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**Magic and realism of the desert  
(The prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī\*)**

Some fourteen centuries have passed since the times when the prince Imru' al-Qays, the invincible black knight 'Antara Ibn Šaddād and many other famous poets in impressive words used to describe the beauty of the camel and the departure of the beloved woman for the eternal desert wanderings with her tribe. These poets themselves were inhabitants of the desert, sometimes roaming and despairing because of a tragic love, as was in the case of Maġnūn Laylā (Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah). It seems that in that time, deserts, at least the deserts of the Arabic world, were vibrant with life. We gain such an impression from the *mu'allaqāt*—the most brilliant seven Arabic *qašidas*. Also "The Days of the Arabs" (*Ayyām al-'Arab*), the epic chronicles of the desert confirm this impression. In the course of time, the desert became depopulated and lost its popularity with the poets. Now towns, buildings, palaces began to attract poets. The towns had been luring them and only seldom they escaped to the desert as the poet Abū Tammām to study the pure Arabic language among inhabitants of the desert.

In consequence those nostalgic escapades enriched the flourishing urban culture which, however, created the new literary patterns in terms of settled life. In the literature of the Middle Ages, the desert did not vanish but remained alive, although it existed in the memory of the people rather than in direct literary pictures. In the *maqāmas*—picaresque stories presenting the Muslim society onwards from the 10th century<sup>1</sup>—these echoes of the desert are particularly clear; they also appear in trade journeys. However, the heroes who experienced the greatest troubles and the most amazing adventures in the desert usually came back home. Their houses were in towns.

In the new Arabic literature from the period called of An-Nahḍa dated to the 19th and 20th centuries, this house was often built according to

\* Out of a number of possible readings of this name: Al-Kūnī, Al-Kōnī, Al-Kawnī, I choose the last, as the most probable rendering of it in Arabic.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Janusz Danecki, *Wstęp* (in: Al-Hamadani, *Opowieści totrzykowskie*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 26–27.

European tastes. The whole literature began to combine local and foreign elements. The generation of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Maḥmūd Taymūr observed and described its nearest environment, the Arabic towns and villages, in the course of their modernisation.

This generation often returned to legends and historical events. However, more or less at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, writers began to criticize sharply historical changes in their environment. This critique was stressed by experiences gained from wanderings in time and space. It was then reflected in their literary output. These wanderings, especially in poetry and drama, were to a great extent abstract, i.e. time was not at all construed in accordance with the conditions of the real world, but reflected the subjective reaction of the authors.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately at the same time such authors as ‘Abd Allāh al-Quwayrī and Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī from Libya, Aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ from the Sudan, Yaḥyà Ṭāhir ‘Abd Allāh from Egypt or Amḡad Tawfīq from the Iraq<sup>3</sup> became active in a new type of literature. Pursuing their literary quests, they left their own towns and villages and arrived at places of famous historical events<sup>3</sup>. They stood only on the free space, the kind relatively stubborn and refractory to the human concepts. This space on the one hand retained its natural dimensions but on the other it contained the mysterious semantics of the primeval nature. This was, above all the space of deserts and steppes. Despite the realistic and concrete character of those regions, their inhabitants depicted in literary works, often refused the rules of causality and willingly submitted themselves to magic powers.

Many authors tried to explore this magic, but it was only the Libyan Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī who was able to introduce it to the literature on a larger scale. He was born in 1948, and began publishing in the 1970’s. Since that time a number of prose works appeared, mainly devoted to life in the desert.<sup>4</sup> Even in his earliest stories such as “The other horizon” (*Al-Ufq al-aḥar*), “Drums of the desert” (*Durrāt ar-raml allatī taqra ‘aṭ-ṭubūl*), *Ġur‘amin ad-dam* (“A draught of blood”), “The fur” (*Az-Zuḡb*) or “The desert” (*Aṣ-*

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ewa Machut-Mendecka, *Z warsztatu arabisty. Jak mówić o literaturze arabskiej*, in: *Plenas Arabum Domos*, Warszawa 1994, pp.176ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.172-173.

<sup>4</sup> Among others he has published the following collections of short stories: *Aṣ-Ṣāla ḥāriḡ niṭāq al-awqāt al-ḥāmisa*, Ṭarābulus 1974; *Ġur‘amin ad-dam*, Ṭarābulus 1983; *Ṣaḡarat ar-ratm*, Tarabulus 1986, Al-Qafs, London 1990; *Dīwān an-naṭr al-barrī*. He is also the author of the novels: *Al-Ḥamasiyya*, Bayrūt 1989; *Nazif al-ḥaḡar*, London 1990; *At-Tibr*, London 1990; *Al-Maḡūs*, Tarabulus 1991.

