Welcome to the Desert of Not-Thinking

Walid Hamarneh
University of Richmond

The desert is a different thing to different people. It is a controversial term even in geography and environmental sciences.[1] But what interests me here is not the definition of the desert as much as its different conceptions. At one level the desert is a physical space with specific attributes that can be described in scientific terms. The desert can be at a different level, though also physical, a place to which one belongs and is attached to, a place that gives meaning to one's being like any other place to which one has some attachment and that can invoke emotions. However, there is another level, which is related to how the desert is made to produce meanings rather than being a symbol or a metaphor for something else or some other idea. This is the level that some desert writers seem to be interested in and develop in their narratives. In order to find a way to understand some of the ways of these writers, I propose to divide the perceptions and conceptualizations of the desert and its representations based upon the spatial proximity to it. There are those that live far away from it and those who have had little, if any, direct contact with it. There are those who live close to it or at its borders, and last there are those who live in it and are a part of it.

For those who live far away from it, the desert generally represents scarcity, aridity, dryness, barrenness in contradistinction to the abundance and plenitude associated with the rural and the urban. In that sense the desert represents poverty or a lack. It is a place where nobody desires by nature to be. But it is exactly within such a dichotomy that the desert may assume different and even contradictory meanings. The appearance of the desert, which is generally associated with that yellowish-brownish concoction of shades that is juxtaposed to the greenness associated with the abundance of water, has given rise to some interesting dualities that penetrate into some deeper structures of signification. One is reminded of the hypothesis of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that the central metaphor in the European environmental vision

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is the tree that dominates "Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy" (18). Because European landscapes were dominated by trees, they argue, "arborescent structures" (17) became the dominant social, political, cultural, and epistemological organizing principle of the West. They continue that if arborescence is "the root foundation, *Grund, racine, fondement*" (1987: 18) of Western culture, then the East is imagined through a different eco-spatial figure, namely, the rhizome. The rhizomatic structure underlying Eastern cultures derives from "a relation to the steppe and the garden (or in some cases, the desert and the oasis), rather than forest and field" (18). In other words, the dichotomic structure of the west (whatever this may be) is the duality of the forest and the field, where the forest is that which is given in nature and the field is the transformation of the forest through human activity. The structure of the East, however, substitutes this with the duality of the steppe and the garden, the latter being the product of human activity (Ekphrasis as a traditional literary convention would fit very well within such a dichotomy[2]), but there also exists the duality of the desert and oasis. Although Deleuze and Guattari insist that the rhizomatic structure is non-dualistic, the steppe and the garden can be conceived as dualistic. It is the desert and the oasis that fit more into the hypothesized rhizomatic structure that they construct. Oases are not only parts of the desert but (mostly and until recently) are the products of nature and not of human activity.

When the desert (oases being by definition parts of deserts) is seen as having a rhizomatic structure, it can be easily conceived as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a challenge to the dominant urban and rural conceptions of progress and abundance associated with modernity, and thereby functions as a questioning and a critique of the extravagance and wastefulness of the distribution of social surplus that transforms social relations of power and authority which results in violence (Gersdorf 16-23). Even from a strictly anthropological perspective, the desert represents the culture of scarcity, by which is implied a culture that is able to optimally utilize all available resources and produces as little waste as possible.

Because this view of the desert is spatially far removed from the actual desert, it can be transformed into an ideal for raw nature. One trend within such a direction of thought is the romanticized view of the desert we witness especially amongst western travelers to deserts, who through such a romanticized view, imbued the desert with interesting aesthetic values.[3] These views have played an important role in the representations of the desert, especially in the media and popular culture. (I do not refer here to the genre of the Western as this is a different issue altogether that has been studied by Americanists especially during the past decade; see Gersdorf and Tompkins). One can mention in this context the desert planet Tatooine in *Star Wars* from which Darth Vader comes, a fatherless boy who lives with his mother and who is also destined himself to father the one who will save the universe from the dark force, or the planet Arrakis in Frank Herbert's *Dune* that has the worms and the spice that keeps the universe moving. It is the planet that becomes the paradise, which is

the hope and the origin, the beginning and the end.

