

Ewa Machut-Mendecka

**The seventy-yard long chain.  
(The prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī)**

Odysseus had already abandoned his young and beautiful wife to begin dangerous travels. He was followed by hundreds of heroes of myths and legends who gave themselves up to the adventures far away from home. But they usually came back willingly to their homeland, while thinking of homeland alleviated the hard life they led in foreign lands. Surprisingly, contrary to this tradition, the travellers in the prose of a Libyan writer Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī (who wrote i.a. a long novel “The Magi” (Al-Mağūs) and many stories dealing with desert themes) go to the desert and never come back to their families.

These dramatic escapes and separations are, no doubt, related to the specificity of magic realism<sup>1</sup>, which is the convention of Al-Kawnī’s prose works. The nomads in his novels lead a hard and severe life permeated with a peculiar magic of the desert in which they throw all their soul wandering through the sandy dunes for weeks and weeks. Searching for their camels, dying of thirst, they meet hosts of desert demons – ġinns. In Al-Kawnī’s prose, realistic – or even naturalistic – scenes (pictures of death showing anatomical details) are interwoven with magic and symbolical scenes (belief in the power of certain signs, symbols, creatures and objects). The heroes’ everyday activities, as well as great events, are determined by both realistic circumstances and animistic beliefs, deeply rooted in the souls of the Muslims of the Sahara. This is an inseparable tie. Realistic scenes, without a magic background, do not justify here the reluctance of men towards women. In the light of day, when there is no time for reflection, magic and symbols, the brave Tuaregs in Al-Kawnī’s prose have every reason to live a happy life in conformity with the generally accepted canons:

“Ūḥā, a relative of the chief, came from a good family. He was tall, able, he wrote poems and songs. He mastered camel riding. He took part in three

<sup>1</sup> See Ewa Machut-Mendecka, Magic and realism of the desert (The prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī), “Studia Arabistyczne i Islamistyczne” 3, 1995, pp. 53-60.

campaigns to the Kūkū river. Tribal shaykhs extolled him to the skies. All the girls were in love with him and waited till he would draw in his horns and let them catch him for a husband.”<sup>2</sup>

Great men meet at every step lovely women, their future partners.

“He was told by his friends that the girl secretly wrote poems, which added charm to her. She was not tall nor slim, as the canons of desert beauty demand. All beautiful women in the desert are tall and slim. But Tānād made up for her modest posture with her charm, charm of her language, lovely face and eyes as well as the charm of secretly written poetry. Bold and roguish eyes did not match the girl...”<sup>3</sup>

The realities foretell an idyll which ends up with a catastrophe for many a protagonist in the prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī. To this catastrophe there leads a complicated desert system of values with all its wealth of beliefs and rituals. On the desert route, the invention and ingenuity may be risky, so it is better to keep to traditional norms and verified schemata. Everything has its own place here, and numerous amulets, talismans and spells serve this order.

Only a woman is approached with mixed feelings by the Tuaregs. This confusion is perhaps caused by the excess of the authorities in the shape of the laws of nature, Islamic teaching and own specific tradition. Nature is an ally of the woman and puts her in the position of its own missionary:

“Who, if not a woman, saved the offsprings of the desert people from destruction? Who in the desert, besides a woman, deserves to be extolled? Who is treated like a sacred figure and who is adored by the knights?”<sup>4</sup>

Islam is propitious to the woman. The nomads in the novel “The Ore” (At-Tibr) know a ḥadīṭ in which the Prophet Muḥammad says that a woman – along with perfumes and prayer – is one of the three nicest things in the world.<sup>5</sup>

In the Tuareg tribes there sound the echoes of the matriarchate: in “The Magi” the power is inherited by the chief’s nephew but it so happens unhappily that the sultan of Timbuktu has no sister and the people are reluctant to see the sultan’s son on the throne.

The old Tuareg legends, in turn, are unfavourable to the woman, give her the shape of a viper and burden with responsibility for the expulsion of their forefather from the paradise oasis of Wāw, lost in the sands of the desert. The viper, which has always been suspected of collusion with a woman, is a magic creature that is capable of unusual deeds; it may make people blind with its very sight (“The Magi”) and it is hard to kill it (“The Sip of Blood” – Ğur‘a min dam). The viper and the snake cause trouble to the bravest

<sup>2</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Al-Mağūs*, Limassol 1992, vol. I, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *At-Tibr*, London 1990, p. 70.

Tuaregs, though they can make friends with them, and in order to protect themselves against bad fortune the latter use amulets made of snakeskin.

They treat the woman ambivalently, too. The Tuareg way of thinking and valuing things, however, is not favourable to her. For the nomads in the novels and short stories of Al-Kawnī, hard facts mean less than any alleged hidden truth. And if the woman has two faces – one real and beautiful and the other one symbolical and gloomy – the Tuaregs usually see the latter:

“Women are small and delicate, but they are cruel monsters which lead a helpless man to hell on the seventy-yard-long chain.”<sup>6</sup>

Women are terrifying because they make use of an unfailing chain connected with the everlasting magic of the figure seven. No wonder the nomads escape to the desert to be farther away from their homes. Amazingly, as times goes by and as they suffer hardships, they do not miss their homes and do not think of going back home. With all their fear of the hell of women, they act against natural instincts and they themselves view this situation as conflicting. The conflict subsides amidst the blooming grass of the steppe (“The Golden Sand”) or under the sky-high mountain peaks (“The Magi”), but it revives as the fascination with the nature weakens.

