-discovery in liminal desert spaces, al-Koni suggests this setting allows transcending constraints to evolve outside rigid cultural schemas. By collapsing boundaries between realms of being, his fiction crafts the desert as a dynamic symbol mediating identity, culture and spirituality. Al-Koni's works emerge from the Sahara both literally and metaphorically as a platform for reconceptualizing heritage away from rigid structures. His works transplant Tuareg traditions outside confinement through nomadic protagonists undergoing transformative experiences in Nature's vast wilderness mirror.

Echoes of Vanishing Traditions

Al-Koni's body of work is fundamentally centered on the notion of the lost Waw: the vanishing past, tradition, identity, the Tuareg people, their heritage, mythology, and the desert itself. His literature grapples with the erasure of a culture whose suffering and history remain largely absent from global narratives. Through his use of various belief systems, religions, and myths, al-Koni underscores the fluidity and relativity of these constructs in shaping human existence, with a particular focus on the Tuareg way of life. What sets al-Koni apart from other Arab authors is his profound philosophical insights, which move beyond mere representation of reality to uncover deeper layers of existence that challenge the reader's preconceptions. His works, imbued with an elegiac tone, serve as a lament for the fading of ancient myths. They function like protective charms, resisting the erasure of cultural heritage—preserving the stories of those who ventured to battle the southern winds (qibli) and never returned. Al-Koni's narratives are a tribute to the enduring fragments of the desert's authenticity, fragments that survive in the collective memory or remain etched in the hidden corners of mountain caves. His writings chronicle the gradual obliteration of the Tuareg's ancient civilization and its confrontation with this loss. In doing so, his works, like traces left by dust on the wind, unveil the hidden truths that the qibli seeks to erase or obscure.

Al-Koni's novels are deeply infused with Sufi thought, where the heart's intuition surpasses the intellect, and inner vision transcends external sight. His works demand a type of spiritual understanding from readers, one that goes beyond conventional knowledge of the desert or the world, aligning instead with the esoteric wisdom (ir-



fan) of Sufism. In his narrative, animals are seen as vessels of the divine, while the desert itself becomes a metaphor for God—its vast emptiness reflecting the boundlessness and formlessness of the divine. The desert's phenomenology mirrors the Sufi journey toward self-awareness and unity with the divine essence.

Al-Koni's concept of creativity is also rooted in Sufi principles, which entail a significant personal sacrifice on the part of the artist. He suggests that true creative expression can only arise when the writer detaches from the constraints of worldly life. Elmarsafy explores this idea by noting that al-Koni's departure from the desert symbolizes the necessary sacrifice for creativity, echoing the Sufi's renunciation of material ties to attain spiritual insight. According to Elmarsafy, al-Koni sees the writer as an "individu-hors-du-monde," (109) an individual who exists outside the established social order, suggesting that such isolation is crucial for genuine artistic creation.

Sufism, Unity, and Transformation

In *Gold Dust*, the character Ukhayyad embodies Sufism on two distinct levels. First, he represents the ascetic pursuit of spiritual perfection, withdrawing from worldly concerns and seeking transcendence within the vast desert. Second, his deep, almost mystical bond with the piebald Mahri reflects the Sufi concept of the Oneness of Being as articulated by Ibn Arabi, where the boundaries between human and animal dissolve. Ukhayyad's perception of the desert as a divine mirror and his belief in God's presence within the heart are core tenets of Ibn Arabi's Sufism. Similarly, in *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Asouf represents Sufism as an eco-philosophy through his sacred bond with the waddan, echoing the Sufi belief in the sanctity of all beings. Both Asouf and his father embrace asceticism by retreating from human society and leaving behind the oasis life, embodying the Sufi ideal of withdrawing from the material world to seek divine truth. Throughout these novels, the desert serves as a barzakh, a liminal space where the protagonists experience Sufi revelations (kashf) and witness the mysteries of the divine.

