



## Manifestations of the desert in the modern and contemporary Libyan novel, the novel *Bleeding of the Stone* by Ibrahim Al-Koni as a model

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**Abstract :** Ibrahim Al-Koni made a significant impact on the Arab novel scene in the 1990s with a distinctive voice that captured readers' attention. His work, centered on the desert, is notable for its novel narrative approach, blending nostalgia and aversion to create a magical storytelling space. The research focuses on the depiction of the desert in the novel "Bleeding of the Stone," aiming to analyze how Al-Koni used this environment to enrich his narrative with deep symbols and meanings. Unlike the late interest in the desert in Arabic literature, Al-Koni excels in portraying this space as rich in cultural and philosophical content. He skillfully integrates elements of Tuareg heritage and his own personal culture, offering a captivating read that affirms the authenticity of Arab identity while resisting globalization.

**Keywords:** Desert, Arab novel, Libyan literature, Desert imagery, Cultural heritage.

**Manifestations du désert dans le roman libyen moderne et contemporain : Le roman *La Pierre saignante* d'Ibrahim Al-Koni comme modèle**

**Résumé :** Ibrahim Al-Koni a marqué l'espace du roman arabe dans les années quatre-vingt-dix avec une voix distinctive qui a capté l'attention des lecteurs. Son œuvre, centrée sur le désert, se distingue par une nouvelle approche narrative, mêlant nostalgie et aversion pour créer un espace narratif magique. La recherche se concentre sur la représentation du désert dans le roman "La Pierre saignante", visant à analyser comment Al-Koni a utilisé cet environnement pour enrichir son récit de symboles et de significations profondes. Contrairement à un intérêt tardif pour le désert dans la littérature arabe, Al-Koni a excelle dans la représentation de cet espace comme un lieu riche en contenu culturel et philosophique. Il a intégré des éléments du patrimoine touareg et sa propre culture personnelle pour offrir une lecture captivante, affirmant ainsi l'authenticité de l'identité arabe tout en résistant à la mondialisation.

**Mots-clés:** Désert, Roman arab, Littérature libyenne, Imaginaire désertique, Patrimoine culturel.

### **Introduction:**

The novel is considered one of the literary genres most capable of depicting and representing reality, and this is what prompted many writers to adopt this literary genre, and among these novelists is the Libyan novelist Ibrahim Al-Koni, who took the world of the desert as a theme for his novels, where he was able with his genius to interrogate the silence of this vast, ambiguous, and desolate space with a philosophical and mythological

interrogation, and to invest its customs, traditions, and myths to build a unique fictional world, which enriched the Libyan and Arab novel scene with a novelistic achievement of profound significance and visions. Among his novels that caught my attention is "Bleeding of the Stone," in which I will search for the image of the desert and its connotations.

The voice of (Ibrahim Al-Koni) resounded in the space of the Arab novel around the nineties of the last century and attracted readers with abundant material that had a special taste and a new tone in a smooth, exciting story, and a familiar subject in which nostalgia is confused with aversion, it is the subject of the desert, which he excelled in investing in to build a magical, enjoyable narrative space, achieving in it a unique narrative identity that nationalized for it a global specificity in the modern novel in image, material, and narration, and a novelist who creates her strangeness from her environment that was nourished by a local popular myth. The beauty of this strangeness was not limited to restoring a mythological or environmental life pattern, but rather to his skill in penetrating into wondrous human worlds that their environment granted this creative specificity. Al-Koni does not only draw inspiration from the components of the desert environment, but also unveils a humanity that has always been hidden behind the veil. If Al-Koni's novelistic experience in its extension embodies this distinctive written image, then the novel "Bleeding of the Stone" represents a shining model in exploring the details of the desert world and the mythology and imagination of the Tuareg. Accordingly, I aim in this research is to investigate the image of the desert in the Libyan novel. How did the image of the desert appear in Ibrahim Al-Koni's novel "Bleeding of the Stone"?

## **1. Explaining the concepts**

### *1.1 .The concept of the desert*

#### - Language

Ibn Manzur defined the desert in *Lisan al-Arab* as "the flat, soft, and thick desert, and it was said that it is: the vast space, and Ibn Shahil said: The desert is from the land, like the back of a bare animal, with no trees, hills, or smooth mountains, and the people become dark-skinned if they emerge into an open space with nothing to cover them, and the plural of desert, according to what al-Jawhari said, is *sahari* and *sahrawat*, and the man becomes dark-skinned if he is [one-eyed] as if he has reached the desert that has no wine and is exposed" (Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, page 2403). Based on the above, we conclude that the desert means, in language, a vast and empty place where there are no signs of life. Based on the above, we conclude that the desert means, in language, a vast and empty place where there are no signs of life.

