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Mythopoetics: Sustaining the Ecosystem in Ibrahim Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*

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Abstract:
This article investigates the ecological imperatives of the Sahara Desert in Ibrahim al-Koni's novel *The Bleeding of the Stone* (published in Arabic in 1990 and translated into English in 2002) and argues that al-Koni incorporated mythology with an end to preserving the ecosystem and exposing cultural disharmony. Cognizant of people's greed and recklessness toward the desert, al-Koni brings it to the foreground and mythically evokes it. We use textual and thematic analysis to explore the mythical vision in the novel. The mouflon (called *waddan* in the Sahara) and the Bedouins become paramount symbols of liberty, reclusive existence, and survival at one with nature. The protagonist Asouf not only guards the *waddan* (around which humans weave myths of sacredness, magical abilities, ferocity, and superb meat) and ancient rock paintings but is also spiritually united with the desert and its creatures. The result is an ecological fable teeming with mythical and mystical undertones and a celebration of traditional, intuitive practices in preserving the desert and its inhabitants against rationalist systems of corruption instigated by modern (Western) technology. The magical transformations and incarnations of humans and animals, the respectful mystery of the desert, and a belief in recounted stories and spells recur in the novel, giving it a mythical quality. The novel, hence, depicts a cultural gap between the natives of the Sahara and foreign hunters.

Keywords: myth, Ibrahim Al-Koni, *The Bleeding of the Stone*, *waddan*, desert novel.

神话学：在易卜拉欣·阿尔科尼的《石头流血》中维持生态系统

摘要:
本文在易卜拉欣·阿尔科尼的小说《石头的流血》（1990年以阿拉伯语出版，2002年翻译成英文）中调查了撒哈拉沙漠的生态需求，并认为阿尔科尼为了保护生态系统和暴露文化不和谐。意识到人们对沙漠的贪婪和鲁莽，阿尔科尼把它带到了前台，并以神话般的方式唤起了它。我们使用文本和主题分析来探索小说中

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的神话视野。摩弗隆（在撒哈拉沙漠称为瓦丹）和贝都因人成为自由、隐居生活和与自然融为一体的最重要象征。主人公阿苏夫不仅守护着瓦丹（人类在瓦丹周围编织着关于神圣、魔法能力、凶猛和一流肉类的神话）和古代岩画，而且在精神上与沙漠及其生物结合在一起。结果是一个充满神话和神秘色彩的生态寓言，以及对保护沙漠及其居民的传统直觉做法的庆祝，以对抗由现代（西方）技术煽动的理性主义腐败体系。人类和动物的神奇转变和化身，沙漠的神秘，以及对叙述故事和咒语的信仰在小说中反复出现，赋予它神话般的品质。因此，这部小说描绘了撒哈拉原住民与外国猎人之间的文化鸿沟。

关键词: 神话, 易卜拉欣阿尔科尼, 石头流血, 瓦丹, 沙漠小说.

1. Introduction

Although it is the birthplace of most prophets and saints, the pivot of absolute freedom, and a major supplier of the world's energy, the desert, seen as vacant and useless, continues to be a site for carrying out nuclear tests and risky experiments. Still worse, it is relegated to the periphery as a wasteland, notwithstanding that it is a "space where humans go to encounter themselves, their demons, and their god" and equally "an oasis, a paradise, where humans renew themselves and are transformed" (Klemm, 2004). The desert, however, provides a fertile ground for legends and myths necessary for the subject matter of Ibrahim al-Koni's corpus that largely rests on the revival of superstitious thought and popular belief. Thus, he concocts intricate myths attesting to the desert, its animals, and its people. Al-Koni mythologizes the desert. Hence, he does not only describe the external manifestations of the place but also monitors the social and cultural dimensions of the owners of the place—the Tuareg people, who have their unique beliefs. He views mythology as a symbol of life and imposed ideology as a symbol of oppression.

