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The Two Approaches — The Bastion of Identity and the Tide of Globalization / A Reading of the Discourse of Cultural Resistance

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Abstract:

The world today is experiencing a huge number of conflicts of diverse wings and ideologies, in search of new expansions of the dominant power's centrality, in contrast to the further marginalization of the vanquished. Nothing can stop the tide and influence of the conflicts that have spread rapidly and mythically, and have plunged the Arab region in particular into a suffocating identity crisis. If we stand today contemplating the global, national, and patriotic scene in recent decades, we will describe it as one of general tension, since after successive calamities and setbacks, we have entered an era of bewilderment.

Keywords: Globalization, the desert, identity, culture, the novel.

Arabic Abstract (translated):

The world today is living through an immense number of conflicts of varied factions and ideologies, in pursuit of new expansions of the dominant party's centrality, at the cost of further marginalizing the defeated. Nothing can halt the tide and influence of the disputes that have spread rapidly and almost mythically, plunging the Arab region in particular into a suffocating identity crisis. If we pause today to contemplate the global, national, and domestic scene of recent decades, we would describe it as one of general tension, for after successive calamities and setbacks we have entered an age of bewilderment.

In such a charged atmosphere, thoughts of fleeing toward a safe refuge and an impregnable fortress multiply — a refuge wrapped in ambiguity, guarding its secret for as long as it can. What if this flight were a migration toward the desert, toward that vast expanse, where the earth draws so close to the sky it seems almost unbelievable? The desert — that immense, spacious place that evokes an intellectual system and a cultural and doctrinal depth — transcends being a mere empty topographical location to become a place brimming with poetry. The desert is not spoken of as an empty place, but rather in its cultural dimensions, in its interaction with human beings, leaving its imprint on them and captivating them with worlds as magical as the Thousand and One Nights. This is what has made it an impregnable fortress through its customs and traditions, and a fierce resistor of everything foreign. This is what we will examine in this research paper, within a framework of authority and cultural dimensions. From this arise a great many questions about the desert, the desert environment, and the desert novel, and their relationship to the tide of globalization: how can a novel from the deep south stand as a bastion against the tide of globalization?

Keywords: Globalization, the desert, identity, culture, the novel.

Introduction

The desert, with its wonders, marvels, and captivating charms, has stirred writers and poets, driving them to create diverse texts about the desert and its secrets. This is reflected in the literary and artistic works they produced, in which they spoke of

the aesthetics of place and described the desert space along with the values and culture with which it teems. This had a significant effect in changing the diminishing view of the desert as a barren wasteland and a place of loss, wandering, and death by thirst — not to mention the difficulty of living there given its harsh conditions and the scarcity of amenities. Here it is worth noting that the Arabic novel has, of late, restored the desert's standing, celebrating it in modern and contemporary novels set in the desert, and proving that the desert possesses a status and a culture distinct from other regions.

When we speak of desert narrative locally and in the Arab world, a large number of those who have written and created within the desert novel come to mind, for writing styles differ from one novelist to another according to their cultural, linguistic, and even semantic baggage. But when a son of the desert writes about the desert in its temporal and spatial dimensions and its geo-cultural terrain, he does not write about it the way someone who is not of it would. For the son of the desert, from his very first cry upon entering existence in the vast, far-reaching expanse of the desert — where geography and history intertwine with myths and marvels, with architecture and building forms, especially the ancient mud-walled *qasrs* — and whose movement through this space has been marked by features and practices that gave him a distinctive and singular image; this cry, breathed with the distinctive desert air and inhaling grains of golden sand, is what set him writing about this unique experience, establishing for it a narrative style different from what those enamored with the novel and the short story, and their arts concerned with the affairs of cities, capitals, and crowded societies, are accustomed to.

This is the novel that, across its pages and lines, takes up varied events and incidents that occurred in the environment of Touat in the far south of Algeria, building its events and narrative course around the character of Sbaï in the novel *Al-Tarhan* by Abdallah Kroum — a man who stood in the face of the tide of globalization and resisted the power of the aggressor, whether near or far, along a narrative course that is at once local, national, and global.