Both *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone* explore the Sufi notion of Oneness of Being by depicting interconnected relationships between humans, animals, and God. The boundaries separating these entities dissolve in a spiritual unity, reflecting the Sufi experience of transcending all distinctions. Written within months of each oth-



er in the late 1980s, these novels share a central theme: the profound relationship between humanity and the natural world. Al-Koni uses the desert as a stage for the Sufi imagination, where different realms of existence converge. His planetary consciousness envisions a wholeness of being, where the human and non-human are interwoven in an intricate dance of life. Ibn Arabi, a key figure in Sufi mysticism, greatly influences al-Koni's portrayal of divine truth.

In both novels, the wilderness of the desert is disrupted by hunters, creating tension that is heightened by the presence of Sufi dervishes and nomads, who roam the desert to resist these intrusions. Despite the ancient tradition of hunting, al-Koni's dervishes stand as protectors of the sacred wilderness. In *Gold Dust*, the simultaneous death of the Mahri and the crucifixion of Ukhayyad underscores the Sufi belief that nothing exists in isolation. In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Asouf's bond with the waddan is equally profound—the animal saves Asouf, and he in turn protects it from hunters. When Asouf becomes powerless, al-Koni invokes the Tuareg-Sufi belief in metamorphosis, transforming him into a waddan, thus ensuring the continuity of their sacred connection.

Navigating Spiritual Desolation

Al-Tibr (1990) was translated into English by Elliott Colla in 2008 as *Gold Dust*, it primarily narrates the tale of Ukhayyad, a descendant of the illustrious Akhenukhen, "[...] son of the most venerable of the desert tribes" (144), and his bond with the piebald Mahri. Following the death of his mother, Ukhayyad's father entrusts him to an elderly African foster mother. He is guided in his spiritual journey by two sheikhs: "Ukhayyad learned a few Qur'anic verses from a blind sheikh who spent his life wandering with the clan. Then the sheikh died from the bubonic plague, and his place was taken by Sheikh Musa, who not only educated him, but also treated him like a sincere friend" (69-70). Sheikh Musa emerges as a constant presence in Ukhayyad's life, significantly shaping his character and leading him to roam the desert like a dervish throughout the narrative.

Sheikh Musa, rumored to have journeyed "from the western ends of the desert, from Fez, the land of teachers and scholars of Islamic law" (19), profoundly influences Ukhayyad, whose experiences in the desert are marked by the persistent echo of



Musa's teachings. As both a Sufi and a disciple of Sheikh Musa, Ukhayyad struggles against his desires, particularly regarding women, reflecting the inner conflict characteristic of his spiritual journey.

In his narrative, Al-Koni intricately unfolds the poignant relationship between Ukhayyad and the Mahri. The dynamic depicted in *Gold Dust* transcends the dichotomy of human and animal, as Ukhayyad feels a profound, voluntary obligation to care for the beleaguered Mahri. Their existence within the desert's liminal space serves as a threshold that intertwines their lives and deaths; each sustains the other, and their fates are irrevocably linked. Throughout his journey, Ukhayyad confronts diverse forces: familial figures (his father, Dudu, and his companions), spiritual entities (the jinn), and the harsh realities of nature (drought and famine), alongside his unfulfilled vow to the deity Tanit. His path is further complicated by the intricate web of customs and beliefs that lead him into a state of confusion and disorientation.

Ukhayyad finds himself ensnared at the convergence of these multifaceted influences. Each time he eludes one peril, he inevitably plunges into another, illustrating the desert's deceptive nature as a trap. From a reflective standpoint, the narrator articulates his views on the role of women in a man's life, cautioning, "Beware the charms of women! Their allure is a mystery...The allure of women was something created just to slay men like Ukhayyad" (66-67). This assertion can be interpreted as Al-Koni's ironic commentary on the diminishing status of Tuareg women in light of the radical interpretations introduced by Muslim scholars. The irony serves to highlight that the Sahara embodies a form of Sufism that is more authentic than that which is imported from external influences.