While ideology monopolizes truth and seeks absolute power, mythology cherishes the soul and empowers nature. Al-Koni's uniquely complex writing can be characterized as mystical, nostalgic, and lyrical. His works engage philosophical and existential questions about the role of myth in preserving the desert and its exquisite animals. A master of magical realism and the depiction of the southern Libyan desert, al-Koni has not been given adequate critical attention (especially in scholarship written in the English language). One critic has observed that his immersion in the Tuareg traditions and lifestyle "prompted some to read his works as anthropological texts" (Hamarneh, 2014, p. 91). In the article on spiritual symbolism in the Sahara of al-Koni's novel, Weisberg (2015) has argued that al-Koni's mythologies, human-animal metamorphoses, and local Tuareg (ecofriendly) philosophies and anecdotes undermine the superimposed power structures and theories of neocolonialism. She postulates that al-Koni's novel interrogates "the primacy or validity of Western novelistic and philosophical structures and offers an alternative, spiritually based 'reading' of the desert as both metaphor and ecosystem, based on balance and interconnection" (Weisberg, 2015). While Weisberg focused on al-Koni's challenge to western hegemonic discourses (literary, political, or intellectual) and imperialistic logic through Tuareg cosmology and Sufi philosophy, we highlighted the role of myth in sustaining the ecosystem in this research. Some critics have tried to include religious discourse in their environmental and postcolonial critique of his works. Defending Islamic environmentalism over the Western one, Asaad (2020) argued that al-Koni's "reliance on local and Islamic embracement of animal rights buttresses his postcolonial project in defending both humans and nonhumans". However, how can a mythical approach enrich the anthropological and environmental approach to al-Koni's novels? Why did al-Koni employ desert mythology? What is his mythical vision, and how is it rooted in sustaining the desert? This article engages such questions.

2. Al-Koni and Desert Writing: Literary Contexts

In fact, *The Bleeding of the Stone* (published in Arabic as *نزيف الحجر* "Nazif al-Hajar" in 1990 and translated into English in 2002) was al-Koni's first novel to be translated into English. Moreover, the full-length Arabic and English studies on the novel are limited. The researchers, however, have not come by a single study fully concerned with al-Koni's incorporation of mythology as the foremost factor in preserving the ecosystem. Therefore, this article serves the double purpose of better introducing al-Koni to the English reader and filling a gap in the critical scholarship on Libyan literature. Notwithstanding his constant travel away from his birthplace of the Sahara Desert, al-Koni evokes it as a paradoxical site suggesting cruelty, enchantment, and alienation, and as a symbol of spiritual cleansing that "haunts the human spirit" (Klemm, 2004, p. xiv). Although many writers, including Edward Abbey, Leslie Marmon Silko, Abdulrahman Munif, Joseph Crutch, among others, opt for the desert as the primary setting of their work, al-Koni is still the most grippingly articulate about it. This popularity originates, in large part, from the ontological modes and realms he interweaves in his fiction, powerfully delineating the intricate bond between humans and the desert.

According to Abrams (1999), mythology has its own truth. It refers to a "system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain

why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives".

In the same way, *World History Encyclopedia* defines myths as "part of every culture in the world that are used to explain natural phenomena, where people came from and how their civilization developed, and why things happen as they do". The researchers use these similar definitions of mythologies as the parameters by which the novel's mythical content is explored. Al-Koni mythologizes the desert, its animals, and inhabitants to privilege an intuitive mode of affinity with a versatile nature and cosmic understanding, which also marks the failure of alternative rationalist, colonialist approaches to the desert. There are deeper truths about life in the desert, al-Koni seems to argue, that hunters and modern technology will fail to understand. A mythical approach to the Libyan desert, for al-Koni, is more privileged and has more truth over imposed Western variables.

Conscious of the indispensable role of myths and mythologies in preserving nature, al-Koni endeavors to forge identity, esteem, and enunciation to the desert and its organisms. Delving into the world of animals and inanimate objects requires mythology that can invoke and converse with natural objects and dig into their secret world. Sufis, "in their vision of the holiness of God's spirit incarnate" (*Bleeding*, 2002, p. 74), believe that "God dwells in all souls. To limit it to gazelles is heresy" (p. 108). Carruba (2018) posits that myths are integral for sustaining the environment in most societies. She elaborates the mythical systems that have explained life through millennia and helped the Tuareg people cope with the harshness of their desert surroundings. According to her, Desert gods and detailed myths accounting for creation, life, and the afterlife gave the space its spiritual dimension. Furthermore, myth and reality as intertwined facets of life are central to Tuareg's cultural demarcation of collective lines and shared imaginary. How al-Koni represents identity is essentially magical/mythical. By examining these magical/mythical narratives, the reader recognizes how al-Koni approaches his native space and how his texts recreate an authentic North African desert identity (Para. 3).

