Chapter Five

Desert as a Mirror:

Gold Dust and The Bleeding of the Stone

By and large, al-Koni’s works are about the lost Waw: the lost past, the lost tradition, the lost identity, the lost Tuareg, the lost heritage, the lost mythology, and the lost desert. They are about everything that captures the loss of a people whose account of woe is almost missing from the records of world history and literature. Al-Koni’s employment of different belief systems/religions as well as myths shows the relativity of each of them in the construction of human existence in general and the Tuareg existence in particular. His congenial philosophical reflections are what distinguish him from other Arab writers. His leap of creativity lies in his shift from mimesis of reality into a creation of a deeper reality that stands as a challenge to readers’ assumptions about reality. Al-Koni’s works are elegiac. They are rewritings of the disappearance of the myths. His works are like amulets and talismans by which he combats loss of heritage—tales told by later generations about those who went to fight the qibli\textsuperscript{52} and never came back. The works of al-Koni are about the last remnant authentic aspects of the desert. Such aspects are still engraved either in people’s memories or in the mountains’ caves. His writings historicize the effacement of the Tuareg ancient civilization and the way it is encountered—works written by dust on dust about the grits within, by which al-Koni reveals secrets that qibli frequently either effaces or veils.

The novel of al-Koni is generally inspired by the Sufi lexicon and practice where the heart overrides the mind and insight precedes eyesight. Sufi gnosis (\textit{irfan})

\textsuperscript{52}Qibli (from \textit{Qibla}): the southern wind from the desert.
is required as a prerequisite for al-Koni’s readers and not their generalized rational knowledge of the desert in particular and the world in general. Animals are the loci of God, the desert stands as a metaphor for God in terms of its emptiness and formlessness, the phenomenology of the desert is a mirror of the Sufi experience of self-knowing and Oneness. Al-Koni’s idea of being a creative writer is Sufi in nature, because he suggests a great sacrifice on the writer’s part as a price for creativity. Elmarsafy in this context considers al-Koni’s departure from the desert as a precondition for his creativity: “Like Dumont’s earliest individuals, he positions himself outside a rigidly structured social hierarchy [...] In order for writing to occur the writer must sacrifice his life [...] otherwise creation becomes impossible. Al-Koni can only assume the writer’s voice insofar as he is an *individu-hors-du-monde*” (*Sufism*… 109). Elmarsafy, as he explains, quotes al-Koni himself in building up his view of al-Koni’s creativity.

Ukhayyad in *Gold Dust* represents Sufism at two levels. One level is his other-worldly Sufi asceticism of unflagging struggle for perfection through isolation from the world in the vast desert. The other level is his eco-Sufi character which is represented through his relationship with the piebald Mahri, a relationship that takes the form of Ibn Arabi’s Oneness of Being. Moreover, Ukhayyad’s perception of the desert as the mirror of God and his belief in God’s locus in one’s chest are central ideas of Ibn Arabi’s Sufism. In a similar fashion, Asouf in *The Bleeding of the Stone* represents Sufism as an eco-friendly philosophy through his sacred relationship with the *waddan*. Asouf as well as his father represent the other-worldly Sufi asceticism by isolating themselves from the human tribe and abandoning life in the oasis. Further, key Sufi ideas in relation to God’s loci in the heart, the desert as His theophanic mirror, and animals as His abode are envisioned throughout the story. The desert in
these two novels novels is depicted as the barzakh where the protagonists experience the Sufi unveiling (kashf) and witness secrets of the Unknown in the abyss scenes. The two novels under study juxtapose Oneness of Being through a network of relationships between the human and the other-than-human and human and God which is the Sufi experience of eliminating all borders. Gold Dust and The Bleeding of the Stone were written by al-Koni in two consequent months towards the end of the 1980s. The two novels have in common a central theme which is the relationship between humankind and the environment.

In the two novels, al-Koni’s medium of inhabiting the desert with different worlds of existence is the Sufi imagination. Al-Koni’s Sufism is a planetary consciousness in which the human and the other-than-human are intertwined to create a wholeness of being. Ibn Arabi is the most influential Sufi saint in terms of representation of the realms of truth as far as al-Koni’s world is concerned. The wilderness of the desert is disturbed by hunters, yet, al-Koni inhabits it with Sufi dervishes and nomadic characters as a means of increasing the tension of events throughout the two novels. Although the practice of hunting is centuries old, the Sufi dervishes wander the desert to combat it. The end of the Mahri and the crucifixion of Ukhayyad in Gold Dust are simultaneous, an end that suggests that “nothing in itself is taken alone.” The waddan saves Asouf and Asouf protects it from hunters in The Bleeding of the Stone. When Asouf becomes helpless, al-Koni resorts to the Tuareg-Sufi belief in metamorphosis by transforming Asouf into a waddan.
5.1 Gold Dust

*Al-Tibr* (1990) is like a novella in length but a novel in content. It was translated into English by Elliott Colla in 2008 as *Gold Dust*. It is mainly a story of the brotherhood of Ukhayyad, “[…] descendent of the great Akhenukhen, son of the most venerable of the desert tribes” (144), and the piebald Mahri. After his mother’s death, Ukhayyad’s father leaves him to an old African foster mother. Ukhayyad has two sheikhs who have taught him religion: “Ukhayyad learned a few Qur’anic verses from a blind sheikh who spent his life wandering with the clan. Then the sheikh died from the bubonic plague, and his place was taken by Sheikh Musa, who not only educated him, but also treated him like a sincere friend” (69-70). Sheikh Musa is almost the omnipresent companion of Ukhayyad and his influence on Ukhayyad makes the latter wander like a dervish throughout the story. The Sufi Sheikh Musa, rumoured to have come “from the western ends of the desert, from Fez, the land of teachers and scholars of Islamic law” (19), is the most influential person for Ukhayyad who keeps repeating the preaching of Sheikh Musa all along his awe-inspiring range of experiences in the desert. As a Sufi and disciple of Sheikh Musa, Ukhayyad combats his indulgence in women.

Al-Koni narrates the traumatic story of the affinities between Ukhayyad and the Mahri. *Gold Dust* at the human-animal level is non-dual because Ukhayyad is impelled, not compelled, to look after the inflicted Mahri. Their life in the liminal space of the desert is a threshold which unites Ukhayyad and the Mahri in life and death, as both of them live for each other and die together. Throughout his lifetime he encounters forces belonging to the human world (his father, Dudu and his men), spiritual world (the jinn), and the natural world (drought and famine) let alone his
unfulfilled pledge to god Tanit. In addition, he is intrigued by the network of customs and teachings by which he is led all the way to perplexity and bewilderment.

Ukhayyad falls at the intersection of all these labyrinthine forces. Once he escapes one abyss he falls into another—affirming that life in the desert is but a snare to be caught in. In a perspectival way, the narrator presents his point of view about what a woman is to man, “Beware the charms of women! Their allure is a mystery…The allure of women was something created just to slay men like Ukhayyad” (66-67). This is perhaps al-Koni’s irony about the decay of the status of the Tuareg woman owing to the advent of Muslim scholars’ radical teachings. The purpose of this irony, I argue, is to show that the Sahara represents purer Sufism than Sufism which is coming from outside. However, Ukhayyad is bewildered again by his father’s remarks on marrying women as per the Islamic Law, “He [the father] was famous for often repeating the saying of the Prophet, ‘The three dearest things to me in your world are: women, perfume, and—most of all—prayer.’ He then liked to offer his commentary, ‘See? Women come first. They’re at the top of the Prophet’s list’” (68-69).

Ukhayyad’s father is presented as a womanizer in the story. Unlike his father, Ukhayyad, a disciple of two ascetic sheikhs, deserts his own self of anything save the desert.

Upon Ukhayyad’s rejection of his father’s marriage proposal to the latter’s sister’s daughter so that Ukhayyad can acquire chieftaincy, Ukhayyad leaves his clan with his pedigree Mahri. Consequently, Ukhayyad leaves ‘the oases of Fezzan’ into the desert. The young colt Mahri is gifted to Ukhayyad by the chief of the Ahaggar tribes. As a desert inhabitant, Ukhayyad is devoted to his Mahri all the time. Being as flirtious to the she-camel as is his master to “the lovely daughter of the ‘noble clan’ inhabiting the valley of Maghargar” (12), the Mahri gets mange owing to fighting
with another camel over the she-camel. Only after this miserable incident does Ukhayyad recall Sheikh Musa’s advice that “Females are the most dangerous trap males can fall into” (20). However, it is too late for Ukhayyad to realize this fatal error. To Ukhayyad, “Adam was led astray by his woman and God condemned him to be expelled from the Garden. If it were not for that damn woman, us men would have remained there, blessed with an easy life, left to wander freely about paradise” (26).

He is not attached to the tribe’s chieftaincy proposed to him by his father, however he is deeply attached to the Mahri. Later, we come to know that in spite of Sheikh Musa’s warnings to him about the snare of women, Ukhayyad falls into the snare of “an Eve…from Air,’ whose beauty remained in full bloom” (66). Ukhayyad realizes that patience is the weapon by which he encounters his endless exile, grief, drought, and homelessness.

Being married to the beauty from Air, Ukhayyad gets a son by her. Unfortunately, the girl’s friend and cousin Dudu comes in search of her and persists to get her divorced from Ukhayyad when Ukhayyad and his family suffer from famine. Dudu puts Ukhayyad a pan-to-fire option that he either divorces the girl in exchange of gold dust or abandons the Mahri. Both options are too hard to Ukhayyad. However, he gives the Mahri to Dudu’s men, but the Mahri is not easy to be tamed by them. Therefore, Ukhayyad divorces his wife because he is not happy with abandoning his Mahri. After that, Ukhyyad hears about the rumors of his abandoning his wife for a handful of gold dust. Owing to unstoppable qualms of conscience, Ukhayyad changes his mind and goes to Dudu on his wedding night. Ukhayyad murders Dudu in the swimming pool and pours the gold dust all over the blood-colored water in order to unpin the blame laid on him by the people. Then, he escapes into the caves of the mountain where he hides himself. But Dudu’s men pierce the Mahri whose painful
shrieks compel Ukhayyad to come out. Ukhayyad, then, is brutally crucified by Dudu’s men, who get gold as a reward for taking revenge from Ukhayyad. *Gold Dust* comes to this lethal end. The novel itself briefly summarizes Ukhayyad’s life as follows, “First, he had fallen out with his father, then he had been expelled from his tribe, and then, with the gold dust outrage, there had been a final break” (151). The final break is his crucifixion.

Throughout *Gold Dust*, Ukhayyad is haunted by a dream of a decrepit house which is destroyed by an earthquake at the closing scene of the story. The house metaphorically stands for Ukhayyad’s body from which he is released when murdered and the Sufi vision of God takes place. This section ends with the Sufi interpretation of this dream as a scene of kashf (unveiling) in which Ukhayyad moves from the terrestrial cosmos to the celestial one in a Sufi vision par excellence.

### 5.1.1 Ukhayyad and the Mahri: Oneness of Being

The reference to Sufism in *Gold Dust* is either made directly, such as in the scenes of Sheikh Musa and Ukhayyad’s frequent references to him and his teachings, or indirectly from scenes and descriptions narrated by the story’s narrator. The desert reveals the presence of Sufism at both the aesthetic and thematic levels. Ukhayyad always remembers Sheikh Musa’s teachings that are the driving force of Ukhayyad’s actions throughout the story. However, Ukhayyad’s experience in both the oasis and the desert shows his dervish-like character.

