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# Mythical Realism in North African Fiction: Ibrahim Al-Koni's *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*

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## Introduction: Magical Realism and the North African Tradition

In Ibrahim al-Koni's "spacious realm," the reader faces an interpretation of a highly complex reality that challenges his/her understanding of fiction and reality. The reality that novels usually disclose is the one of presence as the setting is usually a city or a well-defined place. Al-Koni puts forward the reality of absence or "life in the desert" as perceived by the outsider. What is absent, invisible or imperceptible in a realist novel, becomes central in al-Koni's magical/mythical realist stories.

In this paper, I aim to elucidate what I mean by mythic realism through showing how mythic realism is different from the concept of magic realism and how it prevails in the case of the fiction on the desert in Ibrahim al-Koni's novels mainly *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Gold Dust*.

North African ancient Tuareg culture besets the mythic and mystic systems that explained nature and life through millennia and helped them cope with the harshness of the space. Desert gods and detailed myths accounting for creation, life, and the after-life gave the space its spiritual dimension. Furthermore, myth and reality as intertwined facets of life is central to Tuareg cultural demarcation of collective lines and shared imaginary. In this case, it will be argued that the means by which al-Koni represents identity is essentially magical/mythical and that, by examining these magical/mythical narratives, the reader recognises the way al-Koni approaches his native space and how his texts recreate an authentic North African desert identity.

Myth is the main feature of magical realism in al-Koni's work. The writer debates, in his *My Great Desert*, an auto-critical piece of writing, in which he tells of his "desert novel" as opposed to "city novel." He announces that the nature of desert novel invokes myth, because its language is derived from an alternative approach to time and space. He pinpoints to the fusion of desert novel with myth elaborating

The secret of our being is comprehended in fusing the following trinity: the novel, the void and myth. The novel is the spirit of the secret, the desert its body, and myth its language. [...]. In this cycle lies a secret alacrity and thirst for myth. Narrativity and the novel are annihilated unless preserved in mythical language. The aim from the beginning is to create myth. The aim in writing a novel is to construct myth and to dismantle prefixes. The myth of space is possible only in mythical language. It is telling myth from myth sayings and creating myth from the creation myth itself. (Ibrahim Al-Koni, 1998: 122)

Every human society needs myths, a place and a time of origins. Since myths are a "sum of useful knowledge" (Al-Koni 1998: 122) and acts already performed that aspire to a fully human experience, oblivion or destruction of this "collective memory" (Al-Koni 1998: 122) lead to the loss of identity. Without origin to cling to, society inevitably loses its substance and identity. The North African region is at the heart of this problem because its history has been continually perforated by colonisation. For several centuries, the foreigners' or the outsiders' presences were followed by long and agonistic revolts and wars.

Thus, following this guidelines, this paper focuses on the events of myth and magical tale in the realist North African novels, as well as on possible recreations or adaptations of these elements to the desert. Before going further in depth with these questions, it is vital to define mythical realism as compared to magical realism.

The concept of myth can be defined in many different ways. In one of his lectures, Leon Burnett observed, "myth is the filling of the void," (in a discussion during the Myth Reading Group at Essex University, June 2014). Burnett referred to the desert as the void space *par excellence*. In a general tentative to define it, myth comports a complex and multifaceted reality, a "dramatic human tale" that is interpreted in various ways. The most common ethnographic definition however insists on the sacredness of myth in telling an event that took place in "primordial time, the fabulous time of "beginnings" [...]. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic irruptions of the sacred [...] in the World." (Eliade 1963: 12) To consider myth as a sacred story is part of the definition because myth is also a "true story", as Eliade argues

that it always refers to realities, for instance, "the creation myth" is "true because the existence of world is there to prove it" (Eliade 1963: 12). This distinction is particularly interesting in the context of the colonised and the contemporary North Africa, as it provides two opposed visions of myth. The first is the approach of traditional societies who consider myth true and therefore a belief. The second is the Western perception of myth as fiction or invented stories.

The North African novel of our interest renders possible the intrinsic combination of myth and reality. There is a creed in the intertwining of the human with the superhuman, the species with trans-species, and the natural with the supernatural, which perforates the pages of the novels. The Tuareg transmitted his/her philosophy in the drawings or carvings and sculptures found in the Tassili paintings. Tassili n'Ajjer is a region located in a strange lunar landscape of great geological interest, this site has one of the most important groupings of prehistoric cave art in the world. More than 15,000 drawings and engravings record the climatic changes, the animal migrations and the evolution of human life on the edge of the Sahara from 6000 BC to the first centuries of the present era. The geological formations are of outstanding scenic interest, with eroded sandstones forming 'forests of rock'. Tuareg oral heritage is mainly centred on their mythological tradition, songs and stories from an unknown ancestral origin and aphorisms that act as sacred rules and sayings. Yet, Tuaregs are not isolated from modernity. These tribes grasped from the different civilisations that colonised them and, by their nomadism, they refused to adhere completely to modernity by voicing their tradition. It is in this blending of past and present that al-Koni, in his attempt to account for the intervention of mythic elements in shaping the psyche and lives of his characters, defines his genre as an attempt at "creating myth from the creation myth itself". His definition seems too complex that I would coin it 'mythic realism'.