*Ṣaḥrā'*)<sup>5</sup>, deserts and steppes formed an intrinsic part of the described world.

In the course of time, Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī began to write longer narratives in which the original magic of the Sahara and the traditions of the Tuareg tribes from the south-western borderlands of Libya found their full expression. To them belong, among others: the pentalogy *Al-Ḥamāsiyya* (Bayrūt 1989) and the novels "The bleeding stone" (*Nazīf al-ḥaḡar*, London 1990, "The ore" (*At-Tibr*, London 1991) and "The Magi" (*Al-Maḡūs*, Ṭarābulus 1991).

This is just a brief outline showing the essential combination of magic and realism in the prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, which I regard as an innovative phenomenon in this literature. Undoubtedly, the rich literary output of the Libyan writer deserves a more thorough study. Here I take into consideration chiefly the four-part novel "The Magi" but, if necessary, examples are also drawn from other works of Al-Kawnī. The structure of the novel is complicated: there is a great number of intertwined plots with many persons. The leading characters such as the chief Adda, the darwiš Mūsà, the shepherd Awdād and the knight Awḥà come from the tribe Azḡar from the Libyan Desert and the Sāḥil.<sup>6</sup> Another group of heroes form inhabitants of Timbuktū including members of the sultan family.

The events of the novel take place between the 16th and 19th centuries when Libya was ruled by governors from Tripoli subjected to the Ottoman sultans. It is extremely difficult to find any other indications of historical time in the novel.

However their power was hardly perceptible in the interior. The encounter of the pagan beliefs of the Magi with Islam and the worship of gold with the worship of broadly conceived mental values created the main conflicts of this novel. These conflicts influenced the fate of all the characters and caused many complications and dramatic events such as the escape of the beautiful princess from Timbuktū, the construction of the new town on the desert by the sultan's brother and in the end the complete deterioration and destruction of this newly-built metropolis.

<sup>5</sup> Many of them were translated into Polish: *Durrat ar-raml allati taqra' aṭ-ṭubūl* (*Werble pustyni*) (Janusz Danecki), *Ḡur'a min ad-dam* (*Łyk krwi*) (by Halina Natorf, *Az-Zuḡb* (*Puch gazeli*) (by Barbara Wrona and published in "As-Sadaka" nos. 2/1981, 5/1982, 4/1983 respectively, *Aṣ-Ṣaḥrā'* (*Pustynia*, by J. Danecki) (cf. also the collection of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī's stories translated into Polish: *Tajemnice pustyni*, Warszawa 1985).

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Bogusław R. Zagórski for kindly helping me with the proper names.

The desert in “The Magi” (as well as other works of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī) is inhabited by the three kinds of beings: people, animals and demons (jinns: *ǧānn*). Their relationships are very close, sometimes they are friends, but very often they are harmful to each other. Probably the closest ties linked humans with *waddān* (a kind of antelope). Often in the prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī the two beings—the man and the animal—are united: they undergo a mutual metamorphosis (to those turned into stags belongs, for instance, the boy in “A draught of blood”, the hunter in “The bleeding stone” and the shepherd Awdad in “The Magi”). The relationship between the man and the camel could be described in terms of an almost complete unity. The novel “The ore” provides an example of a shepherd who entered into a kind of blood relationship with his camel. In Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī’s prose animals speak at a scale unparalleled in the whole contemporary prose, with, perhaps, the exception of animal tales; there is for instance a gazelle living alone in the desert after its whole herd was exterminated by hunters (“The bleeding stone”). Finally, the world of people and animals is subjected to the laws of mythology: it remains under the rule of the jinns (*ǧānn*). These demons which resemble human beings very much but belong to the metaphysical world: they fought against people for concrete areas of influence and for treasures such as gold or diamonds. That is why the tribe *Azǧar* from the *Sāḥil* in “The Magi” resigned from one of the mountain summits in favour of demons and gave them all their gold. In order that the agreement concluded between men and these beings be not infringed, *Azǧar* women wore jewels made from silvery moon splinters and sent to them by an ancient goddess. However, the inhabitants of the desert and the steppes did not always accept the demands of demons; sometimes they dared to oppose them.

