

IMAGING THE ARABIAN SAHARA IN IBRAHIM ALKOWNI'S *THE RAW GOLD*

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ABSTRACT: In his literary venture titled, *Tibr*, the Arabic translation of *The Raw Gold*, Ibrahim Alkowni has adopted a new philosophy stemming the desert topographical constituents while having its muse from the language of Tuareg, which Alkowni deems as the inspirational source of all languages as well as civilizations. Readings into this work make apparent quite a plethora of imageries adapted in Alkowni's manner of looking at the world out there and how these same metaphors are utilized in descriptively understanding the mechanisms whereby this world has always maintained its unity and operational functioning. Therefore, the present paper seeks to decipher the multitudinous manifestations and undertones of Alkowni's philosophical thoughts about Sahara and the nomadic cultures residing there. It also takes as its motto in reading Alkowni's work the philosophical assumption to which Alkowni is still faithful in his writings when he does stress the idea that when one reads a piece of literature or looks at a work of art, he/she should never be beguiled by intimations of summarily absorbing all information presented somewhere or anywhere through text or vision without critically deciphering their tinges when instead every human being is bestowed with all that can do that censuring.

Keywords: Sahara, Tuareg, Mission, Camels, Representation.

Ibrahim Alkowni's *Tibr*, the Arabic translation of *The Raw Gold*, is one of the Arab literary masterpieces. As a Libyan writer, Alkowni has been faithful in all his works without exception to what he termed a "mission" whose main preoccupation is to celebrate nomadic cultures or movements all as basic constituents of Sahara's (desert) charm and seduction. In all his works and interviews, Alkowni keeps emphasizing the preciousness of Sahara to every human being's soul. It is the bridge that connects reality with fiction or death with life. It is "a soul incarnated in a breathing body," Alkowni explains "we can say that Sahara is not just an incarnated symbol, but it is also the soul if incarnated in a body"². The image of Sahara in Alkowni's perception seems to be a walking body that can befriend only those who cherish and venerate it, whereas those who seem to put it in a perpetual state of oblivion are always subject to destiny's hardships and tough blows.

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² Alkowni, 25.

In this novel, Ibrahim Alkowni has given much importance to Sahara, but along with it, he provokes other thorny issues that can only be construed under the framework of his “new philosophy.” Alkowni’s philosophy prompts human beings into discovering and then recovering their real past and culture, from where stemmed all human civilizations, religions or philosophies. Basically, Ibrahim Alkowni’s point that he recurrently tends to make in either his works or interviews is that human civilizations and philosophies are originated from the tribe of Tuareg.³ Those people have faced the risk of being exposed to a state of oblivion, but, for Ibrahim Alkowni, it is the task of all those who love Sahara to delve deep into that ocean of human knowledge accumulated through the years so as to discover that Tuareg are the source of that knowledge. Closely related to Ibrahim Alkowni’s philosophy is the post-colonial theory, one of whose concerns is voicing the post-colonial subjects’ recurrent attempts to recover their lost past. It is the past which is still immunized from the poisons infused by colonial cultures. Following this model of comparison, Elleke Boehmer in her book, *Colonial and Post-colonial literature* explains that:

Their [anti-imperialist nationalist] messianic drew support from other utopian ideologies of the time [...] the message they communicated was distinguished by a strenuous defense of the virtues of native culture, characterized as rich, pure, and authentic [...] the identity was that a people’s identity, though long suppressed, lay embedded in its cultural origins and was recoverable intact, unadulterated by the depredations of colonialism [...] So it was culture – in the form of reinterpreted history, religious revivals, elegiac and nostalgic poetry – developed into an important front for nationalist mobilization.⁴

In fact, advanced by anti-imperialist nationalists or nativists, the idea of recovering the past with all of its forms of authentic cultures, languages or religions is not a far-fetched aim. Drawing on such convictions that we can understand the “new philosophy” of a 21st century figure, Ibrahim Alkowni, who prophecies and encourages people to look for the real roots of their civilization, philosophy, culture or language. In this respect, the current chapter analyzes Ibrahim Alkowni’s novels, *Tibr*, under the framework of his “new

³ The Tuareg (also spelled *Twareg* or *Touareg*; referred to as the “Blue Men” of the Sahara Desert) are a seminomadic Muslim people adopting traditionally nomadic forms of living. They are mostly located in Niger, Mali, Algeria and Libya. These people speak a Berber language called Tamazight. Being nomadic, the Tuareg are on constant move across national borders. They are ranked seminomadic, for they travel with their herds on a seasonal basis but also have a home area where they grow some food crops.

