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Ibrāhīm al-Koni: Man and His Works

Abstract

The Libyan writer, Ibrāhīm al-Koni is one of the most outstanding authors of the Arab world, the first world-famous contemporary Tuareg writer. He is the author of more than sixty works published so far, most of which comprise short stories and novels. He also published poems and aphorisms. Al-Koni's writings are almost entirely devoted to the life of Tuaregs in the desert presented in terms of magic realism. The chief plots of his novels and stories include: human unification with nature up to the point of mysticism, human relationships with jinns and magic practices, contempt for gold and material goods and the ensuing conflict of freedom and attachment for a woman, longing for the lost paradisiacal oasis and durability and inviolability of the desert law in conjunction with specific beliefs. The writer is the chief representative of the Arabic variety of magical realism.

Personal History

Ibrāhīm al-Koni was born in 1948 in the Libyan Desert between Ghat and Mursuk in Ghadames Oasis in Fazzan (south Libya), where he spent his childhood and was brought up on the existing tribal tradition. He was a member of the Tuareg tribe and he spoke the Tamasheq language which was used by this people. He attended an Arab school in south Libya and when he was twelve years old he learned Arabic which later came to be the language of his writings. In the 1960s, Al-Koni started to work as a journalist for the local newspaper "Fazzān", and after the 1969 Libyan revolution, led by Muammar al-Kaddafi, which overthrew the monarchy, he worked for the newly established newspaper called "Aṭ-Ṭawra" ("Revolution"). In 1970, the future writer went as a scholarship holder to the Soviet Union, where he studied literature, where he specialised in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's literature. Between 1978 and 1987 Ibrāhīm

a l - K o n i worked for the Libyan Embassy in Warsaw as an *attaché* and at the same time he developed his publishing activity.

In Warsaw he established a unique periodical having the Arabic title “As-Sadaka” (“Friendship”) but appearing in the Polish language and he became its first editor. The periodical published valuable articles devoted to social, cultural and literary issues of the Arab world and translations from Arabic literature. Between 1987 and 1993 the writer lived in the Soviet Union again, where he was employed by the Libyan Embassy in Moscow. In 1993, Ibrāhīm a l - K o n i was employed as an *attaché* by the Libyan Embassy in Bern and he made his home in Switzerland.

Ibrāhīm a l - K o n i enjoys an increasing recognition in the Arab world and outside it. In Libya he was the winner of the Al-Fātiḥ prize in 1998 for his literary output and, later on, o f A l - K a d d a f i prize in 2002 and 2005. In 2005 the writer was awarded the Mohammad Z a f z a f Prize at the Festival of International Culture in Asila (Morocco) for his contribution to development of interpersonal relations, sense of freedom and justice, ability to understand local and global problems, quality of his narrative and excellent Arabic. A l - K o n i was awarded prizes for his literary output in France and Japan, state prizes in Switzerland for his works translated from Arabic into German (1995 and 2002), and the Great Prize of the Swiss State – 2004–2005 (his works were translated by Hartmut Fähndrich). The prizes, particularly the latter one, open up the perspectives of world literature before the writings of A l - K o n i, which he enters as a writer who enjoys the recognition as one of the more interesting literary authors of the Arab world. His works were translated into forty languages of the world, including English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish.

Al-Koni's Writings

A l - K o n i's writings are characterized by the recurrent motifs and plots that appear in various short stories and novels, which resembles the Arab and African tradition of evolving the same themes in ever new versions. The chief plots include: human unification with nature up to the point of mysticism, human relationships with jinns and magic practices, contempt for gold and material goods and the ensuing conflict of freedom and attachment for a woman, longing for the lost paradisiacal oasis and durability and inviolability of the desert law in conjunction with specific beliefs. A l - K o n i's prose works have also their protagonists and fidelity to the existing law that recur in various writings without any chronology.