The woman and the desert draw the hearts of the Tuaregs in two opposite directions: towards love and towards freedom. Outside the world of the prose of Al-Kawnī, the two concepts are the subject of never-ending theoretical considerations and it is worthwhile noting here that they are i.a. regarded as contradicting and antagonistic values. For example, in the opinion of Tadeusz Kobierzycki “love and freedom may become distinguished in the development as conflicting or even antagonistic categories”.<sup>7</sup>

This shows (and this concept is confirmed by others<sup>8</sup>) that the concepts of love and freedom are at variance, but the conflict will cease (or should cease) to exist in the course of time. For Erich Fromm in his *The Art of Loving*, however, the two concepts are not antagonistic, and freedom is even a prerequisite for love.<sup>9</sup>

For men in the prose of Al-Kawnī “the hell of women” is a major threat, because the mentions of the magical chain are frequently found.<sup>10</sup> The conflict between love and freedom is one of the main dilemmas of this prose.

<sup>6</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, op. cit., vol. II, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Tadeusz Kobierzycki, *Między miłością a wolnością (o psychologii zniewolenia dziecka)* (Between love and freedom (on psychology of child captivation), “Albo, albo. Inspiracje Jungowskie” no. 0, 1991, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Halina Romanowska-Łakomy, *Terapia wolności*, “Albo, albo. Inspiracje Jungowskie” no. 1, 1992, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Erich Fromm, *O sztuce miłości (The Art of Loving)*, Warszawa 1994, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Al-Mağūs*, op.cit., vol. I, p. 16; vol. II, pp. 28, 169; *Waṭan ar-ru’ya as-samāwiyya*, in: Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Dīwān an-naṭr al-barri*, Cyprus 1991, pp. 15, 23.

### The hell of women

The question arises whether the inhabitants of the desert have reasons to fear their women or is this fear the result of a colourful imagination of the Tuaregs? The novels and short stories of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī quickly resolve this issue, because they approach it in real – almost earthly-minded – categories and present it in scenes in which one can hardly find a special in-depth semantics. Nevertheless, they prove at the very first sight that in the stories with a *chāin* there is something true, since the desert beauties learn from the very early childhood how to attract and captivate men. They are encouraged by the tradition developing from times immemorial and preserved by their mothers and nurse-maids, often being half-witches of secret descent and connections with the peoples from the African interior. By use of magic spells, amulets and talismans they pass to the young girls they take care of their secret knowledge of the best ways of choosing clothes, perfumes, hair styles and jewellery. The painstaking daily ritual of creating a young beauty is supposed to lead her to meet her destiny. If well-prepared, she is able to cope with it and ensure prosperity and life-long happiness for herself. Although the ritual takes place in a fairy-land atmosphere accompanied by the magic, the destiny to which it leads a woman is indisputable and concrete. Besides, it escapes any symbolical approaches:

“The man is the destiny of a woman. He is the only goal of her life. All the women who searched for something else and wanted to get to know other secrets, perished. Everything God created in this world has its sense. Since He created a woman as a beautiful creature, the man is the one who will gather these fruits. The fruit will fade and decay if it is not gathered in time. A smart woman knows this truth and she gets ready for the harvest. A real woman adorns and makes herself more beautiful, thus becoming attractive and lovely, which is consistent with the nature of the world and the will of gods. A clever woman always feels happy. The other, the foolish one, is an unhappy creature, since the man is not sufficient for her and she seeks still something different in life.”<sup>11</sup>

The old Hausa nurse-maid who propounds this theory (“The Magi”) says that woman's and man's arguments are divergent, which leads in the longer run to the conflict of love and freedom. In this approach, women are anxious to become submissive to the men, with their eyes fixed on them they hypnotise and captivate them. Along with the developing love, the mutual captivation grows. In Al-Kawnī's works, different couples inevitably succumb to this law. Mothers who love their sons too much try to incapacitate them (e.g.

<sup>11</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Al-Mağūs*, op. cit., vol. II, p. 287.

in the novel “The Bleeding Stone” – Nazīf al-ḥaḡar – or in the short story “The Trap” – Al-Faḥḥ); Tāmḡarit in “The Magi” resorts to drastic measures:

“I wanted to tie him down by the only tie which may tie the man with the earth: a woman. I made him get married...”<sup>12</sup>

All the love liaisons bring the feeling of desperation and tragic intricacies, and “the man pays a lot for love and passion”<sup>13</sup>. For example, a young fiancée in “The Magi” demands as wedding gift (mahr): “forty pure-bred female camels, ten camels, a saddle of Kano, thirty silk dresses and fifteen blankets made of mountain dyed wool, three leather tents and three further tents made of the hair of a camel or goat, and, in addition, gold and silver jewellery.”<sup>14</sup>

The Tuareg women in Al-Kawnī’s books love jewels, luxury and the expression of admiration in the eyes of men humbly awaiting at the gate of enchanted gardens where the beauties of paradise walk. However, the inhabitants of the desert do not appreciate thus organized paradise and call it the “hell of women”.