By nurturing nonhumans and breaking off the stereotypes, the writer seeks to bring about a change via cultivating an audience conscious of the centrality of the desert. He does that by avoiding generalizations, absenting, suppressing, and dispersing the referent. This approach has to tone down its objectives because language is inevitably symbolic. Nevertheless, the problem refers to restoring the referent and fostering some value systems among individuals and encouraging them to discard narrow-mindedness in reducing the world to their limited understanding. One of the contradictions of all acts of writing is that something is lost, and a gulf is forged between the thing and its name. However, through mythologies and allegories, animals and nature can communicate their grievance, speak for themselves, and defy the so-called "human supremacy".

Surpassing geographical demarcations and imbued with the cosmology and culture of the Tuareg nomads, al-Koni's "neither exterior nor interior" desert, in the words of Klemm (2004), "refers to a complex locus of experience and reflection. It is simultaneously an interior space of the mind; an exterior space where pilgrims, adventurers, and travelers can visit and dwell; and an inter-textual space produced by cross-references among cultural creations dwelling with the desert as an archetype or icon of the imagination". While al-Koni depicts the desert in positive terms as "a paradise" of self-renewal and regeneration (Klemm, 2004), his depictions and mythologies neither retain utopian undertones and nuances nor lapse into a neo-romanticism and a celebration of the mother earth on textual and rhetorical levels. Rather, the desert is painstakingly viewed as an unforgiving space in which people "die by one of those two opposites: flood or thirst" (*Bleeding*, 2002, p. 69), where "water is the blood that has lost its true color" (*Anubis*, 2005, p. 180). Calleja (2013) explicates that al-Koni's desert "involves thirst, hunger, fatigue, and delirious experiences. It involves reading the most subtle of signs. It involves constant intuition. It is a process of constant and conscious 'living'" (p. 132). Echoing similar perspectives, Derrida (1995) viewed the desert as the space of contradictions, as "a paradoxical figure of the *aporia*", having "no marked out or assured passage, no route in any case, at the very most trails that are not reliable ways, the paths are not yet cleared, unless the sand has already re-covered them". Derrida, in a heterotopia sense, conceptualized the desert as a "condition of *decision* or event, which consists in opening the way, in *(sur)passing*, thus in going beyond" the *aporia* (p. 54, emphasis in original). Al-Koni does not romanticize the desert. Rather, he mythologizes it.

While the history of Arabic literature has witnessed attempts to personify the desert and invest it with political ramifications, al-Koni's sustained use of desert imagery and symbolism remains unique in modern Arabic literature. In his famous story *Men in the Sun*, Kanafani (1962) made the August desert of Southern Iraq "a void, like a black eternity" (p. 22). This desert on the borders of Iraq and Kuwait becomes the merciless burial site for the three dislocated Palestinians trying to smuggle themselves into Kuwait. The desert not only mocks their death in echoing the futile words of their guide Abul Khaizuran "Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank?" (p. 74) in the boundless darkness, but also symbolizes their brittle dreams of returning home and establishing a normal life. It is no wonder, hence, that at the beginning of the story Abu Qais embraces the desert, "and the earth began to throb under him with tired heartbeats" (p. 21). By contrast, al-Koni's treatment of the desert exceeds the existential logic of Kanafani, and Kanafani's political context is subsumed by the mythical one in al-Koni. The

immediate historical realities Kanafani was depicting in his Palestinian novels and stories are absent in al-Koni. Instead, his protagonist Asouf and the sacred mouflon are mythically fused to form, along with the ancient rock paintings, the rich symbols and legends of desert life. The middle section of Willa Cather's novel *The Professor's House* (1925) is entitled *Tom Outland's Story*. In this section, the Professor's former student, Tom Outland, is remembered as an amateur archaeologist and a native of New Mexico. Outland supposedly discovered the ruins of an ancient desert civilization, mainly cliff-dwellings and artifacts while working as a cattle rancher. Like al-Koni's central character Asouf, Outland was against the commercialization of such desert ruins. And like al-Koni's Asouf, Outland worked as cattle herder when he discovered the desert ruins. The regional setting of Cather, the mountains and desert of the southwest (New Mexico), finds echoes in the Libyan desert, caves, and mountains depicted in al-Koni's novel. However, al-Koni's desert is harsher, more pervasive, more immediately present, and more spiritual. Briefly put, comparative and intertextual studies are legitimate even though they are beyond the scope of this article. Hence, the next section is devoted to looking at the mythical constructions in al-Koni's novel by focusing on human/animal metamorphoses/transmigrations, deep veneration for the desert, and recounted stories/ancient engravings. We contend that such a trilogy of dimensions forms the crux of mythical constructions in the novel.