In my attempt to explore mythical realism in the North African desert, I will adopt the native conception and adapt it to western theory. Before studying al-Koni's novels, it is necessary to define magical realism in order to show how al-Koni's work goes beyond the mere "exotic" considerations of the North African desert to include, among others, what I call mythical realism.

The major critics who defined the concept of magical realism are Carpentier, Flores, Wendy Faris, Stephen Slemon and others<sup>1</sup>, each presents his own reflection on it, adding, consequently, to the confusion and ambiguity already inherent to the term since its first appearance.<sup>2</sup> In 1948, Carpentier drew attention to the differences between magical realism and marvellous realism, in his definition of the concept. He describes his visit to Haiti and his

discovery of “lo real maravilloso,” a term and concept that he devises to describe a uniquely Latin American form of magical realism. Carpentier’s proposition of “lo real maravilloso” is perhaps one of the rich definitions of magical realism. Carpentier distinguishes the magical realist fiction by its themes, where myth, legend, and magic are common traits. For him, it provides a new horizon for the conceptualization of magical realism as a corrective project working against monologic political and cultural systems. Hence, the literature of Latin America reflects not only the magical reality there, but also the accompanying faith of the Latin American people, which enables the apprehension of that magical reality (Faris & Zamora 1995: 6).

Alejo Carpentier, calling for a drawing on other peoples’ myths, legends and experiences that precede the cultural process of assimilation of a coloniser that became idealised for his power as an example to follow to join world advancement, limits this mode to Latin American countries, as a unique experience after the colonisation of his country and people. Unlike Carpentier, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris believe in the universality of this mode and emphasise that magical realism was mainly developed during the second half of the twentieth century around the world. They maintain that the literature of all countries is potentially capable to produce magical realist works as long as they are compatible with the belief systems of that culture. It is a mixture of realism and fantasy regarded as ordinary daily occurrence or as typical life among the characters. Regardless of the *exceptionality* and *extraordinariness* of the subjects, all involved characters should react indifferently. Zamora and Faris state that contemporary magical realists write against the mental map that needs to be “erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together” in a new/ancient text that is necessarily, but not only “subversive” never confined into one rationalism but converts the old binaries into “in-betweenness and [...] all-at-onceness.” (Faris & Zamora 1995: 6)

The recent anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* edited by Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora is an important book in the debate on magical realism. It deals with magical realism as a universal conception. It covers a large geographical area and literary contexts as varied as Europe, Asia, North America, the Caribbean, Australia, Africa and North Africa. It is in this anthology that one of the critics, Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, first uses the concept of mythical realism in his “Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English”. To Garant, Ondaatje is the first to coin the concept of “mythical realism” that dates back to the 1989 afterword he writes to Howard O’Hagan’s novel, *Tay John*. Garant comments that the interpretation of magic, with writers like Ondaatje, is no more “literal” than “metaphorical”, nature plays a

major role in this prospect and the landscape “is no longer passive but active – invading, trapping, dragging away, etc.” (Faris & Zamora 1995: 252) Although, both writers agree that landscape “is quicksilver, changeable, human – and we are no longer part of the realistic novel, and no longer part of the European tradition” (Faris & Zamora 1995: 252). The authors limited this concept to the Canadian novel, in the case of Ondaatje, and to Second World countries, in the case of Garant, referring to non-Third-World countries. My interest, in other words, is to apply mythical realism to the rest of the world, mainly the Middle Eastern and North African post-colonial space where “magic” is part of the physical world rather than a projection of the characters’ psyche (Faris & Zamora 1995: 253).

In 2004, in her *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Faris offers one of the most comprehensive critical studies of this literary genre. She adopts the same global perspective she shared before with Zamora asserting that magical realism is “perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction.” (Faris 2004: 136) To Faris, magical realism is a mode of narration that has five features. First, the story should include elements of magic. Second, it should depict elements of the phenomenal world. In addition, it should arouse readers’ confusion in his perception of the events. In addition, the text fuses different realms. Last, it should disquiet standard perception of time, space and identity. (Faris 2004: 140-3)

In Faris’ presentation of magical realism, through the creation of the narrative space between reason and mystery, the mode is able to recreate a dimension of the marvellous that is lost in the modern Western world into modern narrative. It reveals a “hidden presence of the sacred within the profane.” (Faris 2004: 102) As “linguistic magic”, it projects “an implicit aura of the sacred.” (Faris 2004: 111) In her later work, Faris speaks more directly of the function of magical realism, arguing that the modern-day magical realist writer is like the shaman, who performs for his/her community the important spiritual function of connecting the life of everyday to the world of spirits. Furthermore, similar to the way the shaman enters a spiritual state of consciousness in order to heal the individual and the community, the contemporary magical realist writer uses verbal magic to cure the reader of the too-stifling anchoring to material reality that was the goal of realistic representation. (Faris 2004: 80) Magical realism, in addition, speaks of cultural crises; it functions to heal specific “social, political, environmental, and religious wounds” occurring in the contemporary global context. (Faris 2004: 83)

