

# Nature in Peril: An Eco-critical Reading of Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*

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## Abstract:

Ibrahim Al-Koni is a Libyan writer, who has been hailed as a magical realist, Sufi fabulist and a poetic novelist. Brought up in the tradition of the Tuareg, popularly known as 'the veiled men' or 'the blue men', his works combine pertinent ecological issues with a moving portrayal of traditional desert life. This paper aims to analyze how Al-Koni's writings focus on traditional desert life which is disappearing fast, and the need to preserve nature from the brink of extinction. The novelist highlights the increasing global ecological imperilment which is rapidly destroying the desert eco-system. In his novel, *The Bleeding of the Stone* Al-Koni raises questions relating to ecology and makes the readers learn from traditional societies of how to lead a sustainable life.

**Key Words:** Ecological, Extinction, Globalization, Colonisation, Traditional life, Nature.

Nature and literature share a close relationship as it is evidenced in the works of poets and writers down the ages. The uprising threat to humanity due to continuous misuse of the ecosystem has seized the attention of writers in recent times. The intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized through the writings of eco-conscious writers like Ibrahim al-Koni. The present study aims to the environmental issues addressed in Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* that raise questions relating to ecology and make the readers learn from traditional societies of how to lead a sustainable life that is not based on short-sighted over exploitation of natural resources.

'Ecocriticism' is a term derived from the Greek words, 'oikos' and 'kritis'. 'Oikos' means household, a nexus of humans, nature and the spirit. Whereas 'kritis' means judge, the arbiter of taste who wants the house to be kept in good order. It is concerned with the relationship between the living organisms in the natural environment which is not just interdependent but also interrelated. Unlike romantic writers

who worshipped nature, recent writers have started to create awareness through their literary works. William Rueckert, an ecocritic points out that 'eco' is preferred over 'enviro', because 'enviro' is anthropocentric, and stresses the dualities by implying how humans are in the centre surrounded by the environment. Deep ecological analysts believe that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and made them exploit it beyond redemption and recovery.

Peter Barry in his essay on "Ecocriticism" in *Beginning Theory*, highlights the existence of two distinct variants in ecological approach. According to him, American writings on nature are 'celebratory' in tone whereas, the British variant tends to be more 'minatory' in approach. In this regard, *The Bleeding of the Stone* is both celebratory and minatory in its tone as it documents the beauty of the vast Saharan desert with its rich flora and fauna and simultaneously raises questions on the extinction and depletion of natural resources. It seeks to warn us of the environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neo-colonial forces. Barry highlights the role of an ecocritic saying, "For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat" (252).

Fouad in his "Representations of the Desert in Silko's *Ceremony* and Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*" is of the view that *The Bleeding of the Stone* is, "a desert novel where man's relationship with nature is seen as interwoven with spirituality and religion, offering an opportunity for a discussion of a number of ecological and existential dilemmas" (39). The novel cautions the readers by emphasizing the fact that environmental degradation is the result of humanity's disconnection from the world of nature at its purest. Environmental degradation happens not only due to increasing technological developments but also due to the fact that humans fail to understand the dystopian effects brought upon the nature.

Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* represents the life of people in the Libyan deserts and the descriptions of the desert landscape vividly picture their oneness with nature. The novel narrates the life and death of Asouf, the Bedouin herdsman. Living alone with his goats in the mountainous desert, he is also the

custodian of the ancient rock paintings. When foreigners arrive in the desert to kill the desert animals, he tries his best to protect them at the cost of his own life. The novel presents the life of the Tuaregs, who has a better understanding of nature and the hardships they face for survival. Living close to nature, Asouf understands the most secret mysteries of the desert. He is the only person who knows the whereabouts of *waddans*, a breed of sheep thought to be extinct and famed for its ferocity and the quality of its meat. The narrative is an ecological fable, describing the environmental disorders brought by men with modern vehicles and technological machines like land rovers and rapid-firing rifles. The novel combines pertinent ecological issues with a moving portrayal of the traditional desert life. There is also an important message on the environmental dangers poaching in Libya's south, a problem that organizations like the Libyan Wildlife Trust have stressed on due to the unregulated hunting that goes secretly over there.

Colonialism has been a significant factor in the devastation of environment around the world. The transformations in the social and cultural environments have completely changed the representation of man's attitude towards nature in literary expressions. Just after the World War II, Libya is considered to be one of the world's poorest country. Libya has the highest infant mortality rate, the lowest life expectancy and the highest illiteracy rate. The desert regions have impossible climatic conditions, constant environmental hazards and political turmoil. It is estimated that at least half a million of Libyans die in some battle or from disease, starvation or thirst. In addition to this, around 250,000 or more Libyans are forced into exile. Wars and invasions greatly affect the eco-system and can cause diverse effects on the mankind. Al-Koni presents the need for the preservation of Nature, for a healthy sustainable development. It creates an awareness of how globalisation and colonisation result in the extinction of species, hinting at the decreasing count in terms of flora and fauna. Jonathan Bate, an ecocritic in his work *The Song of the Earth* argues that colonialism and destruction of natural resources have frequently gone together. This fact is emphasized more in post-colonial and postmodern novels. Nature is the first thing that is targeted by the colonizer. This is what happened in Libya too. The colonizer lays his interest over the natural setup of the colonized country, thereby affecting the culture and the landscape of the colonized.