⁴ Boehmer, 64.

philosophy” and the post-colonial theory through bringing into focus aspects where Alkowni tends to call for the recovering or re-invention of the past. Those aspects touch upon issues concerned with language and friendship. On the other hand, the chapter as well discusses the contradictory or ambivalent view held by Alkowni with regard to women as both a Goddess and a sinner.

As mentioned before, Ibrahim Alkowni is a Libyan writer whose philosophy is inspired and backed up by the Sahara (desert). The Sahara, for Ibrahim Alkowni, is “the only place where we can attain the highest principle of metaphysics; that is freedom,” he continues to say that, “freedom not as understood in a traditional sense, but in the sense in which Kant framed the Sahara as the contradiction of nature. Thus, Sahara is nature but not indeed nature. It is also a place that is not really a place, since the conditions of settling in it are unavailable because of water scarcity”⁵. It is not indeed a “new philosophy” which Ibrahim Alkowni is trying to propound but rather an older one that has been taken by the West and has been elaborated more on until it has become what it is now. Thanks to Tuareg, to which Ibrahim Alkowni belongs, the world is thriving in knowledgeable oceans full of wise philosophies of Sahara. In this regard, for anyone who yearns after such knowledge, it is a prerequisite to learn the language of Tuareg. This is also the primary mission of Ibrahim Alkowni when recommending the learning of Tuareg language. Therefore, themes of language and friendship are going to be targeted in the following sections, especially as an attempt to bridge the disparity between Alkowni’s philosophy and the post-colonial theory.

Language is a recurrent theme in all Ibrahim Alkowni’s works. It is, indeed, one of the fundamental pillars in his philosophy, since he believes that it is the medium of communication having its roots in the language of Tuareg. It is by the use of some concepts and names dating back to a very far period in history that Alkowni wants us to understand that the tribe of Tuareg used to be a reservoir of human beings’ civilization, philosophy and languages. In his novel, for example, Alkowni employs significant names of characters, tribes and places that are difficult to be traced to this present era. In one of his interviews, Alkowni was asked about the reason why he does not write in the language of Tuareg, since it is the language he is seeking to revive. To that effect, he answered by saying that,

⁵ Alkowni, 12.

The language of Tuareg is an archaic language just like the Egyptian one. This language needs improvement and reviving. It is the language of the soul so that when you write using it, you will be understood in all languages. Thus, you will get the pleasure to write in any language⁶.

Alkowni is referring to the importance of all languages, for they are derived from the language of Tuareg. This language of Tuareg has been breathing new lives in all languages until they have become what they are now. Therefore, it does not matter if one writes in this or that language, but what really matters is that the source should be acknowledged. In fact, leafing through the pages of the current novel under scrutiny, one would easily notice an abundant use of names and certain quotes belonging to the language of Tuareg. For instance, names of tribes, such as *Idir*, *Ahajar* or *Imohagh*, among many others. In addition, there are names of characters that Alkowni himself acknowledges their significance and philosophical dimensions, such as *Dodo*, *Tanit* or *Akhid*, to mention but a few. Besides, from time to time, one is likely to encounter some quoted lines of poetry or proverbs in Tuareg language as the following example, “*Asad yankard amoud nakfi tizdag /Ida chaghat tagunin ytjir timzad*”⁷.

Just as post-colonial writers, such as Chinua Achebe or Ngugi Wa Thiongo, tend to infuse their works with some words, expressions or proverbs of their native language for the sake of reviving it, Alkowni is another Arab writer who seems to be faithful to the same process of language revivalism, but this time through complex philosophical foundations.

Another key marker of Alkowni's philosophy resides in his understanding of the term friendship. This latter is one of the concepts whose different entries can be found in different types of dictionaries. Yet, its value to this present era has taken different shapes and explanations in a colored tapestry of life. The novel of *Tibr* has indeed allowed us an insightful encounter with what it means to be a friend of someone else. Throughout the whole events of the novel, one could feel this unbreakable bond that ties both *Akhid* and his camel. They have never parted except for circumstances beyond their control. They have both faced their destiny by relying on patience and loyalty to each other. In fact, one finds it impossible to find such an example of faithfulness among human beings who have become

⁶ Alkowni, 12.