### 1.2. *Technically*

"The concept of desert is always associated with a specific climatic condition characterized by scarcity or lack of moisture or water, high temperatures and their daily and seasonal differences, extreme amounts of evaporation, extremes in climatic and water elements, and the almost complete absence of life" (Saleh, 1996, p. 16). Accordingly, the desert is a geographical area in which vegetation is scarce or devoid of plants and rainfall is low.

## **2. Characteristics of the desert**

The desert is characterized by the following characteristics:

### *.2.1 The plant characteristics of the desert*

The desert is characterized by a thorny plant cover, in addition to the abundance of palm trees, as "the palm tree has an impact on the lives of the Arabs, as it is a major source of their food and livelihood, as its dates are food for them, and its pods are food for their animals, as it has a great impact on their livelihood and economic life, and after they passed through the hunting and grazing stage, the stage of stability came, which prompted them to take care of agriculture [palm trees] and other trees and plants and benefit from their produce" (Al-Nouti, 2009, p. 207).

### *2.2 .The animal characteristics of the deser.:*

The desert contains a large number of reptiles, insects, scorpions, and spiders, but the most important animal known to the desert is the camel, which can resist thirst for several months. The truth is that the camel's ability to withstand the hardships of the desert is remarkable, and the camel can withstand a rise in temperature above the normal rate of body temperature without losing a lot of water through sweat, and it also stores energy as fat in its humps (Maati, 2014, p. 19). Given the importance of camels in the lives of Bedouins, we find them calling them "al-Na'am," a word derived from the blessing that God bestows upon mankind. Later generations call them "the gifts of God." Most of their conversations revolve around camels, their affairs, and their relationship with them (Al-Suwayyat, 2010, p. 335).

## **3. The presence of the desert in the Arabic novel**

Although the desert "constitutes the largest area in our Arab homeland, it is absent as an artistic and intellectual place in the works of our writers" (Al-Nasir, 1986, p. 118). This is due to the fact that the genre of the novel has seeped into our Arab literary culture from the West, who were interested in the space of

the city in their novels and neglected the space of the desert, because the Western novel derives its identity from the modern bourgeois city according to the point of view of most theorists of the novel, such as George Lukacs. Accordingly, the Arab novel was also interested in simulating the space of the city, but "the city that the Arab novel explores was absent, most of the time, or present at the same time, absent in the aesthetics of the masses and present in an architectural system that has no past. The Arab city often did not achieve its unified, independent self with its reference in itself, its institutions, and its products, because it is an isolated space, shaped by the authority, if it is weak in form, and the authority steals its form, if it has obtained an old form. For this reason, the Arab city appears as if it were a city with no history, no accumulation that it has known, and no accumulation that it produces from those who came to it, but rather it is immersed in a sterile quantitative accumulation" (Daraaj, 2002, p. 160).

But the Arab novelist soon surpassed the stage of being dazzled by the Western novel and blindly imitating its spaces, so "the Arab novel turned to searching for worlds closely related to the Arabic culture and language and transformed some of the novel's margins into central, essential places that often take the lead role, so attention turned to the desert space as a virgin novelist and a new space that adds vitality and a new spirit to the novel after writers grew tired of narrow and familiar places" (Daraaj, 2002, p. 161). Among the early Arab novels that made the desert the stage for its events is the novel "Corruption of Places" by Sabri Musa in 1969 AD, as it "is unique in its environment and strange features, so it does not refer to the creativity that came before it and paves the way for the desert novels that came after it, such as *Cities of Salt* by Abdul Rahman Munif and the entirety of Ibrahim Al-Koni's novelistic works, where the desert is the space in which the events and their narrative components revolve" (Al-Sabbagh, 2018). Thus, the desert, with all its secrets and mysteries, became the stage for the events of the Arab novel. How did it appear in the novel "Bleeding of the Stone"?

### 3.1. *Manifestations of the desert in the novel "Bleeding of the stone" by Ibrahim Al-Koni* - Manifestations of the desert at the level of popular heritage

Le roman du désert est à peine mentionné dans le monde arabe sans être étroitement associé au nom de l'écrivain libyen Ibrahim Al-Koni, car il est profondément lié à ses écrits. Il a réussi à interroger « les composants de cet espace avec une interrogation mythologique et philosophique pour établir une dimension thématique profonde qui a enrichi le roman arabe et approfondi ses visions » (Brick, 2021, p. 95). Ainsi, le désert est apparu dans ses romans comme quelque chose de nouveau pour les Arabes, bien qu'il constitue une grande partie

de leurs terres. Le patrimoine populaire qui abonde dans les zones désertiques se reflète généralement dans les romans d'Al-Koni, et le roman *La Pierre saignante* est un exemple important où certains aspects du patrimoine ou du patrimoine populaire sont combinés, parmi lesquels les plus importants sont:

- Intangible heritage

The intangible heritage is reflected through the following forms:

Myths

In ancient times, the desert was a cradle of myths and legends. All its elements are linked to myths: mountains, valleys, oases, wells, caves, and plants. Myths are often spread in every environment, woven by the collective imagination, appropriate to the time in which they were known. People believe in their validity and believe them. The environment often reflects its symbols in what is said in expressions. The people of the desert and its inhabitants, like other peoples of the world, have invented myths that are specific to them. Myth means “the narration of the actions of a god or a semi-god, to explain the relationship between man and the universe, or to a social system in itself, or to a specific custom, or to an environment with unique characteristics” (Nidal, 2010, p. 24).

Actions may be attributed to a supernatural human hero who has been granted power. In the text of the novel, we find the legend of the gods that says: “In ancient times, the mountainous desert was in eternal war with the sandy desert, and the gods of the sky would descend to the earth with the rains and separate the two companions, and calm the flames of enmity between them. As soon as the gods left the battlefield and the rain stopped falling, war would ignite between the two immortal enemies. One day, the gods became angry in their upper heavens and punished the warring parties. They froze the mountains in lined up paths, and stopped the advance of the stubborn sand within the borders of the Messak Mallat. The sand tricked itself and entered the spirit of the gazelles, and the mountains tricked themselves and entered the valleys. Since that day, the valleys have become inhabited. This is the legend that the father told his son Asouf when he asked him about the secret of the fight between the gazelles and the valleys, that the gods punished the disputants with a demon named Man. I entrusted him with the matter, so he came and settled in the valley, separating them. She was at peace and has not heard any complaints since that day” (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 26–27). Myths have always provided explanations for questions that preoccupied people at some point in time.

The legend of the gods reflected the desert component of sand, mountains, and animals (gazelles and valleys), and it was a living example of the presence of

the desert with all its data. The novel also employs the myth of the sacred totem, and is linked to an animal totem from the heart of the desert. The totem is “the first father of the clan, and then its protective spirit... For this reason, the sons of the totem are subject to a sacred commitment that is self-deterrent, requiring that they not kill or destroy their totem and that they dispense with its meat or any pleasure that it may provide. The totem is not limited to a specific animal or a single being, but rather includes all members of the species” (Freud, 1983, p. 23).

In the text of the novel, “Assouf’s father vows to himself not to hunt the wadan, and not to teach that to his offspring, after he saved it from certain death. However, due to an urgent need, he breaks the vow and is punished. His son Assouf has also identified with the animal in the totemism of affiliation, and affiliation through events confirms brotherhood, as there is a relationship of incarnation with the wadan, where he becomes a blood brother after the father’s death” (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 63). Assouf’s outlook changed, and “meat disgusted him, and he was amazed at how he could eat meat. How could a creature eat the flesh of another creature? What is the difference between animal flesh and human flesh? Whoever can eat the flesh of a wadan can also eat human flesh. The father has become in the wadan, and the wadan has become in him, and the deceased and the wadan are now one thing, and nothing will separate them” (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 75). From here, the story of Assouf’s legendary totemic sanctification began. The legend of the sacred Wadan appears in the novel “The Bleeding of Stone” through many themes. Sometimes it appears in the theme of vow, other times it appears in the theme of sacrifice, and other times it appears in the theme of the savior and rescuer. In the latter, Wadan appears as a rescuer for the father from the danger he fell into at that time. The mother narrated the incident to her son, saying: “Your father does not want you to shed the blood of Wadan because he made a vow long before you were born. He was hunting in the foothills of the Aeneas Mountains, and his foot slipped, and he found himself suspended between the sky and the earth, holding onto a rock and his feet dangling in the abyss. He lost hope of survival, so the same Wadan that he was fighting and intending to kill rescued him and saved him from destruction” (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 47-48). The same thing happened again with the son on one of the trips. Although our Arab heritage conveys stories of some Arab tribes’ sanctification of some animals, Ibrahim Al-Koni, in his novel, refers to the Tuareg’s sanctification of the Waddan, which is the oldest and most astonishing and admirable animal in the desert.

### Popular beliefs

Popular beliefs are part of people's customs and cultural symbols. Individuals practice and apply them to various phenomena they encounter in order to find explanations for what confuses them. Since the dawn of human existence, people have adapted their lives to these beliefs, observing and noting natural phenomena and seeking explanations for them. Over thousands of years, rational humans have shaped their view of life (Al-Ahmad, 2011, p. 5).