I. The Order of Authority: Mechanisms of Domination and Control

The order of authority in the novel *Al-Tarhan* forms a complex structure that goes beyond mere patriarchal power to a comprehensive system governing social and cultural relations. This order is embodied in the novel according to a hierarchy of authority — not a sequential one relative to the escalation of the narrative — as constructed by Abdallah Kroum. We will address each branch of this order of authority from an internal perspective, one we have built through the perception of the novel's protagonist, Sbaï, and according to the circumstances he lived through and depicted for the reader.

The intellectual load of the novel is distributed — in the words of the critic Mohamed El-Amine Bahri — across a number of mental patterns among the human models embodied by the novel's characters, which the author classified according to varied strata of authority and their direct and indirect relationship to Sbaï, the novel's protagonist, and their interventions in the dynamics of the narrative and the alteration of its events. Among these are the sacred, the profane, and the aggressor.

1 — The Sacred Order of Authority / The Tribe's Elders and Sages

The novel portrays Sbaï's suffering and the injustice he endured throughout his life, in scenes that dominate the narrative's events, coloring it with sorrow, oppression, and pain. Amid these painful events came glimmers of hope for the hero at the hands of his elders, chief among them Sheikh Al-Kaawi — Sidi Ahmed Al-Kaawi, known as Hajj Al-Mamoun, owner of the *qasba* (the hero Sbaï's grandfather).

Also appearing is the figure of Moulay Ahmed Al-Taheri Al-Idrissi, sheikh of the Taheri *zawiya* in Sali Berkane, as well as Sheikh Ahmed ibn Malek Al-Qablaoui, author of a book on genealogy, and Sheikh Al-Bakri, a jurist and sheikh of the Timimoun *zawiya*. These figures of authority appear in the novel in their varied leanings and orientations as a sacred order of authority and an impregnable fortress that protected the hero and planted in him, from childhood, the seeds of resistance and authenticity. It was the grandfather who was the support behind Sbaï's words: he recalls himself as the pampered child of the family, surrounded by the care and good guardianship of his grandfather Sidi Al-Kaawi, and among the images that open onto the archive of his memory in childhood is the day he entered the Quranic school at the age of four, to decipher the mysteries of the world of reading and writing (Kroum, 2024, p. 11).

As the pace of the narrative quickens and its events and characters multiply across different eras, this sacred order of authority appears again and again in the hero's life, rescuing him one way or another from being lost. The novelist depicted this within a narrative duality that keeps pace with the development of the novel's events; whoever follows Sbaï's setbacks and sorrows in the novel will find that after every hardship comes relief at the hands of his elders and teachers, as a kind of fortification.

2 — The Profane Order of Authority / The Corrupt Class of Opportunists

The novel's events show a marked variety in who assumes the roles of authority among the *qasba*'s inhabitants, and a rapid dynamic of appropriating fields and even houses, to the point that the reader might imagine there is some kind of game underway. All of this is embodied in the intermingling of events and characters, in a dynamic that is at times joyfully aesthetic and at other times sorrowful, all tied to a single narrative thread: Sbaï. The *Al-Tarhan* agreement was the cause of the injustice that befell the hero, owing to the social standing occupied by Al-Naimi, the affluent merchant of noble (*sharif*) lineage, and his exploitation of people's living circumstances to blackmail them and seize their property — a higher authority and a profane order, much like the events that befell Sbaï at the hands of his uncles, opportunistic and corrupt figures, and the injustice practiced against him in forms of oppression and abuse of authority and decision-making. He was deprived of his inheritance,

and his uncles ganged up against him with the help of the student Gloush after the death of his father, the grandson of Ahmed Al-Kaawi, so that his situation became exactly as he described it: cut off from the tree, with no right to inheritance.