Moreover, Ukhayyad grapples with his father's pronouncements regarding marriage and Islamic law: "He [the father] was famous for often repeating the saying of the Prophet, 'The three dearest things to me in your world are: women, perfume, and—most of all—prayer.' He then liked to offer his commentary, 'See? Women come first. They're at the top of the Prophet's list'" (68-69). The father is portrayed as a womanizer, in stark contrast to Ukhayyad, who, under the guidance of two ascetic sheikhs, renounces worldly attachments and immerses himself in the solitude of the desert.



Desert as Metaphysical Threshold

In the *Futuhāt*, Ibn Arabi delves into the concept of *barzakh*, a liminal state that exists between the earthly realm and resurrection. Understanding the nature of existence within this world transcends mere intellectual comprehension. The inhabitants of the desert navigate life in this intermediary realm through their direct encounters with the harsh natural forces that characterize their environment, such as famine, thirst, and drought. In *Gold Dust*, the theme of confronting death in the desert is poignantly illustrated through the experiences of Ukhayyad and his grandfather. Ukhayyad encounters death in both dreams and waking life, while his grandfather dreams of the lote tree, a potent symbol in Sufism that represents the *sedrat al-muntaha*.

Al-Koni elaborates on the significance of the desert, asserting:

"In my work the desert therefore has an existential dimension, a metaphysical dimension, for in reality the desert is not a place; a place has preconditions, and one of the preconditions is water, and the lack of water in the desert makes it impossible to settle there, so the desert becomes a place of absence, a place that is a shadow of another place; a place that invites *dahsha*. Because the place [setting] which is also unconnected with the speeds that are characteristic of civilization in the city, that is boundless and unconnected, must necessarily also influence time" ("Visiting Death" in *Myth and Landscape* 75).

Through this lens, the desert transcends its physicality, transforming into a metaphorical landscape that shapes both existence and perception, emphasizing its role as a threshold between life and the unknown.

In al-Koni's perspective, the desert engenders a sense of "bewilderment" due to its inherent placelessness and timelessness. He rationalizes his departure from conventional notions of time by associating it with the desert's unique quality of being unanchored in space. In this sense, al-Koni conceptualizes time as a continuum where the past, present, and future coalesce simultaneously. While death looms as an inevitable future event, the desert serves as a realm in which one may encounter death prior to the actual moment of passing. Thus, it emerges as a *barzakh*, a domain that transcends the material world.

The desert acts as a threshold, existing alongside both life and death, yet not whol-



ly belonging to either. In its shimmering mirage, only the presence of God can be discerned, as this mirage is referenced in the Quran as an imaginative realm where divine encounters occur. Michel Chodkiewicz, in his exploration of Ibn Arabi's teachings, articulates that "[...] God can be found only in the absence of things [i.e., of second causes] upon which we depend [...] God will be life for the thirsty man" (An Ocean without Shore 41). Consequently, the desert is characterized as a non-dual space where water and mirage intertwine, exemplifying a profound unity.

Moreover, al-Koni perceives the desert as a space where one may experience death and subsequently return to life; in this context, the profound encounter with death signifies freedom. For him, freedom equates to death. In his essay "Visiting Death," al-Koni observes, "In the desert we are at the dividing line that is between us and death. And that is in fact a kind of cure. For it is only in the desert that we can pay a visit to death and afterwards return to the land of the living" (75). He posits that saints, prophets, and divine revelations emerge from the desert, as it represents the true demarcation between authentic freedom and existence, as well as between life and death.

Ecological Bonds and Sacrifice

The Bleeding of the Stone serves as an eco-Sufi narrative that reflects the self-awareness of its narrator. Ibrahim al-Koni's Sufi perspective is exemplified through Asouf, an ecological Bedouin who fosters a profound connection with the waddan, a creature emblematic of the desert's fragile ecosystem. Musa also embodies this "Ecological Bedouin," as explored by Sherif S. Elmusa in relation to three significant Arabic novels situated in arid landscapes: Endings (1977) by Abdal Rahman Munif, The Bleeding of the Stone (1990) by Ibrahim al-Koni, and Seeds of Corruption (1973) by Sabri Moussa. Elmusa's examination in "The Ecological Bedouin: Toward Environmental Principles for the Arab Region" draws a parallel between this ecological archetype and the "Ecological Indian," or the Native American who harmonizes with nature. He posits that the ecological Bedouin plays a crucial role in "the formation of environmental principles for the region" (9).