For that purpose men invented and developed magic. Countless amulets, talismans and charms were created and used by sorcerers, magicians and charmers. *Ṣaḥrāwiyyūn*<sup>7</sup>, i.e. inhabitants of the desert did not move without magical objects or words even for a short distance and never undertook somewhat important tasks. The amulets and talismans prepared by the sorcerers in Kanu and Timbuktū were the most precious objects for the inhabitants of the *Sāḥil* and the Libyan Desert. The magic flowed to the coasts of the Mediterranean from the interior followed by old pagan rites and beliefs preserved across Africa up to Timbuktū despite the expansion and influence of Islam. The reconquest of the worshippers of the god Amnay is presented in the novel which took its title after them. The *Ṣaḥrāwiyyūn* based their resistance against the Magi on magic rights inconsistent with the principles of intellect. They were Muslims reluctant to rationalism which was

<sup>7</sup> Plural form of *Ṣaḥrawī*.

expressed in their inclinations to mysticism propagated by numerous groups of *ṣūfis* in North Africa. The fanatic *ṣayḥ* of the Qādiririyya brotherhood depicted in “The Magi” enjoyed such a popularity among the Azǧar that their chief had to leave the tribe and emigrate far into the desert. The mysticism was based on symbols<sup>8</sup> while the orthodox Islam offered its believers a rather rational discourse. *Ṣaḥrāwiyyūn*, living far from the intellectual and civilisational achievements, were attached to symbolic forms.

Key-symbols for the inhabitants of the desert were rock drawings from the Libyan caves. Their ancestors lived in wild mountains and in their caves. When they felt alone and were seized by a longing to the unknown (*al-maǧhūl*), they drew colourful figures, and pictures on their rocks.<sup>9</sup> Figures of animals and human beings as well as inscriptions carved out in stone sometimes form a puzzle which causes the contemporary man rack his mind. Triangles—symbols of the ancient goddess—were magical signs symbolizing complications of love (“The ore”, “The Magi”). The symbolic world is often recognized intuitively. This is a very important element in the prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī. Intuition enabled many persons to understand their prophetic dreams and even led one of the hunters, a very secluded man, to find God in his heart (“The bleeding stone”). The system of irrational beliefs increased the need of magic activities conceived as an effective weapon in the struggle against the unknown. In it vanishes the desert but continues, but it continues to exist in the invisible world. The unknown have always had a negative impact on human fate. It could not be averted even by the powerful defence system of magic rites.

Even sacrifices could be of no help against the fate, if it already was decided.

The sources of destiny remain hidden in the desert.<sup>10</sup> The destiny of a careless wanderer who too bravely dared to cross the vast sand areas was the death from thirst. This is depicted many times in Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī’s prose. However, the world of the deserts, steppes and inaccessible mountains, charmed into being by the Libyan author, seems to be a multidimensional organism arousing extremely different feelings. The sands of the desert attract people by a sound resembling the beating of drums created by God’s breath.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless the language of desert is the language of emptiness.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sławomira Żerańska-Kominek, *Symbole czasu i przestrzeni w muzyce Azji Centralnej*, Kraków 1987; Ewa Machut-Mendecka, *Duchowość islamu*, in: “Albo albo. Inspiracje Jungowskie” no. 1-2, 1994, p.90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Al-Maǧūs*, Ṭarābulus 1991, vol.I, p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 193

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 351

“(...) Desert is the hell.”<sup>12</sup> However, owing to magic exertions the desert is not cruel but should be understood and regarded as friendly.

The desert is like celestial songs, if you do not hum its melody, the thirst and madness will win you over.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most beautiful celestial songs of the desert is undoubtedly the freedom it offers to its inhabitants. The freedom was beyond price because in order to attain it, Ṣahrāwiyyūn were leaving their wives and families and escaped into desert, steppe or mountains to live there alone and to commune with nature only.

If you know the desert, you will give yourself to it leaving the most beautiful girls in the world of people and demons.<sup>14</sup>

To attain enjoy freedom one has to become acquainted with the desert and sing its melody. Numerous plots in the prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī indicate that such competences would be reached by somebody who enjoys the physical efficiency, sagacity, feeling and intuition. The desert provides the chance of freedom only to perfect people. As for the heroes of that prose, they always exhibit some weaknesses and shortcomings and many are even unable to withstand the harsh conditions of desert life. Nevertheless, if one of the desert paths leads to nothingness or at least to hell, the other tends towards perfection and the Tuareg form of paradise. According to Tuareg beliefs, the paradise assumes the form of the missing oasis named Al-Wāw and it receives those wanderers who went through an ordeal. Next, filled with bliss and happiness, they come back to the real world, completely losing trace of the mysterious oasis which is likely to appear in the next millennia. The desert stretches between hell and paradise. The direction of wandering in one of the two sides is linked with the magic of desert life. It was shaped in course of the dramatic fight of man with the difficult fate of the desert.