Al-Koni highlights the growing environmental destruction brought in Libya by the westerners, especially Italians. It is an irony that development happens in the sense of destruction. In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Al-Koni has realistically delineated the condition of the subalterns who are under the clutches of colonialism and oppression. The tension that has been rapidly bounding between Libya and Italy is pictured by analysing its divisive effects brought upon nature. The natives of the place are driven out by the colonizers who offer technological developments at the cost of environmental destruction. Al-Koni in *The Bleeding of the Stone* points out that, “The foreigners seem to have beaten us everywhere in the desert. Wherever we’ve been, we’ve found they were there before us. These foreigners are devils” (12). Subsequently, the novel enumerates incidents that vividly bring out the writers’ concern for ecological issues. It is one of the Arabian novels that strongly raises ecological issues in Arabian fiction. Al-Koni’s novels reveal the interactions between the man, fauna and flora, and the physical environment; and in doing so, his work highlights both the tragedy and the hypocrisy that are inherent in the conservation efforts in the Sahara. Al-Koni explores the tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations with the natural world, and the extra-discursive reality of nature that changes and is simultaneously changed by humanity. Man’s constant encroachment of the ecosystems of the Sahara justifies the tensions between the various elements of the nature. For settlers, the desert offers an extremely unpredictable and insecure life.

Peter Barry in his essay on “Ecocriticism” in *Beginning Theory* highlights that, “The point repeatedly made by ecocritics is that for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet, for every region is affected by global warming, and other anthropocentric problems” (257). Desert lifestyle is highly influenced by climatic changes. Unrest and eviction are constant threats and attacks on desert animals are most common. Unexpected floods destroy the stability of life on the desert without any warning. The novelist uses water imagery as a paradox in the novel, *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Water is both a blessing and a curse. Asouf remembers his father saying that man in the desert must be sparing with two things: water and bullets. “In the desert, he’d gone on, water and bullets were like air, the very fountain of life. If you ran out of the first, you’d die of thirst, and if you ran out of the second, some enemy, man or

beast or snake, would strike you down. Water and bullets were the life blood of a lone man. He could go without anything else, but not those”(24-25). In the desert, the store of water is the store of life. Men in the desert have to die by one of those two opposites: flood or thirst. Asouf’s mother who is caught up in a flood is found dead only after three days. Water is both the life giving and life taking element. During droughts the desert flora and fauna perish. And, at times floods in the desert is also threatening. Natural forces react when human atrocities over nature increases.

Al-Koni gives the description of the paintings on the rocks of the caves that belong to ancient civilizations. Though, these paintings are painted thousands of years ago, the symbols and signs in the paintings are clear, deep, majestic and vivid. These paintings have images of unknown animals and other species from the ancient times and are extinct across the ages in history. This stands as a proof for the gradual and rapid extinction of animals across the ages and is unnoticed most of the times. The rock paintings in the desert Wadi stand as a proof for the existence of Art beyond the realm of time. These paintings emphasize the bond between man and wildlife. Asouf is the custodian of these rock paintings, and many of these paintings are discovered by him while chasing his unruly herd to seek residence inside the caves as a refugee from the scorching sun. He refuses to get salary for protecting the Wadi as he thinks that it is his responsibility to protect it. Asouf finds out that the animals that are found in the paintings are not seen in the deserts now. This subtly hints at the fact that *waddans* and gazelles are very rare species of animals found only in some of the rare places in the world. But now, these species are in danger in the brink of extinction. The novelist highlights the increasing global ecological imperilment which is rapidly destroying the desert eco-system. The character Cain in the novel, stands as a symbol of limitless consumption associated with modern forms of life. In this regard Moolla, a specialist in African literature and orature, in his research article, “Desert ethics, myths of nature and novel form in the narratives of Ibrahim al-Koni” is of the view that, “land and animals are conceptualised as infinite resources whose exploitation finally is curtailed only rationally under the threat of depletion, but cannot be bounded or controlled by a mythical or traditional order” (191). The novelist constantly discusses the conflict between man and nature in the context of the Saharan deserts in the Southern Libya, and warns mankind against the

overt exploitation of nature. Asouf's father warns his son that he should not hunt more than one animal in a day. His intention in doing so is to maintain the ecological balance and to maintain the food chain. The Tuaregs hunt animals for their hunger. But, on the other hand the Europeans who arrive in the desert landscape hunt the animals to trade its meat. Man going against the vows of nature results in dystopia. Pope Francis in his Encyclical letter, *LAUDATO SI*, mentions that, "The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes 'a seedbed for collective selfishness'. When people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume" (159).

