

# An Invisible Existence Between Life and Death in Al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*

Majed Alenezi

Middle Tennessee States University, Murfreesboro, TN, United States

The Bleeding of Stone traces a philosophical concept related to the existence of humankind. The uniqueness of the story's setting and the main character provide a metaphysical ontological dimension. The notion of the metaphysical existence is drawn into public within the atmosphere of the novel through certain elements; religion, time and space, and freedom. The present paper investigates on these factors and their roles and relations to convey and reach a metaphysical ontology. I argue, in this paper, that the metaphysical existence is established as a state between life and death. This state is created through a dialectical relationship between man and desert where there are unseen struggles between the two for immortality. However, the ultimate result of losing the battle is known for the man, yet deliberately ignored because of the instinct for immortality.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, Ibrahim Al-Koni, postcolonial literatura

## Introduction

The question of ontology is at the core of both Ibrahim Al-Koni's philosophy and his fictional texts. His novel *The Bleeding of the Stone*, for example, traces a philosophical concept related to the existence of humankind. The uniqueness of the novel's setting and the main characters provide a metaphysical ontological dimension. The setting—the desert—and the central character lack the basic necessities to pursue their existence in accordance with Al-Koni's philosophical thoughts. Nonetheless, Al-Koni creates and depicts a distinctive setting and a character who are able to stand by themselves. In an essay about Al-Koni's narratives, F. F. Moolla (2012) affirmed that the author's desert is rarely found in other Arabic fictional texts. For Al-Koni, the desert is not the strange world which occupying vast areas of dry and burned sand as represented by other authors, such as Abdulrahman Al-Munif. Rather, Al-Koni uses the desert's distinctive characteristics to create a metaphysical abstract existence where he alters the bases of the nature, giving the desert an absolute power, and a centralized position in shaping the novel's rituals, while mankind has a marginalized role. In other words, the desert is not merely a passive stage for events, but rather an eternal, consistent, and unmovable set of natural phenomena. Human beings, on the other hand, are mortal, variable, mobile, and live according to the rules of nature. The notion of the metaphysical existence is drawn onto the stage of the novel's atmosphere through certain elements, such as religion, time, and freedom. The present paper investigates on these factors and their roles and relations to convey and reach a metaphysical ontology. In this paper, the author argues that, based on Al-Koni's

philosophical thoughts, the metaphysical existence is established as a state between life and death. This state is created through a dialectical relationship between the man and the desert where there are unseen struggles between the two for immortality.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the philosophical notion of ontology as “the science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence”. In fact, the concepts of ontology and metaphysics have no differences as defined by *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Audi, 1995). Nietzsche usually views metaphysics as some type of reality beyond our daily life (qtd. in Addis, 2012). Al-Koni shares a similar view with Nietzsche, since he attempts to create an invisible reality beyond everyday world. In his fictional writings, he uses a mythical discourse and a unique setting to ensure the existence of a third state between life and death.

### **The Desert and Beyond in *The Bleedin of the Stone***

*The Bleeding of the Stone* recounts the story of Asouf, a young nomadic individual who inhabits Libya's southern desert, herding animals and guiding tourists. Asouf's integration and association with the desert creates his social identity and limits his social interactions with other humans. In other words, Asouf's identity has been constructed in accordance with the laws and features of the desert. Since the day he was born, he has never had any human neighbor. He was mainly surrounded by a world of mysteries, arid, solitary, and hot. His daily communication was constrained to non-human and invisible elements. Occasionally, Asouf met with foreign visitors, yet his communication does not exceed the limits of directing them to particular caves. Whenever, he attempted to move beyond the limitations of the simple interactions with other humans, as an obviously result of the assigned identity given to him by the desert, he failed. Al-Koni's desert occupies the main position in the novel's events, while mankind merely works in the margins. With the distinctiveness of the novel's setting, the standards of power have changed to be on the side of the place.