Those who live in the vicinity of the desert share some of these attitudes and conceptions of the desert, yet due to their proximity they tend to emphasize its aridity and its threat to human existence. The desert usually becomes a place associated with death, actually with slow and tortuous dying. To go back to the dichotomies mentioned earlier, one should remember that exilic prisons in the west have been mostly associated with islands, big and small, ranging from Australia to St. Helena, whereas in the Orient, even until today, they are associated with desert places.[4] But as with those who live far removed from the desert, the desert can be seen as the raw nature, as a brutum factum, which automatically associates it with all that is originary and original that has not been spoiled by culture. It becomes a place of closeness to beings and being which explains that long and venerable tradition of seclusion and contemplation in the desert (Desert Church fathers, Eastern Monks and hermits). Such a seclusion and solitude results in what might be termed the reconnection with all beings large and small and through that with the elevated beings. Wandering in the desert becomes "a metaphor for the human situation" (Jasper xi). The desert then becomes "simultaneously an interior space of the mind; an exterior place where pilgrims, adventurers, and travelers can visit and dwell; and an inter-textual space produced by cross-references among cultural creations dealing with the desert as archetype or icon of the imagination" (Jasper xii). The desert thus shifts from being a geographical and environmental place into an experiential space that can then be transformed into a text.

Even in modern Arabic fiction we can point out to secularized versions of such conceptions of the desert. In Sabrī Mūsā's *Fasād al Amkinah* (*Seeds of Corruption*), Nicola finds his reclusive refuge in the Darhib Mountain, thereby not only repeating the experiences of the early desert fathers, but doing it in the same area. Another secularized but more politicized version of such a desert journey that might be described as an epistemic crossing is to be found in Sun'allah Ibrāhīm's *Wardah*, where an Egyptian author crosses the margins of the Empty Quarter (one of the most desolate and arid deserts in the world) between Dhofar in Oman and the then-South Yemen.[5] But what about those who live in and with the desert? What is the desert for them? And how do writers who are from the desert but with whom the desert still lives construct it fictively, or at least what role does it play in their fictional practices?

What I will do in what follows is not a descriptive analysis as much as a heuristic one which I think may be helpful. In some ways this is analogical to what, for instance, Lukács did in his early book *Theory of the Novel*, in which he juxtaposed his own conceptions of the novel with an historically faulty conception of the times of the epic. In many ways one can interpret everything he says about the epic as a construct of what the novel according to him is not. Allow me to quote at length the first paragraph:

> Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths—ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet

> familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. Thus each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in this duality: complete in meaning—in *sense*—and complete for the senses; rounded because the soul rests within itself even while it acts; rounded because its action separates itself from it and, having become itself, finds a centre of its own and draws a closed circumference round itself. (29)

I could not find a better description of the desert as seen from within than in some of these lines, although I doubt that Lukács had the desert in mind, nor did he have any experience of it when he wrote this.

Two Desert Writers

The desert for Arabic literature is the cradle of poetry and the place of revelation. From it comes the singing of songs, love and infatuation, horses and camels, handsome dark-skinned men and women with eyes like wild cows. From it are derived poetic conventions and the cultural mores that define identities. I have chosen two novelists who hail from deserts and in whose writings the desert has a prominent position. And although they have a few commonalities, they also differ in the ways they construct the desert and how such constructs impact both the subject matter and the structure of their narratives. I have also tried to limit my discussion as much as possible to works that have been translated into English.