Human Unification with Nature to the Bounds of Mysticism

The Tuaregs in A l - K o n i's prose works, who are usually descendants of the Al-Azğar tribe, live a primitive life as close to nature as it is possible. A l - K o n i's writings

acquire the features of magical realism when their characters move too far and impair the cause-and-effect order. They perceive nature in the categories of a living organism which is capable of feeling and experiencing. The illustration of this concept can be found, in particular, in his novel *Nazf al-Ḥaġar* ("The Bleeding of the Stone"). Its main character, a hunter Assūf, kills the game only when he is compelled to do so, and the dry broken twig is bleeding in his eyes. The feeling of unification with the desert nature is so strong that he can see how man changes into a dignified desert mouflon. The opposite of Assūf is Qābil, who was fed on gazelle's milk and he needs meat to be able to live. He receives a helicopter from an officer from the local base he befriended and with his help he tries to find desert animals and to kill them. He brutally kills Assūf when the latter refuses to show him the mouflon's tracks. In this novel (of which the action takes place during World War Two and then in the 1950s) the desert itself is declining, as it is being plowed up by the Land Rovers' wheels and it seems to lose its identity under the pressure of strangers.

Nature in Al-Konī's works is a kind of god (or goddess) whose manifestations can be observed in all of its aspects, which has a pantheistic implication; intuitively, one wants to unite with this god. This gives rise to the Gnostic attitude and the tendencies to mysticism in the relationships of the wanderers with the desert. Mystical behavior is favoured by the desert itself at a time when the lonely wanderer takes up nostalgic songs putting him in ecstasy, or when somebody rhythmically repeats the same action.

Human Relationships with Jinns and Magical Practices

The desert in Al-Konī's writings is cohabited by animals, people and invisible creatures (*ahl al-ḥafā'*), that is to say jinns. The two latter species are at variance, since – according to the legend recurring in Al-Konī's prose works – jinns are the first inhabitants of the desert and its hosts, while people arrived in the desert later and stole the treasures, first of all gold, from the demons. Then the jinns assumed an invisible shape and started the war with humans, trying to do harm to them. Humans, therefore, began to defend themselves against jinns by using magical practices, creating a system of signs and defensive customs, primarily amulets and talismans, and by inventing incantations. The Tuareg Azġar tribes (most often depicted in his writings) stopped using gold; women, for example, wore only silver ornaments not to irritate the demons. Nevertheless, according to the beliefs presented in Al-Konī's writings, the magic of the Tuaregs results in the first place from the striving to settle their relations with the jinns. Another reason for magical practices, which can be seen particularly in the novel *As-Saḥara* ("The Sorcerers") is the want of subordination of reality to oneself on the principles of alchemy, first of all by uniting contradictions and deriving benefits from this.

Contempt for Gold and Material Goods; Freedom and Woman

The Tuaregs in A l - K o n i's works despise gold, wealth and all forms of attachment. They think highly of unrestricted freedom in the desert, which can be limited by the material goods. The accumulation of the latter is related to the sedentary culture and the Tuaregs consider it to be dangerous. That is why they observe the rule that they should not stop in any place for more than forty days. Freedom may also be restricted by the starting of a family and the ensuing obligations, and even by the very affection for a woman as a form of man's subordination restricting the freedom of his activities. An example of the plot developed on the motif of contempt for material goods and the opposition of freedom and woman is the novel entitled *At-Tibr* ("Gold") Its main character, a shepherd Uḥayyid, has a feeling of being absolutely fraternized with his camel, but he sells it with a heavy heart in order to support his wife and his little son during the period of famine. Since the buyer still adds a small bag of gold sand to the contract, the rumor is spread that Uḥayyid sold his family for this precious metal. The sold camel returns to his master time after time, who finally decides to divorce his wife, in exchange for which he gets back his animal. However, he cannot forget the family, which leads him to destruction.

Longing for the Lost Paradisiacal Oasis

The source of mythology developing in the writings of A l - K o n i is the myth of the lost paradisiacal oasis named Wāw, which humans try hard to recover. The oasis as the source of happiness and joy is the opposite of the ascetic life in extremely difficult conditions led by the Tuaregs during their daily wanderings and it has a symbolical dimension. It is an ambiguous phenomenon which encourages free and subjective interpretation; however, in its basic meaning, in addition to the paradise in the form of compensation and prize for hardships, it also suggests perfection which the desert dwellers seek in the physical and psychic dimension. Colorful pictures of the paradisiacal oasis are the source of tales enriching the desert culture of the Tuaregs. The oasis assumes a particularly concrete shape in an extensive two-volume novel entitled *Al-Mağūs* ("The Magi") which enables one to reach the inside of the oasis. It is described as a phenomenon appearing once in a thousand years before the eyes of an extremely exhausted traveler, being on the border of death, which is the only state that allows him to deserve to enter this place, thus being his rescue.