Al-Koni is regarded as not only a fictional writer, but also a profound philosopher, a researcher, and a seeker for the truth. In both fictional and non-fictional writings, the Sahara remains a core and centralized element. Elliott Colla (2009), in his study entitled “Ibrahaim Al-Koni's *Atlas of the Sahara*”, pointed out, “much of al-Koni's work pursues a broad set of historical arguments that place the Sahara at the center of civilizational development” (p. 188). Al-Koni's in-depth treatment of the desert moves further, beyond the mere surface boundaries of the desert's concrete physical appearances. He depicts the desert's invisible presence, wherein all creatures are united outside the immediate limitations of nature. For Al-Koni, the Sahara or more broadly the desert carries a sense of ontological dimensions once it accompanies the soul. However, the ontology takes a metaphysical form rather than a concrete one. According to Fouad and Alwakeel (2013), “Al-Koni sees the desert as a treasure box for many of the world's secrets. For him, the desert is the center of the world and everything else is on the margin that is populated by others” (p. 38). In an interview with Aljazeera, Al-Koni said, “The desert with the presence of the spirit is an abstract paradise where the soul conveys meaning to it while the absent of the soul makes it a maroon”<sup>1</sup>. Elliott affirmed Al-Koni's view as he stated:

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<sup>1</sup> “Aljazeera Ibrahim Al-Koni” Al-Koni interview. Online video clip: *YouTube*. You Tube, 30 November, 2015.

Al-Koni's novels take place in a desert world that is, despite its desolation, surprisingly rich in the sense that everywhere there are living beings struggling to live. In Al-Koni's fiction, the meaning of life is always tied to struggle. Thus, Al-Koni's novels paradoxically suggest that only here—in the harshest concerns of the desert waste—does life emerge in its richest sense. (Qtd. in Fouad & Alwakeel, 2013, p. 38)

The desert or the setting of *The Bleeding of the Stone* has attracted many critics, since the space maintains a pivotal role throughout the course of the novel. Nonetheless, the majority of the research on this work has dealt with the desert as a physical, concrete, and real environment. These attitudes for approaching and appreciating the desert do not accurately reflect Al-Koni's abstract perception of the Sahara. In his interview with Aljazeera, Al-Koni said, "In my fictional writings, I have never used the desert as a concrete physical place". Al-Koni forms his unique perception of the desert as a result of his cultural background, as he belongs to Tuoreg people who dwell in the desert and are influenced by their unique environment. Fouad and Alwakeel supported this concept stating, "Since one's worldview stems from experiences and daily interactions with certain cultural identifiers, the perception of the individual (writer) varies from one culture to another depending on the kind of the environment s/he interacts with" (p. 3). In his study on Al-Koni, Salam (1994) wrote that "Al-Koni in *The Bleeding of the Stone* invites us to discover his unique world and figure out its private secrets since it is unrepeated world" (p. 149). On several interviews and in some of his non-fictional texts, Al-Koni repeatedly demonstrates his philosophical view of the desert. In his interview with the Louisiana Channel, Al-Koni said, "The question of the desert is first and foremost an existential question. The desert is not a place, but it is a symbol of human existence". Additionally, he confirmed that in his fictional texts, the desert has both existential and metaphysical dimensions in his fictional texts. Its existential dimension takes the shape of physicality and visibility, whereas its metaphysical dimension is represented as enigmatic and mysterious. The latter is obtained through the way in which the desert inspires and encourages meditation. In his nonfiction book entitled *The First Papers*, Al-Koni (2004) summarized the bulk of his philosophical concepts. "The desert", Al-Koni writes, "is a substitution to the metaphysical dimension" (p. 152). The strangeness of the desert and its lack of the preconditions establish a metaphysical experience for its inhabitants. This metaphysical experience is not merely a state, but it is a meditative voyage for exploring and understanding the deep and hidden meanings related to the value of human's evanescent lives.