Their need for these beliefs and efforts to establish them stem from a desire to address unforeseen events. Thus, humans are the creators of these beliefs, and human nature requires them to build a foundation of customs and beliefs, thereby establishing the foundations of society (Diab, 1980, p. 220). Folklore studies have demonstrated that popular beliefs, once labeled with clear value judgments such as myths and nonsense, have evolved. Initially rejected by clergy due to their supernatural aspects that contradicted official religion, popular beliefs today encompass "everything that people believe regarding the external world and the supernatural world (...), as well as those ideas and feelings that drive people to respond to both normal and abnormal natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, lightning, eclipses, meteors, etc., as well as perceptions of the mysteries of physical and psychological phenomena like dreams, sleep, birth, death, and visions of the future" (Al-Jawhari, 1978, p. 42-45). They also refer to "those imaginary physical and moral phenomena and manifestations that the public believes in and for which they employ special means and rituals, operating according to what these beliefs dictate, consciously or unconsciously."

In other words, these are the metaphysical phenomena through which the public seeks to explain the causes of life and death (Saidi, 1995, p. 6). In his novel *Bleeding of the Stone*, Ibrahim Al-Koni portrays some of the beliefs of the Libyan desert society. Like many other societies around the world, this society holds popular beliefs and is deeply attached to them. One of the most prevalent beliefs in the desert is the existence of jinn, supernatural beings that people weave stories about and believe to be real. Jinn are thought to inhabit mountains and caves. Asouf reflects on this, wondering, "Were our ancient ancestors jinn?" He asks his father, who laughs and responds, "Perhaps they were jinn – good jinn. Just like people, jinn are divided into two tribes: the tribe of good and the tribe of evil. We belong to the tribe of jinn that chose goodness. Is this why you don't live near anyone? Yes, if you live near evil people, evil will befall you. A person who values goodness must avoid others to prevent harm, and this group of jinn does the same. They have lived in caves, fleeing from evil since ancient times. Don't you hear them talking on moonlit nights?" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 9-10).

## Rituals

Rituals mean “traditional activities and actions, mostly related to religion and magic, whose causes and purposes are determined by custom, and rituals are always derived from the life of the people who practice them. Primitives believe that performing them pleases the gods, supernatural powers, and deities, and not performing them causes their anger and brings their wrath. Various activities take place in the ritual, such as dancing, offering sacrifices, slaughtering animals, performing prayers, and chanting hymns” (Saleem, 1981, p. 824).

When such pleasing rituals are performed, they are accompanied by dancing, prayers, and offering sacrifices. Rituals also mean “a set of actions and movements that come in response to the internal religious experience and aim to establish a connection with the sacred worlds” (Al-Sawah, 2001, p. 129), where ritual behavior is the basis of sacred ignition, as the function of the ritualist is always to “bring the sacred down from its metaphysical world to its tangible existence, and through it the human being approaches the sacred and immerses himself in it” (Al-Ghazawi, 2010, p. 348). In the novel “The Bleeding of Stone,” the writer recalls some rituals, perhaps the most important of which are the magical rituals related to hunting the Waddan. The Tuareg are known for their pessimism about hunting it because of its sanctity. In the fifth chapter of the novel, entitled “The Price of Isolation,” the writer recalls a set of incantations that the people of the desert repeat when they go out to hunt the Waddan. “He has become afraid of hunting the Waddan since that incident, and does not move toward the majestic peaks until he has read all the verses he has memorized from the Quran, and recites the amulets of the Negro magicians in the Hausa language, and hangs around his neck the incantations protected in the skins of snakes that the caravan merchants from the fortune tellers in Kano brought him. He sits one day before traveling, muttering his incantations and abstaining from speaking” (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 31). The father is attached to such rituals, believing that they protect him from harm. The belief in incantations is closely tied to the story of the boy Qabil, who was ill-fated from birth. As a child, Qabil was marked by a dark destiny; he grew up consuming animal flesh and eventually turned into a killer. His life was drenched in blood from infancy. After the death of his parents, his aunt took him in and, following the advice of a jurist, gave him the blood of a gazelle during a journey to Hamada. The jurist had claimed that this was the only charm that could cleanse him of his bad luck and protect his remaining family from the curse that had haunted him since he was in his mother’s womb. However, the aunt and her husband died of thirst on that journey, and a passing caravan found the boy, his head buried in the gazelle's belly, licking the blood (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 91).