The harsh living conditions ground Sbaï down during this ordeal that befell him and his family, forcing him to live with his friend Baza in the bachelors' shop, and to work for Al-Naimi in his orchard in exchange for food. Here the order of authority was represented by his uncles Al-Fadhil and Lakhdar and their love of possession, seizing his property — the great house, the outer storehouse, the orchards, the salt flats, the livestock, and the shares of water in the foggara — all of which his grandfather Al-Atwi had left him, unjustly.

The injustices and forms of authority exercised against Sbaï continue to accumulate. Al-Naimi, as mentioned, imposes on him the unjust law of Al-Tarhan and forces him to submit to its conditions: the noble Al-Naimi, who lent him money and imposed two harsh conditions, one heavier than the other — the first, that the loan be witnessed by the student Gloush and his register, and the second, that he submit to the law of Al-Tarhan (Kroum, 2024, p. 83). On one side stands the power of his uncles, and on the other the power of Sheikh Al-Naimi and the student Gloush and what the dictates of his register — the Al-Tarhan — impose.

3 — The Aggressor Order of Authority / Colonizers and Settlers

The novelist depicts the ugliness of colonial conduct, an authority that exploited and exercised its tyranny and transgression over everything green and dry, over human and natural resources, reaching the point of blatant assault on the environment: before we parted, she told me the war in Algeria would drag on, and that France would build a strong military base, especially after it had set its sights on manufacturing a nuclear bomb, and that the plans showed General David's government... wars throughout history breed hatreds, orphans, the destitute; they are decided by politicians and their victims are ordinary people. If only the world were free of weapons that destroy — I do not love wars, I do not love wars — thus spoke Nadine (Kroum, 2024, p. 159).

The novelist introduces the character of Nadine, a witness to the atrocities of the aggressor order of authority to which she belongs while simultaneously disavowing it. On wars she comments that throughout history they breed hatreds, orphans, and the destitute, decided by politicians while ordinary people pay the price (Kroum, 2024, p. 159). Nadine's character here is not among those we have classed within the aggressor authority, but rather the one who describes and exposes those hideous colonial practices against peoples. She came from the paradise of Toulouse, forced into an arid desert with a criminal husband, saying that he took her with him to the Algerian desert, to the region of Reggane, to be a witness to the crimes of the country of lights (Kroum, 2024, p. 166). Here Nadine speaks of her French husband of Jewish origin, who directly represented the figure of colonial authority over Sbaï. Major David Johnson represents the image of the aggressive colonizer, and was the reason behind the change in the course of Sbaï's life, his conscription, and his being thrown into the Indochina war alongside Officer Dubosc.

The novelist writes that colonial France thinks only of its own interests, its expansion, reviving its economy and exporting coal to Europe; it seeks greatness and domination at the expense of the weak, and even when it carries out certain achievements, they are not meant for the eyes of the Algerians, or the "natives" as it calls them — which is why, when it built the railway from Oran to Béchar, it was dazzled by the gleam of coal for the sake of black gold (Kroum, 2024, p. 140). It burned human beings and everything green and dry without the slightest mercy or human conscience, subjecting the Algerian people to the most horrific forms of torment and death, and taking the lives of its sons unjustly and aggressively in massacres it committed across every region of Algeria.

The power of the colonizer, as an aggressor order of authority, imposed on Algerian youth participation in a war that was none of their concern, so that Sbaï found himself in Vietnam fighting peoples whose lands had been seized, side by side with a colonizer of his own country who practiced its injustice and discrimination against him and separated him from his fellow soldiers and army. Sbaï depicts and portrays the scenes in which he and all the peoples of the colonies thrown by the occupier into the Vietnam/Indochina war were subjected to discrimination and injustice, saying: in the camp in Vietnam we discovered the disparities between Arab conscripts and soldiers of French origin — we were not equal in worth, for the Westerners were housed in quarters befitting a first-class rank of conscript, while our lot was the tents, where every Arab conscript was equal, even the artists, medics, cooks, and others, and the doctrine in the camp turned into this: that no matter one's role in the mission, every man was a conscript who carried arms and took part in combat operations (Kroum, 2024, p. 191).