The desert, as the novel's setting, vividly participates in every single event. In his essay entitled "Place in Ibrahim Al-Koni's Novel *The Bleeding of the Stone*", Awin Al-Fouri (2000) argued that the desert is not merely the space or a setting where the events of the novel took place, but rather it is the protagonist of the novel with a special status and distinguished characteristics. He added, "The place reflects the mysterious inter-related relationship that links the characters of the novel into one entity and destiny in which drama mingles with legends, philosophy, magic and superstitions" (p. 42). In her study of *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Miloud Shoniv (2011) concentrated on the myth and miracle and their roles in shaping the novel's meaning. She argued that Al-Koni deliberately employs the mythical discourse to demonstrate the eternal struggle between humankind and nature. In a more recent analysis, Meg Furniess Weisberg (2015) examined Al-Koni's structural style and his ability to manifest a vivid role for the desert to argue that *The Bleeding of the Stone* calls the legitimacy of neocolonial power structures into question. In their article, Fouad and Alwakeel revealed a new dimension of Al-Koni's novel by tracing the representations of the desert in two different novels: Silko's *Ceremony* and Al-Koni's *The Bleeding*

of the Stone. The paper points out the similarities between the two texts in terms of the transformation of the physical into an existential realm and also in the notion of timelessness.

The fact that a man is in the desert in isolation does not by itself lead him to the metaphysical state unless it is combined with certain practices. As articulated earlier, the metaphysical ontology, among other essential elements, is represented within the milieu of *The Bleeding of the Stone*. The purpose of religion and its practices is often primarily seen as an avenue to achieve everlasting paradise. For some practitioners of religious prayers, however, there are believed to be temporal moments of metaphysical experiences as well. In Al-Koni's view, inhabitants of modern cities would not encounter this type of existential experience because of their earthly daily distractions. In contrast, the virgin desert creates a godly and holy atmosphere where the body is in total and rooted connection with the place, and on the other hand, the soul raises up spiritually to experience a phase between life and death. In his philosophical book *My Homeland is a Big Desert*, Al-Koni (2009) mentioned, "The desert for the body is an exile, but it is a homeland for the spirit" (p. 49). Al-Koni deliberately opens his novel with a religious practice. The first line of the text reads, "It was only when he started praying" (p. 1). Hence, the starting point for the novel's spiritual voyage to the metaphysical dimension is a religious practice in the unique environment. The notion of prayer strikingly remains a facet throughout the course of the novel. In the text, the prayers are only conducted in the space of the desert alone. The physical body and the religious practice amalgamate with the desert as a setting to spark the meditation trip. The narrator tells us:

Asouf finished his prayer and learned back his head, still gazing at the vast wall soaring above him. The master jinni was blessing him. From behind the veil that strange look expressed contentment and calm. The majestic waddan was in harmony with its god; the prayer had, it appeared, been accepted. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 7)

Because of the sacred desert, Asouf receives the acceptance of his prayer, even though he failed to direct his prayers toward the Ka'aba, immediately after conducting his religious practices. The invisible acceptance of his prayer took place as a result of the feelings of contentment. The harshness of the desert does not act as a barrier from the metaphysical and spiritual dimension, even though the holy practices of the religion and the brutality of the desert seem incompatible in some ways. Weisberg, in his delineation of Al-Koni's desert, wrote, "The desert as a setting is omnipresent yet barely described" (p. 51). However, he added that on rare occasions, the depiction of the desert is accompanied with adjectives, such as harsh, rugged, and bare. Al-Koni, as a talented and creative writer, mingles the two seemingly contradictory elements to create an unseen spiritual state.

There is no single protagonist in *The Bleeding of the Stone* who propels the novel's events or its plot. According to Al-Fouri, the protagonist is the desert, as all characters are under its constraints, rituals, and boundaries. Even with his extensive portray of the desert, Al-Fouri remarkably escapes mentioning the value of religious practices in this unique atmosphere, a type of value rarely found in the monotonous religious practices of modern cities. In *The Bleeding of The Stone*, the two men of the city (Cain and Masoud) identify themselves as Muslims, yet they do not practice any religious principles. Cain tells Asouf, "It is true we do not pray, or pay zakat, and we have never done the pilgrimage. But we are Muslims just the same" (p. 12). The life of the city revolves around bodily struggle, conflict, and competition to gain temporal earthly materials through both greedy and selfish means. Such gains are often obtained through bodily struggle, conflict, and competition, which easily distracts from the clear mind needed to achieve a higher states. In his article, Weisberg wrote, "Cain represents