In the case of the North African desert, this heritage comes from the historical and cultural relations with Africa, Middle East and the Mediterra-

near Europe in their peculiar magical and mythical influences. Describing two parallel systems in the world, like Carpentier's essay, al-Koni's novels show how, while other cultures lost their spirituality and magic, the desert preserves them. This idea is further enhanced in Carpentier's essay, "The Baroque and the Marvellous Real". It proposes the idea that the marvellous aspect is inherent to the human and natural realities of space and time. This idea is extended by the present work to the North African desert suggesting that the marvellous is a universal phenomenon. As Faris explains:

In the magical realist texts [...], the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. (Faris 2004: 158)

Some of the characteristic features of this kind of fiction are "the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or strange, skilful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealist descriptions, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable." (Thody 1996: 94) The magical realist mode covers accordingly all the literature that is not labelled under the Western definition of realism, thusly overlapping with postmodern theories.

To the present research, the discussions of the theory of magical realism owe the greatest depth to Stephen Slemon. Particularly to his influential article "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." (1995: 407-427) One of Slemon's central claims is that magical realism is the genre of the people on the "margins" of mainstream literary tradition. Indeed,

The critical use of the concept of magic realism can therefore signify resistance to monumental theories of literary practice—a way of suggesting there is something going on in certain forms of literary writing, and in the modalities of cultural experience that underline those forms, that confronts the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with them. (Hutcheon 1989: 154)

Slemon relates magical realism to post-colonialism, which is an act of resistance through glorifying one's past, heritage and culture, which are denigrated and stereotyped as savage and inferior in colonial fiction, press and political discourses. In opposition to the existing canon of genres and modes, and against controlled order, which is the dominant style of the metropolis (McHugh 2012:5), magical realism mixes the modern and the traditional, the realistic and the fabulous, the secular and the religious, the sophisticated and the popular, and resists classical expectations of closure and unity. In the

postcolonial context, however, this also suggests that magical realism "carries a residuum of resistance toward massive imperial centre" (Faris 2004: 408) and presents a positive alternative to the colonial ideology.

Through this duality, a space is created where alternative realities and different perceptions of the world can be conceived. The issue of space is crucial to both magical realism and postcolonial discourse. The struggle between the "centre" and "periphery" is the one for space. The discourses of colonialism position the natives as subjects to be studied, observed and defined as a way to exercise hegemony over space. The imposed literary, social and political systems of Western culture effectively denied a space where native voices could express themselves. At most, literary contributions emerging from the "margin" were often described as a variant of the original and thus inferior. For these reasons,

Magical realism has become associated with fictions that tell the tales of those on the margins of political power and influential society. This has meant that much magical realism has originated in many of the postcolonial countries that are battling against the influence of their previous colonial rulers and consider themselves to be at the margins of imperial power. (Faris 2004: 408)

By adopting the discourse of the margins, the literary genre corresponds to the postcolonial theory's claim. It is in the marginal space that magical realism and post-colonialism meet. To Faris, magical realism originates in postcolonial countries. Her claim is central to our analysis, where al-Koni appears as the magical realist novelist from the post-colonial North Africa.

Slemon remains the critic who has drawn the most attention to the importance of binaries within magical realism: such as Europe and its "Other", coloniser and colonised, and the West and the rest, which is followed the Western Rationale; and now is on its way to recover identity in the magical realist text. From a postcolonial critical standpoint, "these binaries can be read as legacies of the colonial encounter: a condition of being both tyrannized by history yet paradoxically cut off from it, caught between absolute systems of blind cognition and projected realms of imaginative revision in which people have no control." (Faris 1995: 418)

At this level of the analysis, magic realism seems to cover all the transgressive elements a writer introduces in his realist work. However, my main objective is to highlight the differences between magic and myth and see how the North African novel in its depiction of space is more likely to be mythic rather than magic. The first who used the expression "mythic realism", to my knowledge, is Ondaatje in 1989. He established the difference between magic realism as an extension of the characters' psyche and the mythic one as an outcome of the space in action. In the desert as perceived in al-Koni's work, the

characters are led by the meditative nature of the space into a spiritual being. This is how the protagonist in al-Koni's work is the desert with her ancient gods and saints reincarnated in its characters (Tanit, Anubis, Akka, the Waddan, the Lion, the Moon, Amanai, the Qibli, the Stone, etc).

Ibrahim al-Koni focuses mainly on the way the North African quester seeks to redefine and explore his cultural identity through a mythical/magical realist mode of writing. The North African magical realism is bound up with a kind of nationalism that seeks to revalue its heritage in popular Berber culture. The stories of al-Koni set forth a different perspective from the dominant Eurocentric and Arabic discourses, by evoking the myths and the spirituality of the desert where he was born and where reality is magically different from the European one.