II. The Discourse of Resistance and the Tide of Globalization

1 — The Character of Sbaï / The Book, the Impregnable Fortress

The secret of Sbaï's attachment to his identity and his qasba lies in the Book (the Qur'an and its schooling), which was an impregnable fortress and a solid foundation on which to build a genuinely strong identity. Between the covers of his novel the writer offers us codes and messages calling for holding fast to identity and to communal points of reference, so as to affirm self-awareness of foreign stimuli in confronting what the Other offers and openness to his civilization. "In the beginning was the Book" — it was the cradle and the wellspring, the first and the last in that era, its walls sheltering him from the first thread of dawn until after the darkness of twilight had passed. It was nothing more than four mud-brick walls, roofed with palm trunks, between which ran close rows of palm-frond matting, divided into two sections: the first sheltering the young children

and girls of various ages, run by the student Gloush, and the second where the elders gathered around his grandfather Ahmed Al-Kaawi — that is, those who had passed the first decade of their lives (Kroum, 2024, p. 205). These were the first beginnings of the authentic formation that shaped him and into whose embrace he threw himself in his early years. He adds, in the same vein, that he joined his grandfather's circle and became very active in memorizing more of the Quranic chapters, becoming his constant companion, filling his slate with a quarter added by his grandfather to what his grandson had already memorized; his grandfather began him with a foundational text on Maliki jurisprudence, then a poem on Arabic grammar, opening his taste onto some classics of literature, requiring him to recite the Hamziyya ode on Friday nights and the Burda ode on Saturday nights, and continuing to have him read from Abu Tammam's *Diwan al-Hamasa* and Ibn Habib al-Halabi's *Nasim al-Saba* (Kroum, 2024, p. 127). This passage of the novel depicts the sound foundations that formed and refined Sbaï's character — from the Quranic school and the Qur'an to the classic works of grammar and jurisprudence. How could someone whose identity was built upon the Book and the Sunna and the classic works of language and grammar go astray, lose his way, efface his character, and shatter the sound foundations upon which he was formed? In addition, the value and sanctity accorded to one who has memorized the Qur'an grants him boundless confidence in his character no matter how young he is. The Hafiz, within the desert environment and through the novel *Al-Tarhan*, is shown to hold the highest standing in his society and family, making him fortified and an impregnable bastion against anything foreign to him. He speaks of the rituals of preparation for the ceremony honoring the huffaz (those who have memorized the Qur'an), saying that the family decided to set a date to celebrate his completion of memorization, and invitations were sent to guests from outside the qasba, and as the appointed day drew near — which he awaited with a heart parched from long drought — a strict order came from his grandfather for the family to prepare and cooperate so as to complete the rites and ceremonies of the celebration (Kroum, 2024, p. 130). Thus the novelist depicts the preparations for this momentous day, from outside and inside the Hafiz's family. Sbaï's mother, the protagonist's mother, for a month had thrown herself wholly into racing against time and overcoming fatigue to make her son's Hafiz crowning celebration a success, and would shake him and beam at him, saying: you have planted for yourself a tree in the forest that gives us dates and shelters us from the heat with its shade — God bless you, my son — she told him, her hand on his shoulder, her eyes searching his face (Kroum, 2024, p. 130). Thus Sbaï describes his mother's preparations and her words, which confirm what we have argued about the sound foundations on which our novel's hero was raised, especially what she said about the Qur'an's place in his soul, likening him to a palm tree. He continues until he reaches the appointed day, saying that the promised day came, and the whole world could not contain his joy — he bathed and perfumed himself, and his mother prepared him a bag containing a qandoura, a turban, and Arab trousers, all the color of snow, along with a kohl container and applicator and a bottle of perfume, and before he left she sealed him with a silver bee... when he came to the mosque... then the people rose and brought a woolen rug and made it a covering over them, and the elders of the town dressed him in the qandoura and turban, applied kohl to his eyes, and smeared his palms with henna (Kroum, 2024, p. 132). What value is this that the Hafiz of the Qur'an receives from the elders of his village — it is, indeed, a value and a sanctity without equal; it is a spirit, an identity, and a history that the boy Hafiz will never forget no matter how far and wide he roams the earth. Among the enduring customs on the day of the Hafiz celebration is a procession to greet the dead, so the people of the village circled with them around the cemetery, the celebrants repeating: God, Lord, Forgiving, Most Thankful, forgive us our sins and our errors... and in sum, his village's celebration of the Hafiz defies description, a scene that sends shivers through the body (Kroum, 2024, p. 132). Thus Sbaï describes the status and value of the Hafiz in his environment and village; from here comes protection, from here comes identity, and from here sound upbringing arises.