the widespread, globalized majority culture, while Asouf represents the indigenous minority; in the novel, if Cain is humanity in all its evil and decadence, Asouf is the emptiness of the desert and also its loneliness" (p. 53). From Al-Koni's philosophical viewpoint, the city without a spirit is just a hell. The people of the city interact with each other negatively, in a seemingly permanent competition, and struggle for to possess temporal and earthly things. The contradiction lies in the fact that it is impossible for the temporary human body to own luxurious goods permanently. Hence, men of the city have an impermanent relationship with the world around them. Nevertheless, their social behavior manifests deliberately total ignorance to their mortality. The discrepancies between the city man and the desert man are presented in *The Bleeding of the Stone* through the contrast between Cain and Asouf: The former represents the man of the city, while the latter is an example of the man of the desert. In novel, the narrator demonstrates this contrast with Cain's stance towards Asouf's refusal to eat meat. Cain says:

You do not eat meat? What sort of life is that? It makes sense. If you do not eat meat, then you have to live apart from other people. I see now why you have chosen to live in this empty wilderness. If a man does not eat meat, then he does not live. You are not alive at all. You are dead. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 14)

Significantly, Al-Koni incorporates meat as a concrete substance for two main reasons: first, to feed the body of city inhabitants, and second to reveal the greed of the man of the city. Hence, Cain seeks meat to feed his physical body, while Asouf rejects meat as he lives spiritually and in isolation in the desert. Asouf tells Cain about the negative impact of eating meat excessively: "A craving for meat brings madness. People cannot help themselves" (p. 33). Al-Koni uses the concept of meat as a metaphor to reveal the greedy personality of the city man; meat symbolizes commodity. Near the end of the novel, Asouf affirms this notion as "he made a comment about Cain's gross appetite. I heard my father say, he remarked, that only through dust will the son of Adam be filled" (p. 93). Asouf draws a solid division between his understanding of life on its abstract and spiritual level and Cain's view, since he reconsiders his relation with his environment. Therefore, earthly valuable materials carry no value for Asouf as he is a spiritually attuned desert-dweller.

As mentioned earlier, the novels' metaphysical dimension takes the form of a voyage. That is, Asouf spiritually transforms as he used to eat meat, and his subsequent refusal to feed his physical body with meat signifies his spiritual progress, as he considers his position equal to that of other creatures. "How can one creature eat the flesh of another? What was the difference between the flesh of an animal and that of man? If someone could eat the flesh of the waddan, then he could eat human flesh too" (p. 65). Asouf's transformation gives him access to the state between life and death as he surrenders his earthly values. On the other hand, Cain, as the man of the city, on the other hand, has an endless appetite for meat. Masoud tells Asouf about Cain's desire for meat, "I have known him all my life [...] he is likely to eat himself if he does not find some meat to eat at night" (p. 13). For Cain, everything relates to his body and its physicality. Cain says to Asouf, "Everything begins and ends with meat. Woman's meat too. Have you ever tasted a woman's meat?" When Asouf replies with no, Cain responds, "You are a poor devil" (p. 14). Asouf cannot appreciate the value of meat as Cain does. For Asouf, spiritual existence is the ultimate purpose of his life's journey. The detached setting of the desert guides Asouf to a state of metaphysical and unearthly ontology, as he isolates himself completely from his fellow humans. Asouf and Cain represent complete opposite perceptions towards the setting. For Asouf, the desert is a way for mental

survival, as he uses the desert to survive spiritually and live out a sort of an invisible existence, while Cain sees the desert as something to use and abuse to feed his inexhaustible bodily desire. The novel further explains the differences between the two when Asouf's father tells him:

The jinn are like people. They are divided into two tribes: the tribe of good and the tribe of evil. We belong to the first tribe to the jinn who chose good. That is why. If you live near bad people, their evil will strike you. Anyone choosing the good has to flee from people, to make sure no evil comes to him. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 4)

Thus, true metaphysical existence requires a physical isolation and the search for contemplation. The notion of the contrast between physical existence and spiritual existence is implicitly demonstrated in the novel through the detailed and strictly physical description of the two men from the city, Cain and Masoud. "Two men got out of the truck, quite different in appearance: one tall, the other short, the tall man slim, the short man plump. They seemed about the same age" (p. 11). In contrast, the narrator hardly mentions any physical features of Asouf and his parent highlighting the fact that they live on a metaphysical dimension.