### The Libyan author Ibrahim al-Koni

The focus of this paper is on the originality in al-Koni's novels and in his exploration of the desert from the mythical realist perspective. This part is going to study the elements of mythical realism in al-Koni's novels, *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Gold Dust*, highlighting its specificity to the North African desert.

In these stories, the desert is the ancestral place that the Saharan left behind when the conqueror had arrived to spread greed. al-Koni's desert is peopled by the tragic protagonists (like the *zai'm*, the guardian, Mussa, Akhmad, Anubi), gods, *jinn* and spirits, as in the case of the *Zai'm* in *The Animists* who found in the shadows his bond and support

Azger was the only home that bridged us to the ancestral life. Our ancestors share with us by offering us the best gifts, treasures and wisdom. (Branin 2011: 18)

It is within this realm of immensity and extension that the protagonist of al-Koni dwells. The connoisseur of the desert applies one of the philosophies of desert life on his text. He textualises infinity. The stories are shaped according to desert rules, different to the European ones, which raises many questions about the genre of the metropolis. With al-Koni, the North African novel is recreated from a desert perspective where the narrator's choice of words is also of crucial importance in understanding the ways of thinking of desert dwellers. Metaphorical expressions, such as the aphorisms at the end of Al-Koni Anubis: *a Desert Novel*, show the philosophy of native Berbers in their approach to life. The aphorisms are timeless laws of the desert, they are orally inherited from generation to generation, and al-Koni textualises them and encapsulates their timelessness and immensity. They are timeless sayings that the characters refer to as the voice of the desert. Any of the characters, who does

not respect his vows and the dictates of the desert, is doomed. By transgressing one of the backbones of fiction as genre, al-Koni transforms the setting into an infinitely circular place and time. These elements of the particular setting in al-Koni's fiction more likely adhere to the depiction of mythical place and time.

On the other hand, Al-Koni's work is often described as *'aja'ibi* (marvellous) or magical. His transgression in depicting the nature of the events, characters, and settings is offspring of a magical and mythical North African reality. Indeed, the texts are filled with stories such as Anubi's awakening, instead of birth, his search for the father, or the eternal god-father that dictates an eternal quest on nomads, and the protagonist's transformation into a mythical beast. Assouf's father tells the reader of an everlasting war between the mountain and the plain, whose spirit travels from sky to earth, then to animals, and to humans.

Another instance is the *waddan* and his majestic mythical presence in the narrative of *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Gold Dust*. In these novels, the Carthage myth of Tanit appears. It refers to the goddess of love and fertility for the ancient Libyans. The goddess's name was written tnt so that it appears that the myth can be related Phoenician and Punic cultures. Its meaning is still disputed and other scholars consider that it comes from the Semitic root "lament" and so it signifies "She Who Weeps," perhaps for a disappearing (dying) god like Adonis (Lipinski 1995: 199). Yet other scholars translate Tanit as "Dragon or Serpent Lady." "Tanit", according to this theory, derived from the same root as Tannin, the snaky, dragon-like sea monster of Canaanite myth and the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 51: 9; Ezekiel 29: 3-5) (Olyan 1988: 53-54). In the novel, the protagonist promises to sacrifice a bull for the goddess Tanit if his Ablaq is cured. Then living through a series of disasters, he thinks of his vow and about the quality and the right time to fulfil it. Afterwards, he has no means to sacrifice the bull because he kills it for his unblessed wedding. He betrays his father and his mythical mother, and he continues to regret it in the novel. Tanit is present in the story; her symbol comes to the threshold of the narrative for numerous times. Her voice is echoed by the cave drawings that Ukhayyad observes in his last refuge; that is meant to remind him of his mistakes and his oath.

In one of his interviews, Al-Koni tells a journalist that his protagonists are different faces that constitute and construct the identity of the desert. Al-Koni recreates tradition from a mythical perspective. In his fiction, one explores the Maghreb from the perspective of the ancient and timeless elements. The relationship of man to the native desert is crucial and vital link of the novels. The path the characters take, during their lives, usually ends with their death and return to the earth's womb. There is always a physical return to

the desert earth. This concept of initiation through suffering is important as it strengthens the native nostalgia to the homeland. The homeland is "desert, void, harsh and dry". In fact, in Al-Koni's texts, a contention takes place between desert and water, as oasis, mirage, vision, flood, and mother womb. It is the metaphor of the origin in nature and to the first being.