⁷ Idem.

more corrupt and exploitative of each other let alone befriend animals. In most his novels, Ibrahim Alkowni tends to stress the kind of relationship bonding human beings to animals. For instance, he succinctly explains that,

In these moments, the camel (*Almohri*) sneaks up in darkness. In the motionlessness setting of the dark Sahara [...] the poor camel (Almohri) crawls and buries the head in his sleepy friend's lap [...] *Akhid* embraces him, and both start crying, and each of them wipes the other's tears with his tongue, thereby tasting salt and pain.⁸

These touching lines have much to say about a strong friendship that has been born in drastic moments and kept to exist until death does them part. During the camel's inflicted disease, *Akhid* has never ceased to think and share his friend's agony. It is an unbelievable relationship in which both would really like to share all the moments for better or worse. This is clearly noticed in the following excerpts,

Oh god, will he die? What will I do alone if he is gone? Oh god, you gave me a faithful friend among many others, and you are taking him back away from me thus leaving me alone. What will I do in this horrible life with those monsters without Al ablaq? Do not take him away from me, God. You are not that cruel. You are merciful.⁹

Life without *Akhid's* friend is hell. People outside are monsters and beasts since their main preoccupation is to use one another, manipulate one another and may be kill one another for money or Gold. It is Gold that drives people crazy and make out of them walking beasts. That is why, for Ibrahim Alkowni, Gold is an infliction and a curse that belongs to Jennies, whereas friendship is a value that though can be born in tough moments, it does not cease to exist and is perpetuated until death transports such relations into other places. Therefore, for Alkowni, it is in the Sahara that such friendship can be maintained and cherished. Since people have strayed away from Sahara, they are now facing the risk of losing human values that cannot be replaced by all the earth's treasures. In this account, Alkowni explains in one of his interviews that

The issues appertaining to Sahara need to be the main priorities of the Arab nations. The Arab misery has come as a result of their people's denial to the principles of Sahara and its true message [...] what I have talked about a little bit earlier corroborates the fact that Sahara throughout centuries has been the reservoir of the whole world's spiritual treasures.¹⁰

⁸ Alkowni, 30.

⁹ Alkowni, 41.

¹⁰ Alkowni, 41.

As there are people nowadays, who speak of the Palestine cause as the main concern of the Arab and Islamic world, Ibrahim Alkowni is analyzing things from his own perspectives. For him, strong bonds exist in Sahara, and Sahara is the place where the reservoir of the whole world's spiritual treasures can be traced. Therefore, Arabs are bumping into walls of ignorance and misery, in that they have ignored their having a duty towards Sahara. Thus, the solution is the following,

The Arab, who is inherently a Sahrawi either he wants it or not, does not have the right to remain ignorant about the essence of Sahara. He is not immunized from being alienated if he decides to overlook the real message of Sahara.¹¹

The question that asks itself here is which reality does Alkowni talk about or mean? His philosophy propounds that Sahara is the place where one can die and come back to life again. It is also a place where the mind is stimulated and given the chance to imagine, think and then produced great works that would serve humanity. Therefore, since Arabs have forgotten about such a precious source of knowledge, they are now faced with many social, political and economic problems, the flagrant of which is the loss of human values such as friendship.

Central to Alkowni's philosophy as well is the depiction of women. Alkawni has included the topic of women in all his works without exception, as he himself testifies in some interviews. This is true because women for Alkowni are categorized into two types. That is to say, women can serve the purposes of sexual seduction, and they can also be creative when using their minds the right way. This is further explained in the following lines as Alkowni contends with the idea that, "there are two kinds of women and not just one: The creative woman and the malefactor (*Alkhatiae*). I am always hostile towards the second type of women".¹²

Ibrahim Alkowni has made many references to the two kinds of women in his novel, *Tibr*. There is always this ambivalent attitude regarding women in all his works, and *Tibr* is par excellence a case study of Alkowni's new philosophy in which women contribute a powerful dialectical relationship. If, for Alkowni, women are to be overlooked in any writer's works, many realities are going to fade away and grow unnoticed or

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Alkowni, 49.

unprotected. Taking the example of *Tibr*, one can observe the hostility Alkowni has against the woman as a sinner. For him, it is the female that was the cause of the camel's inflicted disease, and it is also the female who made *Akhid* take the decision of sequestering his long-life friend, the camel, in return for two others so as to feed his hungry baby and wife. That is why *Akhid* protests in anger by saying, "may God's curses be upon the female"¹³, for she is the cause behind human beings' traumas and tough living conditions. In this sense, Alkowni writes that,

Seduction, seduction [...] Ahh from the female's seduction. It is that hidden side of the woman [...] seduction is the hidden beauty that has been created to finish off his [*Akhid*] likes of men.¹⁴

It is this Women's seduction to which men fall victims of lust and passing fads. The woman is that mysterious creature that mesmerizes men with her natural talismans, such as her eyes, silky voice or coyness, among many others. In this sense, it is quite noticeable through the whole novel that the female has been part of the infliction of both *Akhid* and his faithful friend. More importantly, Alkowni attributes the female's villainy to her innate nature, in that she is the reason why both *Adam* was expelled from paradise, the same as *Akhid* who was chased out of his tribe and away from his friend, as testified in the following lines,