God draws our attention to contemplate His creativity in the camel: “Do they not look at the camels, how they are created?” (Koran 88: 17). The camel in Arabic has several names including *al-naqah* (the she-camel), *al-Ibil* which is used for both
sexes of the camels, *al-ba‘eer* which is used for the riding and the carrying camels (male and female), and *al-Mahri* which is used by tribal leaders and knights as a prestige to its owner. Originally, the piebald Mahri comes from Yemen where there is a region called al-Mahra. Historically, the Mahri was brought to North Africa from Yemen by the ancient Ḥimyarite kings. Other narratives account for the Yemeni origin of the Mahri by saying that it was brought to North Africa in the eleventh century AD (Laura Robson, *Minorities and the Modern Arab World* 147-9). For its beauty and elegance, the Mahri is considered by nomadic tribes (Arabs and the Tuareg) as a source of pride and prestige.

Al-Koni depicts Ukhayyad and the piebald Mahri as representatives of Sufi tenets and lessons, traits and experiences throughout *Gold Dust*. In Arabic, the camel is considered as the ship of the desert (*Safinat al-Sahara*) in terms of its patience and endurance of thirst for days in the desert. Ukhayyad is not the only main character in this story, the piebald Mahri is the other main character. The Mahri is personified by al-Koni. The desert is a space where all creatures coexist. The human-animal oneness, which is indicated by Ibn Arabi in *Futuhat* is manifest in the story of Ukhayyad and the Mahri. It constitutes an infinite multiverse or worlds of existence that exist as one world. In his essay “Desert Discourse,” al-Koni reveals the reason for his interest in the Sahara as follows, “I have always been interested in the problem of the unity of the creation, and indeed of the unity of the creation and the creator. God, humans and animals are to be found united in a single body that is called the Sahara” (*Myth and Landscape* 73). In the same essay, he shows his nature-friendly attitude through the ecological bedouin Ukhayyad by stating that any action taken against any creature is against one’s very self. In other words, destruction of nature is a destruction of humanity. Ukhayyad and the Mahri are brothers as it appears from the narrator’s
account, “Ukhayyad’s body, now also naked, fused with the viscous flesh of the Mahri. Flesh met flesh, blood mixed with blood. In the past they had been merely friends. Today, they had been joined by a much stronger tie. Those who become brothers by sharing blood are closer than those who share parentage […] Becoming someone’s brother is easier said than done” (47). It is no wonder that the Mahri also does favors to Ukhayyad, “The piebald saved Ukhayyad from slavery” (131).

Although Ibn Khaldun describes lineage as an illusory relationship for achieving gains like authority, high social status and wealth, here human-animal lineage is a symbolic one in the sense that each one is ready to sacrifice his own life for the other, and this is what really happens at the end of the story.

The Mahri is a dumb animal, but it has a voice that can utter only one verbal expression (Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a) throughout the story:

[…] chewing at his bridle in his joyous rush, the thoroughbred would respond, ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a,’” (13)

The beast lowered his eyelids and answered in shame, ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a. (21)

“Sometimes he would complain miserably, ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a. (26)

Overcome with fear, the camel protested: “A-a-a. He swallowed what was in his mouth, and rejected the proposition: ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a.” (93)

“At that moment, he heard a distant howl of pain, ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a. (112)

“Still, some time passed before Ukhayyad heard his howl of distress, ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a” (161)
Again, it [the camel’s cry of distress] rent the desert silence, echoed across the mountains, ‘Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a. (162)

Ibn Arabi’s eco-Sufism emphasizes the animals’ equality to humans in terms of speaking and sensing, even though their language is insensible to humans. But Ukhayyad is a gnostic-like character, for he knows the expressions of the Mahri. In fact, the nomadic vision has the expertise of understanding the facial expressions and the meaning of the voices released by animals including the wolves, the camels, the gazelles, and the waddans. But al-Koni gives Ukhayyad the Sufi saintly rank of understanding the language of animals, accordingly, Ukhayyad makes sense of every utterance of the Mahri. The Mahri’s voice achieves a new meaning each time it is uttered. It recreates meanings: it is response, shame, complaint, protest, pain, rejection, and distress. The narrative connection of events and ideas is not through introspection of the animal’s consciousness. This animal is speechless, but it has a vision. Ukhayyad observes: “[…] he is mute and unable to express his complaint. But he comprehends. And he feels pain, excruciating pain—otherwise he would not be howling” (36). In a sort of Sufi vision or bio-homology, the narrator exploits the identification of human (Ukhayyad) with the mute animal (the Mahri) to translate the latter’s non-linguistic expression into a language of his own that carries his point of view.

In addition, there is a sort of human-animal vivid rotation of roles. When Ukhayyad is unconscious the camel is conscious. This seems a narrative technique employed to maintain the progress of events in the story. Each one is in need of the other as far as consciousness is concerned. This human-animal scene of exchange suggests that the animal’s life is significant for the human’s life and vice versa.
Ukhayyad needs the Mahri to maintain his vision, and the Mahri needs Ukhayyad’s voice. For the sake of keeping the plot in progress, the narrator revitalizes Ukhayyad’s consciousness every now and then:

Ukhayyad came back to his senses and began to move his legs without letting go of the tail. (40)

[…] he had slept. He did not know how or when that happened…Then he slept as if he had passed out. (45)

Ukhayyad’s eyes melted into the limitless horizon. The camel walked on, with wide, firm steps—the steps of one ready to cross the waterless wastes. (48)

With the first fall, Ukhayyad found himself perched between consciousness and oblivion, in that interval [barzakh]$^{53}$ between life and death…Being in this no man’s land between heaven and hell…lingered so long in that interval between this world and the hereafter. (49-50)

His descent [to the wall] was automatic, unconscious…he fell into the abyss…Once more he returned to the space between, and ascended, one more time, into the world of shadows. (51)

In all these examples, the narrator keeps Ukhayyad’s status shifting through “semi-consciousness” (49) from consciousness into oblivion and back to consciousness again in order to keep the narration going. In the well Awal, Ukhayyad seeks his

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$^{53}$ *Barzakh* is my entry according to the source (original text) of the novel in Arabic. The word as it is in the original text *برزخ* which is a Sufi expression of the world of mediatrix or intermediary imagination where the experience of seeing God during *inkhitaf* becomes possible.
camel’s help for reaching water and quenching his thirst, however, Ukhayyad seems unable to speak while his camel shows some ability to do so:

He [Ukhayyad] wanted to tell him [the piebald] 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 sight, and now he had lost his voice. Man and camel spoke to one another…Then he [Ukhayyad] began to choke and gag. He did not vomit in the well itself, but outside. If he could have opened his eyes, he would have seen a vision of the piebald, and the rays of the sun, glaring sharply like fiery spurs. The piebald had carried out his unspoken command—he had pulled him out of that freshwater sea. Once more he returned to the space between, and ascended, one more time, into the world of shadows. (50-51)

The brotherly relationship functions metaphorically as a complement of the image of the familial scene. We notice in this passage how the camel turns out to be a human-like animal and a savior of the unconscious Ukhayyad who is stuck down the abyss. The piebald comprehends not only his own pain and distress but also Ukhayyad’s, as the piebald licks Ukhayyad’s head and carries him out of the well, though Ukhayyad is animal-like—unable to speak or even to realize anything around. These are all states of Ukhayyad in his unconsciousness. Unlike Ukhayyad, his grandfather is able to see his own death in advance while sleeping. His dream is narrated with a Sufi tenor. The grandfather’s dream of both the lote tree and the pool of immortality have
Sufi references. Both the lote tree and the pool of immortality, as per the story, exist in the western desert. In a dream, the father is enabled to see his own death before he dies.

As it appears from al-Koni’s novels, Sufism is the Sahara itself in terms of the nature of existence and the nomadic eye of perceiving it as a mirror of God. The relationship between Ukhayyad and Sheikh Musa is not dissimilar from that of Junayd and his disciple Shibli. Sheikh Musa teaches Ukhayyad that patience is the only path to self-realization and to God in the desert for the desert entails pains and sufferings that are purifiers for a desert wanderer. The Sufism of the Sahara is more intangible to one than Sufism elsewhere because the Sahara is the locus of spirituality and mystical wanderings over the millennia. Shibli asked his teacher, Junayd, “Many people have informed me that you are a supreme expert on the pearls of awakening and divine wisdom. Either give me one of these pearls or sell one to me.” Junayd smiled. “If I sell you one, you won’t be able to pay the price; if I give you one, coming by it so easily will drive you to undervalue it. Do like me; dive headfirst into the Sea. If you wait patiently, you will obtain your Pearl” (Perfume… 19). Ibn Arabi describes animals as dumb beasts, however, he argues that they have the faculty of speech of which humans, who are not endowed with kashf (unveiling), cannot understand them. Al-Koni displays Ukhayyad as a Sufi to whom the language of the Mahri is unveiled. For Ibn Arabi, “Each created thing has a specific speech taught to it by God. It is heard by those whose hearing God has opened up to its perception.” (Futuhat Vol. 3: 488. 4). The border between the human and the other-human collapses in al-Koni’s novels as long as every creature is animated by the Divine blow (haya) and command kun (Be) which are the cause of worldly existence.
Ukhayyad compares the Mahri to the life of Sufi ascetics in terms patience, “It was the first hour of dawn. At this early hour, the melancholic piebald seemed saint-like in his pose. The other camel, whose mind remained carefree and vacant, seemed brutish and stupid in comparison.” The simile of the Mahri and the Sufi saint shows not only the cherishing of the Mahri but also the Tuareg’s reverence of the Sufis. Ukhayyad perhaps remembers sees Sheikh Musa in the Mahri. In flashes of memories Ukhayyad frequently summons Sheikh Musa. He talks with his camel:

Only sadness can implant the glow of divinity in a heart! […] Sheikh Musa always said that God loves only those worshippers who have experienced pain and suffering. Indeed, He inflicts misery only upon those whom he loves! The Sufi sheikhs in the oasis also often talked about something like this […]. On the road, Ukhayyad found himself repeating a refrain as if he were singing, ‘Patience is prayer. Patience is worship. Patience is life itself’ (122).