Abdul Rahmān Munīf (May 29, 1933-January 24, 2004) was born in Amman, Jordan.[6] His father was a merchant from the Arabian Peninsula (which is now known as Saudi Arabia), while his mother was Iraqi. Though brought up in Amman, Jordan,[7] he held Saudi citizenship until he was stripped of it for his political opposition to the Saudi regime. The young Munīf became a member of the Ba'th Party. Yet he always fell out of favour with Ba'thist governments, first in Syria and later in Iraq, due to his outspoken democratic attitude. He left the party but remained active in the defence of democratic freedoms, especially of writers and intellectuals. He studied law in Baghdad and Cairo, and then received his PhD in oil economics from the University of Belgrade. He worked in the Syrian, then the Iraqi, oil industries, to become the editor of the Iraqi monthly *al-Nift wa-al-Tanmiyah* (*Oil and Development*). While working in Syria, he wrote and published his first novelistic work, *al-Ashjār wa-ightiyâl Marzūq* (*The Trees and the Assassination of Marzūq*) in 1973. This novel was followed by *Qissat hubb majūsīyah* (*A Magian Love Story*) in 1974 and *Hīna taraknā al-jisr* (*When We Left the Bridge*) in 1976. These three early novels, despite their attempts at introducing modern techniques, were still novels of apprenticeship. They are fine works, but little is innovative or original in them.

It was with such works as *Sharq al-Mutawassit* in 1977 (*East of the Mediterranean*;

French translation 1985), *al-Nihāyāt* in 1978 (*Endings*; English translation 1987), and *Sibāq al-masāfāt al-tawîlah: Rihlah Ilā al-Sharq* in 1979 (*Long Distance Races: The Journey to the East*), that Munīf acquired his own independent and original voice in the contemporary Arabic novel. *Sharq al-Mutawassit* is a prison novel in which the stream of consciousness technique is utilised to the fullest to show the physical and psychological horrors resulting from torture of political prisoners. *al-Nihāyāt* is a novel that will be discussed in more detail later, while *Sibâq* is a novel about the period of Mussadiq in Iran, in which the narrator is a British agent who witnesses the decline of the British and the rise of the American Empire. Munīf reverses the roles by being an Arab Easterner who assumes the voice of a Westerner thinking about the East (which is an inversion of the tradition of Westerners usurping the voice of Easterners), and the Easterner talking about the meeting with the West on his own turf. Following these novels he published *'Alam bilā kharā'it* (*A World without Maps*), which he co-wrote with Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, in 1982. He also wrote a historical novel about Iraq, *Ard al-sawād* (1999), as well as some other novels and books of essays.

His most well-known novel, however, is a quintet with the title *Mudun al-milh* (*Cities of Salt*). The quintet begins with *Al-tīh* (1984, *Cities of Salt*) in the desert oasis of Wādi al-Uyoun that is disrupted by the arrival of Western oilmen and the impact this had on two communities; the first was completely destroyed while the second completely transformed. The quintet continues with *Al-ukhdūd* (1985; *The Trench*), *Taqāsīm al-layl wa-al-nahār* (1989; *Variations on Night and Day*), *Al-munbatt* (1989; *The Uprooted*), and *Bādiyat al zulumāt* (1989; *The Desert of Darkness*). The last two novels in the series have not been translated into English.

The second writer is Ibrahim al-Koni[8] from Libya. Born in 1948 in Ghadāmis, close to al-Hamāda al-Hamrā desert in the Libyan Fezzān region, which is a part of the great African Sahara, he spent his early years in the desert. al-Koni is a Libyan Tuareg who writes in Arabic but who only started learning Arabic by the age of twelve. After working in Libya for a few years, al-Koni studied comparative literature at the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow and then worked as a journalist in Moscow, then Warsaw. On leaving Poland, he settled in Switzerland in 1994, where he still resides. He published more than eighty books and received many prizes and his works have been translated into more than thirty languages. Of the novels that have been translated into English and where the desert is either a central theme or motif, one can mention the following: *The Bleeding of the Stone* (2002), *Anubis: A Desert Novel* (2005), *Gold Dust* (2008), *The Animists* (2010), *The Puppet* (2010), and *The Seven Veils of Seth* (2010). His novel *Wāw al-sughrā*, to which we will be referring, is to appear in an English translation in 2014.