3. Mythopoetic Constructions in *The Bleeding of the Stone*

3.1. Human/Animal Transformations and Transmigrations

According to Harmon and Holman (1996), "[m]yth makes concrete and particular a special perception of human beings or a cosmic view" (p. 334). The myth explains the meaning of life and death and accounts for our hopes, adventures, and actions, and they are the site of a deep, intuitive, or spiritual truth. It is the site of primordial rituals and primitive truths. Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* reverberates with a plethora of ecologically sound myths and conventions, striking a balance with the ecosystem and touching upon human greed as the primary dynamic for environmental degradation. In the words of Aubuchon (2017), the novel is a "taut, allegorical meditation on the pastoral virtues of—and modern challenges to—traditional Berber, or Amazighen, desert life" (p. 3). Greed is manifested in Cain Adam and Masoud al-Dabbashi's desperate lust after the elusive, agile *waddan*, a legendary animal that has become extinct in Europe in the 17th century. The arrival of these two strangers (along with other foreign agents) searching for *waddan* disrupts Asouf's and the desert's sense of peace and harmony. The novel suggests that violating pastoral traditions and virtues is linked to the very existence of the desert's main symbol, Asouf, whose crucifixion at the end of the novel by the greedy, flesh-eating Cain entails extinction of both human and animal life. Linking the fate of humans and animals is part of the mythical thrust of the novel, whereby humans, spirits, and animals coexist. It is intruders who disrupt this harmony.

The structural complexity of the novel, animal-human metamorphoses, and mythologies blur the line between humans and animals. People's and animals' shapes shift and metamorphose to the point one would question: "Which of them was the victim, which was the executioner? Which of them was human, which was animal?" (p. 60). One cannot distinguish between the spirit of Asouf's father and the *waddan* that has come to help him. Tempted to hunt a waddan, Asouf is trapped between mountain rocks and is about to fall into the abyss when the spirit of his father (transmigrating into a waddan) saves him: "Suddenly, in the dimness of the glow, he saw his father in the eyes of the great, patient *waddan*" (p. 61). The demarcations between beast and human become blurred, and Asouf (before the waddan drags him into the pit) assumes animal qualities when he encounters a *waddan*:

He did not know what made him start moving, *on all fours*, toward the possessed animal. He did not even know what he was trying to do. Some unknown power was pushing him to it. He forgot the vow, forgot his father's fate. Wonderment drove him on beyond his power to resist. His father had said, and so had his mother, that the spirit of the waddan attracts, stupefies, robs a man of his mind, takes all his will away. Then the hunter finds himself dispossessed, led away, haunted, leaping on his own four limbs as he chases the beast over the smooth, hard rocks. (p. 46, emphasis added)

Charmed by the crazed *waddan*, Asouf assumes animalistic qualities and thus walks on four legs. Before Asouf loses consciousness, he envisions that the *waddan* that has come for his rescue is a metamorphosis or a corporealization of his father: "You are my father. I recognized you" (p. 61). This same animal that saved Asouf from falling into the pit also saved Asouf's father when he almost fell into a chasm due to a hunting accident (p.40). Just as the *waddan* is viewed as the spirit of the mountains, Asouf becomes the spirit of the inclusive desert that harbors gazelles, the *waddan*, and ancient ruins. Fouad and Alwakeel (2013), who associated *The Bleeding of the Stone* with Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, explained that in both novels, "the physical is transformed into an existential realm in which ontological and epistemological questions about human existence are raised" (p. 50). After being saved by the *waddan*, Asouf develops an aversion to all kinds of meat that starts to arouse his disgust. Following this life-changing encounter with the *waddan* (that magically rescued him), Asouf questions:

"How could one creature eat the flesh of another? What was the difference between the flesh of an animal and that of man? If someone could eat the flesh of the *waddan*, then he could eat human flesh too" (p. 65). Asouf concedes, "He, his father, and the mighty *waddan* were one now. Nothing could separate them" (p. 66). Again, the novel teems with myths about the transformation of animals and humans and their unity with the desert cosmos against intruders. For example, the desert people of the oasis recount stories that they had seen a man break loose from his captivity and change into a *waddan* (p. 74), thus escaping from the colonizing Italians and vanishing into the dark desert. In his foreword to *The Sacred Desert*, Klemm (2004) identified the desert as "the encounter of the self with itself, encounter of the self with the other self, and encounter of the self with the unknowable Transcendent Other that in the end is no other than self or other self" (p. xiii). Primarily, the desert occupies "a primordial place in discourse and experience, where conventional distinctions [between humans and nonhumans] are overturned" (p. xiii), revealing that they all originate from the same root. At the end of the novel, Cain, too, transforms into a *waddan* the moment he exchanges speech with the eyes of the animal: "He vanished in them, and they in him so that no one could tell where he was or what he was. He was the *waddan*, and the *waddan* was Cain" (p. 129), disturbing subject-object relations. In killing a gazelle and her calf, Cain, son of Adam, "did not just kill his sister. He ate her flesh too" (p. 119). Cain cannibalistically breaks a sacred communion with nature.

The mother gazelle not only tragically howled like a wolf but also had a look of wretchedness and fright in her eyes (p.119) because she could not protect her calf. In other words, the gazelle and *waddan* instinctively react to danger like humans. They are not much different from us. Asouf, given his intimacy with the desert, is the only free-spirited nomad who can pinpoint the lair of the *waddan*. So, greedy hunters like Cain—who cannot pass a single day without eating game meat and who "had little thought for the rules of nature"—and Masoud mount much pressure on him to assist them in locating the animal. Asouf is confronted with choosing between defiance and compliance, between maintaining his spiritual allegiance to the *waddan* and aiding these greedy hunters in finding it. Defiant, he deploys ruses and deception to mislead them and guarantee the noble animal's safety from the ravages of modern technology. Subsequently, they drag Asouf to the painting of the greatest priest (the desert image of a *waddan* as a giant priest on a rock) in Wadi Matkhandoush and crucify him there: "Asouf was crucified now, his legs and arms wide apart. His body covered the majestic, legendary *waddan*, while the priest's hand touched his head now bare of its turban, as though patting it" (p. 96). His only reaction to their aggression is reiterating his talismanic spell: "Only through dust will the son of Adam be filled" (p. 93). Cain slaughters Asouf (after metamorphosing into a *waddan*) on the rock. Blood drips on the stone tablet on which it is written: "I, the high priest of Matkhandoush, prophesy, for the generations to come that redemption will be at hands when the sacred *waddan* bleeds and the blood issues from the stone" (p. 135). The curse is washed with a miracle: the Earth cleanses, and the desert floods. After this climactic scene in which the stone magically bleeds, the desert is engulfed by a deluge that washes away the sins of humans. Intriguingly, this metamorphosis into a *waddan* exempts Asouf from being drafted into the Italian army, alluding to the role of nature and myth in dissent against all forms of oppression, be they local or global systems of oppression. Asouf turns into a bleeding *waddan* on the same site of engraved Tuareg alphabet and the priest's image.

3.2. Veneration for the Mystical Desert

Overall, the desert is routinely regarded with much ambivalence and symbolism in al-Koni's novel. Al-Koni treats it as terrain of mystery and yet naturalistically depicts it as a merciless locale where thirst, hunger, and oppressive heat are the norm. Nevertheless, his desert is beyond human disrespect or harm. Immediate revenge is the expected outcome for transgressions. Tynan (2020) elucidates that there is no simple or self-evident approach, no clear path, to the topic of the desert. We can grasp it as a natural wilderness or a barren wasteland, an ecology sometimes unusually rich in life and surprisingly fragile, an idea of geographical extremity or alterity, a sacred or accursed site, a metaphor for nullity, a subjective or existential terrain, or an object of sheer aesthetic exultation.

However, al-Koni, refuting parasitic and exploitative nefarious attitudes toward the desert as a lifeless wasteland devoid of biodiversity and human activity, essentializes the desert as a spiritual locus full of beauty, rooted in heritage and history, and teeming with local and religious philosophies and mythologies, one that "hides all sorts of treasure, including extinct animals" (p. 123). According to Colla (2010), al-Koni's writing radically redraws the "map of the world—one in which the Sahara is a full, rather than an empty space; one in which the Twareg lies not at the edges, but the center of history" (Para. 3). Al-Koni locates his critique within a teleology of the history of the Sahara Desert, where a place cannot be separated from its inhabitants. Still, he emphasizes that place should not be merely valued and devalued just because of its relationship to humans, though this is one of his central points. The place is not a dead spot; it is a history, a potential, and a system capable of responding to humans positively if its rules are observed. Thus, the place stands as a witness to what humans have done and are doing to it and themselves. The spirit of treating the place as a commodity fails to realize itself as much as it harms the place. Hence, Asouf is extremely chagrined when Masoud "cursed the desert with vile words. Asouf had not heard before—he'd never in his life heard such ugly expressions. What had the desert done to deserve such

ugly insult?" (p. 75).