According to Elmusa, "The portrayal of the Ecological Bedouin in these narratives embodies a strong environmental philosophy, acts as a conservationist, and holds the



lives of non-human beings in high regard for their intrinsic worth. This perspective recognizes creation as an interconnected entity rather than a collection of separate parts, while also honoring the heritage of ancestors through rock art, storytelling, and geographical names.” (9). A defining aspect of al-Koni's narrative is its desert setting, where the biodiversity is scarce, yet figures like Asouf forge profound connections with the natural world.

Asouf opts to sustain his spiritual bond with the waddan, prioritizing this connection over human relationships. Nature, personified by the stone and sky, responds to the act of Asouf's crucifixion: “The murderer had no eyes to see how the sky had darkened, how clouds had blocked out the desert sun [...] great drops of rain began to beat on its [the murderers' truck's] windows, washing away, too, the blood of the man crucified on the face of the rock” (135). The concept of Oneness of Being transcends mere human-animal relations; it encompasses a unity between sky and earth as well. Asouf's sacrifice is emblematic of his commitment to protect the waddan, which embodies “the magic of a woman and the innocence of a child, the resolution of a man and the nobility of a horseman, the shyness of a maiden, the gracefulness of a bird, and the secret of the broad expanses” (88).

Moreover, the waddan represents both a temptation for John Parker's transcendent aspirations and a victim of Cain and Masoud's brutality and greed. Parker's girlfriend Caroline departs from him, disenchanted by his peculiar ideas, influenced by Buddhist teachings and obscure Sufi texts advocating the consumption of animal flesh as a means to commune with the divine. He resolves to use his isolation in the western mountains to uncover the secret of tasting the flesh of this legendary creature, hoping that such an act would grant him divine revelation:

“In his isolation in the western mountains, he sought to uncover the secret of tasting the flesh of a legendary animal, hoping this act would grant him divine insight. He was intrigued by the Sufis' belief that grazing animals were particularly deserving of God's holiness, drawing parallels with Zen teachings that prioritize animals over humans. These teachings distinguished between animals, deeming some worthy of mercy while others were not. Furthermore, an obscure Sufi mentioned various unusual ail-



ments that could only be cured by consuming gazelle flesh, prompting him to express his need for gazelles, which led others to reference Cain, the son of Adam.” (107).

In this intricate narrative, al-Koni weaves a rich tapestry that explores the intersections of ecology, spirituality, and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Through characters like Asouf and Ukhayyad, al-Koni utilizes the Saharan desert as a setting that provides space for his nomadic protagonists to escape socio-cultural constraints and embark on journeys of self-discovery. Isolated in the vast emptiness of the desert, these characters undergo transformational experiences often inspired by Sufi philosophies of solitude, nature-worship, and unveiling spiritual truths. Whether forming profound bonds with non-human creatures like the Mahri and waddan or suffering immense hardship alone, al-Koni’s nomads undergo trials that shape their identities outside of normative structures.

By depicting intricate human-animal relationships and symbolic natural elements, al-Koni collapses man-made boundaries and envisions an eco-Sufi vision of interconnectivity. His protagonists achieve liberation and self-realization through detachment in the desert wilderness. Although the ecological heritage of the Tuareg faces threats of erosion, al-Koni resurrects vanished traditions and perpetuates an environmental consciousness through characters who foster sacred ties with their desert environs. Overall, al-Koni employs the desert setting to portray journeys of autonomy, where solitary figures break free from societal and religious confines to achieve self-knowledge outside rigid frameworks.

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