The Tuareg inhabit the great Sahara and are dispersed in many countries, from Libya in the east to Senegal in the West. They did most of the cross-Sahara trade and played an important role in the dissemination of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. The Tuareg are Muslims, but they preserved much of their pre-Islamic traditional culture and customs. Their attachment to the desert and their traditional modes of life forced

the Libyan government, during its campaign to eradicate illiteracy, to use mobile schools to accompany the Tuareg moving settlements as they resisted sedenterization. Al-Koni is immersed in the Tuareg traditions and customs, which prompted some to read his works as anthropological texts. Yet his novels are informed with Arab-Islamic themes and his study of literature in Russia exposed him not only to Russian literature (he wrote a thesis on Dostoevsky) but also to world literature.

Can the Desert Think?

To understand how these two writers construct the desert, it may be a good idea to start structurally and anthropologically.[9] When Lévi-Strauss worked on his *Mythologiques*, the first volume of which he gave the title *Le cru et le cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*), he started with the structural duality or antinomy of the raw versus the cooked. But he soon added a third side, namely, the rotten, to produce a triangle. One can do the same with the desert, the city and the countryside. For our present purposes, it may be useful to ignore the rural and preserve the dichotomy of the urban and the desert, especially that the novel is generally seen as an urban product though its subject matter is not necessarily restricted to urban life.

If the desert represents extension, then the city represents height; or, in other words, the city is vertical while the desert is horizontal. In the desert the place is the space, while in the city place is the appropriation of space through severing and cutting it into pieces. In the desert the part is the whole, but in the city there are only monadic parts that resemble each other sometimes but mostly differ. The relations between the components of the desert are paradigmatic while those in the city are syntagmatic. The desert can be conceived as a semiotic system based on the absence of the division between nature and culture; or, to put it differently, it does not acknowledge such a division and thereby does not have the two concepts. Let me quote Munīf from *Endings*: "If every place in this world is a circle that has a center, this desert is damned to the extent that each particle of it is a circle and each point is the center" (92). Here, Munīf uses the Arabic word *dharrah* (atom), which is translated to *particle* in order to make sense of the English context. But we all know that an atom possesses all the chemical and physical properties of the element; the part is the whole. Munīf again resorts to the metaphor of *dharrah* talking about time: "Even time in the desert assumes a different meaning; it is transformed into small bits (*dharrāt*, atoms). The second and the minute is all the time. Then that time is fragmented unendingly, as the desert eternally" (94). The desert here is again timeless and outside history. Even scientists inform us that, of all the types of soil in our earth, the sand has the greatest longevity (Welland).

The city constitutes a complete semiotic system of signs whereas the desert is an extension without direction. Its signposts are external to it like the sun and the stars. When in the desert, the human being does not recognize himself in it but is united

with it, is an extension of it. The desert is not like other spaces and places, either a background or a reflection of the individuated person. The desert constructs persons and their identities: they are it. This is how *Endings* by Munīf begins: "When drought seasons come, things begin to change. Life and objects change. Humans change too, and no more so than in their moods! Deep down, melancholy feelings take root. They may seem fairly unobtrusive at first, but people will often get angry. When that happens, these feelings burst out into the open, assertive and unruly" (1).

Endings has an interesting structure. The novel is about a person and a place. The place is al-Taybah, a small village located on the borders of the desert, and the person is ʿAssāf, who lives in the village but remains a stranger. He is rarely seen and does not socialize with the people in the village (28). Even when he joins them in their communal meetings, he sits near the exit. His only real companion is a dog who, like him, is of unknown origin. But ʿAssāf is the best hunter. He knows where to find the birds yet has his own rules about hunting in order to preserve the animals. He knows the desert and its parts better than anyone else. When some city folks come to the village to hunt during the drought season, he first refuses to go with them on the hunt, but under pressure from the villagers, reluctantly agrees, but with conditions. He ends up dying with his dog in a huge sandstorm that kills almost everyone who participated in the hunt. The second part of the novel is made up of 14 sections of stories about animals and excerpts from *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, a classic in Arabic literature about animals, composed by al-Jāhiz (781-869), an Arab polymath and rationalist. The stories can be seen as commentaries on the relationship between humans and animals and on the relations between animals that emphasize the strong connections and affinities of animals and human beings. The stories and ʿAssāf himself can be considered a reversal of what Agamben has called the anthropological machine. They emphasize the continuity, the reciprocity and symbiotic relationships within the animal kingdom that includes human beings. Animals kill other animals (although we are not exposed much to this in the novel); but they do it to survive. ʿAssāf, who has a close connection to the desert and its animals and dirt, possesses a similar attitude to hunting. He agrees to it only because it becomes the last resort for survival in the village when droughts occur, and in such a way as to preserve the continuity of life in the desert. It is only when the city people come and hunt that the whole equation changes and becomes that of killing for fun or for no reason at all.

