

## Nomadic Ethos: An Eco-cultural Reading on Ibrahim al-Koni's *New Waw*

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### Abstract

Ibrahim al-Koni, a Libyan desert writer who was brought up in the tradition of the Tuareg, combines pertinent ecological issues with a moving portrayal of traditional desert life in his works. The novels of Al-Koni are eco-cultural texts as they record various popular environmental and cultural issues. Cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, cultural degradation, and the materialistic attitude of the modern world are the major themes in the writings of Al-Koni. The aim of this research paper is to examine the impact of culture over nature as the chosen work, *New Waw: Saharan Oasis* is obsessed with nomadism, the desert landscape, and the relationship between the settled and the nomadic peoples. Al-Koni's writings insist that the cultural acts and expressions of human beings affect the environment and globalization is a growing threat to both indigenous cultures and nature.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture, nature, nomadism, sedentary, landscape

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Culture is an important element in the social life of human beings. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines culture as “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group” (370). The term culture is initially used to denote a cultivated piece of land. Every human society has its own culture and an individual's attitudes, values, ideas, and beliefs are immensely influenced by the culture they are exposed to. Culture is passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialization. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* defines cultural formation as “a geographically, ethnically, and historically distinct actualization of human symbiosis including all of its specific social, mental, and material aspects” (90). From an anthropological and cultural perspective, ecological crisis is not merely a scientific fact, but it is more of a cultural fact. It seeks to warn us of the environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial, commercial and neo-colonial forces and this research paper aims to examine the impact of culture over nature. Ursula K. Heise, an ecocritic in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planer* highlights the interdisciplinary nature of Eco criticism saying, “The persistence of place and place-attachments as a basis of environmentalist thinking also made itself felt in the emergence of Eco criticism as a new area of research in literary and cultural studies in the mid-1990” (41).

Being a Tuareg and a member of a nomadic, linguistic, ethnic, racial and rapidly diminishing minority group, Ibrahim al-Koni makes voice for the lost roots of his culture. The Tuaregs lack socio-political organizations and representations. They are particularly vulnerable to being marginalized and rendered us an insignificant peripheral group. The Islamic religious setup that the novelist is exposed to, have undoubtedly been a

syncretisation of various African and Arab beliefs. Emphasis is laid on mystical experience and spirituality not bound by strict dogma or orthodoxy. Such beliefs have been a synthesis of animist and magical beliefs through influences that came from Saharan or equatorial Africa. However, it is widely believed that the people from the Fezzan region in Libya also adhere to a puritanical version of Islam. Al-koni's identity as a Tuareg gives a better understanding of his writings.

The Oasis Trilogy by Al-Koni comprises of *New Waw*, *The Pupper* and *The Scare Crow*. The chosen work for study, *New Waw* is a mythic tale of greed and political corruption and the downfall of the Saharan oasis community. It highlights the tension between nomadism and settled life that represents a choice faced by people everywhere as a result of globalization. Upon the death of their leader, the members of the oasis whose traditional homeland is the Saharan desert turn to the heir as dictated by tribal custom. However, the heir who is also a poet is reluctant to accept leadership. The tribal elders force him not only to abandon his poetry but also his lady love and he reluctantly serves as a leader. After his death, his tribe settles down permanently, abandoning not nomadism but also the inherited laws of the tribe. The community they found is named as *New Waw*, the name for the mythical paradise of the Tuareg people. Aghulli, a noble man who has been chosen as leader of the oasis, hankers after the traditional nomadic pastoral life of the Tuaregs. He considers commerce as the prime reason for the loss of nomadic ethos and is devastated to learn that his supporters are hoarding gold which is forbidden by law. The conspirators assassinate the community's leader as he opposed the use of gold in business transactions, a sign of a critical break from their nomadic past. And they search for a leader at random and their choice is not entirely human but an interloper from the spirit world. He is a self-righteous depot, whose intolerance of humanity presages disaster from the oasis besieged by an international alliance. The novel delineates how the cultural conflicts that the characters undergo in the name of modernity and development and affect changes in the cultural identities of human beings, their customs, practices and identity.

William M. Hutchins, translator of Al-Koni's works into English in his "Introduction" to the novel, *New Waw: Saharan Oasis* is of the view that:

The landscape of the Sahara Desert has certainly been the destiny for Ibrahim- Koni, and his novel *New Waw: Saharan Oasis* contrasts the landscapes and cultures of desert nomadism with those of oasis life.... Al- Koni does not simply take his readers on an adventurous trip through the Sahara but embeds them in a culture in which natural world rife with signs, symbols, sparks of enlightenment and prophesies. (vii- viii)

In the ancient times, the Tuaregs were traditionally pastrols and nomads who have moved freely across the Saharan deserts. But, the growth of commerce, culture and the increasing globalism has made them settlers, thereby, making them lose their tribal identity. The trifling tensions between nomadism and settled life in Al-Koni's novels have implications beyond Tuareg nomadism: it stands as a microcosmic sample of modern nomads who relocate themselves in the face of choices like career advancement, technological needs, education and so on and. "They feel really sad at its loss, even though they have never perceived its secret. They often feel sad, but would experience a greater suffering if they knew that this lost jewel is called "life"!" (68).