One of the most cruel and trying experiences in the desert is the yearly disaster brought by the merciless, hot wind named qiblī tormenting people and the nature. Sometimes the wind blows longer than usual. In “The Magi” it had been blowing for three consecutive years. This is explained in magic terms as the vengeance of the pagan god Amnāy liberated from his imprisonment which lasted many hundred years. Only rites of black magic could change the god’s anger. He demands that a virgin be married to him and then to be thrown into a chasm. But one of the chosen girls, a beautiful princess, for a long refused to be married to the god thus opposing the cruel destiny.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 406; *ibid.* vol. II, pp.100, 108

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., vol. I, p.97

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p.37.

When she finally threw herself into a well (as a consequence of a romantic love) the wind stopped blowing. Also the long drought ended and a rain fell.

The desert always demanded sacrifices. One of them was the destruction of the above mentioned town. It was named Wāw after the celestial oasis and it was disloyal to the old tradition prohibiting to deal with gold. There developed trade in this precious metal. It was then plundered during a strange war expedition undertaken by people of unclear origin, animals and demons at the same time. Most of Al-Wāw's inhabitants, who belonged to the Azğar tribe, were killed. But as a result of this sacrifice, the desert regained its primary purity and innocence, while the demons took back their property back to their satisfaction.

The deserts, steppes and mountains in the prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī though conceived as magical are also presented in concrete, real terms. The action of his novels and stories takes place in a concrete area, towns and places located on caravan routes are named: Tamanğast, Al-Qayrawān, Tripoli, Ġadāmis, Kanu and Timbuktū. Inhabitants of the desert enjoy with the charms of the nature, ravines filled with stupefying smell of flowers, birds returning from their wanderings.<sup>15</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī bravely presents concrete forms of reality, he does not spare his readers suggestive descriptions of nature or female beauty and even the most brutal details of devastation inflicted by death in human body. This prose is pervaded by naturalism. However, the most dramatic situations, realities and phenomena of nature evaded, to a great extent, the cause-and-effect order of events. The development of events sometimes inconsistent with intellectual demands is due to an attitude called finalism or irrationalism. However, an entanglement of magic and realistic forms dominates in this prose, decisive for its contents and the construction. The two forms also increase the significance of each other. The magic of the desert reached to the original tradition of ancestors while the concrete territory spread between Tripoli and Timbuktū was under the rule of Ottoman Turks reigning over Libya at that time.

Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī's desert, which in the same time is magical and realistic, almost automatically brings to mind the so-called magical realism of the Latin American literature. Let us—after Edward Elbanowski—describe some of its characteristic traits:

“(…) The essence of the magical realism lies in the close relationship between two elements: reality and magic which are not opposites but form a unity”<sup>16</sup>. And: “The magic, prodigality, became an immanent feature of the

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51, 400-401

<sup>16</sup> Adam Elbanowski, Marquez: od realizmu magicznego do ironii magicznej in: “Literatura na Świecie”, no. 9, 1983, p. 14.

reality of the continent originating from the magic understanding of the world, typical for folk mentality, primeval, both Indian and African.<sup>17</sup>

Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī is aware of the African sources of magic which reached the north enriching the areas it encountered on its way up. Sometimes there occurs very favourable symbiosis of cultures. In the 17th or 18th centuries, a princess of Ethiopian and Arabic origin wandered through the desert. She was famous for her marvelous beauty. Similarly to her, 'Antara who lived in the 6th century became the hero of a legend depicting an unconquered knight and a sensitive poet. Both characters: one from "The Magi", and the other from Old Arabic poetry are prototypes of many literary heroes. Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī is the only contemporary Arab writer who all his enthusiasm and literary efforts devotes to this mythology, and continues to do so in his latest novels, such as "The sorcerers" (As-Saḥara).

The question whether the works of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī and—perhaps—of some other Arab authors mentioned above is to be included into the realm of magical realism will undoubtedly be the object of future discussion. Most probably such a discussion will start when the works of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī—already translated into a number of languages (English, French, Italian and Polish)—gain popularity.

Sometimes the need and importance of such research and discussions might arouse objections. To reject them, I would like to quote A. Elbanowski again: "Literary criticism is above all, as it seems, an attempt at defining and classifying the incoherent mass of literary output. In order to change this chaotic material into an organized world of literature, it is necessary to define tendencies, directions and currents. They are exactly what critics need to regain confidence that there exist common bases and homogenous patterns which link together the different elements of the system called literature."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the above arguments will suffice to justify the need for the search for common places in the works of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī and, for instance, in those of Angela Carter, which might cause both writers meeting on the friendly territory of magic realism.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.10.