The oasis offers the newcomer the glamour of colors, golden and silver cups, paradisiacal beverage and the meeting with a good-natured old man. This picture resembles the descriptions of paradise included in the *Koran*. In *Al-Mağūs* and other works by A l - K o n i tribal wanderers who are excited by this story travel across the desert trying to find the paradisiacal oasis. Having this place in view, they also build towns named Wāw, which are supposed to be the earthly replicas of paradise. Ironically, the rapidly

developing town of Wāw in *Al-Mağūs* indicates the flourishing of the sedentary civilization, which the Tuaregs deplore since at one time they offered the future constructors only a patch of land of the size of the buffalo leather. The town furnishes everybody with water, which is priceless in the desert, in exchange for which gold comes into everyday use, bringing about the feeling of attachment to material goods contrary to the Tuareg mentality.

In *Al-Mağūs* there appear all the main plots of Al-Konī's writings. Nature is a powerful goddess absorbing humans and denoting destiny. Princess Tinnīrī, who was destined for an offering by the sultan of the distant Timbuktu in order to appease the desert wind, finds shelter among the Tuaregs; a whimsical woman pushes a Tuareg shepherd to death, but she will not avoid her destiny. She commits suicide and then the hot wind tormenting the people of the desert for many years calms down. This, however, does not save the sinful town, which is exterminated all of a sudden under the pressure of people, animals and jinns. This cataclysm has a concrete and symbolical dimension.

Durability and Inviolability of the Desert law; Beliefs

In Al-Konī's prose works there occur the motifs of ancient ethics binding in the desert and of religious beliefs. The Tuaregs are guided in the first place by the inalienable law of their predecessors and by the religious texts functioning here from time immemorial. The syncretism of beliefs is predominant. Mythology is one of the main sources of popular beliefs. The traditional religions and faith in animistic gods come to the fore, even though Islam is the binding religion. The proof of durability of tradition are rock paintings made thousands of years ago, which the Tuaregs meet during their wanderings.

The Protagonists of Al-Konī's Works

The literary characters of Al-Konī's prose works are usually individualized figures having strong personality and at the same time being referential vis-a-vis the culture and customs of the Tuaregs. Two of them deserve attention, as they are present in all of the writer's novels, meeting the requirements of realism (as individualities). The first one of them is the Tuareg Chief Addā, weighing his words and being rational, who always – in considering his decisions – tries to catch "the stick in the middle". Over the years Addā led his tribe throughout the desert in search of water and pastures and he generally enjoyed great respect and trust of his fellow tribesmen. When the Chief grew old, he wished to die, but the demons did not want to let him do it, so he secluded himself far away in the mountains and from there he sent envoys to his tribesmen (*Al-Mağūs*).

The second character recurring in Al-Konī's novels is the dervish Mūsā, hailed as a Sufī, a Muslim mystic, for the sake of his vegetarianism, poetic manner

of speaking and immense sensitivity to all aspects of nature. Although Mūsā, stands out among other Tuaregs, he shares their system of values, sometimes even in an extreme manner. In defence of freedom of life and in fear of women (and his own attraction to women) Mūsā made a brutal autocastration in *Al-Mağūs* and in the short story *Ḥarīf ad-Darwīš* (“The Dervish’s Autumn”) in the collection under the same title he leaves his tribe, as an old man, to find death somewhere on a desert track.

Influences and Contributions

Ibrāhīm al-Koni began his career as a writer with the political journalism. His articles already appeared in the newspaper “Fazzān”, and in the post-revolutionary period the following historical and political works were published: *Al-Ġuzūr at-Tārīhiyya fī al-Ḥaraka at-Tawriyya* (“Historical Roots of the Revolutionary Movement”) *Naqd Nadwat al-Fikr at-Tawrī* (“The Critique of the Seminar on Revolutionary Ideology”) and the collection of literary articles entitled *Mulaḥazāt ‘alā al-Ġahīm al-Ġurba* (“Remarks on the Hell of Strangeness”). Ibrāhīm al-Koni, on account of his studies and interests, has a very good knowledge of European literature, starting with Dostoyevsky. In present-day Arabic literature he can see the radiation of such authors as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus or Marcel Proust. In his writings he proves the importance of European tradition from the ancient time to the present day, especially in his novels in which the particular chapters are often preceded with extensive mottoes referring to the authors representing various cultures with special emphasis on Europe and the Arab world. In his works the writer cites and refers to the masters of ancient thinking: the Greeks – Herodotus, Empedokles and Sophocles, and to the Roman poet Ovid; he recalls the great names of the European literary tradition, Shakespeare and Goethe, and the contemporary authors, including Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Umberto Eco, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Robert Musil. His works also comprise short citations from the writings of the present-day European scholars, such as James Frazer, Eric Fromm, Hölderlin, Levi-Strauss, and Nietzsche. He also introduces into his novels the mottoes deriving from Holy Scriptures, especially of the *Old Testament* (with special reference to the *Book of Genesis*), the *Gospel* or the *Koran*.