Religious practices in the space of the desert enable an emotional and spiritual existence beyond the surface feelings of the earthly life. Al-Koni's godly desert is very inclusive of other religious faiths. In the novel, Asouf observes the foreigners as they practice their religion in the desert, "Veneration, and supplication and surrender, were revealed in their eyes" (p. 10). The exercise of religious practices in the desert provides a particular spiritual feeling that exceeds the limit of human understanding. In the novel, Al-Koni depicts a coexisting multiplicity among all religions in the desert, because prayer in an open space universally encourages contemplation.

In *My Homeland is a Big Desert*, Al-Koni describes, "the desert as a paradise made of void" (p. 49). For Al-Koni, the desert is void, simply because it is absent of water, the essential element for the survival of humanity. This emptiness enables meditation and access to the metaphysical. However, in the novel, this takes place through mysticism or sufism. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD)* defines "mystic" as the one "who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truth beyond the understanding" (*COD*, p. 536). Although mysticism in Christianity has been defined in various ways, there is a consensus that understands mysticism is a way in which an individual reaches a state of unity with the divine. Ursula King defined a "mystic" as:

A person who is deeply aware of the powerful presence of the divine Spirit: someone who seeks, above all, the knowledge and love of God and who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life. (King, 2001, p. 3)

There are three kinds of mystical experience, namely, physical enclosure, the idea of virginity, and visions. For the purpose of this paper, the first feature of mysticism is relevant. The idea of physical enclosure and self-isolation is a common feature that characterizes mystical philosophy. It is a practice through which a mystic individual attempts to break with all worldly pleasures and devotes all his /her senses to worshipping God. Laura Miles finds that the purpose of physical enclosure is to enable the individual to be free for God. Usually, the physical enclosure in sufism is accompanied by "muwwals" sad songs, which induce a kind of melancholy feeling. Both Asouf and his father use the physical enclosure to seek access to the metaphysical dimension. In the novel, the narrator reveals the loneliness of Asouf and his father's life as he says, "They had lived alone in the desert, alone in their movements and wanderings" (p. 17). However, their sufism practices are not mainly

religious or only for the purpose of unity with God; but rather, they are the avenue by which they seek to reach a spiritual peaceful state. Asouf's father tells him, "I cannot live near anyone. That is what my grandfather taught me, and that is what I must teach you. All I want is peace. Do you understand?" (p. 21). Weisberg viewed Asouf's practice of suficism as a way of reaching to the oneness of existence. Unlike Weisberg, the author holds that Asouf and his father use the method of suficism to reach an invisible third phase between life and death. This stage puts them in complete separation from the world. The powerful of the desert enables the most conducive atmosphere for the practice of disengagement and withdrawal from the world.

Indeed, Al-Koni concretely emphasizes the stage between life and death as Asouf and his parents physically experience this third state between life and death. Asouf's mother describes to her son his father's experience with the stage between life and death: "He found himself hanging between earth and sky, holding on to a rock with his legs dangling down into a chasm. He had given up all hope" (p. 40). Later in the novel, Asouf himself encounters the same phase when he goes to hunt Waddans. Unlike with his father's story, the narrator provides a thorough depiction of Asouf's experience with death. The narration closely concentrates on the extreme torture of Asouf's body:

Now Asouf's right arm was about to be ripped off. He tried to summon help from his bloodied legs, burning their wounds, [...]. When pain becomes unbearable, the body starts to lose all sense of it. The limbs were numbing and pain was eating up pain. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 49)