Water stands for life, fertility and prosperity. In the desert, water is the dream to survive in the long walk through wilderness. Water element and in particular, its absence, thirst, and floods are kernel motifs in Al-Koni's novels, linked to the idea of rebirth in the natural womb of the desert. As the kernel of the creation myth, al-Koni's novels propose another representation of the origin associated with a much more positive form of rebirth. For instance, the idea of bathing, drinking and coming back to life is seen in Ukhayyad's "bottomless well"-experience before which he starts losing his senses towards a state of near-death,

He wanted to tell him what to do as he plunged into the abyss. The piebald lavished the young man with attention, covering him with his lips and licking his face. Ukhayyad was unable to see the other's eyes and unable to utter a word. He had lost the ability to speak. First he had lost his voice [...]. (al-Koni, *Gold Dust* 50)

Before plunging to bath and heal, Ukhayyad enacts his gradual loss of his senses as a way of approaching death, essential for initiation and rebirth. Drawing from the notion of initiation from the abyss, this ritual represents amniotic diving combining origin and amniotic environment as a symbolic return to the origins of the world. Thus, in *Gold Dust*, this ritual is associated with a particular experience that belongs to primordial times. This healing experience takes into the novel, a mythical tone since, as Mircea Eliade suggests, this type of ritual immersion is a common process

To restore health, were in the presence of the patient process of the world, refreshes the emergence of the first humans in the Earth. This is because this makes present and active anthropogony [...] the patient back to health: he feels in his inner process essential emersion. In other words, it becomes contemporary cosmology and anthropogony. (Eliade 1957: 200)

To Eliade, any ritual of immersion produces the feeling of having been born out of the Earth. This notion reinforces a sense of autochthony, which is interpreted as the sensation that belongs to "people of the place." (Eliade 1957: 203) It is a place in the heart of nature that takes the value of the mother womb and is perceived as a refuge. The experience of this type is found in many of al-Koni's novels, in which the protagonist is found in a ravine in the heart of which source is of amniotic properties.

Indeed, for this dive and return, characters manifest solidarity with the

homeland against the belief of emptiness and aridity. This relationship is at the heart of the primordial nature, which is like an ancient mother, directly related to the past against which the characters seek to measure themselves. This would bring this symbolic journey towards a "pre-existing" experience of Ukhayyad and Assouf, who symbolically metamorphose into an animal, being aware of their own identity.

This almost carnal relationship with the mother and mother-earth is so important that it is also evidenced by specific Berber rituals inherited from African traditions, often described in the novels. The protagonists identify themselves with animals specific to the desert: *waddan*, gazelle, snake and Mahri. They preserve ancient rocks and talk to their predecessors in the form of *jinnns*. They use the masks of these animals as their ancient fathers tell of the ancient stones. In addition, they sacrifice themselves in the open-temple space to recreate myths. The fraternity cross-species is one of the mythical structural evidence of al-Koni's fiction.

The lost oasis "Targa" is believed to be the origin of the name Tuareg. In *Anubis*, the desert is peopled by spectres, jinn, humans, gods and animals. What is noticeable about these characters is that they can change or mix being, they can metamorphose into animal or semi-animal or can acquire super-human powers. The lost oasis "Targa" or Waw plays the same role of the Promised Land, and continues to be the focus of different novels by al-Koni, where characters express their eternal desire to behold it in words of sorrow and nostalgia. The oasis Targa of *Anubis* refers to *Waw*, the lost *ferdous* in al-Koni's long novels: *the Maggie*, *the Animists*, *the Magi*... *Waw* is the dream of desert people; it acts as a deferred desire that fuels their nomadic life and animates their night feasts of singing, poetry and storytelling. There are many stories of the original Targa, in Arabian myth,

The stories are ways of justifying the real existence of the lost paradise that Arabs called 'Wabar's land,' after the mythical Noah's sons. (Said 2000: 57)

This paradisiac oasis is not a "utopic" dream of the "deprived people" (Ibid.) as some critics explain. For pre-Islamic Bedouins, this *ferdous* is more an everyday reality than a dream to evade a harsh reality. Tuareg's pagan reality was oppressed by Islam; nevertheless it continued to be part of their rituals. In fact, for the archaic societies, magic bestows a human quality on nature, while myth just explained it (Said 2000: 58), which explains the place of the promised oasis in their creed. Desert people renew their ancestral life by evoking the lost space and identifying with them by perpetuating their adoration. This paradise is their eternal quest that reckons them in a circular time and place.

The desert as a realistic enclave and a mystical primordial space becomes a

place of rebirth and acceptance of origin. For Eliade, there are different ways to turn back in time to witness the fabled time of beginnings or the creation time. One can live progressively one's origins passing from the present time to the absolute beginning. It is a symbolic return that allows the recovery of a time that precedes the birth of the actual world, and then to achieve a rebirth through specific rites. In fact, it is the main mythic feature of *The Bleeding of the Stone*. The different characters meet around the historical stones of the valley or *wadi* Matkhandoush. This stone, as the story narrates, is a symbol of the beginning of humanity,

The mighty rock marked the end of a series of caves, standing there like a cornerstone. Through thousands of years it had faced the merciless sun, adorned with the most wondrous paintings ancient man had made anywhere in the Sahara. There was the giant priest depicted over the full height of the rock, hiding his face behind that mysterious mask. His hand touched the waddan that stood there alongside him, its air both dignified and stubborn, its head raised, like the priest's, towards the far horizon where the sun rose to pour its rays each day on their faces. (al-Koni *The Bleeding of the Stone*: 2)

This ritual description of the priest and the *waddan* summarises the history of the desert by taking its readers to the world in its beginnings. Matkhandoush is the happy beginning of time when the ancestors lived their "first existence" in their "lost paradise".