In many ways, the structure of the novel is analogous to that of the desert. The title of the novel is *Endings* in the plural, and the stories are somewhat like the atoms that Munīf refers to when he describes both time and place in the desert. Our other novelist, Ibrahim al-Koni, says in his *The Bleeding of the Stone*: "man in the desert had to die by one of those two opposites: flood or thirst" (69). But ʿAssāf dies from neither. He and his dog die in a sandstorm. Both are covered with sand when their bodies are discovered. It is as if they both were returning to where they belonged. When ʿAssāf is buried, and contrary to Islamic custom, he is buried with the clothes he had on when he died, as if to preserve that connection to the desert.

Mit'ib in *Cities of Salt* is the main character in the first few chapters. He does not want to leave his village (*Wādī al-'Uyūn*), which is to be destroyed and its inhabitants transferred in order to make the excavation of oil possible. He leaves the village in an act of resistance and rejection and disappears in the desert. With our common sense as readers, we know that he dies, but we are never told that. When he is swallowed by the desert, he becomes one of its particles of sand. He reunites with what is originary and gives the desert his body so that the desert can give him his soul through which he keeps reappearing to those who are facing great hardships or those who suffer from the intrusion of alien forces into the desert. These alien forces (the Americans, the government, and the economic interests) destroy the symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment.

To think is to give form. The implications of such a statement are both simple and complex, as it implies that where form exists, thinking is already there. However, Munīf's conception is that the desert has a form of formlessness that somehow antecedes the conscious process of giving form and is grounded in the unity of humans, animals, and physical nature. Those who are connected to the desert and are genuinely parts of it and its rhythm can grasp and interact with it as having form. But for those who remain separate from it, the desert seems to be formless. If we understand thinking as giving form to that which is formless, then the desert in this sense of Munīf's is the ultimate in not thinking.

Can the Desert Speak?

In his *Wāw al-sughrā*, al-Koni describes the migration of birds across the land twice a year. He juxtaposes the attitude of those who live in oases to the birds, which is antagonistic as they fear for their crops with the attitude of the desert people who welcome the birds as a godly sign. Even the soothsayers of the desert people follow the birds in order to listen carefully to the sounds they emit, which are thought to be secrets of the future. The mood of the desert people is celebratory and children are taught that "the bird is your mother, your father, your brother, your family, the bird has entrusted you and now comes back to get that which he entrusted you" (10).

Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* is arguably one of his best novels. It is a text that possesses different levels of signification (mythical, philosophical, and existential to mention a few) and it is not my purpose here to provide an interpretation of the novel. I want to point out some indicators from the novel that can help us construct what the desert signifies in the works of al-Koni. The desert is a central metaphor in his work, as Calleja has pointed out, but Calleja wants to see the desert as a metaphor only and he tries to resort to an understanding of the desert as a type of a Kantian intuition derived solely from sensibility without the interference of the intellect (135-6). Such an approach is helpful, but is not adequate. I think that one needs to go further and see the desert as more than a metaphor. It is a mode of existence that

permeates everything that is within it, thereby achieving organic connections that do not allow for a separation between being and knowledge, between the ontological and the epistemological, thereby rendering thinking as a separate and autonomous activity redundant. Al-Koni's conception of the desert is closer to a different tradition that does not ground thinking in time and space, but insists that nature possesses what rational cognitive powers alone are not in a position to grasp. These are not intuitions that are inherited as much as sensibilities that can only grow and mature with the greater embeddedness in nature and with achieving what one might term as a spiritual unity with it. It goes without saying that nature includes animals too.