The caravan's leader adopted Qabil, unaware of the misfortune that followed everyone who came into contact with the child. As a result, the leader's trade suffered losses and thefts. By coincidence, the adoptive father witnessed the child eating raw meat, his teeth stained with blood. During a subsequent trip to Kano, he consulted sorcerers about the boy's condition. One sorcerer asked for a hair from the child's head or a piece of his clothing, so the man offered a leather bracelet that had been around the boy's neck. The sorcerer chanted incantations, casting the bracelet into the fire, and ominously declared that a child weaned on gazelle blood would only be satisfied with human flesh in his old age (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 92). Undeterred, the man sought advice from another, more renowned sorcerer, who, after hearing the story, agreed to create an amulet to protect Qabil. Yet, even the powerful amulets crafted by the sorcerers of Kano could not change fate. The amulet was lost on a journey, and the boy reverted to eating raw meat (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 92-93). In the desert community, magic is a well-known practice, deeply rooted in the Tuareg culture, where it is passed down through generations like an inherited profession. The Tuareg, a primitive desert community, had absorbed magical practices from the Magi tribes, which had existed in the vast African desert since ancient times (Dahmani, 2017/2018, p. 173).

The fascination with magical rituals and spells extended beyond the desert's inhabitants, captivating even foreigners. John Parker, an Italian archaeologist on exploratory expeditions, also relied on amulets during the Waddan feasts. He carried a leather talisman adorned with signs from African magicians, proudly displaying it. When Qabil saw the amulet, he recognized the symbols as those of the devils of Kano, and questioned how an American Christian could live in the Nafusa Mountains with such a fortress of jinn around his neck (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 132). Qabil's friend and companion, Masoud, also used amulets and explained that he had been introduced to this practice by a Negro sorcerer who had traveled with a caravan. The sorcerer had made him a similar protective charm, which Masoud proudly displayed (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 132). These accounts collectively demonstrate that the desert inhabitants, particularly those of Negro descent, deeply believe in magic and frequently resort to its rituals.

#### The folk tale

The novel incorporates a folk tale centered around a desert animal, the gazelle, which chose not to leave its homeland. The gazelle imparts wisdom to her offspring, explaining the dangers of defying natural limits. She says, "The wise gazelle saw the wildness in the eyes of her little one, so she told her the

reason... She responded with a parable, saying: When the Creator created the soul, He set limits for it, and imprisoned it in three prisons: time, place, and body. The curse was fulfilled and everyone who tried to escape these limits perished, because the Creator sanctified them and made them a fate around the neck of the creature, and disobeying them is rebellion against His will. It happened that the gazelle was deceived by his two large horns, and left the herd in the plain, and rose to the highest peak, so he was punished by a bird that ripped open its belly, so whoever wanted to leave the place left his body" (Al-Koni, 1992, pp. 109-110). The novelist uses this tale, deeply rooted in the desert environment, to symbolize the consequences of human treachery and the breach of self-made promises. The harsh punishment that follows serves as a metaphor for the inevitable consequences of defying one's destiny or natural limits. By drawing on this folk tale, the author reflects the values and beliefs of the desert community, illustrating the idea that rebellion against the natural order leads to severe repercussions.

#### Popular expressions

The novel "The bleeding of Stone" contains popular expressions derived from the desert environment, whether they are popular proverbs or expressions that carry wisdom and life experience. When Asouf descended to the Ghat Oasis, the young men laughed at him and one of them said: "The wind sleeper finds the bone in the stomach" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 83), as an expression that whoever does not arrive early and hurry to fulfill a need will not get anything, and whoever arrives late has lost his right and his share. It is a common expression in the desert because its difficult environment requires a pulley. Al-Koni also decorated his novel with expressions that came from the womb of the Libyan desert, as the Qadiri dervish reveals to the Christian John Parker one of the most important secrets of the desert, saying: "The oil is Gharyan, the dates are Fezzan, the meat is Waddan, then he laughed and added, 'Ah, if the Tijani heretics knew that I was revealing the secrets of the desert to the Christians, they would stone me'" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 119). The best oils come from the city of Gharyan and the best dates come from the city of Fezzan, and they are two ancient Libyan cities. As for the best meat, it comes from Waddan and no other. The novelist also cites a phrase that is considered a wise saying, repeated by Asouf's father: "The desert is a treasure, a reward for whoever wants to escape from the enslavement of the slave and the harm of the slaves. In it is happiness, in it is annihilation, in it is what is desired" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 24), as the desert is a land of contradictions. Whoever learns its secrets will attain happiness, and whoever does not learn the arts of coexistence in it will be afflicted with annihilation. Another wisdom is also

common among desert dwellers, which says: "A person in the desert must die from one of two opposites: flooding or thirst" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 79), which confirms the previous statement, as the desert is truly a land of opposites .