Such narrative descriptions are abundant in *Gold Dust* with an aim to present mystical ideas of the desert space as the exemplary loci of theophanies. The desert here is not only presented as a pharmakon for its denizens’ diseases, but also as a gateway to the afterlife. The moment thirst is felt lethal, a nomad starts this visionary process in the desert which helps him to defy its extreme hardships. Thirst cleanses the soul which is the means of transportation to the other world. Ukhayyad’s journey with the piebald Mahri is a *barzakhi* journey in which the hierarchal boundaries between the human and the non-human vanish. The desert is the space in whose liminality boundaries cease to exist. Ukhayyad’s relationship with the Mahri goes beyond riding.
5.1.2 God’s Presence in the Desert

There was God’s presence in the desert, and His presence inside a man’s chest. And while the waters of the vineyard spring may wash clean the body, only the desert can clean the soul. In the desert, the soul empties and clears and becomes free and brave in the process. And so it enables you to defy the endless open space, challenge the horizon, and explore the emptiness that leads beyond the horizon, beyond the desert void. It invites you to face the other world, the hereafter. It was here, only here, in the labyrinths of never ending desert plains, that the extremes converge—open expanse, horizon, and desolation—to form a firmament that expands outward, toward eternity, toward the afterlife. (129-30)

The experience of divine *hadra* (the Presence) shows al-Koni’s inspiration by the Sufi philosophy of divinity. Al-Koni’s portrayal of God’s presence in all creatures including humans and animals is based on Ibn Arabi’s Oneness of Being. Everything in the desert exists in harmony with everything. A stone is a symbol of harmony, dust is the source of creation, and all creatures are manifestations of Divine Attributes and Names. Everything is significant in the desert including the grains of sand. Nowhere but in the desert does dust appear in its authentic form pure and dense with the added golden glow of the sun’s radiance. Dust is the secret of the beauty of the desert. As the source of the theophany of God, dust is a revelation of God. Hence, any space in the desert is a locus of God’s manifestations. A wanderer in the desert is likely to see God provided that the goal of wandering is spiritual, i.e. detached from worldliness. Al-Koni has solitary protagonists who are similar to Ukhayyad in relation to
realization of God’s presence in one’s heart. In his invention of the desert, al-Koni travels the Sufi realm ascetically and mystically. In his autobiographical novel *The Elegies of Ulis: The Disciple* (Marathi Ulis al-Murid, 2004), Ulis obtains the Sufi Eye of the Heart (‘ayn al-qalb) as the medium of perception in lieu of the mind’s eye through solitude. Ulis has the desert as the center and sacrifices his communal life in order to obtain the Sufi vision and witnessing:

The desert hides its truth from those who see with physical sight, and reveals its beauty to those who see with spiritual insight rather than sight. The latter see no more in the world than the beauty of women […] He has no place among them because they do not see what cannot be seen, and he cannot see what they see. They only see the visible, whereas he can only see the invisible. How can he relate to them what they cannot see as long as they will only acknowledge what they do see. (qtd. in Elmarsafy, *Sufism*… 132)

The Sufi protagonists represent al-Koni right from his childhood in terms of perception of the desert as the Mirror and of one’s Self as the Witness. Al-Koni’s visionary art belongs to the realm of Active Imagination (*khayal*) that is mystically the platform and the framework of insight into the hidden treasures of the Unknown in the desert. The portrayal of his characters vis-à-vis the liminal space of desert is not simply an artistic invention but an existential question of Being and Oneness of Being. Al-Koni describes his mystical endeavour of inhabiting the exotic desert as a Sufi journey:

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54 Al-Sahara tastur haqiqa'atah 'an al-fareeq allath la yara bil-basar wa takshif 'an mafatiniha lil-fareeq allath la yara bil-basira la bil-basar allath la yabsir fi-l dunya fitnatan ghayr fitnat al-nisa'. La makan lahu baynahum l’annahum la yarrow ma la yara, wa la yara ma yarrow. Li’annahum la yarrow illa la yara fi heen la yara huwa illa ma la yara. Fa kaif yastat‘i an yarrow lahum ma la yarrow ma damu la ya’tarifun illa bina yarrow? (*Marathi Ulis* 131).
I grew up in the vast expanse of the desert, in this unlimited emptiness that extends into the infinite, reaching out to the horizon where it meets an eternally clear, equally bare sky. Together they form one body, and in fact I have been always looking for the secret of their union that resembles the fusion of two lovers in the intoxication of love. As a child I sought God in this fusion, and through it, with the understanding of a child, I understood the *Unity of Being*. Then I discovered in the cosmic ritual the meaning of freedom […] All of my novels, my short stories, my essays and aphorisms constitute an attempt to put into words the mystery of this great being: God, the Unity of Being and freedom. (qtd. in Elmarsafy, *Sufism*… 110)

We can infer from the passage above that al-Koni speaks through his characters. Along with Sufi sheikhs, the desert plays a major part in constructing Ukhayyad’s Sufi perception and consciousness of God’s presence, himself, the camel, and the desert. Like many nomads, Ukhayyad is presented as a sage through his acts of speech. His descriptions of the desert vastness, emptiness, stillness, and serenity show his mystical view of the desert as the Sufi mirror, not as a place or an object that comes and goes. Forms in the desert come and go like clouds, but the emptiness and formlessness are what Ibn Arabi calls the immutable entities (*'ayan thabita*) or the infinite possibilities of existence in God’s mind. Thus, it seems that every nomad is spiritual by nature. The desert, according to a Tuareg aphorism, is “a homeland for the spirit, exile for the body” (al-Koni, *A Sleepless Eye* 29). The desert, hence, breastfeeds its denizens with spirituality and a wide range of contemplative ideas of meaningfulness in life so that its nomads develop a spiritual identity. As it appears from *Gold Dust*, the desert is the best place for practical Sufism. The emptiness of the
desert allows a space for emptiness of the soul and quietness of the mind. Throughout the story, Ukhayyad is driven by two forces: the desert and Sheikh Musa. Perception of God’s presence in the desert entails cleansing one’s soul—an act that is spiritual and can be best achieved in the desert, where “demons die of thirst” (129) so that the desert helps its nomads become spiritual and defy its hardships all the way to transcend everyday’s existence into a world beyond it. The Sufi stage of unveiling is the desert *barzakh*.

### 5.1.3 *Barzakh*: Visiting Death in the Desert

Ibn Arabi in the *Futuhat* discusses how people remain in *barzakh* which is a state between this world and resurrection. Grasping the possibility of being in this world is unachievable by the intellect. The people of the desert experience life in the world of *barzakh* by encountering the natural forces of the desert including famine, thirst, and drought. Visiting death in the desert is reflected upon in *Gold Dust* through the experiences of Ukhayyad and his grandfather. Ukhayyad visits death both in dreams and when awake while his grandfather dreams of the lote tree which symbolizes in Sufism *sedrat al-muntaha*. Al-Koni explains:

> In my work the desert therefore has an existential dimension, a metaphysical dimension, for in reality the desert is not a place; a place has preconditions, and one of the preconditions is water, and the lack of water in the desert makes it impossible to settle there, so the desert becomes a place of absence, a place that is a shadow of another place; a place that invites *dahsha*55. Because the place [setting] which is also

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55 *Dahsha* is an Arabic word meaning “stupefaction.”
unconnected with the speeds that are characteristic of civilization in the
city, that is boundless and unconnected, must necessarily also
influence time (“Visiting Death” in Myth and Landscape 75)

In al-Koni’s view, the desert invites “bewilderment” because it is placeless and
timeless. Al-Koni justifies his infringement of traditional time by connecting it with
the desert as placeless. To put it differently, al-Koni employs time as an eternal time
where past, present, and future exist at the same time. As death is something that
awaits us some time in the future, the desert is a space where one is likely to visit
death before dying. In this way, the desert becomes a world of barzakh, which does
not belong to the world of objects. The desert is simply an isthmus that is concomitant
with both life and death but is neither of them. Nothing is actually found in the mirage
of the desert except God, for the mirage is used in Koran as an imaginal space where
one finds God56. Exploring Ibn Arabi’s account in this regard, Michel Chodkiewicz
notes that “[…] God can be found only in the absence of things [i.e., of second
causes] upon which we depend […] God will be life for the thirsty man” (An Ocean
without Shore… 41). The desert, hence, is a non-dual space where water and mirage
are interwoven to constitute non-duality par excellence. Further, al-Koni considers the
desert as a place where it is possible to visit death and return to life because the
sublime experience of death is freedom in the desert. Freedom, for al-Koni, means
death. In “Visiting Death,” al-Koni writes, “In the desert we are at the dividing line
that is between us and death. And that is in fact a kind of cure. For it is only in the
desert that we can pay a visit to death and afterwards return to the land of the living”
(75). He attributes the coming of saints, prophets, and sources from the desert to the

56 “But the Unbelievers their deeds are like a mirage in sandy deserts which the man parched with thirst
mistakes for water; until when he comes up to it he finds it to be nothing: but he finds Allah (ever) with
him and Allah will pay him his account: and Allah is swift in taking account” (Koran 24:39).
fact that it is the only true divide between true freedom and existence, between death and life.

*Gold Dust* is replete with several scenes of *barzakh*. It opens with an epigraph from the *Ecclesiastes* that elucidates the whole story of creation. *Gold Dust*, from a Sufi view, is a story several of whose scenes are manifested in the intermediate world of imagination where different contemplative visions and dreams take place. In the desert, characters encounter worlds of spirituality (higher worlds). The desert is a space of serenity, stillness, and isolation from worldly possessions. The desert is also a world of materiality as long as it is invaded by those who are possessed by gold, women, and worldly pleasures. For the human soul to be released into the higher world of spirituality, the body has to be annihilated into dust so that the body remains in the lower world and the soul goes into its higher world. By and large, dust represents a medium of annihilation for the desert denizens. At one level, gold dust is a material that pulls humans down in search of it such that as soon as it is found they start killing each other for its possession. At another level, dust is the *barzakh* (isthmus) or the grave. The following passage describes Ukhayyad’s experience in the world of *barzakh*:

> An entire lifetime passed in the fraction of a second that came between the stone lip of the well and the water below. An eon went by, taking him back, beyond the day he was born. During that moment, he saw his own birth pass before his eyes. He saw himself as he fell from his mother’s womb into the chasm. He heard the trilling of she-jinn on

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57 “For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one being befall eth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (*Ecclesiastes* 3: 19-20).
Jebel Hasawna. He saw the shadow of houris in paradise. It was one of these dark-eyed virgins wearing a diaphanous mantle who then caught him and gently placed him down into heaven’s river. Here, in this river of paradise, he began to drink. (51)

Isolation (al-tajrid) in Sufism is a prerequisite for revelation. This scene mystically interconnects the dualities of time and turns them into an eon or “a fraction of second.” Time is timeless in the abyss, hence, non-dual. Being in the abyss down the well, totally unconscious, Ukhayyad “saw nothing, heard nothing, and felt nothing” (51). However, his active imagination in the barzakh (abyss) carries him to several scenes where past, present, and future are unified to be seen in a blink of the eye. Ukhayyad in a fraction of a second sees his self with the Eye of the Heart in his mother’s womb, in front of the houris in paradise, and in heaven’s river where he begins to drink. Ukhayyad, in this scene, is like a Sufi in a state of inkhitaf (ecstasy) which happens to man while being unconscious of the world around. Ukhayyad falls into the same state of swinging between consciousness and unconsciousness which is explained by the Sufi master Kabir as follows:

Between the posts of “conscious” and “unconscious”

The mind has strung a swing:

On it hang all beings, all worlds

And it never stops swinging.