Asouf grew up in the great desert with his father and mother. He knew the desert better than any other person (in this he is similar to ʿAssāf). While ʿAssāf lives on the margins of his community, Asouf is further removed from anyone other than his parents, his goats and the *waddān* (the moufflon), namely the desert. His father separated himself from other people, even members of his own community. His father dies because he breaks his oath not to hunt the *waddān*. But in his death his spirit transmigrates into a *waddān* who saves Asouf as he tries to hunt it. Asouf's mother dies from the tricky flood, yet she does not die in one piece, as the flood cuts her parts and disperses them across a large area that Asouf ends up having five graves for her.

Asouf learns things from the desert and his father, who in turn has learned things from the desert. This is what his father tells him:

> The heart is the guide for those who don't understand people. The heart is the fire by which the Bedouin is guided in the desert of this world, just as a man lost in the wilderness will be guided by the Idi star. All other stars transform and move, shift and vanish. Only this one stays firm until morning. Idi is like the heart. It does not deceive. (17)

His father also tells him: "Listen to your heart. What would a desert man do if he lost his heart? If we lost that, we wander lost in the world, because a desert man doesn't understand the wiles of men" (17). Asouf is the one who knows the desert best. Even the government resorts to him to guide its people. Yet as much as he is at home in the desert and with its creatures, he is completely incapable of handling or knowing those who are alien to the desert. When he needs to barter and get wheat in exchange for goats, he is so shy that he does not face the merchants of the caravan. He leaves the goats tied with a rope to a stick that he fixes to the ground and waits some distance from the place. The caravan merchants pass and take the goats and leave the sacks of wheat for him without exchanging a word with him (see 27-29). He interacts with the government people and with the foreign archaeologist but develops his own "mis"-understanding of their actions and discourses. When the man from the government gives him ten pounds, "Asouf gave him the ten pounds back. He would not know, he said, what to do with the money. 'I'll guard the wadi,' he went on. 'I'll guard all the wadis of Massak Satfat. I don't want money. What would I do with it here in Massak?'" (9).

Asouf treats what others conceive as an environmentally cruel space with a lot of

empathy: "How cruel, that the desert should disappear! How could he bear it, parting with the desert? The worst thing, after his mother's suffering, was never to see the eternal desert merging into the vastness of God" (59). When Cain and Masoud start cursing the desert, he thinks to himself: "What had the desert done to deserve all these insults?" (75). For Asouf, "water cleanses the body and the desert cleanses the soul" (110). The desert reveals itself to him like an open book because "nothing is ever a secret in the desert, no matter what lonely spot you choose" (24), and he, like any real desert person, is capable of seeing what others cannot see because "no one sees into things as desert people do, no one can match them in reading the secrets of the unknown. Whenever they meet, they seek some means to interpret the signs of time" (91).

Asouf faces death while trying to hunt a *waddān*. Yet he is saved by the *waddān* who seems to possess the soul of his father. And it is neither the desert nor its creatures that kill him. It is Cain, the meat eater who devours like a Gargantua and is never sated.

When we examine how the desert is viewed by those who live far away from it and who come face to face with it (as is witnessed by western travelers), we can safely say that the experience is basically visual. It is related to the expanse of the desert and its colors. Yet for those who come to experience the desert more closely, the experience becomes auditory. Wellard describes this experience saying: "All that one can intimate is an awareness of a silence such as is never heard outside the real desert, neither in the mountains or the sea; a sense of timelessness which transcends even the sense of mortality.…These are the intuitive experiences which are seldom, if ever, vouchsafed by the city-dweller" (16). The great Egyptian-French poet Edmond Jabes expresses such an experience poetically, saying:

> You do not go into the desert to find identity but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. You make yourself void. You become silence. It is very hard to live with silence. The real silence is death and this is terrible. It is very hard in the desert. You must become more silent than the silence around you. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak.