The novel also sings of the moral values known to the people of the desert, perhaps the richest of which is the heart, for "the heart is the fire by which the Bedouin is guided in the desert of this world, just as the lost in the open is guided by the star of Idi. All the stars change, move, change their place and disappear, but he remains fixed until the morning" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 23). Asouf was raised on this advice from his father, who always used to repeat to him, "Take care of your heart. What good is it for a son of the desert if he loses his heart? He who loses his heart is lost among people, because a desert dweller does not know the plots of people" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 23). Listening to the voice of the heart alone is what helps him discover the nature of people, and this wisdom has always been a principle on which the sons of the desert were raised. The father also instills in his son (Asouf) another moral value, asking him to be adorned with it at all times, which is patience. "I advise you to be patient. How can the desert be straight without patience? Whoever is not given this blessing will not enjoy his stay in the desert. You must be patient and resourceful, for they are the secret of the desert" (Al-Koni, 1992, page 66). Such values that are poured into these expressions are what the sons of the desert are raised on

### 3.2. *Material heritage*

The desert is full of material heritage dating back to ancient times. The African desert has always been a tourist hub par excellence in all its aspects, attracting tourists from all countries of the world for the antiquities it contains those express ancient human civilizations. Foreign delegations specializing in archaeology or tourism enthusiasts have always settled in the desert to see the secrets its rocks and mountains hold. "It never occurred to Assouf in the past, when he crossed the desolate valley in his youth, busy with herding his sheep, that this drawing engraved in the rocks would be as important as it is today when it has become a destination for Christian tourists, who come from the most distant countries, crossing the desert in desert vehicles, to see the stone and open their mouths in amazement at its grandeur, beauty, and mystery" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 8). The African desert is a wondrous world in terms of the things that are drawn on its rocks. In it, explorers and researchers notice "hunters with strange rectangular faces, running after many animals, of which only the hyenas, gazelles, and wild buffalo are known. In the rocks, there are also naked women, carrying large breasts on their chests - very large and not proportionate to their size" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 9).

The deeper Asouf ventured into the mountains with his herd, the more enigmatic secrets he uncovered in the ancient rock carvings. "As he climbed the mountains following the goats, he discovered more drawings – faces twisted in grotesque expressions, like those of ghouls, and strange creatures that don't exist in the desert... His mother told him they were the ancient cave dwellers – the first ancestors" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 9). Asouf eventually became a guide for Italian archaeologists, owing to his extensive knowledge of the desert. The inscriptions and drawings hidden within the desert's rocky embrace are a precious treasure that must be protected. This was the advice given to Asouf by an antiquities officer: "From today, you are the guardian of Wadi Matkhandoush. You are our eyes in the valley. Many people from different races and religions will come to see the antiquities. You must watch them. Don't let them steal the stones or damage the rocks. These drawings are the pride of our country. Stay vigilant – they are greedy and will steal stones to sell in their countries for thousands, even millions" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 14). Indeed, the desert is a treasure, both in its hidden depths and on its surface.

#### **4. Manifestations of the desert on the natural level**

##### *4.1. Animal*

The animals in the desert have an invaluable place in the hearts of their owners. The father tells his son before he meets his death, "Do you think that the animal does not understand just because it does not speak like you? It is smarter than me and you." This is his response to Asouf's mockery of the outpourings of tenderness that the father is keen to show towards his elegant camel. He talks to it day and night... caressing the fur on its body, running his hand over its long neck, and tenderly feeling its large lips... Oh my God, how beautiful it is... You should always take care of your foal. If you do not love it, it will not love you. If you do not understand it, it will not understand you, and it will not save you at the critical moment. The animal is more loyal than the human being" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 55). The camel is the animal that can endure the harshness of the desert and bear all its burdens. The inhabitants give it all their attention and love, because it is their means of confronting the difficulties of the desert .

The father also likes to go on describing the beauty of gazelles, especially on moonlit nights, saying to his son: "How beautiful their build is, how graceful their stature, how soft their body, magic overflows from their eyes, the most beautiful creature in the world, the spirit of the sandy desert, in it is its expanse, its calm, its serenity, and the magic of its moon, in it is the impossible, in it is freedom, and therefore no creature has ever hoped to capture it alive" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 56), for gazelles are what give the desert uniqueness and distinction.

Without forgetting the most important and rarest animal in the world, the Waddan, which is considered the oldest animal in the desert, is a mountain goat that became extinct in Europe in the seventeenth century, but it is still present in the desert of North Africa. Asouf describes its magnificence, saying: "The Waddan is a giant, gray in color, with silver hairs shining in its thick hair, a long beard hanging from its chin, and its head is crowned with two curved horns" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 54). The importance of this animal does not stop at the beauty of its appearance, as it is also "the most sensitive and alert animal in the desert, smelling the scent of humans from the farthest distance, and does not fall under the threat of sight except suddenly in the darkness of dawn, or on days when the air dies and the wind stops completely" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 97). Therefore, we find this animal surrounded by an aura of holiness by the people of the desert .