Despite the ideas and knowledge the hero Sbaï gained from his cultural interaction with the French culture that Madame Nary de Bermont, known as Nadine, taught him — which was a boon to him — he did not dissolve into French culture; rather he resisted the occupier and his culture and remained attached to his own character, indeed asserting it wherever he went, which is itself a form of resistance: the French I learned from you was my spoils in these two wars, and through it I have kept in touch here with people — glory to you, and a curse upon colonialism (Kroum, 2024, p. 205). He focused on spreading a spirit of civilizational communication with the Other and a rational openness to his culture, and urged peaceful coexistence with the Other anywhere on earth, in a spirit of humanity.

In this context we recall what the novelist Abdallah Kroum said in the cultural program *Qutuf Thaqafiya* broadcast on Boumerdès Radio, in his conversation with the journalist Ahlam Mazouni, speaking of the cultural systems carried by the novel: he mentions how such legendary figures multiply, as with the chickens on the day winter begins, and that the novel *Al-Tarhan* is built upon such systems, which carry both a positive and a negative side. There are three cultures: first, the Arab-Islamic-Amazigh culture, which is the culture of the self; second, the European-French culture, the culture of the Other; and third, the culture of the East Indies, the culture of an Other that is neither European nor Arab. The novel highlighted the positive aspects, and within the culture of the self we find discussion of the concern for Quranic teaching, calligraphy, manuscripts, and the crafting of life and of the foggara irrigation system (Mazouni, n.d., 2025).

2 Touat: The Narrative's Movement from the Local to the Global

The hero Sbaï chose his original local identity and remained attached to it, with all its foundations and constituents, preserving his cultural identity and civilizational belonging. His engagement with the Frenchwoman Nadine and her culture, and with

those he met in Vietnam and their culture, did not affect his communal values in dialogue and interaction with the Other; rather, his effectiveness in intellectual and humane activity only deepened in his local displacement (in Hammoudia, Berkane) within his Algerian milieu and his desert society and his Arab-Islamic nation, as well as in his displacement abroad — specifically in Vietnam, in the school where he taught children — as though putting into practice the testament of his great ancestor: all people, Arabs and non-Arabs, yellow, red, white and black, are begotten in wombs, their father is Adam and their mother Eve (Kroum, 2024, p. 17). The novel here points to the debate over identity and the racial discrimination existing among ethnicities and human races in the region, and is an explicit call for peaceful coexistence and the rejection of all markers of such distinction. The order of resistance in the novel is embodied in a long path taken by Sbaï and in his way of dealing with the Other, engaging with and getting to know him, without dissolving into him or abandoning his own identity. As soon as he arrives at the Frenchwoman Nadine's house and works in her garden, he lends it his desert touch, and this carries over into her studio, where he excels with his Arabic calligraphy, and his extraordinary ability to memorize and learn French comes as a blessing of the Qur'an he memorized at the hands of his elders. The same holds for his going to Vietnam and drawing close to the imam of its mosque and insisting that his marriage follow Islamic teachings, and his eventual return to his forgotten village and qasba — that in itself is resistance, among other cultural systems woven through the novel.