Millions of beings sit on it

And the sun and the moon also.
Millions of eras come and go
But the swing remains.
Everything swings!
Sky and earth, air and water
And the Beloved Himself
As He comes into form—
Seeing this
Has made Kabir a servant. (qtd. in Perfume… 64)

Ukhayyad, like Kabir, is able to see the unseen in the hereafter and redeem the moments of his birth in the barzakhi abyss. Furthermore, Ukhayyad seems to be analogous to the Muhammadan Light (al-Noor al-Muhammadi) in Sufism that precedes the creation of Adam. During this fraction of a second he enters the realm similar to that of inkhitaf in Sufism where redemption of his True Self is very close to the farthest reaches of existence (sidrat al-muntaha). This scene depicts Ukhayyad as a Sufi experiencing Ibn Arabi’s state of ecstasy where a Sufi completely loses awareness of the world and God can be seen. Having not been completely unconscious, Ukhayyad would not be able to redeem his past and cross his present

58 In Sufism and Surrealism, Adonis summarizes the six stages through which a Sufi passes in achieving sight of God. After finishing the three states of Mukashafat, Tajalli, and Mushahadat, a Sufi enters into the intermediate world of imagination (inkhitaf/ecstasy) that Ibn Arabi classifies into six stages: "In the first stage, the Sufi loses awareness of human actions (for they are the work of God). In the second stage, he loses awareness of his powers and attributes, which are appropriated by God. God, not the Sufi, sees, listens, thinks and wants with these senses. In the third stage, awareness of the self disappears, and all the Sufi’s thoughts are taken up with the contemplation of God and divine things. The Sufi forgets that it is he who is thinking. In the fourth stage, the Sufi no longer feels that God is the one who is thinking about him or through him. In the fifth stage, his contemplation of God makes him forget everything apart from him. In the sixth stage, the field of consciousness narrows, the qualities of God become non-existent and God alone as an absolute being with no ties or qualities or names is revealed to the Sufi in ecstasy" (33).
into eternity, which is represented by the paradise, in ‘a fraction of a second.’ In this visionary scene, al-Koni puts Ukhayyad in a state of lethargy or languor as if he is no longer in possession of his body. It is this refreshing tiredness in which Ukhayyad’s limbs do not wish to move.

In different scenes Ukhayyad speaks about existence in the desert and the oasis like a gnostic. He is the best one to know about the desert as a spiritual station where he finds whatever he misses in the oasis. He is the son of the clan’s chief. If water in the oasis is good for the body, thirst in the desert is good for purification of the soul. The desert helps people like Ukhayyad achieve self-mortification, purgation, and freedom. The desert makes its denizens accustomed to all hardships that they encounter with patience. For Ukhayyad, “Patience is also god of thirst” (40). Hence, the desert is a space characterized by freedom of the soul from the body, emptiness of the heart and stillness of mind that are all derived from the pure nature of the desert itself. Such freedom does not come by accident but by patience in encountering hardships and suffering. In the desert, Ukhayyad savors truffles for his camel; “The truffles were like a reward for all his patience and suffering” (128). Although he finds the truffles in the desert and not during his “long exile in the oases,” the truffles are not the real reward for him:

But the real compensation was not to be found in the truffles, or in the piebald’s regained health. The prize was in the pure presence of God that can be found only in the quiet emptiness of infinite wilderness. Only those who have been shackled by life in the oasis can know the meaning of serenity. Such serenity means nothing to those who have
not experienced the fetters of family and shame, not to mention the worries of life and the machinations of men. (129)

Besides the ascetical views of life in the desert, the desert is more preferable to Ukhayyad than the oasis, though he is the son of the tribe’s leader and is supposed to have enjoyed all privileges in the oasis that could have left no space for Ukhayyad’s interest in the desert. The contrast made between the oasis and the desert in the passage above is an expression of Sufism both at the ascetic and mystic echelons. Ukhayyad is no longer in search of the health of his piebald or the truffles, he is in search of a prize—God’s presence—which is preconditioned by emptiness and stillness. In the desert, Ukhayyad is liberated from the fetters of the oasis and worries of material life so that nothing stands between him and God. Emptying the self from day-to-day worries and fetters requires emptiness around; only when the soul is empty of all the shackles and fetters of worldliness, God becomes present and intelligible.

5.1.4 Ukhayyad’s Grandfather’s Ascension

God unveils Himself to the grandfather in the dream, which is a Sufi experience par excellence. The narration of the grandfather’s dream has its own Sufi resonance. At one level, it shows how nomads have deep insight into the Sufi-natured spiritual experience. At another level, the desert is presented as a spiritual sanctuary, an infinite spiritual space that though is waterless and full of hardships has its own Sidrat al-Muntaha, which is symbolized by the fabled lote tree and the spring of immortality for its seekers. The grandfather represents a follower of Muhammad through a dream of the lote tree as his spiritual journey toward union with God. The tree as per Koran is located in sidrat al-muntaha (the edge of Heaven). The analogy of
heaven and the desert is another image of al-Koni’s employment of Ibn Arabi’s Oneness of Being. The edge of Heaven has its own counterpart in the desert. In Sufism, the lote tree (shajarat al-sidr) is a metaphor of a journey that leads the murid into a world beyond this world. The active imagination happens either in a dream or with some Sufis in a waking state. Here, it occurs in a dreamy state:

One night, he [the grandfather] dreamed of the fabled lote tree, said by some tribes to exist in the middle of the western desert next to the spring whose waters grant immortality. In his dream, he drank from the pool. In the morning, the soothsayer told him, “Ready yourself for a journey. What you have seen is the lote tree at the furthest reaches of existence.” So he prepared his burial shroud, washed his body with ritual care, and donned his finest clothing, then waited for the King of Death. He did this each day for a week after the dream, until he breathed his last. (31)

The grandfather’s dream is not only the voice of his deeper soul but also the soul’s own language. Sheikh Musa has the miracle of interpreting dreams, he is “[…] well versed in the kinds of visions that took place around Muslim saints’ tombs.” The whole tribe remembers his saying, “If God ever sends you a warning, and its secret is revealed to you, you will have no one but yourself to blame” (31). It is not coincident that al-Koni’s self-consciousness is evident through his Sufi fabulation in terms of employing the Sufi terminology to describe his characters concerns about life in the

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59 Elliott Colla in his “Afterword” to Gold Dust notes that “The novel’s references to the lote tree are also replete with Islamic and specifically Sufi undertones. In the Qur’an there is mention of “the lote tree of the farthest reaches” (sidrat al-muntaha). According to tradition, this tree marked the farthest point to which the Prophet Muhammad traveled during his ascension to heaven—it stands at the very boundary of existence, beyond which no one can pass. With enormous leaves and fruit, the lote tree stands at the edge of heaven itself, and under it flow the four rivers of paradise. For Sufis, the metaphor of the lote tree marks the point at which the mystical seeker moves beyond human guidance and into the realm of experience itself” (Gold Dust 170).
desert. For example, the secret (*al-sirr*) in Sufism is the inward reality which is revealed to Sufi saints and dervishes as well as good people (*al-saliheen*). Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, the founder of the Qadiriyya Tariqa (path) has written a wonderful book *Kitab Sir al-Asrar wa Mazhar al-Anwar* (*The Book of the Secret of Secrets and the Manifestation of Lights*) where Jilani shows the importance of saints in gnosis of God and His secrets and signs of creation and existence. Qushayri in *Epistle* writes, “When the sky of the innermost heart (*sirr*) is free from the clouds of unveiling, the sun of witnessing begins to shine from the zodiacal sign of nobility” (qtd. in Elmarsafy, *Sufism*… 217).

Through the dream, the grandfather’s gets God’s sign and secret of union with Him—a journey from the quotidian world to the Divine world, from the terrestrial world to the celestial world.

Soothsayers from Kano have the expertise of reading visions “[…] inspired by ancient tombs, pagan tombs […]” (30). The soothsayer reads the grandfather’s dream, “Ready yourself for a journey. What you have seen is the lote tree at the furthest reaches of existence” (31). Like Sufis who discuss their dreams within their groups, nomads narrate their dreams to either Sufi saints or soothsayers, as both share in common the competence in reading visions. The Divine sign of the dream drives the grandfather to the torturous maze of his psyche. It symbolizes a call to his real inner nature because its value is as infinite as the inner journey of the spirit. It is a messenger of God that takes him from his oasis’ material culture towards the emptiness of the desert which is a metaphor for God. The dream signals his journey back Home. Dream in Sufism is a spiritual act of the soul that is loaded with deeper meaning of the soul’s union with the Divine. It is an opening to the inner world.

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60 Elmarsafy notes, with reference to al-Koni’s *The Homeland of Celestial Visions* that Qushayri’s description of *al-sirr* (the secret) as the location of *mushahada* (witnessing) of God “The breasts of the noble men are the graveyards of innermost secrets” (*sudur al-abrar qubur al-asrar*) stands as a motto for al-Koni’s characters.
Vaughan-Lee writes, “[...] amidst the seeming distortions of our dreams, in the myriad reflections they offer us, a single thread is hidden. This thread is our own story; not the story of our outer life, but the deeper destiny of our own being. It is the story of the soul going Home, the search for the invisible treasure which is nothing other than our own essence” (In the Company of Friends: Dreamwork within a Sufi Group 1). *Sidrat al-muntaha* is the “lote tree of the boundary” encountered by the Prophet Muhammad at the peak of his mystical *mi’raj* (ascent). In Sufism, the lote tree is interpreted as a symbol of intimacy between the prophet and God.

“Epitomizing the themes of boundary-crossing, nearness, and luminous theophany, Mohammed’s experience at the lote tree of the boundary recapitulates the Sufi process of *fana’ fillah*—annihilation in God” (Hannah Bigelow Merriman 329). Like the prophet, a follower of him can experience the *mi’raj* according to Ibn Arabi, and al-Koni refers to Ibn Arabi’s exegesis of this process in the Arabic text (32). The lote tree here shows that the man’s dream comes true and he is carried in his dream to the same boundary Muhammad was carried—*sidrat al-muntaha*. Dream of the inner soul involves the Sufi *khalwa* (solitude) as a precondition or a life that is not spatiotemporally confined. The desert generates the Sufi dream, because the symbolic wisdom of one’s dream in the desert is not obscured and veiled by the heavy curtains of the city’s everyday life which is a life regulated by time and space. The grandfather’s dream paves the path of his return journey from the world of forms to the formless Presence of God.

Thus, the grandfather is presented as a blessed man who is visited before his real death by the Angel of Death, which means he is a man of miracles and a spiritual master. Not anybody can experience death before dying either in a dream or in a waking state. One of the famous hadith of Prophet Muhammad is “Die before you
die” (*mutu qabl an tamutu*), which means the experience of transcending the ego while one is still alive. Although the statement looks paradoxical, it apparently entails two deaths and between the two deaths is a luminous life. When you die in a dream like this grandfather you are helped to send your self-ego to death. What remains is the physical death that everybody dies. God grants Ukhayyad’s grandfather this dream, so he becomes able to prepare himself for the physical death. His character is like a spiritual nomad whose life is as blessed as his death.

On the other hand, Ukhayyad struggles to achieve perfection through being other-worldly ascetic whose aim is union with the Divine. However, his eco-Sufi union with the Mahri hurdles his struggle. However, death is the doorway to salvation from all hurdles in al-Koni’s world. Death is the extinction of the self and the acquisition of the soul. Death is freedom as al-Koni frequently puts it. Ukhayyad does not come out towards the end to rescue the life of the Mahri from Dudu’s men, rather, his exodus from the cave metaphorically liberation of his soul to be One with the Divine. Ukhayyad is always inspired by Sheikh Musa’s teachings till the end of the story:

Sheikh Musa has been right—he was right about everything:”

Ukhayyad continues giving Sheikh Musa’s advice to him, ‘Place your heart nowhere but in heaven. If you leave it in the care of someone on earth, it will be stolen and burnt into cinders.’ Sheikh Musa had never pawned his heart, nor had he loaned it to anyone. He had never married, never had children, and never raised herds of sheep or camels. Perhaps that was how he remained free from worry. (161-62)
Ukhayyad reveres Sheikh Musa who is his model. Like him, Ukhayyad strips himself away from his wife and children and refuses to exchange gold dust for the Mahri. He realizes that Sheikh Musa did not even have a Mahri. Therefore, Ukhayyad shows indifference by sacrificing himself and the Mahri in a desire for following the Sufi path (tariqa) of Sheikh Musa. This flashback scene indicates the presence of the Sufi influence on the Tuareg from the beginning of the story till the end. The story begins with Sheikh Musa accompanying Ukhayyad, is permeated by his lessons, and ends with his lessons that are memorable to Ukhayyad. Thus, the desert is a world where the waddan (mouflon) and the Mahri are “Divine Messengers” (157) and are closer to Ukhayyad than his relatives and family, and truffles (128) and are much more valuable than gold.