But, alas, *Hawae* has come and parted him from the tribe and the camel (*Al ablaq*). The woman, woman [...] has not sheikh *Mousa* said that it is the female who chased Adam out of paradise?¹⁵

It is this role of the seductive woman that Alkowni despises. In this sense, he goes on as to explain that,

When I personally meditate the role of the woman, I go back to my acquired religious heritage. I mean all the religions, because who has seduced the other: Adam or *Hawae*? Who has been the reason of our deprivation and expulsion from paradise? Is it *Hawae* who seduced Adam or the other way around? The idea of seduction is in itself a sin. When we talk about the woman, I always condemn malefaction (*alkhatiae*)¹⁶.

¹³ Alkowni, 30.

¹⁴ Alkowni, 68-69.

¹⁵ Alkowni, 98.

¹⁶ Idem.

In fact, Alkowni's philosophy preaches delving deep into this ocean of religions and try then to understand the message and the truth of Sahara, the cradle of all religions. In an interview with Alkowni, Sami Clib states that, "if I asked him about the looked for truth, he would say that he is looking for a lost part in the philosophy of history"¹⁷. This lost part indeed is where Alkowni reserves an uplifted place for women, totally in opposition to his former attitude of them as being sinners. In this respect, this rather different perception of the woman as a positive producer of knowledge and wisdom is found within this lost part of the chain in Alkowni's historical philosophy. Now, it is the picture of the mother, the sister or aunt that comes to Alkowni's mind since the Tuareg's community is a motherly society. In this regard, Alkowni explains the idea that,

The woman is the same as a goddess when treated by the community of Tuareg [...] since Tuareg are still clinging to initial religious symbols up till now. Tuareg is a motherly society that holds the woman as a goddess, for she has creative abilities whereby to peruse the world: She is the Sumerian *Tanit*, *Isis*, the Sumerian *Thiamin*, the Greek Athena and she is always the pot that unifies the whole world. We have, therefore, to venerate the woman.¹⁸

If just a moment ago, the woman was treated in aggressive terms, now it is a different that comes into light. It is the image of the woman as a Goddess in the community of Tuareg. Therefore, we should bow down to women in veneration and never transgress limits when dealing with them. Going back to *Tibr*, this praising view of women is noticed throughout some events in the novel. The fact that the female is perceived as a Goddess in the community of Tuareg is made reference to when the father of *Akhid* declared that Tuareg have been right to nominate descendants of women as Sheikhs or leaders of the tribes. In this regard, *Akhid's* father addresses Sheikh *Mousa* by commanding him to, "tell the idiot [*Akhid*] that *Imohagh* (ایموهاغ) were right when they named their children after women"¹⁹.

Again this attraction to women is omnipresent in the novel in the sense that they are a value that cannot be done without. *Akhid*, for instance, was having secret trysts with beautiful girls from the other tribes. He used to bridge distances to get to women. In this sense, this clearly shows that one can take the hardships of travelling for long distances

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Idem.

¹⁹ Alkowni, 75.

just to get to a woman regardless of what the real intentions behind the travelling really are. Similarly, even the camel has fallen in love with *Noug* (the female camel) as a powerful testimony of the idea that women are to be loved after all. In support of this, Alkowni concurs to the fact that,

All what I said about the maxim of malefaction in the woman is something we all feel [...], indeed, the woman is not guilty in all what happened. It is always her destiny [...] this is not a condemnation of the woman. By contrast, the woman, as I said earlier, is a goddess in the ancient world. Therefore, within me lives all the worlds: The ancient world and the world of religions. Also, within me lives the meditating man. The creative writer is not a single entity but a complicated structure in multiple entities.²⁰

Ambivalence is something inherent in human nature. This state of ambivalence has uncovered the different attitudes Alkowni holds for women. He sometimes appears to be hostile against women and sometimes gentle in dealing with them. In general, Alkowni has said something that only women can judge. He claims that, “no novelist in the Arab world has been just to the woman except me”²¹.

To bring home this discussion of Alkowni’s philosophy about the Sahara, the novel of *Tibr* has proven much revealing under the framework of post-colonial theory. This theory has tackled different issues ranging from ambivalence to recovering the colonized subjects’ identities or pasts. Alkowni, in the same path, has appeared to be one of the likes of those people aspiring at re-inventing or recovering the past legacies. However complex his philosophy may seem, Alkowni is one of the famous figures highly acclaimed in the West. Most of Arab readerships do not know much about Ibrahim Alkowni, whereas in the West his books have been translated into different languages probably for the richness of ideas they contain and that are derived from Sahara: the beacon of light of his new philosophy.

Bibliography

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Idem.

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