Assouf, whose name in Touareg means "wilderness or Sahara," (al-Koni *Maggie* I, II 477) is the first character that appears in that lost place. He is a simple shepherd who decides to exile himself from the rest of human race and to dwell in a mythical happiness. Myth allows him to befriend desert animals and to belong to its stones and sands. He believes that ancient inhabitants of the caves were his ancestors and he likes to stay where they witnessed peace. In his dream of life, Assouf, through isolation, recovers the myth of creation. He is absorbed by his mythical world to the point of praying in the front of the stone figure towering above his head instead of Ka'aba (al-Koni *The Bleeding of the Stone*: 7). On the stone as knowledge, Eliade affirms, "For those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality." (Eliade 1957: 128) In the Al-Konian novel, the decision to return to the origin and reclaim identity reminds his readers of the original harmony when humanity worshipped nature and honoured the elements of earth and sky in general.

The second character that the novel presents just after Assouf is an Italian archaeologist, who lives, like Assouf, in the same mythical dimension of the world. He is so attracted to the stone that Assouf

[...] often wondered just what lay behind the Christians' interest in the ancient paintings. He decided, finally, they must be making pilgrimage to the Matkhandoush figures because they belonged to the same old religion; [...]. Veneration, and supplication and surrender, were revealed in their eyes; betrayed too by the odd way their hands moved over their faces as they examined the vast figure of the king of the wadi, and his sacred waddan that rose alongside him, contemplating the far horizon. The Christians stood before the masked giant exactly as Muslims stood before God. And yet his father had told him this masked jinni was his ancestor too. (al-Koni *Bleeding* 10)

As a child, Assouf was taught by his father to respect Waddans and to never hunt them. Nevertheless, with the war and famine, Assouf betrays his promise to his father and starts following the *waddan*. He ties a cord on the animal's neck and surrenders to the drive of the animal that takes him to the top of the mountain and throws him there for a long moonless night between death and life. At the end, Assouf sees a cord and recognises the one he put around the *waddan's* neck. The *waddan* saves him, while he sees in Waddan's eyes his father's face. Before he loses consciousness, Assouf shouts: "You are my father. I recognised you. Wait. I want to tell you..." (al-Koni *Bleeding* 71) The journey of the Al-Konian protagonist, reminds us of the rites of passage in the shaman's initiation, which marks his admittance to adulthood, as his ancestors would define it. Moreover, the evocation of a perilous and death-like experience and the imagery of suffering and endurance recalls this ancient practice.

This is a rebirth scene, like the one of Ukhayyad out of his skin and entering the deep diving waters in the womb of the earth, the well. Eliade argues:

It is only in initiation that death is given a positive value. More than an empty tomb, death becomes also the womb of change. In dreams and dramas of initiation, death represents change for the entire psyche and life of a person. It means change inside and out, not simple adaptation or switch in "life style." Initiation includes death and rebirth, a radical altering of a person's "mode of being" [...] Without conscious rituals of loss and renewal, individuals and societies lose the capacity to experience the sorrows and joy that are essential for feeling fully human[...]. (Eliade 1958: 8)

In this respect, Eliade's view tells of a need to look back to ancestral rituals of birth and death in terms of "change and renewal" and learn how these rituals benefited the community or individual. Indeed, Assouf is reborn and changes his natural father by a mythical one. Gilbert Durand describes this change of the father showing how having the 'son' is considered the people's way to control mortality and to win over time, while in myth there is a doubling of fathers by adding a mythical father to the natural one. The latter has a common background while the first has sacred origins. (Durand 1960: 284)

Indeed, Assouf has two fathers. The mythical father is the *waddan* to whom Assouf promises not to eat meat anymore.

The *Waddan* is presented by al-Koni in the notes of the novel as a sacred creature. No one knows how the narrator arrived to the conclusion of the superiority of this animal. What is clear, however, from al-Koni's approach is the importance of this animal for Touareg. In Tassili paintings, Henri Lhote notes how moufflon or waddan plays a central role in the ancient population's creeds, as the cave paintings repeatedly show representations of a glorified and huge *waddan* [...]. Hunting moufflon has also many complex rituals, like putting a heavy rock or a waddan mask on their heads, singing specific magical verses and keeping the hunt as secret to avoid *jinn*s' anger. (Lhote 1973: 154) Al-Koni's text depicts the ancient tableaux and scenes of hunting as a ritual of mixing realms and mixing species, where the human hunter puts the attire of the most perilous predator of his culture to become part of the herd and avoid offending nature.