In Al-Koni’s writings citations from the European works mingle with the citations deriving from the works of the famous old Arabic authors. Among them is Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā, one of the most outstanding poets of the pre-Islamic era, author of one of the most valuable casidas called mu‘allaqa, who died before 610; Al-Ġāḥiz, one of the most prominent Arab writers of the classical period, author of the treatises written in prose and bordering on belles lettres and scholarly literature, who died in 869; Ibn Ḥaldūn, pioneer of world sociology (1332–1406); famous Arab philosophers: Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, 980–1037), Ibn ‘Arabī (1164–1240), and Ibn Rušd

(Averroes, 1126–1198). Al-Konī's works also include mottoes inspired by the Tuareg folk tradition. Due to the enhancement of so varied inspirations in his citations Al-Konī's writings may be viewed as an inseparable synthesis of cultural patterns which enables one to grasp the thought inherent in them in universal categories. The works of Ibrāhīm al-Konī present the characteristic traditions of the life of the Tuaregs, making reference to their most important customs in which magic and mythology play the prominent part, and which come to be the background for the literary fiction and narration. In this sense, these works are of both anthropological and literary importance. The writer is the chief representative of the Arabic variety of magical realism, since the Sahara Desert as presented by him and the tribal life going on within its confines have, on the one hand, a concrete and physical dimension, and, on the other hand, a metaphorical and symbolical dimension. The world depicted in Al-Konī's works is governed, on the one hand, by magic and mythology and, on the other hand, it is subordinated to the conditioning stemming from realism.

The literary output of Al-Konī cannot be confined within the framework of the models accepted in literature, both Arabic and world literature; nevertheless, one can speak of the common – shared with several other Arabic writers – tendency of Al-Konī to present the primitive forms of human life mingled with the world of nature (Yaḥyā Ṭāhir ‘Abd Allāh of Egypt, Abd ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf of Jordan, or Aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ of the Sudan), the specific features of which escape the categories of causality, due to which it can be associated with the flagship novel of magical realism, that is to say *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Marquez. Like the village of Macondo in this novel, the desert depicted by Ibrāhīm al-Konī is both realistic and magical.

Legacy

The output of Ibrāhīm al-Konī encompasses works comprising, first of all, collections of short stories and novels. Al-Konī started his literary activity in the 1970s and developed it in the following decade. He made his literary debut in a collection of stories *Aṣ-Ṣalāt Ḥariğ Niṭāq al-Awqāt al-Ḥamsa* ("The Prayer Beyond Five Times"), and he also published *Ṣağarat ar-Ratam* ("The Broom Bush", 1986), *Al-Qafaṣ* ("The Cage", 1990), *Dīwān an-Naṭr al-Barrī* ("A Collection of Wild Prose", 1991), *Ar-Rabba al-Ḥağariyya wa-an-Nuṣuṣ al-Uhrā* ("The Stone Goddess and the Other Texts", 1992), *Waṭan ar-Ru'yā as-Samāwiyya* ("The Native Land of Heavenly Vision", 1992), *Ḥarīf ad-Darwīṣ* ("The Dervish's Autumn", 1994). He published novels from which the most interesting are: *Ruba'iyy al-Ḥuṣūf* ("The Eclipse", 1989), *Nazīf al-Ḥağar* ("The Bleeding of the Stone", 1990), *Al-Mağūs* ("The Magi", vol. 1, 1990, vol. 2, 1991), *Al-Famm* ("The Mouth", 1994) and the novel *Uṣb al-Layl* ("The Night Grass", 1997). Al-Konī also writes poetical works; he is the author of the collection of poems entitled *Abyāt* ("Verses", 2000) and of the aphorisms collected in the volume *Risālat ar-Rūḥ* ("The Mission of the Spirit", 2001).

Further Readings

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