#### 4.2. *Climate*

The narrative vividly captures the defining aspects of the desert climate, where the intense and scorching heat stands out as its most prominent feature. The harsh sun dominates the landscape, with its relentless rays burning everything in its path: "As evening arrives and the flaming disk moves from the throne in the heart of the sky, bidding farewell, it threatens to return the next day to complete its mission of burning what it could not burn today" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 7). Life in the desert demands endurance, patience, and an ability to withstand the harshness of both nature and weather. The days are often unbearable, with "the sun being harsh since morning, the day is hell – oh my God, where can we escape from you, oh sun of the desert" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 41). This sentiment reflects the struggle of visitors who are drawn to the desert's beauty and allure but find it difficult to cope with its severe climate. The challenge intensifies with the onset of summer when "everything abandons the desert with the approach of summer, leaving behind an emptiness that defies the mirage, stillness, and the rays of the sun" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 124).

The desert is a land of contrasts, where violent whirlwinds can suddenly arise, yet the day often concludes with a breathtaking sunset. Asouf experienced this many times, witnessing scenes where "a dust storm rose on the horizon across the plain. The goats bleated loudly, and the kids jumped in protest at the early confinement. The sun disappeared behind the mountain but continued to pour its red rays on the opposite plain at sunset. The sun likes to cover the desert with a red veil of rays" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 17). Despite the harshness that may seem overwhelming to outsiders, the desert remains the most familiar and natural environment for its inhabitants, as these characteristics are integral to their way of life.

#### 4.3. Topography

Regarding the topography, the desert is vast and unparalleled in its magnificence. The landscape is marked by "shady caves rising to the top of the mountain, accessible only through smooth rocks, and other wild caves fortified with stones like the fangs of beasts. Stubborn wild grasses cling to them, surrounded by scattered tongues of sand, with soft sand etched with the tracks of snakes, lizards, geckos, and desert rats" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 125). The North African desert boasts diverse and varied topography, and Asouf began to name the valleys, ravines, and mountains based on the ghostly figures drawn on their rocks: "This is the Valley of the Gazelles, that is the Hunters' Division, there is the Mount of the Waddan, and that is the Shepherds' Plain" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 11). The desert is a complex mixture of mountains, oases, and plains, and its inhabitants have become accustomed to its challenging geography, finding comfort in its rugged terrain.

### 5. Manifestations of the desert at the level of symbolism

The stillness and vastness of the desert made it a symbol of secrets and mystery, because "the natural world devoid of any semantic investment cannot be domesticated except by transforming things into signs, then, and only then, do things get rid of their functional dimension in order to become a repository for a huge amount of meanings" (Krad, 2008, p. 10).

In light of the above, Ibrahim Al-Koni made the desert a novelistic symbol in his writings despite its primitiveness and simplicity. So, what does the desert symbolize in the novel "The bleeding of Stone"?

#### 5.1. The desert is a symbol of isolation and loneliness

The events of the novel *The Bleeding of Stone* unfold in the Libyan desert, a remote and harsh environment that profoundly shapes the characters, instilling in them a love for isolation and solitude, and a reluctance to engage with others. This is not out of fear, but rather because they lack any connection to the world outside their desert home, even to the point of not understanding the language others speak. For instance, Asouf's apprehension about interacting with the merchants of Qafa to barter goats for bags of dates and barley is evident when he says, "Bartering was not an easy matter for young men who did not have a language to address people, did not know their nature, morals, or behavior. And how could he know when he had lived his entire life isolated from them, far away, afraid of them, terrified by helplessness and frightened whenever he thought—even just thinking—of approaching them, so how about addressing them or mixing with them? The first time he stood far away, and watched the

long caravan as it traveled along the winding road that cuts through the valleys and ascends the rugged mountains, sometimes deviating to the right, sometimes to the north until it disappeared into the unknown horizon, so that the line of camels could flow into it, the patient, laden with burdens and goods. The caravan disappeared, and he could not approach" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 37).

As a result, Asouf returns empty-handed, paralyzed by his intense fear of people, choosing to remain in poverty rather than confront them. In this way, the desert in *The Bleeding of Stone* becomes a powerful symbol of isolation and loneliness, embodying the characters' deep-seated aversion to human contact.