The death of Ukhayyad, at the end of the story, is still unverified though apparently his head is cut. In the furthest reaches of the desert, namely Jebel Hasawna, the narrator closes the novel peculiarly in a way that makes the reader curious:

> Across the twilight a sudden glow broke. The dream house of shadows was shaken by a massive earthquake. Its terrible wall began to collapse, struck by the blow of a sword of light. Only now did the invisible being of his [Ukhayyad’s] dreams finally show itself as clear as day. It had finally become manifest in that moment when Ukhayyad could no longer tell anyone what he had seen. (164)

The presence of God through annihilation, for Junayd, entails the murid’s loss of every object other than Him and this is what happens to Ukhayyad as the story ends. This scene of unveiling in death is connected with Ukhayyad’s repeated dream
through the story. Ukhayyad is haunted by a dream of a phantom house through *Gold Dust*. The earthquake to my mind is Ukhayyad’s union with the Divine. He abandons his wife and son and seeks harmony with the Mahri, but he does not know that the Mahri symbolizes his dream of the ancient house too. Whenever he wakes up from the dream “all vision of the divine vanishes, and all signs of heaven disappear” (135). He dreams that he is to fall from the decrepit house, but he does not fall in any of the times he has this dream. As a Sufi fabulist, al-Koni’s self-consciousness is obvious in the connection between Ukhayyad’s last moment in the story and the dream with which he is always haunted:

> For three consecutive nights he dreamed of the same decrepit house.

> He did not actually sleep. The burning that filled his heart left no room for slumber. But with the glow of each new dawn, he managed to drift off for a short spell. And there, in his sleep, he saw the wretched ruins. Though he knew this fitful sleep would be fleeting, his wanderings through the wrecked dwelling would last the whole night.

> The dream was not new. In his childhood, it had tortured him again and again, returning to torment him during the first years of his youth. At that time, he had not yet visited the oases, nor ever once seen a house built with adobe or stone. Even so, the vision haunted him […].

> It was strange: Ukhayyad always found himself trapped inside without knowing how he had got in. He was on the second floor walking along dark hallways looking for a way out—a door or window or even a glint of light. The ground beneath him shook and threatened to collapse, and he would step faster, holding his breath for fear of falling. At the same
time, he instinctively felt the presence of a specter that never actually appeared, neither as substance nor shadow. In the dream, these two fears were always with him, that he would fall and that he would enrage the phantom being. (136-7)

Sheikh Musa’s memorable maxim “Place your heart nowhere but in heaven” (162) is realized through the collapse of the dream house. Ukhayyad commits a mistake by placing his heart in the Mahri. He sees freedom in the company of the Mahri. Nothing is wrong in the Mahri, but it belongs to the spatiotemporal finitude and it is the impossible salvation. The collapse of the dream house is a metaphor for the collapse of the body and its desires. It symbolizes the annihilation of the body and the permanence of the soul to which God reveals Himself in the darkness of the decrepit house. The “glint of light” in Ukhayyad’s frequent dream finally turns out to be “the blow of a sword of light” in the doorway to Oneness of Being. Ukhayyad’s death is depicted as freedom from the body and the desert is absolute freedom (hurriyya mutlaka) for al-Koni. By liberating himself from the world of objects, Ukhayyad enters the realm of Wilber: “This is actually the profound discovery of … the pure divine Self, the formless Witness, causal nothingness, the vast Emptiness in which the entire world arises, stays a bit, and passes. And you are That. You are not the body, not the ego, not nature, not thoughts, not this, not that—you are a vast Emptiness, Release, and Liberation” (The Simple Feeling of Being… 7). As a nomadic ascetic, Ukhayyad fails to actualize his discovery amid the human evils in the desert. Only death becomes the freedom because worldly life is not mystically real. The death of Ukhayyad marks the blurring of the boundary between the Mirror and the Seer where darkness is broken by the twilight. The image of the outward reality (zahir) is broken down and replaced by the inward reality (batin) of Ukhayyad’s soul. His end indicates
that reality is not what we see with the mind’s eye but what we see with the Eye of the Heart. In the process of Self-Exploration through self-emptying, Wilber writes:

When, as a specific type of meditation, you pursue the observing Self, the Witness, to its very *source* in pure Emptiness, then no objects arise in consciousness at all. This is a discrete, identifiable state of awareness—namely, *unmanifest absorption or cessation*, variously known as nirvikalpa samadhi, jnana samadhi, ayin, vergezen, nirodh, classical nirvana […] I am not objects in nature, not feelings in the body, not thoughts in the mind, for I can Witness them all. I am that Witness—a vast, spacious, empty, clear, pure, transparent Openness that impartially notices all that arises, as a mirror spontaneously reflects all its objects…. (*The Simple Feeling…* 07)

Ukhayyad’s experience of the Sufi states of unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mushahada*) becomes possible when he is emptied from the Mahri, the son, the wife and all his worldly obsessions. Ukhayyad witnesses his inward Truth, even though “It had finally become manifest in that moment when Ukhayyad could no longer tell anyone what he had seen” (164). Remarkably, al-Koni does not say in the closing sentences that Ukhayyad dies. Ukhayyad’s inability to say what he has seen represents al-Koni’s criticism of the impossibility of talking about freedom which becomes sayable only in death. Al-Koni affirms that “Ukhayyad sees Allah, His Self (*Nafsah*), the Truth (*al-Haqiqa*), the Spirit (*al-Ruh*).* The invisible thing that Ukhayyad used to fear inside this house becomes visible. Only in the moment when he is unable to tell anybody what he has seen because what he has seen belongs to the

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Sufi realm of the unsaid. The dream house is always a symbol for the human body which stands as a barrier between the Seer and the Seen. Thus, *Gold Dust* is al-Koni’s elegy of the *fana* (annihilation) of Ukhayyad’s terrestrial self and the *baqa* (permanence) of his True Self. Ukhayyad becomes the Sufi Seer and the desert is depicted as the Mirror. Like al-Koni’s other novels, *Gold Dust* ends with a stretch to eternity through Ukhayyad’s departure from the terrestrial world to the celestial homeland.

### 5.2 The Bleeding of the Stone: God Dwells in all Souls

Al-Koni’s *Nazif al-Hajar* (1991), translated by May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley as *The Bleeding of the Stone* (2002), is a story of a Bedouin family that upon its head’s decision leaves life among people and moves into a mountain in the Southwestern Libyan Desert where the rare *waddan* (mountain sheep) lives. The family comprises of three members, the father, the mother, and the son (Asouf). Solitude is what chiefly characterizes their life. *The Bleeding of the Stone* is deemed an elegy of the human status quo in relation to all worlds of existence in the cosmos. It is an ascetical Sufi story of Asouf and his father. It is also a story where everything including the stone are is ensouled. As Asouf grows up, he never remembers having any human neighbor. External forces such as famine, drought, specter, and the *waddan* as well as human forces such as Masoud, John Parker, and Cain intervene in

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62 Rasmussen discusses the meaning of *asouf* in Tamacheq, “In ritual healing and cosmology, this denotes approximately “the wild” or “solitude”; it is at once a mental state, a place where the soul of a possessed person travels, and also a literal remote space, far from the nomadic tent and camp […] Paradoxically, it is a place to which some are tempted to travel, but also an abyss of suffering. In other contexts—for example, in modern literature, poems, and songs—many Tuareg artists and intellectuals translate *essuf* as nostalgia… Some contemporary writers and performers use this image to convey a remote vastness, but reverse its older “wild” connotations, associating this space with the sheltering, enveloping haven of their desert home, for which they yearn” (“The People of Solitude: Recalling and Reinventing *Essuf* (the Wild) in Traditional and Emergent Tuareg Cultural Spaces” 609).
changing Asouf’s story into misery and suffering. *The Bleeding of the Stone* is a story of the human-human conflict of which the everlasting story of Cain (Qabil) and Abel (Habil) is an eponym. Cain Adam has an insatiable appetite for meat without which he is unable to lead a one-day healthy life. He accompanies John Parker, an American officer in a military base located in the Southwestern Libya, in chasing the *waddan* after they killed all gazelles. The story displays Parker as a scholar of Zen Buddhism who attempts to connect his scholarship with Sufism in terms of spirituality. Ironically, Parker plays sophistication with the sayings of the local Sufi dervish Shaykh Jallouli by arguing that eating the meat of the gazelles and the *waddan* on the Red Hamada (*Hamada Hamra*) is the spiritual path to soul-cleansing. Like Cain and Parker, their friend Masoud is a hunter of the gazelles and the *waddans*. Asouf’s father used to hunt the *waddan* in “the mountains of western Massis” and the gazelles in Massak Mallat. The father goes to hunt the *waddan*, unfortunately he does not return. Consequently, Asouf has to take his place in looking after himself and his mother in the remote desert. Upon learning that Asouf is the only one who knows the lurking place of the *waddan*, Cain and Masoud pressurize him to show them the *waddan’s* place. As his name suggests, they seek Asouf for helping them reach the *waddan* because he intimately knows the desert. But Asouf refuses their request because he has vowed not to hunt the *waddan*. Therefore, Cain and Masoud torture Asouf, drag him all the way to the bleeding rock in which the carving of the legendary *waddan* stands alongside the High Priest. Finally, Asouf was slain by Cain with a knife.

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63 Asouf also works as a guide for tourists who come to visit the ancient “rock paintings of the Sahara” in Wadi Matkhandoush (*The Bleeding…* 9).
The triad of Cain, Masoud and Parker are encountered by the triad of the Asouf’s belief system of Islam, Sufism and the Tuareg pre-Islamic religion. Asouf holds a firm belief in the sanctity of the *waddan* because he is intrinsically an eco-friendly character. His father is saved by the *waddan* that he then kills. However, Asouf’s father is killed by another *waddan* that he has chased thereafter. Like his father, Asouf makes a vow not to hunt *waddans*, but the family’s starvation forces him to chase the *waddans*. While chasing a *waddan*, Asouf finds himself hanging from a jagged rock on the top of the mountain, his legs dangling above the abyss. Feeling hopeless, Asouf (the hunter) is saved by his victim (the *waddan*). For this reason, he refuses to show Cain and Masoud the hiding place of the *waddan*. Asouf is captured by Captain Bordello’s men in order to be trained on fighting for Italians in their invasion of Abyssinia. On their way to Uwaynat, Asouf morphs into a *waddan* and escapes the Italians’ guns. His metamorphosis is a popular tale told by the Sufis, “God opens for him a door He had opened only to his saints […]” (74). He is made analogous to the *waddan*. The Sufism of Asouf is expressed by the Sufis who witness his entry to the realm of Sufi sainthood. Asouf’s mother also dies when the floods sweep away everything on their way as a result of heavy rains.