It is not arbitrary that Al-Koni spends three chapters developing this scene, as he aims to create a clear delineation between the body and the soul. Torture of the body, in that particular moment, indicates a state of hell, while the spirit is simultaneously in a metaphorical stage. The distinction between the two is further clarified, as the narrator says:

Movement now decided life or death, spurred on by the resolution of a man in the grip of death to take in one last draft of life, even if his head should be sliced from his body. A goat breathes, takes in air, long after it is slaughtered. As for a slain waddan, it gets up, headless, and runs off along way, before giving in at last and submitting to God. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 64)

Al-Koni hints at the eternal hidden conflict between the spirit and the body, as the soul tries by great effort to liberate itself from the body's restrictions and gain immortality, while the body, on the other side, fights seriously to keep itself alive. Death is depicted here as a virtue that brings an end to the seemingly continuous struggle between the body and the soul. On one hand, death liberates the body from the pain, and on the other hand, it means immortality for the soul. In confrontation with death, the narrator reveals Asouf's sever resistance: "Forcing out his tongue, he licked the tears flowing over his lips. They tasted salty, but that was better than having his heart burst" (p. 52). Then the narrator provides the opposite image of Asouf's situation, "He would plunge down, and his heart would burst before he reached the bottom of the abyss. He would not suffer. There would be no pain. Pain was here, on the rock, clutching on. Pain was in life" (p. 53). In his interview with the Louisiana Channel, Al-Koni said, "In the desert we stare at death and it is a miracle because the desert is the only place where we can visit death and return home safely"<sup>2</sup>. In that specific situation, Asouf visited death and safely

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<sup>2</sup> "Ibrahim Al-Koni: In the desert we visit death" Al-Koni interview. Online video clip: *YouTube*. You Tube, 16 November, 2015.

returned home. Al-Koni depicts such moments not only in Asouf's experience but also in his parents as well, since they dwell in the same desert. Additionally, Al-Koni highlights this notion further when he intensively describes the horrible death of Asouf's mother, she also encounters the same phase between life and death.

These floods had taken them by surprise, driving the old mother from the cave, and he had found her remains three days later in Abrahoh. Stones had torn away her limbs as she was swept on and on. Her head was disfigured, and the bushes had plucked the short silver hair from her small head, leaving it almost naked; nothing was there on the skull but a few scattered hairs caked with mud. The right eye had gone, ripped away by the stones on that savage journey, and an empty, gaping space was left. The other eyes was shining, staring up at the sky. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 67)

With the above description of Asouf's mother, Al-Koni demonstrates the moment between life and death and at the same time the struggle between the soul and the body. The description of Asouf's mother's two eyes demonstrates two opposite situations: One is earthly, and the other is heavenly. The empty space of one eye indicates the ultimate fate of the physical body: It will pass into nothingness and emptiness. Meanwhile, the other eye signifies the immortality of the soul, as it was portrayed shining and staring up to the heaven. Asouf encounters the same notion of the eyes when he sees the image of his father in the Waddan's eyes at the moment when he survives his death. "He saw his father in the eyes of the great, patient waddan" (p. 61). Significantly, this particular incident reveals the metaphysical existence of Asouf's father when he ceases to exist physically.

The conception of time in *The Bleeding of the Stone* is a vital factor in confirming the novel's metaphysical ontology. Al-Koni puts forward a unique view of the notion of time in the desert. The time in the desert, Al-Koni says, "is not traditional, it is a mythical since the past, present, and future prevail all at the same time". He expands on this notion of time in his book *My Homeland is a Big Desert*, where he writes, "Only in the desert, we discover the secret of time as it is completely stopped" (p. 135). The novel does not follow a chronology and readers do not have a sense of time as the novel flashes back and forth. However, this technique slightly represents something about Al-Koni's concept of time as it exists in the desert. Weisberg described the notion of time in Al-Koni's text as "time outside of time" (p. 50). The way the novel is written and the way chronology is presented enhances this loss of the sense of time. For Al-Koni, losing sense of time is evidence for immortality, because the visible and concrete understanding of the notion of time is developed within a world of relationships. *The Bleeding of the Stone* deliberately operates outside this world of relationships. The desert and Asouf are completely disconnected with the concrete world.