Similarly, Asouf feels disturbed. His heart beats more when the shrieks of laughter and sarcastic comments of Cain and Masoud echo in the desert mountains (p. 16) as if desacralizing the place. It seems that tourists, foreign hunters, and strangers cannot fathom the deep mystery of the desert or simply venerate its ruthless silence.

Because of attending to the many dangers enshrouding, the desert resulting from disruptive technological forces and the havoc people relentlessly wreak, al-Koni occupies a remarkable position in his unbending quest for liberating the desert and its life forms from the irresponsible intervention that culminates in mischief, corruption, and pollution. As evinced in the novel, pre-human intervention, the desert "had teemed with life, and there were herds of gazelles everywhere" (p. 86). However, because people infringe on the desert and its resources, animals would "flee, and as they ran off altogether, the whole plain would seem to move. Yes, the very desert seemed to be flying human attack" (p. 86). Besides, "neither Land Rovers nor rapid-firing guns had yet arrived to disturb the desert's peace. The merciless vehicles arrived with the companies searching for oil and underground wealth" (p. 87). Principally, the overwhelming acceleration of technology has had a profound impact on the desert, and it threatens its surface and ecosystem. The desert suffers under the harness of the greedy hunter:

With the introduction of rapid-firing guns to the desert, the gazelles' chance of escape was far less, and the herds virtually died out! How well he remembered the rivers of blood, he spilled after getting his hands on that gun! Down he would go to the plain, teeming with its gazelles, and start gathering in the harvest. A single round would bring down several beasts. He would press the trigger once more, and again the gazelles would drop like clusters of dates torn apart in a storm. (p. 89)

Human beings have no right to transgress against the desert since it is also the abode of other creatures, especially those animals that embody noble spirits such as the *waddan*, whose meat is believed to have "divine secrets lurking in it" (p. 110). Gazing at the rock and cave paintings, Asouf can see rich mythology: "animals fleeing from the arrows of the masked hunters: *waddan*, gazelles, oxen, and many others, huge in size, with long legs he never saw in the desert today" (p. 5). What happened to these animals? A great many environmental catastrophes (and the extinction of many animals) stem from people's greed, caprice, whims, and desires, paying no attention to the repercussions of their actions. While many dignified species—such as the *waddan*, tigers, leopards, elephants, rhinos, whales, and eagles—are either endangered or extinct in many regions, other creatures like roaches and rats thrive. In several cultures, these animals inspire baby names, and such a tendency engenders a unity between humans and animals. Some cultures deem animals holy and thus prohibit eating their meat; other cultures attach the animal's name to its meat: the animal's name is bound to its meat and is not substituted for by a signifier. Asouf's father, who has pledged not to hunt the *waddan* and believes that "animals are more faithful than people" (p. 44), wonders: "Why should this wicked creature man chase such an angel, to kill it and fill his belly with it? Would man die of hunger if he never killed a gazelle? And why should man be so hungry that he feels he has to spill the blood of this lovely creature?" (p. 45). However, Asouf's father dies because of breaking his sacred pledge with the *waddan* to feed his pregnant wife. He knows that there would be consequences to his violation of the rules of the desert: "He said he had broken his vow and the spirit of the mountains would punish him for it" (p. 40). The father's repeated mournful muwwals (hymns) suggest not only the existential hardships and cruelty of desert life but also the father's betrayal of his oath not to hunt *waddan*. Hence, Asouf's father broke a bond with nature, for which he was punished.