5.2.1 The Divine Secret is in the Waddan

*The Bleeding of the Stone* is an eco-Sufi fabula in terms of the self-consciousness of its narrator. Al-Koni’s Sufi vision of Asouf as an ecological bedouin is evident through the latter’s intimate relationship with the *waddan*. Musa also represents the “Ecological Bedouin” that Sherif S. Elmusa has studied with reference to three Arabic novels set in the desert, namely, *Endings* (1977) by Abdal Rahman Munif, *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990) by Ibrahim al-Koni and *Seeds of Corruption*
(1973) by Sabri Moussa. The ecological bedouin in Elmusa’s Essay “The Ecological Bedouin: Toward Environmental Principles for the Arab Region” is based on the “Ecological Indian (the Native American in unison with Nature).” Elmusa considers the ecological bedouin as a contributor to “the formation of environmental principles for the region” (9). According to Elmusa, “The Ecological Bedouin as depicted in these works upholds environmental ethos, is a conservationist, values the lives of non-humans for their own sake, sees creation as an interdependent whole, not as isolated components, and evokes with reverence the inheritance of the ancestors inscribed in rock art, stories, and place names” (9). The distinctive feature of al-Koni’s novel is that it is set in the desert where the existence of fauna and flora is scarce, however, nomads like Asouf build strong bonds with nature.

Asouf chooses to maintain his spiritual ties with the waddan and ignore the human relations. Nature, represented by the stone and the sky at the end, reacts in its own way to the act of crucifying Asouf, “The murderer had no eyes to see how the sky had darkened, how clouds had blocked out the desert sun […] great drops of rain began to beat on its [the murderers’ truck’s”] windows, washing away, too, the blood of the man crucified on the face of the rock” (135). The Oneness of Being is not merely human-animal but also Oneness of the sky and earth. Asouf sacrifices his life for protecting the waddan, because in the waddan “[…] was the magic of a woman and the innocence of a child, the resolution of a man and the nobility of a horseman, the shyness of a maiden, the gracefulness of a bird, and the secret of the broad expanses” (88). The waddan is not only a source of temptation for John Parker’s transcendental vision but also a target for the brutality and greed of Cain and Masoud. Parker’s girlfriend Caroline has left him because of his strange ideas, which he has
taken from the Buddhist teachings and an obscure Sufi text, about eating the animals’ meat as a means of closeness to God:

Now he decided to use his isolation, here in the western mountain, to try to unravel the secret: to taste the flesh of this legendary animal, in the hope that God would open the door to him, that he’d know the bliss of seeing Him as He truly was. He was surprised by the Sufis’ agreement that grazing creatures were specially worthy to receive God’s holiness and presence, but he saw a strong parallel with Zen teachings, which set a greater value on animals than on man. They too had preferred some animals to others, placing savage beasts beyond the pale of mercy and ascribing holiness to those that were peaceful. The obscure Sufi took his vision still further, listing numerous strange illnesses whose only known cure was the eating of gazelle flesh. He needed gazelles, he told people—and right away they told him about Cain the son of Adam. (107)

Notably, al-Koni frequently uses footnotes in his Arabic texts to explain points that might seem mysterious to readers such as references to names of Sufi tariqas (paths), Tuareg aphorisms, and also some philosophies taken from the Sufis such as Ibn Arabi’s and al-Niffari’s as well as other contemplative traditions such as Zen Buddhism. Parker is influenced by what he “[…] studied Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Islamic Sufi thought at the University of California in 1957 […]” (105). In the story, he is an American captain in a mission in the desert:

What fascinated him above all was an idea advanced by a French writer: that it was the Maghreb that had brought Sufism down from its
throne of heavenly philosophy, to the common soil of everyday life. Here in these countries, in contrast to the Arab east, there seemed no difference between the wise sage, the simple dervish, and the pious saint—they all looked like wandering beggars! And so Sufism here, as an esoteric philosophy, was actually closer to Buddhism. There was no difference between God in heaven and the poor vagabond on earth, so long as God Himself was prepared to take up His abode in such holy fools. (105-6)

This passage highlights the interaction between the Sahara as a spiritual geography and Sufism as a mystical dimension of Islam. If Sufism spiritually contributes to the Sahara through teachings by Sufi sheikhs, the Sahara too is a vast space that is characterized by its spiritual traditions, hence, is considered the best geography for Sufi dervishes. Every contemplative tradition including Zen is made equally relative to existence in the desert as far as Creator-creature relationship is concerned:

Man’s search for union with God could, it said, only be realized when he’d passed through the animal state. He must live apart until he became an animal himself, silencing his tongue until he lost the ability of speech, eating grass until he forgot the taste of food. The Creator was more inclined to enter a creature living deep in the wilderness, secluded even from those animals that seek the company of humans. (106)

There is a sharp divide between Asouf and Parker as far as eco-Sufism is concerned. Parker’s character is ironical in the sense that he employs strange ideas and develops them in order to fulfill his desires. Parker reads a book written by a French author,
who quotes a passage from an obscure Sufi traveller, “The truth lies in the grazing beasts. In gazelles God has placed the secret and sown the meaning. For him who tastes the flesh of this creature, all impotence in the soul will be swept away, the veil of separation will be rent, and he will see God as He truly is” (106). Al-Koni’s narration of this obscure passage is a hilarious criticism of the corrupted interpretation of Islamic thought over the centuries, because this passage is totally against al-Ghazali’s view of asceticism (zuhd) and Ibn Arabi’s theory of animals’ rights in *Futuhat*. Parker manipulates the Sufi language, “This mystical passage would never have evoked such an echo in him had he not been interested, too, in the Buddhists’ bold ideas on dumb animals” (106). Unlike Parker, Asouf considers the *waddan* a Divine Mirror that contains the magic of women, the innocence of children, the gracefulness of birds, and most importantly the secret of the vast desert. Al-Koni’s narrative is characterized by focalization of the desert as the Sufi mirror where theophanies of God reside.

Asouf’s nomadic-religious composite is shown through his sanctification of the *waddan* whose blood, for Asouf, is not different from human blood. The Sufi dimension in *The Bleeding of the Stone* appears from the outset through a Koranic

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64 Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s *Abstinence in Islam: Curbing the Two Appetites* emphasizes the importance of the ascetical rigorous exercise as a protection from satiation and its aftermaths, “For pious Muslims of the Sufi persuasion, abstinence is a necessary virtue for the conduct of spiritual exercises leading to Union with God” (9). Consequently, al-Ghazali states that “[…] the stomach is the fount of lust and the source of ailment and evil […] Food leads to intense desire for ostentation and wealth, to all kinds of envy and greed” (32-33).

65 Arabs have different stories of the self-centered manipulation of religious discourse. For example, sellers of fenugreek (al-hulba) used to narrate the following false hadith which they attributed to the Prophet in order to earn more money from selling fenugreek with high prices: “If my people knew what there is in fenugreek, they would have bought and paid its weight in gold.” Fenugreek is hot and dry. As a tea it aids menstrual flow and is useful in colic and as a cleansing enema. Fenugreek strengthens the heart.” Muslims in India and some Arab countries eat the *haris* (beef meat or haleem) as an aphrodisiac meal and they have a false hadith of the prophet: “Once Muhammad complained sexual weakness and God sent him Angel Gabriel who told him, “O Muhammad! You ought to eat *haris*.” Al-Koni uses in *al-Majus* an epigraph for the section on the false Qadiri Sheikh from the Gosepl of Mathew “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” Thus, al-Koni’s narrative is fabulation because it involves its author’s self-conscious narration throughout his novels.
epigraph\textsuperscript{66} that highlights Oneness of Being via the human-animal relationship between Asouf and the \textit{waddan}. In other words, Asouf and the \textit{waddan} are homologous and he has not any fear of the jinn. Asouf is in harmony with everything in the desert including the Spirit World, “He wasn’t afraid of the jinn, nor had he any wish to seek protection against the \textit{waddan}. Who seeks protection against himself? But he didn’t tell her [his mother] the secret—the secret of his transformation” (66). The human evil is the only threat to Asouf and the \textit{waddan} alike. Oneness of Being is expressed through the Asouf’s unity with the non-human: the jinn, the \textit{waddan}, and the desert. The analogy of Asouf and the \textit{waddan} is established to denote the unity of existence referred to in Sufism as \textit{wahdat al-wujud} (Oneness of Being). It is not accidental that the story begins with the epigraph mentioned in the footnote and ends with both Asouf and the \textit{waddan} as victims of Man’s violence.

In addition, the story is permeated by scenes where gazelles, \textit{waddans}, and humans have some qualities in common including speech and feelings. Further, God is seen via the narrative course of the story in the \textit{waddan}, in the stone, and in the gazelle, not to mention the vast desert. The Sahara is a unifying force of Asouf, the \textit{waddan}, the stone, and the dust. According to Sofia Samatar, “The hero [Asouf] of \textit{The Bleeding of the Stone} is the mountain desert, the wilderness, as embodied in Asouf. The blood of the human Asouf is also the blood of the \textit{waddan}, the spirit of the wilderness, and it is also the blood of the land, the bleeding of the stone itself” (203).

The Tuareg in \textit{The Bleeding of the Stone} maintain cultural and traditional heritage by the oral transmission of stories from one generation to the next. Besides the Sufi presence, other traditions exist in the desert. The desert embraces religion and

\textsuperscript{66}“There are no animals on land or birds flying on their wings, but are communities like your own” (Koran 6:38).
mythology coexisting peacefully side by side. Asouf and his father represent the trans-generational rendering of folktales, myths, stories, aphorisms, and beliefs. In the Sahara, as it appears from al-Koni’s narrative, each main character is like a disciple with a spiritual father. Ukhayyad in *Gold Dust* memorizes Sheikh Musa’s teachings and Asouf in *The Bleeding of the Stone* memorizes his father’s advice. The nature of their teachings has a phenomenological relevance in the sense that the teachings deal with the ways of living and the maxims and aphorisms that help one survive in the trackless desert.

Parker meets the dervish Sheikh Jallouli who “was a solitary old man who sat each day with his back against the wall of the mosque, facing the rays of the twilight sun. He didn’t mix with others, and people avoided him because of his odd ideas on religion and the world” (107). Jallouli rejects the Parker’s idea of union with God through one’s meat-eating by answering the latter’s question about God’s dwelling in every creature, “God dwells in all souls. To limit it to gazelles is heresy […] The divine secret’s in the *waddan*” (108-9). In this context, the Qadiri dervish shows Parker the contrast between Islam and Christianity, “That’s our difference with you people. With you Christians. You say Christ is God, limiting God’s glory to one creature, while we see Him present in all creatures. Our religion is more just than yours” (107). Worthwhile, al-Koni in the footnote of the original text refers to Ibn Arabi’s views regarding the Sufi idea of God’s presence in contrast to the Christian idea of God’s incarnation, “The Christian view is mistaken not only in making Christ the God but also in limiting God to one human being (*Nazif al-Hajar* 118).

Throughout al-Koni’s novel, the Sufi fabula which is characterized by the author’s self-consciousness is used so as to impose the author’s point of view about his world and the implications of foreign encroachments in his Sahara at the moral and material
levels. Jallouli represents the Sufi resistance against the colonizers of the Sahara who are represented by the Italians and the American officer John Parker. Discussing the Sufis’ role in *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Muhsin J. al-Musawi writes, “Sufism is recalled and inscribed to challenge the greed of the officer John Parker. Anointing Parker’s helicopter mission to slaughter gazelles and mouflons “with curses,” the Sufi Shaykh Jallouli murmured: ‘How can you claim […] to belong to the religion of Christ?’” (*The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* 55).

