Abstract

This dissertation approaches the novels of Ibrahim al-Koni through the Sufi lexicon as a medium for a depiction of different worlds of existence in the Sahara. Sufism offers al-Koni a rich vocabulary to express the spiritual nature of his nomads and the Sufi geography of his Sahara. Al-Koni’s desert is inhabited by Sufi sheikhs and pure dervishes, soothsayers and diviners, chiefs and sages. The Sufi imagination plays a key role in shaping al-Koni’s fictional world and the experience of his protagonists in the dark recesses and abysses of the Sahara. Sufism represents a shift in the nomadic consciousness of God from paganic polytheism to God residing in the heart. Al-Koni sets his novels in the Sahara which is portrayed as a metaphor for God and as the locus of Divine theophanies and where all creatures are treated equally. His fictional world is paradoxically flooded with desert images rich in darkness and light and outward reality (zahir) and inward reality (batin), metaphors of Divine Existence in Form and the Formless, lyrical descriptions of the depths and distances of the desert. Everything in al-Koni’s desert is animate, every creature is personified. The self is one with the other in a unity that is inspired by the Sufi union with God which is best articulated in Ibn Arabi’s Oneness of Being. Characters perceiving the oneness of humans, fauna, and flora are Sufi dervishes to whom the desert unveils the inner reality of this Oneness. The wilderness of the Sahara is preserved in al-Koni’s novels because it is the locus of this Sufi unity.

Chapter One locates al-Koni as a writer and his cosmology at the literary and geographical levels. It provides details about his life, works, fictional space, and his place in the literary scene in the Arab world and internationally. It shows al-Koni’s
fictional map in the Sahara and draws attention to his literary contribution to Arabic literature as an incomparable desert novelist.

Chapter Two deals with al-Koni’s community, the Tuareg. It juxtaposes their travails in the Sahara and the way external encroachments upon them intensify their suffering. The Tuareg are known as people of the veil, a fact that is explored in this chapter. The chapter sheds light on the Tuareg’s belief system as Islamic though they still hold animistic beliefs today. It also shows the Tuareg as a matrilineal society.

Chapter Three focuses on the desert at the spiritual and literary levels. The desert is presented theologically and spiritually as God’s chosen land for purification and revelation and as a refuge for the Israelites, Christians and Muslims. The desert for mystics and writers is equally a space for self-exploration. This chapter argues that the desert intensifies the writers’ talent to a better value of vision than other landscapes since its serenity and stillness, solitude and struggle, emptiness and infinity are facets of a special setting for higher contemplation of ultimate reality. Some of the most well-known fictional and non-fictional works about the Sahara are briefly discussed to show the significance of the Sahara for human consciousness and a mystical path to the True Self.

Chapter Four examines the nature of Being in Sufism. This chapter explores the journey of the Sufis as a journey from “alone” to the “Alone,” a journey where the traveler’s final destination is Oneness of Being. The shift from a pure ascetical movement to the mystical trend in Sufism is historically presented with reference to key Sufi saints. More importantly, the Sufi world is shown as an imaginal realm (barzakh) where the self undergoes spiritual transformation through the Sufi states.
and stations towards perfection. The chapter ends with reflections on the greatest Sufi master Ibn Arabi and his school of wuḥdat al-wuḥūd (Oneness of Being).

Chapter Five is a study of two novels of al-Koni, *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone* in which the author employs the Sufi lexicon and metaphors in inventing his fictional world. These novels dwell on the desert as the Mirror of God. The *waddan*, the gazelle, the Mahri, the physical structure of the desert, and the hearts of the protagonists are all divine mirrors that are presented in accord with the hierarchy of the desert cosmos and the ontological levels of its universe (*maratib al-wuḥūd*). The protagonists of both novels are discussed in terms of restoring meaning in the desert encounter through their heart-based perception of animals and desert nature as loci of the Divine.

Chapter Six dwells on the utopian world of *Waw* in al-Koni’s *al-Majus (The Fetishists)* and the intersection between eco-paganism and eco-Sufism. It shows the other-worldly ascetics and the way they embrace paganic beliefs. This chapter shows the conflicts between lovers of God and desirers for gold, the human tribe and the jinn tribe and the human struggle against the drought and the *qibli* (the southern wind). Sufi characters believe that the desert calamities are God’s response to human violations of His Law. Both Sufis and soothsayers recommend blood sacrifice as a means of surviving the desert hardships.

This dissertation reaches the conclusion that the Sahara is paradoxically depicted by al-Koni as a paradise of freedom and not as an arid, life-extinguishing space. Al-Koni’s novels reflect upon the wisdom of the Tuareg pre-Islamic religion, the Sufi maxims and the historical facts and facets within his community. Al-Koni’s Sufi fictional world is *barzakhi* (liminal) as it is set between existence and non-
existence, annihilation and permanence, the outward and the inward and is a world run by the heart and not the mind that is permeated by spiritualizing self seeking union with the Divine.