*Waddan's* place is mountaintops and gazelle's is the sandy plain. Desert animals respect their spaces and if one disobeys desert rules, he should pone an end to his life. This is what happened to the *waddan* of Assouf's father. This latter "Waited until the moon had risen, then told Assouf how the *waddan* was the spirit of the mountains." (Al-Koni, *Bleeding* 20)

I forgot to tell you that our battle happened in a wadi well away from the mountains. The waddan knew he couldn't escape because he was so far from his mountain stronghold. In the middle of the wadi there was a small hill covered with high, smooth rocks. When he saw I'd taken my rifle, he climbed the rocks in a single swift movement, then leaped to the ground and broke his neck. The blood gushed out from his nostrils, and, after he was dead, his eyes were open and that strange look was still there—the mixture of wretchedness and rancor and helplessness. (Al-Koni, *Bleeding* 20)

Nevertheless, the fight between *waddan* as a single mountainous animal and gazelles as bundle plain animals takes the reader to a mythic war between two deserts. Waiting again for the moon to cross the sky, Assouf's father tells the story:

Once long ago, the mountain desert waged constant war with the sandy desert, and the heavenly gods would descend to earth to separate the pair, calming the fire enmity between them. But no sooner had the gods left the battlefield, and the rains stopped pouring down, than war would break once more between the two eternal enemies. One day, the gods grew angry in their high heavens and sent down their punishment on the fighters. They froze the mountains in Massak Satfat, and they stopped the persistent advance of the sands on the borders of Massak Mallat. Then the sands found a way to enter the spirit of the gazelles, while the mountains found a way into the spirit of the waddan. And from that day on, the waddan was possessed by the spirit of the mountains. (Al-Koni, *Bleeding* 21)

This story explains how the spirit of the mountains in *waddan* fights the spirit of the plain in gazelles. In fact, in the name *waddan*, there is an evocation of ancient deity. The linguistic root of *waddan* is (w-d-d) which is an allusion to the desert Arabs' "father Wad," which is one of the many names of the moon. Libyans today cuddle one another by calling "waddy." Ancient Arabs called wad the moon and gazelle the sun. Indeed, the *waddan* is the "god" moon light and solitude; while the gazelle is the "god" of the sun and the power of community. *Waddan* is the North African desert hero, and the bull is his Arabian alternative. (Said *Epic* 5)

In his *Epic Ceilings: the Desert Imaginary in Ibrahim al-Koni's Literature*, Said Ghanemi introduces the circular timing in the desert which accounts for the mythical realist dimension of al-Koni's novels. For desert people, daylight is blinding, the sun, heat and draught are enemies. As Ibn Manthour argues:

The Arabs are interested in the moon because it gives them company in their nocturnal life; it indicates their ways during their travels by night; it makes them forget the heat during their long days; and it reveals the identity of the villain and the passers-by. (Said *Epic* 44)

Moreover, it is believed that Western Semites, unlike Babylonians, worshipped the moon. In Arabic, for instance the moon is called: *wad*, *seen*, *shabeer*, *warakh*, *maqa*... In their prayers, they called it by *waddan aban*, for instance. Ali Jawad argues: "Jahilits considered the moon as a father and was their favourite among other planets. It has become the god of gods, in particular for southern Arabs."<sup>3</sup> This place that the moon occupied in ancient history, imaginary and religion showed people's need of myth to control time. To Ghanemi, the moon is depicted as a symbol of renewal and creation, in its continual death and rebirth. Durand emphasises the importance of the moon in Arabian myth,

La lune apparait en effet comme la premiere mesure du temps. [...] Comme l'ecrit Eliade en un important ouvrage consacre au *Mythe de l'Eternelle Retour*: "l'homme ne fait que repeter l'acte de la creation; son calendrier religieux commemoire dans l'espace d'un an toutes les phases cosmogonyques qui ont lieu *ab origine*."

The moon appears indeed like the first time measurement. [...] As Eliade wrote in an important book devoted to *The Myth of the Eternal Return*: "Man only repeats the act of creation; its religious calendar commemorates in the space of one year all cosmogony phases that take place *ab origine*." (Said *Structures* 322-4)

Thus for Durand, the moon is a way to measure the first time and a continual promise of the return. Durand thinks of the role of the moon in following the natural changes of nature. He gives examples of the myth of moon's influence on the wind, the sea, the floods, renewal, birth and death. Both Durand



and Eliade agree on the principle that the moon is the symbol for continual change and renewal, the moon is eternal and young (Said *Structures* 348)

The idea of the moon as the father of all the gods, humans and animals, leads to the understanding of fatherhood and its symbolism in these cultures. The moon is a symbolic father; it epitomises the notion of fatherhood. In this prospect, natural fathers aim at their children following them and hence, they defy death through them, in a circular time that insures their continual recreation. Ghanemi adds

Time is not a linear succession of actions. A series of repeated actions reproduces the "first action" in a circular movement of recovery. In Arabic, time or Zaman is called daher whose roots are dour or repetition. So the name of the year sana is from san or the moon, a month shaher or a crescent, history or tarikh is from warakh or the moon again. . . . (Said *Epic* 48)

Indeed, both father and moon have crucial importance in al-Koni's stories. Generally, al-Koni's characters are desert people, Bedu, nomads, and exiled. They all share desert heritage of philosophy, art and aphorisms that enhance their belief in the circularity of time and space.