**5.2.2 Asouf: Like Father Like Son**

The mother reveals to Asouf the secret reason behind his father’s abstinence from hunting *waddans* as follows:

He vowed he’d never again go near the *waddan*, and that he wouldn’t teach his children to hunt it. But he became hungry. We were hungry together in those harsh drought years before you were born. I was pregnant then, and he had to break his vow and hunt. He wept before he did it. I heard him with my own ears, weeping at night. He left in the morning, and he came back with a large *waddan*. We skinned it and ate it, filling our stomachs at last. He said he’d broken his vow and the spirit of the mountains would punish him for it. But he wouldn’t, he assured me, teach his son, if he were granted a son, how

67 The English translation of this phrase “filled our stomach at last” renders an incomplete meaning of the Arabic phrase و أكلنا بعد جوع طويل [wa akalna ba’d ju’in taweel] which means “We ate it after a long time of hunger.”.
to hunt the *waddan*. Do you understand now, you stubborn boy? I told you not to keep pestering him. It hurts him.” (40)\(^68\)

Asouf cannot be Cain unless he and his family are in jeopardy of extinction. This is what qualifies Asouf to be a holy nomad. The mother’s tale highlights the difference between nomads and non-nomads with regard to hunting—a reality that is obviously created by al-Koni. The way the visitor talks to Asouf about meat-eating reveals the difference between the two, “Everything begins and ends with meat […] You’ve never enjoyed a woman’s meat. It’s the tastiest of all. Apart, that’s from the gazelle’s meat and lamb’s meat—and the meat from the *waddan* […] If a man doesn’t eat meat, then he doesn’t live. You’re not alive at all. You’re dead” (14). Unlike the visitor, Asouf neither likes animals’ meat nor does he have a penchant for women.

*The Bleeding of the Stone* is a story of a family characterized by asceticism. The father and son do not differ from each other in their ascetic approach to life. They are holy nomads who prefer a life of loneliness in the Sahara to life among other people in the oasis. For the father, the oasis is full of the evil of men, a place where man kills his brother. Their experience with the *waddan* is similar. The hardships lead both father and son to the same abyss (*hawiya*) with a slight difference in the way they die in the desert. The father refuses to live the oasis life. Like him, the son refuses the oasis life and lives, after his father’s death, with his mother in a mountain cave in a remote desert where only gazelles and *waddans* live. Moreover, Asouf exceeds his father in asceticism because he even refuses to take money from the

\(^68\) In al-Koni’s *al-Waqa’i al-Maquda min Sirat al-Majas* [The Lost Stories from the Life of the Magi] (10) “the desert people only chase the *waddan* when they are on the point of extinction and they see their offspring threatened with disappearance” (qtd. in Cooke 6).
government officials for guarding the archeological sites in Wadi Matkhandoush. Asouf wonders about the uselessness of money in the desert—thanks to mother desert that renders money useless in the eye of its nomads. Indirectly, the desert seems to be cherished for beliefs and aphorisms it provides to its denizens. Asouf, thus, is a character with no interest in money which represents worldly temptations to humans. Instead, the story introduces him, right from the outset, as a person who plunges “[…] his arms into the sands of the wadi to begin ablutions, in readiness for his afternoon prayers […] and give God His due before the Christians arrived […]” (1-2). Asouf is a man whose prayers, unlike ordinary Muslims, are task-centered and not self-centered. Asouf prays to God for prayer’s own sake—nowhere in the story has he appeared asking God for fulfillment of any mundane favors. Asouf works as a tourist-guide without any interest, however, he is always ready to “[…] welcome them [visitors/Christians] to the wadi and show them the figures painted on the rocks” (2).

Like ascetics, the father and the son hunt gazelles only when there is no alternative to eat. His father, following an advice of a soothsayer, scarcely hunts a gazelle, he passes this maxim to Asouf, “Although there were plenty of gazelles in the desert then, his father had made it a strict rule never to hunt more than one gazelle each trip” (37). The Sufi view of meat-eating is slightly different from the common view in Islam. Many a Sufi master shuns meat-eating, because it nourishes the animal-soul (nafs), which is usually called the lower self or the commanding self. Ibn Arabi, in his Treatise of Lights (Risalat al-Anwar), admonishes the reader to “[b]e careful of your diet. It is better if your food be nourishing but devoid of animal fat.” Jili notes that this is “… because animal fat strengthens animality, and its principles

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69 Matkhandoush Valley is famous for its prehistoric carvings and visitors view it as an open-air natural gallery of extinct animals such as the waddan and other Tuareg myth-related engravings.
will dominate spiritual principles” (qtd. in Richard C. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Traditions and Muslim Cultures* (116). Ghazali’s view is similar to Ibn Arabi’s. In this way, Sufi teachings are transmitted from one generation to the next in the desert. Like *waddans*, gazelles receive a great share of care and attention from Asouf and his father. The father assures Asouf, “That way, the soul of the gazelle would become stronger and firmer. It would find itself protected by the shield of the Quran, and by the talismans of magicians and amulets of soothsayers, and by the incantations of the devout sages” (37).). Being all ears to his father, Asouf is found to be a perfect model of a holy nomad, who not only renounces eating meat but also protects the *waddan* against hunters and loses his life at the end.

Asouf’s father is dead but his teachings are still engraved in Asouf’s heart. As the story develops, Asouf is found in his speech and monologues to have views that are similar to his father’s. His reflections on solitude and freedom as values of life in the desert are tantamount to his father’s:

His father was dead and the world was a desert. The man who chooses to live free in the desert must look after himself. Such was the philosophy he’d read in the life of his father, and his father has paid for it with his life. Now he too was to pay the price. Was that what freedom meant? Was living apart from people a crime to be settled by death? Was solitude a denial of God? (52)

As it appears from this passage, Asouf seems bewildered, seeking answers to such questions related to the nature of life in solitude and what it means to be a solitary nomad.

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70 The phrase “holy nomad” is borrowed from Matt Litton’s book *Holy Nomad: The Rugged Road to Joy* in which Litton calls for life as a nomadic adventure where discovery of the soul takes place along the rugged road to joy by combating the self’s desire to possess and enjoy by exploitation of lives and sufferings of other humans and non-humans as well.
figure in the desert. He is trying to find answers about the network of relations between solitude and the desert, freedom and death, and whether such states of living are accepted by God. Later on, we come to know about his questions while he is thinking of his mother—questions that are indirectly put as answers to the previous questions of Asouf, “His mother would be on her own now […] She’d never survive without him. She too would pay the price of solitude. The price of freedom. The price of living apart from people and their malice. There, among people, was malice and humiliation, here, in the desert, was freedom and death.” The series of inquiries are coming from Asouf’s heart, not from his mind. This series is preceded by a description of Asouf showing that he is thinking with his heart, “But now the strength of his heart brought clear sight, to see he was in a state crueler and more hateful than death” (56). Heart is the source of clear sight in Sufism. A nomad always follows his heart, this is the advice of Asouf’s father to him. Freedom and death in the desert are preferred by Asouf and his father to malice and humiliation of other people in the oasis. The end of Asouf and his parents is atrocious death, they pay their lives as the price of freedom and solitude. They are conscious of this truth, which is unpleasant to people of the oasis as well as to outsiders such as Masoud, Cain, and Praker. The story of Asouf with the waddan is the same as his father’s.

Sufism is obviously announced to the reader at the level of narration. For instance, Asouf frequently recollects a Sufi that praises the desert life. The third-person narrator describes the way Asouf remembers his father either through the latter’s teachings or through this:

His father would recite a Sufi he’d heard sung, he said, by the Sufis in the community at Uwaynat:
The desert is a true treasure
For him who seeks refuge
From men and the evil of men.
In it is contentment,
In it is death and all you seek. (18)

Sufis play a key role in strengthening the nomads’ penchant for their desert, because the desert is a spiritual value to the Sufis. Contentment is one of the spiritual states in Sufism. Maria de Cillis summarizes Ibn Arabi in this regard, “According to the classification of the spiritual stations, the maqam of the tawakkul, that is, the ‘abandonment to God,’ and ‘trust in God’, is followed by the maqamat of taslim (submission), tafwid (acceptance) and rida (contentment)” (225). The desert is a treasure, a refuge, contentment, and a death. In the desert, Sufism and nomadism dissolve into one spiritual entity—a point that is embedded in this. It becomes puzzling for readers to distinguish between the Tuareg spiritual aphorisms and the Sufi maxims. The mawwal seems to be the anthem or the hymn of wanderers in the desert.

Asouf meditatively ponders the meanings embedded in his father’s. Sharing his father’s reaction to the desert’s drought and hardships, Asouf thinks that his father’s heart was always burning. The recitation of s puts out the burning of the heart. The narrator delineates Asouf’s perplexity as to whether these songs bring pains to the singer or they are a means of eliminating them:

Why did these songs tug so at his heart? Why did they bring him such unbearable pain? Was it because they made him sense the desert’s cruelty? Or because they told how the destiny of a lone man was only sorrow and hardship? […] Was it because of some message those
s bore: that salvation and freedom meant the desert, and the
desert merely meant death? Was he weeping because his sad father’s
s somehow captured the nature of their strange life in the
eternal desert, where nothing else seemed to exist in the world? (36)

The mawwal not only sustains Asouf’s peace but also stirs his longing. It shows the
author’s view of the desert as freedom and freedom as death. The mawwal mystically
expresses contemplative means of nomads’ existence. It also illustrates the ‘eternal’
desert as a space yet unknown to outsiders and mysterious to its denizens. Such
perplexity in Ibn Arabi’s terminology in particular and in the Muhammadan sense in
general is called hayra (bewilderment), which is deemed the highest level of knowing
one’s own existence vis-à-vis God’s. Earle H. Waugh explains the way the mawwals
in the Maghreb served through the munshidoun (chanters) as a platform for Sufi
sama,’ “These maqamat mawwal are inspired phrasings drawn from the Qura’n, the
Hadith, and special sayings of the saints. A whole range of terms finds its way to the
Sufi malhun […] The goal is to construct a distinctive landscape of the world for the
Sufi” (95).71 Aphorisms by al-Koni express nothingness and eternity as features of the
desert, “The Desert, oasis of eternity.” This aphorism ironically indicates that the
desert is the real oasis because it is eternal. Further, the desert is expressed in the
following aphorism as a house of nothingness: “He who has the Desert as homeland
has nothingness as a house” (A Sleepless Eye 29).

Al-Koni employs Sufism in the body of his narrative in order to reveal a
deeper reality of the desert as a spiritual, mystical space characterized by infinity. The

71 Waugh observes that “The mawwal form is drawn from classical Arabic and is recognized in the
munshid’s performance […] The munishid extrapolates from this form to construct the form called
timwila, which is like mawwal in that it respects form and language of the text in its rhythm, even
while adapting its usage to the needs of dhikr and sama’ […]” (Memory, Music, and Religion:
Morocco’s Mystical Chanters 95)
desert expands to include worlds of existence perceived by the Sufi Eye of the Heart. Parker in the story looks up the “waddan in the encyclopedia to find out that the waddan has been extinct since the seventeenth century” (124). However, he realizes that Sufis prove to be truer than the encyclopedia because the waddan still exists in the desert. Masoud tells Parker, “Our desert hides all sorts of treasures, including extinct animals” (125). Thus, the desert is a space that is rich with hidden treasures, worlds of fauna, flora, spirits, caves and caverns, idols, rocks and stones.