The mighty rock marked the end of a series of caves, standing there like a cornerstone. Through thousands of years it had faced the merciless sun, adorned with the most wondrous paintings ancient man had made anywhere in the Sahara. (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 2)

As a result of the distinguished atmosphere, the time does not affect the environment; it is still and eternal. It is only when the time stops that it represents eternity and becomes comprehensive. In the desert, the place and time share a common ground: Both are void. It is impossible enough for Asouf to live physically in the emptiness. In total contrast to the concrete world's general perception, the desert's complete emptiness signifies an endless unseen metaphysical existence. Al-Koni's novel emphasizes how the earthly soul is incarcerated in time, place, and body and "he who seeks [...] to leave his appointed place has sought to leave his body. He who seeks to leave his body has sought to leave time. He who seeks to leave time has laid claim to immortality" (p. 100). Al-Koni



incorporates the unique nature of time in the desert to ensure the presence of the metaphysical dimension. "In the physical world", Al-Koni writes, "everything reminds us of our time, our existence, and our mortality. On the contrary, in the desert we feel our immortality through the eternity of time" (p. 136). As Asouf and his parents inhabit the abstract desert, they leave the three designated frontiers, time, place, and the body, and cease to exist physically. Therefore, the ultimate death of these three characters represents a state between life and death, since their physical deaths are inevitable because of the impossibility of living physically in the desert.

Freedom is another element Al-Koni implements to depict the state between life and death. For Al-Koni, absolute freedom and death are identical. Al-Koni elaborates his concept of freedom as he states, "Only dead people have the right to brag about their freedom" (Al-Koni, 2004, p. 76). Therefore, the absolute freedom exists only on abstract and metaphysical levels. Absolute freedom has the same status as the soul: Both are incarcerated in the body. At the same time, they are active only in the void on a metaphysical dimension. While listening to his father muwwals, Asouf poses questions to himself:

Why did these songs tug so at his heart? Why did they bring him such unbearable pain? Was it because they expressed man's helplessness in the desert? Or because they made him sense the desert's cruelty? [...] because of some message those muwwals bore: that salvation meant the desert, and the desert merely meant death? Was he weeping because his sad father's muwwals somehow captured the nature of their strange life in the eternal desert, where nothing else seemed to exist in the world? (Al-Koni, 2002, p. 36)

Asouf experiences the absolute freedom while living alone in the desert at the level of metaphysical ontology. Nevertheless, his couple of interactions with other human beings demolishes his sense of freedom in the desert. Absolute freedom is obtained only in a complete solitude. Asouf refuses to work for the government, as it would put some restrictions on his freedom. "Do you know what it means to get a salary from the government?", Asouf replies, "I will guard the wadi. I do not want money. What would I do with it here in Massak?" (p. 9). Metaphysical freedom is more valuable to Asouf than earthly temporary materials.

### **Conclusion**

The state between life and death goes beyond the metaphysical dimension to represent Al-Koni's perception of the desert itself. In fact, Al-Koni provides a sub-field to the environmental studies as he puts considerable emphasis on the relationship between humankind and nature in his philosophy. *The Bleeding of the Stone* provides an ethical dimension for ecocritics to consider and evaluate the invisible relationships between the man and nature. However, the novel still manifests some aspects of ecocriticism, such as Rob Nixon's concept "slow violence committed against nature". In the novel, this is manifested through Cain's abuse of nature and animals.

Al-Koni's philosophical approach conceives of the desert not merely as a space but as the origin of the universe. The desert offers a metaphysical experience for its inhabitants where the physical is transcended and transformed. Consequently, Al-Koni uses the distinctive characteristics of the desert to create a metaphysical abstract existence where he alters the foundations of nature, giving the desert an absolute power, and a centralized position in shaping the novel's rituals, while marginalizing the role of humankind. The concept of the metaphysical ontology is presented through certain elements, such as religion, time, and freedom.

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