More important than eating or not eating animals is the environment that supports these animals and makes our presence possible. Attending to our bond with animals and the natural world is not a new phenomenon; it has always run through world literature. By way of illustration, *The Animals' Lawsuit Against Humanity* (a multicultural fable published in Iraq in the 10th century by a religious group called Ikhwan al-Safa) resonates with similar issues, where animals assume voice and agency and debunk the system or the hierarchy that perpetrates their suffering. This parable dwells on the idea that humans and nonhumans originate from the same divine source and thereby form a complex web. In brief, humans rule over animals on an island, but they quickly become tyrannical. Animals, in effect, resent human domination and call into question the superiority of humans to animals, bringing a lawsuit by eloquent representatives of all members of the animal kingdom against humans to the spiritual ruler of the island on which all humans and animals subsist. Humans have to appear before the court to justify their subjugation of animals. During the trials, humans and animals debate their complex links, and both parties present arguments and counterarguments regarding our legitimacy to rule over animals. In the end, humans lose the right to subdue animals, and their so-called supremacy crumbles at the threshold of forceful rebuttals that animals are created to exist, not simply to serve humans. Humans are not entitled to exploit the natural world; rather, they should cultivate the Earth. The case against humans is brought because of their lack of morality and overconsumption.

Again, most of the damage to the Earth emanates from the greed of the consumer economy, retaining residues of capitalism and imperialism. The word "consumer" used to mean the devil in old English, implying that, much like the devil who consumes the souls of people, consumers squander the land and its resources without considering the consequences. Any

comparison between spiritual communities, governed by environmentally friendly ethics of subsistence, and consumerist ones unveils the level of damage instigated by ethics of consumerism where people "shop until they drop". In traditional cosmology, there is a link between what happens inside of us and what happens outside of us—nature is contaminated because we are internally corrupt. In other words, the macrocosm is structurally similar to the microcosm. As viewed by Fouad and Wakeel (2013), the desert is

> a timeless microcosm that allows for a re-enactment of the story of creation and the everlasting struggle between good and evil. It becomes the locus for the rituals and ceremonies necessary for restoring balance in the universe. It also works as a catalyst in the protagonists' initiation and transformation processes [and] a stimulus for existential quest and Sufi struggle. (p. 50)

Having no spirituality, Cain, thanks to modern machine guns, can "slaughter a whole herd in a single raid, with one or two gazelles escaping if luck smiled on them" (p. 90), but right now, he feels the ramifications of overhunting animals which has led to the utter extermination of formerly common animals in the desert. Cain, the epitome of greed and cruelty who ate *waddan* and gazelles into extinction, "had little thought for the rules of nature. His concern was to hunt just as many gazelles as he could, and so to quench the flames between his teeth and calm his belly, then sell the rest to the American officer at the camp" (p. 88). When accused by the American John Parker of wiping out the gazelles from the desert, Cain lays the blame on Parker because "you helped me do it. You gave me the trucks and the guns. You are the one who wiped out the desert gazelles" (p. 110). Not respecting the rules of nature breaks the sanctity between humans and animals and reduces humans into greedy creatures. It is insightful that strangers do not revere the desert, unlike the native Asouf, who intuitively lives in it and learns from it, even though he can be under its spell. Briefly put, al-Koni mythologizes the desert as the enigmatic site of contradictions (sand and mountains, spirituality and exploitation, ghosts and creatures, among others). He gives the desert rich symbolism and deep resonances to elevate it to the mythical realm.

3.3. Recounted Stories and Ancient Engravings

According to C. Baldick (1990), myths are orally transmitted stories, re-told and adapted by generations and carrying no significant "historical basis". However, myths contain "deeper truths" and express "collective attitudes" to significant matters like life, death, and existence (Baldick, 1990). Storytelling and communal beliefs, it turns out, are essential aspects of mythmaking. In this logic, man's art and painting can capture our thinking and attitudes, i.e., our myths. The most prominent rock in the Wadi Matkhandoush is adorned with "the most wondrous paintings ancient man had made anywhere in the Sahara" (p. 2). The giant priest depicted on this rock touching a *waddan* epitomizes the essential unity between man and animal that forms the essence of the novel's mythical thrust. The engraving is a text that tells a meaningfully rudimentary story about the origin of our life. While herding his sheep, Asouf, who is deeply impacted by natural fluctuations, volunteers as a curator for the prominent historical drawings that "adorn[ed] mountain rocks and caverns in the other wadi" (p. 3). These monumental paintings, accurately and artistically explicated, are linked to the line of events, foregrounding the deeply seated ties between people and their surroundings. On one huge rock, there is a painting of a masked priest touching a "dignified and stubborn" *waddan* and both facing the empty horizon toward the sun (p. 2). Painted on the hard rocks in a majestic, sacred, and vivid fashion, those engravings signify the essential, legendary unity between man and beast, hunter and quarry. These paintings usually attract fetishist European tourists "who came from the most distant countries to see them. Their mouths open in amazement" (p. 3). Some of them even murmur Christian prayers before these engravings. Myth, al-Koni suggests, is part of the history of the desert, just as sand and rocks are. In her fairy tales, Asouf's mother never mentioned the faces and animals he discovers on rock walls in the desert. While part of the novel's mythical thrust revolves around what is told to Asouf by his parents about jinn living in caves (p.4), the other part comes from personal discoveries he has to make about life, death, and divinity. Hence, when Asouf unwittingly fails to direct his prayers to the Ka'aba, he finds himself facing the mighty stone figure of the masked jinni in the wadi (p. 7). His father had already told him a story of this masked figure painted on the rock as his ancestor (p. 10). The young Asouf allows such stories to form his level of expectations and arouse his curiosity about the mystical bond between humans, animals, and spirits.