Like waddans, gazelles are also personified in The Bleeding of the Stone based on the Sufi creed that “God dwells in all souls” (108). Disharmony is brought to the desert by outsiders who apparently represent the colonizers in the history of the Sub-Saharan. The stone, Asouf, gazelles, and waddans bleed because of outsiders. Two gazelles, a mother and a daughter, are conversing about their existence in relation to humans in the desert. The old gazelle alerts the young one that, “The only talisman able to protect against beasts and evil ones was patience in calamity” (101). The following passage articulates the Sufi idea of God’s presence through the gazelles’ conversation:

The wise gazelle, seeing the loneliness in the eyes of her little one, told her just why she was venturing to linger behind, rather than to go along with the migrating herds. […] she decided one evening, by way of warning example, to relate the story of their homeland. She told how, when the Creator made the soul, He assigned for it three frontiers and set it within three prisons: time, place, and the body. Any who attempted to break free from these was justly cursed and consigned to perdition, since the Creator had hallowed them and made them a
destiny for every creature. Any attempt to pass beyond them was disobedience to His will. (99-100)

The gazelle’s story is parallel to the story of Asouf and his father in the sense that the mother gazelle inherits some advice of wandering in loneliness in Hasawna mountains so that she and her calf can escape the evil of man. The calf tells the mother her objection against what the mother says about the migrating herds. She tells her that the place (Hamada Desert) becomes more dangerous than jungles. But the mother replies that she possesses a talisman that no other gazelle possesses—it is an amulet that protects them from any danger, “The only talisman able to protect against beasts and evil ones was patience in calamity” (101). The mother gazelle later tells her calf the story of her grandmother’s sacrifice for the sake of saving the life of a human family living in a remote mountain, “He [the head of the family] crawled among the bushes, on hands and knees, leaving his family up on the heights. We heard a baby screaming in the lap of a woman who was swaying, trying to fight back weakness, barely able to stand on her feet. This, my wise mother said, was because of thirst” (101). The head of the family slaughters her mother to quench their hunger. Al-Koni bestows the gazelles with human consciousness and traits so that Oneness of Being is realized. Like the bedouin’s family, the story of the gazelle shows that the gazelle strongly trusts in God as long as she does not go beyond the three limits put by Him. In al-Koni’s Al-waqa’i al-Mafquda min Sirat al-Majus the Tuareg have genealogical connection with animals, “Some of us descended from the waddan, some are originally dabb (lizard) and many are originally gazelles” (13). Therefore, Asouf and his father stand against hunting gazelles.
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Asouf is inspired by lessons from the animals about patience in calamities. The desert is presented by the narrator as a sacred place where not only humans’ spirits but also animals’ can escape killing by experiencing a third state of life between void and existence. In the scene of chasing the waddan and being under its mercy thereafter, Asouf experiences life in the world of barzakh. He recalls stories of different animals that pass through the same experience he is having. Struggling to rescue himself from the abyss (the pit) by making one move:

It was desperate progress, a final move. Movement now decided life or death, spurred on by the resolution of a man in the grip of death to take in one last draft of life, even if his head should be sliced from his body. A goat breathes [Asouf remembers], takes in air, long after it’s slaughtered. Even when its head’s cut clean from its body. As for a slain waddan, it gets up, headless, and runs off a long way, before giving in at last and submitting to God.

Then there’s the waran. With that things are even worse. You kill it in the morning, then, when you fling it on the fire to grill it at night, it leaps from the blaze and runs right off. There’s another life, between life and death. A third state neither void nor existence. He [Asouf] was in that state now, crawling along the wadi like a snake, his eyes blinded. He could see nothing, feel nothing […] (64)

Goats, waddans, and warans altogether have the same experience in the pit as Asouf does. Elmarsafi describes al-Koni’s use of this epigraph in this novel as a “Qur’anic allusion that underlines the continuity between human and non-human” (Sufism… 128). Asouf is haunted by the waddan because he has broken his vow not to hunt it.
What brings Asouf back from the barzakh to life again is the waddan itself, “[…] his victim and executioner. But which of them was the victim, which the executioner? Which of them was human, which animal? […] Suddenly in the dimness of the glow, he saw his father in the eyes of the great, patient waddan” (60-61). Ibn Arabi’s worldview of the barzakh is represented by Asouf living another life while trying to escape death, a third state between life and death, when he morphs into the saintly waddan. Scenes of metamorphosis in al-Koni’s novels take place in the desert’s abysses where the desert makes characters ecstatic. While being tortured by Italians for refusing to join their service camp, Asouf wakes and falls asleep again. Then, he morphs into a waddan and escapes execution by imprisonment:

They’d seen a man break loose from his captivity and change into a waddan […], heedless of the bullets flying all around him [….] until he vanished into the darkness of the mountains […] The wise oasis Sufis were [sic] convinced one and all that this man was a saint of God. That evening they went to the Sufi mosque and celebrated […] filled with joy that the divine spirit should come to dwell in a wretched creature of this world” (73-74).

Asouf’s escape from captivity is an assumption of a new identity. One function of metamorphosis, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, is that it “[…] serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of crisis: for showing how an individual becomes other than what he was” (111-112). Shapeshifting is also a means of prolonging the shapeshifter’s life. Asouf’s ability to shapeshift into a waddan liberates him from death and postpones the end of the story. Nancy Gray Diaz writes that “Metamorphosis […] enables the individual to transcend
time and death. It postpones an absolute end, and allows an indefinite continuation of existence” (31). In Sufism, the abyss is mentioned with reference to hell. In the Arabic text (Nazif al-Hajar), al-Koni explains the abyss (al-hawiya) in a footnote, which is important for his readers as a paratextual element. In this footnote, al-Koni refers to al-Ghazali’s explanation of the meaning of al-hawiya (the abyss).72

Elmarsafy notes that “al-Koni takes the title of the chapter [The Pit] from al-Ghazali’s detailed description of hell: al-hawiya is the deepest abyss in hell, whose infinite depth parallels the many temptations of this world” (Sufism… 220-21). Asouf experiences what the Sufis describe as soul-cleansing. Al-Koni’s abyss is comparable to the abyss of hell. Cleansing in the abyss, for Asouf, is akin to those who will be cleansed in hell.73 Although Asouf has suffered in the abyss, his attitude towards the waddan changes. Asouf “[…] felt an aversion to meat, to meat of all kinds […] he saw his father dwelling in the waddan and the waddan in his father” (65-66). Al-Koni usually employs epigraphs as paratexts, thus, he makes readings of his novels author-wise. For “The Pit” section, he uses a Sufi epigraph about patience from al-Niffari’s Fulfillment: “Fulfillment springs from patience,/ Patience springs from power,/ Power springs from authority” (The Bleeding… 41). Life stays incomplete without patience because in al-Niffari’s lines patience stands as a metaphor for life.

72 Al-Koni’s footnote in Nazif (p. 53): The Muslim Sufis consider the abyss as the lowest/seventh strata of hell, according to Imam al-Ghazali. Ghazali says: “… gates/strata of hell are seven in number, the last of which is al-hawiyah (the abyss/pit). The abyss here is not mentioned with reference to punishment but as a Sufi symbol for purification and atonement for sin [cleansing the soul]. (My translation)

73 In Koran, Adhab jannaham is the punishment of Hell (25:65). Ibn Arabi in Fusus explains the meaning of adhab (adhab) or punishment in Hell with reference to the Arabic root of the word which is ‘udhooba (sweetness), ”Even though they enter the abode of distress [Hell],/ They have their pleasure in a delight,/ Other than Heaven’s delight, but they are One [in Him],/ The difference between the two being apparent in his Self-manifestation./ It is called an ‘adhab because of its sweet taste,/ Like a skin that preserves what is inside” (“Chapter VII: The Wisdom of Sublimity in the Word of Ishmael” 109-10).
The Bleeding of the Stone pays attention to the importance of the heart in guiding Asouf throughout his journey. Asouf is advised by his father to follow and listen to his heart whenever he feels lost in the desert:

The heart is the guide for those who don’t understand people. The heart is the fire by which the bedouin’s guided in the desert of this world, just as a man lost in the wilderness will be guided by the Idi star. All other stars transform and move, shift and vanish. Only this one stays firm until morning. Idi’s like the heart. It doesn’t deceive…Then, when he’d memorized the whole chapter, his father said: ‘Listen to your heart. What would a desert man do if he lost his heart? If we lost that, we wander lost in the world, because a desert man doesn’t understand the wiles of men. (17)

Heart is the locus of God and the medium of perception of God is, according to Ibn Arabi, the Eye of the Heart. The importance of heart in Sufism is indirectly highlighted by Asouf’s father in the passage above. Only those who lost their hearts are lost in the desert, the father reaffirms this maxim by making the heart analogous to Idi star because it stays as firm as one’s own heart. The mind is not mentioned in the novel. Heart is the source of patience and strength. Without what Ibn Arabi’s calls himma of the heart, one cannot live in the desert. At the age of seven, Asouf learnt from his father a Sufi lesson that the heart is the locus of God, “Do you know where God is?” He’d [Asouf] pointed his finger upward, and said, “In heaven.” His father had roared with laughter at that. “God’s here,” he’d said, pointing toward his breast. “Not in heaven!” […] “In the heart, with us, in us.” […] “If anyone asks you, just say He’s in the heart. Remember that always. In the heart” (58). If the presence of God in Gold Dust is realized by Ukhayyad through emptiness and serenity of the desert, it is
comprehended and apprehended by Asouf through his father’s teachings. However, the father’s Sufi teachings remain unrealized to Asouf till Asouf falls in the abyss:

Asouf hadn’t understood the words then. How could God, the Great One, the Might, All-Powerful One, lodge in this small heart, be imprisoned within the cage of this chest of his? Now, hanging from the top of the cliff, he realized his dead father had been right. Where was he finding all strength to endure, if not from the heart? But for this mysterious strength, but for the presence of God in the heart, he’d have fallen into the abyss of darkness that was plucking him down by his feet. (58-59)

The hardship he encounters in the desert plays a vital role in correcting his misunderstanding. Hanging from the top of the cliff between life and death, Asouf realizes that the secret of his endurance and patience lies in God’s presence in his heart.

The idea of God presence in the desert in *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone* has resonance in the Sufi view of God’s manifestation in all creatures. Al-Koni’s inspiration by Sufism is explicit and implicit throughout the two novels examined in this chapter. The desert and the protagonists’ heart and the waddan and the gazelles are depicted as the loci of God therefore all the human-animal boundaries are negated in both of the novels where Oneness of Being prevails. The Sufi lexicon including the secret (*al-sirr*), patience (*sabr*), presence (*hadhra*), asceticism (*zuhd*), the abyss (*hawiya*), isolation (*tajrid*), solitude (*uzla*), existence (*wujud*), ecstasy (*wajd*), longing (*hanin*), incarnation (*hulul*) appear frequently in the scrutinized novels. The two novels have Sufi sheikhs and dervishes. Sufis stand against the cultural hegemony of the oases and their dwellers including Ukhayyad’s father who is
depicted as a Muslim womanizer. Asouf and his father are released from the bondage of the oasis and lead their private life which is inspired by the Sufi mawwal and view of God’s dwelling in the heart and the waddan. The two novels also establish Oneness of Being through the human-animal brotherhood which is represented by Ukhayyad and the Mahri in *Gold Dust* and Asouf and the waddan in *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Sufism negates the spatiotemporal boundaries, which are represented by the oases. Al-Koni employs a self-conscious Sufi discourse in reinventing his fictional Sahara where Sufism becomes an outlet for symbols, metaphors and lexicon.