### 5.2. *The desert is a symbol of freedom and emancipation*

Freedom represents liberation from all constraints and is a cherished ideal for every human being. In the novel *The Bleeding of Stone*, this concept of freedom is embodied by the desert—a vast expanse where the protagonist, Asouf, finds solace. For him, the desert is not just a physical space but a source of freedom and a vital connection to life itself, as he reflects: "The eternal sad desert, the happy prancing sheep, the graceful wandering gazelles, and the mother's murmurs in the cave on winter nights. This is life" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 37). However, the freedom that the desert offers comes at a cost. Asouf realizes that "whoever chooses to live freely in the desert must take charge of his own affairs. It is a wisdom he read in his father's life and paid his life as a price for it. He will also pay his life as a price for it. Is this freedom?" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 36).

Despite the harshness of desert life, which could ultimately claim his life, Asouf remains steadfast in his commitment to it. For him, the desert symbolizes purity, innocence, and true freedom—freedom from all constraints.

### 5.3. *The desert is a symbol of death*

The desert's harshness and isolation have turned it into a realm of death. A flood devastated Asouf's family, claiming the lives of his mother and their sheep. The desolation following the flood was severe: "A person in the desert must die from one of two things: a flood or thirst. After the flood, drought spread, leaving its mark on humans, animals, and plants. Asouf's sheep perished" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 35).

Asouf's father also met a tragic end during his confrontation with the Waddan. He had been tracking the creature's trail, and when he reached the "Ainsis" valley, he followed the signs of a fierce struggle. There were bloodstains on the stones and drops scattered on the sand. Ultimately, he found his father lying lifeless beneath a foreboding rock, his face turned towards the sky, his eyes vacant, and his body surrounded by large blue flies. There was no visible

bleeding, only scratches on his hands. The father had been killed by the Waddan, mirroring the fate he had once inflicted on the creature (Al-Koni, 1992, pp. 33, 34). In *The Bleeding of Stone*, the desert thus emerges as a symbol of eternal departure, marked by the relentless severity of its environment.

#### 5.4. *The desert is a symbol of contemplation and philosophy*

Ibrahim Al-Koni says, "The desert is a principle of metaphysics, linking the natural with the supernatural, as it overlooks eternity, and is what pushes you to the garden of contemplation" (Kleib, 2009) .

Accordingly, the novel "The bleeding of the Stone" constitutes a fictional world surrounded by many philosophical, Sufi, and existential contemplations. It summarizes the existential vision of the novelist Ibrahim Al-Koni through his discussion of the relationship of man with all components of the desert space open to the unknown horizon, which reveals to us the essence of humans, their characteristics, cultures, beliefs, myths, and superstitions, so that the desert space becomes a place where the soul washes and purifies itself to live in peace in this eternal void .The fact that Ibrahim Al-Koni remained the omniscient narrator in the novel "The bleeding of the Stone" was intended to present his ideas and visions through the characters of his novel, where we find many philosophical and existential contemplations scattered throughout the novel, such as his use of his Sufi philosophy when he mentioned the conflict between the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya orders during the meeting of John Park, the Italian officer interested in Eastern philosophy, with one of the sheikhs of the Qadiriyya order, "whom others describe as a heretic in addition to a dervish. It seems that people's avoidance of him is due to the sheikh's conflict with the sheikhs of other Sufi orders. He once accompanied him to a dhikr party in which the ecstasies tore their faces and chests and waved knives in the absence of ecstasy, so he said to him while standing with him away from the crowd: - Look at the Tijaniyya heretics, how they invent innovations and harm Sufism and Islam" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 117).

Then the Sheikh continues to explain the difference between Islam and Christianity to the Italian officer, saying: "Our disagreement with you, O Christians, lies here. You say that Christ is God and you limit His majesty to one creature, while we see that He is present in all people, indeed in all beings. Our religion is more just than your religion" (Al-Koni, 1992, p. 118) .In light of the above, it becomes clear to us that the Sufi discourse constitutes one of the most important components of the novel "Bleeding of the Stone", because it is a realistic aspect that is widely spread in the desert, considering it the appropriate place for the emergence of Sufism.

## Conclusion

The Arab novel's exploration of the desert came quite late, but Libyan novelist Ibrahim Al-Koni has distinguished himself in this realm. In his novel *The Bleeding of Stone*, Al-Koni masterfully portrays the desert, transforming its barren and desolate nature into a rich tapestry of symbols and meanings. He employs the desert not just as a setting but as a philosophical, intellectual, and anthropological landscape. Drawing upon the profound cultural heritage of the Tuareg people, combined with his own extensive personal knowledge, Al-Koni infuses the novel with a deep, evocative sense of place. His innovative and captivating use of Tuareg folklore and mythology engages readers, offering them an authentic experience of Arab identity while presenting a resolute counterpoint to globalization.

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