For Asouf, the visual and the auditory are connected as he is aware that "sounds in the desert could deceive and delude" (7). His desert is truly real with its silence speaking without all the transcendental and poetic frills added to it by the city-dwellers. It is experienced first-hand and without the labor needed in the attempts to connect or reconnect with nature in order for the experience to take place. In the desert "is contentment, in it is death and all you seek" as his father recited in a *mawwāl* (a type of song).

One may, and probably should, be critical of what can be seen as idealized conceptions of the desert by our two authors. This may be related to the emphasis both Munīf and al-Koni give to the juxtaposition of the desert to what lies outside of it and the possibilities of resistance that the desert seems to provide, though with tragic results. This may account for both writers working with dichotomies. But such an

emphasis needs to be seen as a part of their empathetic construction of the main characters in their respective novels. Yet it is also associated with both writers' conceptions of the desert as a basis for a critique of the destructive forces of enforced modernization. Munīf emphasizes the social, economic, and cultural aspects while al-Koni's emphases the philosophical, even metaphysical, aspects of such a process.

There are many similarities between the desert in Munīf's *Endings* and in al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Even the names of the two protagonists ('Assāf and Asouf) sound similar. Yet al-Koni is the writer who goes a step further than Munīf. Almost all his novels are desert novels. But for him existence is grounded in the desert and not in thinking. The desert is the fundament of existence as the latter is completely absorbed in it with the result that thinking is neither the prerequisite nor the fundament of being. At the level of characters, both Munīf and al-Koni construct many of their desert characters by first giving them names derived from the desert, mostly those of animals. But it is not the naming only; even the definite descriptions of these characters are desertified. Al-Koni develops this by emphasizing the unity of the components of the desert including humans, animals and plants, which accounts for why many of his novels can be read as anthropological or environmental studies of the desert. Al-Koni develops this by conceiving the desert as the container of a specific kind of wisdom which is based on freedom, which in turn is the result of the confluence of the desert and love (eternal and infinite love) which is the source of creativity and where all these are grounded in being in the desert. The desert is then a creative space that needs nothing to ground it other than itself. It is the ultimate in creativity and the ultimate in a mode of cognition that is different from epistemic thinking as we have come to understand it.

Notes

1. For discussions of different definitions of the desert from a geographical and environmental perspective, see Laity (especially 1-13), Lange, and Middleton.

2. See Hewett Koelb, especially 19-42.

3. See classic accounts of travelers to the desert, like Charles Doughty and Wilfred Thesiger.

4. Most of the prisons to which political prisoners have been sent in the Middle East, for instance, are, to this day, desert prisons, like al-Jafr in Jordan, al-Wahat in Egypt, and Tadmor in Syria, to name just a few.

5. A comparison of works like these with works by western novelists interested in the East and in the desert, like Paolo Coelho in his novel *The al-Chemist,* is very interesting, but cannot be pursued here.

6. Most of the biographical information about Munīf is based on personal communication with him. The literature on Munīf has grown during the past few years, especially following his death in 2004.

7. His book *Sirat Madinah* (1994) is about his early years in the city. The book was translated by Samira Kawar as *Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*.

8. The name has been transliterated as al-Koni, al-Kawni, al-Kuni, and al-Kouni. I have opted for the

format al-Koni, which is now standard in the English translations.

9. The following is heuristic rather than descriptive. It is a way to understand the desert in the two works under discussion rather than a way to understand the desert as such. Although I do resort to dichotomies, the thrust of the argument is to go beyond them. However, our two writers tend to base their conceptions on dichotomies, especially in how they construct the views of their main characters. The two writers, though in different ways, share a rather idealized view of the desert and emphasize the corruptive impact of the intrusion of "civilization" on its environment and its inhabitants.

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