On this journey from the local to the global, the novelist says that from Béchar to Oran he then travels to Vietnam — East India and Buddhist culture — which one finds to be a serious culture that respects work and order, a culture of coexistence between the Dalai Lama and the Muslim sheikh, but also a culture of revolution: what the Vietnamese revolutionaries achieved with Giap and Ho Chi Minh is a model of giving and of fighting colonialism, though there are also dark sides — fanaticism, and some who show no tolerance for the Other alongside a sanctification of the leader, that is, the making of a tyrant (Mazouni, n.d., 2025).

Conclusion

In closing, it can be said that the study of cultural systems takes on particular importance, as it helps in understanding the mechanisms of cultural resistance that this desert society developed to preserve its identity in the face of attempts at alienation, Westernization, and globalization. From here, the novel *Al-Tarhan* represents a telling model of how narrative can be employed as a tool for expressing collective selfhood and defending cultural particularity in the face of modern and global challenges. This is precisely what the novelist Abdallah Kroum conveyed at the close of his press interview on the program *Qutuf Thaqafiya*, where he summed up his remarks on the desert novel and what it has offered Algerian literature, saying that such writings uncovered the region's tangible and intangible heritage and preserved its linguistic lexicon — many words having fallen out of daily use, their referents no longer existing — so that these writings restored their presence, among them *Al-Tarhan*, *Ghennouwa*, and what *Al-Zaiwani* also wrote, along with many other chronicles that recalled the heritage, if only to draw attention to its value; among them *Al-Shalali*, a corpus of amorous chronicling that many have never heard of, containing much praise poetry, satire, and much of life itself — love, poetry, and life — as well as tangible heritage such as manuscripts, whose value lies in the fact that a manuscript that is lost represents a loss of civilizational and epistemic depth; the *foggara* system, now on the verge of disappearing, whose meaning people used to ask about even before it was documented; and likewise the *qasba*, which in his own experience and that of *Al-Zawi* are much the same — mud houses — for people no longer live this way of life, but the book is a living memory against forgetting, and writing is a presence set against absence, against denial (Mazouni, n.d., 2025).

After this critical journey in which we have traced the narrative course of the text *Al-Tarhan*, and after pausing at certain stations to uncover the particulars of the narrative and to give voice to the desert and its symbolism in the face of the tide of globalization — the desert being both product and driver of the narrative — we can say that the novel *Al-Tarhan* by the writer Abdallah Kroum constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of contemporary Algerian narrative, not only because it belongs to what might be called desert literature, but because it represents a serious attempt to explore the cultural and civilizational depth of the societies of the Greater Desert, which for long periods remained on the margins of Arabic novelistic writing. This text does not content itself with folkloric description or an orientalist depiction of desert life, but goes beyond that to an attempt to understand the deep cultural systems that govern the behavior of the desert person and shape his vision of the world and of existence. The author has lent his text a profound desert dimension that can only be grasped through its contents, which are consistently marked by that desert pulse manifest in its vocabulary and meanings; on the other hand, he has given it a touristic dimension that makes it stand out all the more as what might be called desert tourism, thereby bringing the desert closer to the reader who tries to trace its footsteps and will find nothing but texts that treat the desert with all its features and distinguishing traits.

The novel *Al-Tarhan* also embodied, through its distribution of roles among the characters, a cultural and social space marked by hierarchy — a multi-criteria hierarchy that takes into account rank by age, sex, religion, social standing, culture, and politics. Cultural heritage likewise stood as a prominent feature on which the text relied in portraying its principal characters, foremost among them the hero, who moved from the local milieu to the national sphere marked by colonial conditions, and then to the global atmosphere that followed the Second World War.

The novelist Abdallah Kroum learned the alphabet of the word within a linguistic environment that began with the Quranic school, then was reinforced by formal schooling and all its educational stages, until that linguistic faculty matured within him in speech, writing, and communication, issuing forth once that capacity to give voice to place and to travel through time had been fully formed — engaging in dialogue with people and interacting with events and incidents in an interaction that draws its existence from reality while deploying the imagination. In this he became, in effect, the official spokesman of the qasba and its social fabric, and a tour guide for every lover of the desert sands, embodying in *Al-Tarhan* the social and political circumstances he himself lived through in the region of Touat.

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