The *waddan*, prized for its "magical" meat, contributes to forming the legendary desert space on which the novel relies. Asouf's father told his son a story about a *waddan* that killed itself and broke its neck rather than allow the hunter (the father) to catch it. Hence, Asouf's father considered this animal "possessed" and described it as "the spirit of the mountains" (p. 20) in contrast to the gazelle, which is the spirit of the desert sands (pp. 20-21). Like the *waddan*, Asouf's father faced a similar fate and died while chasing a "charmed" beast. Cain and Masoud fail to catch the animal because of the sanctity of the desert, promoting unity with other life forms. While recounting the story of the desert, the novel relates the story of Asouf, a reclusive shepherd who takes refuge in the desert mountains away from civilization and whose fate is bound to that of the *waddan*. When approached by traders, Asouf would become "highly nervous. Sweat was trickling down his neck and back, and he did not know what to do with his hands. He tried to hide his embarrassment by fixing his turban on his head" (p. 29).

Clearly, Cain and Asouf represent two completely different paradigms, one representing constructive and destructive approaches toward the desert and oscillating between balance and imbalance with nature. They even represent different mythologies. While Asouf has learned to live in harmony with the desert and its animals, Cain holds erroneous mythologies about Bedouins living in the desert. For example, Cain heard and retells stories that desert people mingle with jinni women in mountain caves (p. 33). His prejudices and stereotypes prevent him from real access to the desert and its inhabitants. By contrast, Asouf bases much of what he knows about the desert, aside from what he personally discovers in the caves and among the rocks, upon the fairy tales he heard from his parents (pp. 3-4). The desert mythology al-Koni constructs through stories and rock paintings enhances the idea of history and tradition against change and mechanical forms of existence. Mystery, intuition, and collective wisdom are essential values in al-Koni's mythopoetic vision.

4. Conclusion

Al-Koni mythically treats the desert to condemn environmental damage and praise spiritual unity among creatures. To build a mythology of the desert, he highlights animal/human sacred affinities and transmutations, fairy tales about the desert, and deep respect for a mystical desert. Hence, this article has dissected the basic elements of al-Koni's mythical vision in terms of transformations, stories, and mystical desert experiences. The writer calls for a wider integration of the desert, its long history, philosophies, and animals by debunking the prevailing idea of the desert as a cruel, useless ruin lacking in dignity. Hence, his exceptional desert narratives and myths of animal-human intersections and transformations contest the distortion of the desert as a wasteland. By cementing this missing dimension, al-Koni proves that it is a symbol of life and spirituality, unlike widely held perceptions of the desert. People should envision the desert in the same vein they perceive other green terrains—any assault (not free from imperialist motives) on the desert is a transgression against nature. Thus, al-Koni cautions people about the gravity of the desert as biodiversity, meriting appreciation to the wellbeing of the whole world through presenting complex characters engraved within their surroundings physically and spiritually. The novel permeates many stories about the desert, its miraculousness, and its duty to preserve it for humans and nonhumans alike. While this article has not employed myth theory by critics like Carl Jung, Sir James Frazer, and Northrop Frye due to space limitations and in favor of thematic and textual analysis, future studies can pursue this critical direction.

5. Limitations and Further Study

Lack of space prevented us from using more theory on myth. Further studies should do that while practically applying this myth theory to the novel.

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Author's Contributions

The first author conceived the idea and prepared the discussion of the novel. The second author added references, enhanced the argument, and edited the manuscript.

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