Asouf's father once made a vow that he will not hunt *waddan*, because it saved his life. As a true Sufi, he admires the beauty of the gazelle. But due to hunger and his ailing pregnant wife he breaks his vow and kills a *waddan* to feed his family. He suffers from the fact that he is forced to kill one of these creatures, because it is necessary for the survival of his family. He regrets his situation that makes him kill the animal to feed his starving family. Asouf sees his dead father through the eyes of the *waddan*. Al-Koni calls for a spiritual relationship and understanding between man and eco-system. It should be a relationship that requires respect, reverence and balance for a harmonious existence. In the novel, the human-animal connection is presented as a possible pathway to divinity, leading to a more literal vision of heaven on earth. One of the main devices used in the novel is the blurring of line between human and the non-human. Al-Koni begins his work with a quote from Quran that highlights the oneness between man and the non-human world, "There are no animals on land or birds flying on their own wings, but are communities like your own" (1). Moreover, Asouf's father is of the opinion that animals are more faithful than humans.

Al-Koni points out how nature's balance is broken due to the selfish motives of humans. He calls the language of the animals as "some unknown language" (23), the voice that man fails to understand. The inhabitants of the Libyan deserts believe that *waddans* possess the spirit of the mountains. When Asouf is tortured by Cain and Masoud to reveal the whereabouts of *waddans*, he tries his best to protect the animals from danger. Living close to nature, he understands the language of the animals and he warns them of the impending danger. Al-Koni is of the opinion that no human language is necessary to understand the voice of

nature. Asouf tries his best to save desert animals from these hunters who are instrumental in the slaughter and extinction of the gazelles. When he is forced to choose between his human kinship and his spiritual ties with the *waddans*, he chooses death to save the animals from his fellow human beings. Cain and Parker are symbols of misguided neo-colonialism anchored in Western ideas of scale that put humans at the top of the chain making them blind to the laws of nature.

All indigenous communities have close links to their ancestral land, on which their cultural survival depends. Land is an important aspect of cultural identity for people. Vine Deloria, a Native American Lakota scholar, in his work *God is Red* opines that, “Every society needs these kinds of sacred places because they help to instill a sense of social cohesion in the people and remind them of the passage of generations that have brought them to the present. A society that cannot remember and honour its past is in peril of losing its soul” (276). The ancestral land means so much to the Tuaregs, because it is an icon for their tribal identity. So, land is more important for them. Though they are not educated, they have necessary knowledge to live wholesome lives. They feel it as their duty to protect the desert that feeds and shelters them. When the desert animals are killed rapidly, Asouf feels hurt because he lives close to nature and considers the desert animals as his kin. For centuries, the Saharan deserts are conserved by their ancestors and now the elite system destroys the desert; they feel that they are controlled and victimized.

Nature is the spirituality of the Tuaregs. As they dwell in the desert, it is their home. Whenever they hunt an animal, they pray and ask for its forgiveness, as they are doing it only for their survival. They have reverence for everything in their habitat including the stone and sands that surround them. Their deep understanding of the eco-system helps them to handle the hardships involved in the desert life. The desert remains an open ground for invasion. The desert land is boundless and the Tuaregs are not the kind of people to forbid any guests. The people in power, namely, the colonial powers misused their hospitality and kindness to encroach their lands. To protect their tribal identity, the Tuaregs remain silent sufferers in the hands of the colonizers. After colonization, the tribals try to assimilate into the mainstream culture thereby, losing their land and identity.

Environment has a great impact on the cultural aspect or arena. Landscape shapes the culture of any society. Survival of the fittest is true with desert life. Human beings acquire knowledge through various aspects of nature. Just a passive observation of nature will provide the necessary knowledge. The emotional attachment to a place can influence a person's experience and it also shapes one's personality. The novelist explains how the desert plants and animals are maintained naturally and how man-made weapons and human existence threaten the peaceful existence of the natural environment. "The plains would turn green in spring, the birds and rabbits and gazelles would flourish . . . The moment they sensed the movement of humans, they'd up and flee . . . the very desert seemed to be flying human attack" (86). The novelist is of the opinion that destroying nature is equal to destroying oneself. Pope Francis in his Encyclical letter *LAUDATO SI*, expresses his concern for nature in his letters highlighting that, "technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress . . . people's quality of life actually diminishes by the deterioration of the environment" (151).

Al-Koni's writings highlight the need for the understanding of ecology for a harmonious existence of man and Nature by evoking a spiritual relationship between humans and their natural environment by depicting the spiritual, invisible, harmonious bond. In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Al-Koni explores how as civilization grows more aggressive and arrogant, men begin to destruct and exploit Nature for self-aggrandizement, self-glorification, and self-indulgence. Human beings have a natural quest to find their roots and be a part of the natural environment that they belong to. But at the same time, they have over exploited natural resources and exploited nature to its fullest. *The Bleeding of the Stone* is the result of the new consciousness that there will be nothing to discourse about if necessary awareness is not spread around the world. The exploitation of the land and its resources has contributed significantly towards altering nature and the magnitude of the effects is alarming. The fact that traditional desert life is disappearing fast and the need for human beings to act before nature is not able to sustain us anymore is voiced by the novelist.

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