Al-Koni expresses how the nomadic way of life was close to nature whereas, the settled life in the oasis is against the vows of nature. For instance, he explains how the oasis is hostile towards migratory birds:

People say that in the past the flocks preferred oases as migratory way stations but that these dense throngs of birds alarmed the oasis dwellers, who thought the onslaughts threatened their crops. So they fought off the birds, set traps for them, shot arrows at them, and beat drums to frighten them away. Then the birds abandoned the oases, and migrating flocks avoided cultivated fields, eventually choosing the desert's nomadic camps for their stopovers (3)

On the other hand, the people of the desert consider the arrival of these birds as a very good omen and their sages consider the bird's landing as a heavenly sign. "All the desert's people go out to the open country when, the first flock appears on the horizon. The sages hurry out before anyone else to greet the migrating community" (3). Aldo Leopold, environmentalist in *A Sand Country Almanac and Sketches Here and There* makes a critical comment on modern culture and the way it alienates people from the land. He says, "our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than towards, an intense consciousness of the land. Your true modern is separated from the land by many middleman, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no relation to it: to him it is the space between cities on which they grow.... In short, land is something he has 'outgrown' " (223-24),

*New Waw* illustrates how the sedentary lifestyle of the Tuaregs evolved along centuries. The Tuaregs have genuine reasons for their nomadic way of life. According to them nomadism is more nature oriented way of living. It allows nature to be as it is and man by being a part of the biosphere live in harmony with the ecosystem. On the other hand, sedentary lifestyle demands a fixed pattern of living where commerce and culture come into play, "People who savored a sedentary life and have yielded to the land's temptation also grow accustomed to viewing the noble blue-clad council, which looks from a distance, as a council of crows and a threat to their sedentary life: a convulsion, a blotting out of indolence, an end to muddling through, and the beginning of every futile deed" (44).

A community living a particular space requires abundant material needs that are compensated at the expense of nature and its resources. Unlike sedentary lifestyle that encourages anthropocentric attitude towards nature, nomadism encourages people to have an eco-centric vision. For instance, when the nomads feel that they had stayed in a particular place than it should have, the sages belonging to the tribe will leave that place so as to let the land return to nature and hence rejuvenate, "The tribe discovered that it had stayed in a place longer than it should have, and the sages were of the opinion that they should let this land return to nature" (41). It is also notable that the nomadic way of life is against domestication or owning of land. The Tuaregs nomads had the practices of not staying in the same place of land over than forty days according to their spiritual command. In the novel, Al-Koni ponders over the nomadic lifestyle of the Tuaregs:

Why do tribe move about? Why do they traverse an area and head to a more distant one? Do they do this to leave a land threatened by drought and famines in search of a land that promises ample grazing? Do they set forth because they fear the ancient prophecy that warns that remaining in one place for forty days invites servitude to the land?... Or do their sages inspire the masses to migrate in search of water and grass even though they actually travel in response to another unknown call they do not disclose even to themselves?(10)

The New Waw depicted in the novel metaphorically stands for modern Libya. Robert Draper, an American journalist in his article “New Old Libya” for National Geographic comments that, “The ghosts of Libya's greatness past remain plainly visible by the grace of dry climate, a paucity of urban sprawl, tribal beliefs against tampering with ruins of the dead, und an abundance of sand as an optimal preservative.... the Bedouin themselves didn't remain primitive.... They learned to believe in systems and government”

Commerce has been a significant factor in the devastation of environment worldwide. The transformations in the social and cultural environments have completely changed the representations of man's attitude towards nature in literary expressions. The Oasis Trilogy enumerates many incidents that vividly bring out the writers' concern for ecological issues. Al-Koni's detailed description of the oasis in the desert is ample to voice his concern to preserve nature from human wrong doings. 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.

The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes a seedbed for collective selfishness. New Waw raises questions relating to ecology and makes the readers learn from traditional societies of how to lead a sustainable life that is not based on the short-sighted over exploitation of natural resources. The intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analyzed and emphasized through the writings of Al-Koni. The characters undergo cultural conflicts in the name of modernity and development. In the novel, Al-Koni points out how the anthropocentric attitude has made human beings move away from the lap of nature and has evolved into a threat to the ecosystem to which he himself belongs to. And the leader of the new found desert oasis remembers how. “In his childhood he had discovered that birds do not merely sacrifice nests but abandon their eggs as well if they find that human hands have touched them.... Then he would depart to another land where there is no trace of our filthy species” (84). In this regard, Timothy Morton, an ecocritic in *The Ecological Thought* is of the view that, “Environment, the upgrade of Nature, is fraught with difficulty. This is ironic, since what we often call the environment is being changed, degraded, and eroded (and destroyed) by global forces of industry and capitalism. Just when we need to know what it is, it's disappearing” (10).

From an anthropological and cultural perspective, ecological crisis is not merely a scientific fact, but it is more of a cultural fact as it is conceived, imagined, discussed, and acted upon through diverse cultural expressions of humanity. Rootless, mechanized life of the people is a growing threat to indigenous cultures and to the eco-system. Though cultural and technological advancements are essential, concern should be given regarding the gradual disappearance of indigenous communities. Because, whenever the culture of a group or community is disturbed, it will in turn have adverse effects on the eco-system too.

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