In contrast to the father's image, the mother is figured as desert, land and nurture. In the novel, this idea is announced in the aphorism: "if the father is spurious, the mother is always legitimate." (al-Koni *Anubis* 118) Accordingly, the father as absence is opposed to the mother as presence and reality, a dichotomy reinforced by the nostalgia of the father and the desire for the mother in these novels. This aligns the mother with that "absolute reality," the sun or gazelle figure that illuminates the path for Anubi, to survive (for instance, blinded by his extreme thirst, he had to drink the gazelle's urine and cling to her belly for days). While the father, the *naddan* or the moon is the un-reachable truth. He says, "We worship what we don't see and only love what we do see." (al-Koni *Anubis* 14)

As the father is two, un-reachable real and symbolic, mothers are also two: one real and true and the other is the goddess of all the gods in the North African desert, Tanit. In south and west Arabia, the extreme power is in the father of all the gods, the moon. In North Africa Tanit is the goddess Mother of love, fertility and war. It is present in almost all al-Koni's novels. The characters use to recall her name and run to her in a moment of crisis. Tanit is introduced in *The Maggie*, "Pray to Tanit who made us impeccable" (al-Koni, *Maggie I* 102)

She is also present with her symbol either in the movement of the story or the images described on the stones and the caves. Tanit is part of a collective imaginary and she is sacred. She has the overwhelming control of the desert; in one of al-Koni's stories one character is advised to put Tanit's symbol on his herd and leave it in an unattended place mid the desert with the certainty that no one will dare touch it.

Desert people depend on Tanit in their work and life; they vow offerings to have her blessings in marriages, in having children and in their commerce. However, as al-Koni shows the human and the animal on an equal ground, birds, for instance, live and procreate thanks to Tanit. In their own way, the birds:

Stop singing and fly forming triangles as pleading Tanit to bless them in their next trip. (al-Koni, *Maggie I* 45)

With this goddess, al-Koni describes the silenced history of Berbers who adored their sacred female sovereign and relied on her support to survive and to recreate its myths through her eternal return. Tanit remains central in Berber history and spirituality. They carry on sacrificing on her behalf and fear her anger. Tanit is not only a goddess to worship; she is the spirit of the desert. So if one angers this Mother of all the gods, he is damned by nature with all its desert elements, sea, land and man. He/she then would be orphan and suffer his/her ordeal until death. Tanit for Berbers is like Inanna in Sumerian mythology, Ishtar in Babylon, Anet in Canaan, Nut in Egypt, and Aphrodite in Greece.

Tanit tells of the matriarchal system of Berbers, al-Koni adds,

Without the gratefulness for the ancient generosity, desert people would not worship a woman who shares their children's names and to whose offspring authority is transmitted. (al-Koni, *Maggie I* 111-2)

Although this authority of a pagan goddess has been contradictory to the Islamic monolithic creed, Berbers carried on believing in the ancient goddess and vowing sacrifices in her name. They, also, call her the absolute mother and, along with the father-moon, they create a familial balance. She is the collective mother, who creates a secret union among the individuals and between the person and his land. The pagan mother and father generate a feeling of serenity and protection among tribal societies. So far, this work develops the idea of al-Koni's uniqueness or difference from magical realists. In fact, mythis the term that al-Koni states in his *My Great Desert* extract and different interviews to explain his premise and the major significance of what writing fiction means to him. It allows him to go beyond the concept of magical realism, to clarify and overcome the orientalist belief in an exotic desert reality.

## Conclusion

The exact term that qualifies al-Koni's writing and mentions the timeless and the spiritual space without involving the Eurocentric hierarchy is "mythical realism" to which I may add "North African" as an expansion of what Ondaatje observed in the Canadian novel and Garant in "Second World" literature. To my opinion, the difference between myth and magic lay in their

relation to nature. If myth had been the earliest form of Man's revolution to decipher the spirit of nature, with magic, Man had shown his/her capacity to transform nature by science. In addition, the desert, in its rough nature, is pregnant of myth to explain the extremes of life/death, love/loath, sacred/profane to its children. The Sahara is the landscape that entraps the human into its ceilings and turns it into its protagonist.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For further information see, Harry Ransom Center, "Collections".

<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/collections/guide/latin/>

<sup>2</sup>For further information, see "Postcolonial Studies @ Emory". <http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/magical-realism/>

<sup>3</sup>Jahilits are the pre-islamic population. Please Ali Jawad, The Pre-Islamic Arabian History, <http://www.soundvision.com/info/seerah/hameed5.asp>. 51-7.

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