#### The paradise of men

Men run away from women not only in fear of love restraining their movements. They escape from all limitations and avoid everything that may stop them from wandering through the desert. A woman – or perhaps her demands to a larger extent – is one of the obstacles here; others include habits, trammels and inconsiderate involvement in the system of relations hampering the dynamics of movement. If man stays at some place for more than forty days, he is a slave.<sup>15</sup> The settled life is so disgusting to one of the sultans of Timbuktu that he renounces the throne and chooses free wanderings through the desert (“The Magi”). For the Tuaregs, freedom means independence of their own longing, lack of sensitivity to the needs of body and whims of soul. Al-Kawnī’s heroes again and again resort to asceticism which lessens their dependence on the desert and alleviates the excessive emotions and worries. When faced with more painful experiences, the nomads refrain from meals and fast until their clouded mind regains the state of equilibrium. “The people of the desert hate satiety”<sup>16</sup> since it leads to laziness and the weakening of vigilance. That is why they succumb to their peculiar diffi-

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., vol. I, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, Waṭan ar-ru’ya as-samāwiyya, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, Al-Maḡūs, op. cit., pp. 224-225.

<sup>15</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, Al-Maḡūs, Ṭarāblus 1991, p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, Al-Faḥḥ, in: Dīwān an-naṭr al-barrī, op. cit., p. 58.

cult freedom, fight with the desert, hot wind and the phantom of death of thirst. They enter this state from the early childhood. The fraternizing with the desert is a form of initiation into the adult life. Already a six-year-old boy (“The Magi”) sets out with goats and sheep to distant pastures, where he meets the “desert – his second mother.”<sup>17</sup> He will return to it only as a young man, able to bridle the most unruly camel and to hunt the fastest gazelle. The woman is a rival of the desert. At this point there occurs the set of events which might be called “Al-Kawnī’s schema”: young man finds a female partner and then he feels such an unbearable discomfort and captivity – the “hell of women” – that he abandons his home and escapes to the desert. Among these desperadoes there is a herdsman Awdād of “The Magi”, who loses his beautiful voice on a wedding night and after seven days of marriage he runs away back to the mountains. In the same novel, a young Adda, a would-be clever tribal chief leaves his wife and renounces women altogether. Similar is the behaviour of a nameless Tuareg in the short story “The Homeland of Heavenly Visions” (Wāṭan ar-ru’ya as-samāwiyya), although he has a different motivation, being more and more overwhelmed by the settled life in the oasis. It is not amazing then that the herdsman Iḥnāḥūn (“The Ore”) “exchanges” his wife and son for his favourite camel and sets out into the steppe. Each of the nomads chooses a solitary life for different reasons, but all of them are equally attracted by desert wanderings. Men experience a second (after leaving home in childhood) initiation through a second deep penetration into the desert and severing family ties. Yet the first initiation ran along the laws of nature, while the second one denies them. A Tuareg boy struggled with the realities of nature, while a mature wanderer – an ascetic – yields to the magic of the desert making him feel euphoria of freedom and life in the state of continuing threat. People speak of the desert in a good or bad way in al-Kawnī’s prose works:

“Marzūq remembers those years. He saddles his camel and leaves for the steppe for days or even weeks. All his companions are the horizon, fata morgana and emptiness. Hunger makes him eat the leaves of the tamarisk and roots of the lotus. He almost dies of thirst. He drinks camel’s blood and finally he is saved by a wanderer. Some other time, he comes back feeling shame, unconscious, his head hanging down, barefooted, crazy because of enormous thirst.”<sup>18</sup>

and:

“I awfully miss the desert. I would drink the female camels’ milk and eat roots and truffles. I would hunt gazelles and kill two of them each year. What times those were! The desert is God’s paradise and it is the most wonderful

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Al-Ġizlān*, in: *Dīwān an-naṭr al-barrī*, op.cit., p. 95.

shelter for man. It also had been a shelter for the prophets: Muḥammad, Jesus or Moses.”<sup>19</sup>

The desert is a paradise and hell at the same time. I assume that these two antithetical concepts neutralize each other in Al-Kawnī’s prose, in which symbols and hard facts have the same rights. If we make this assumption, the wanderer moves in emptiness and has only his own company. This concept is confirmed by the mythology of the desert in the shape of a colourful story about the lost oasis Wāw, which was a place of relief for the wanderers who suffered greatest hardships:

“The lost wanderer felt hunger, but before he opened his mouth to say something there arrived a procession of beautiful houris wearing transparent clothes and colourful tulles. Green veils on their hair flowed onto their rounded shoulders and firm breasts. Red transparent ankle-length dresses underlined limber and slim bodies. On their legs glittered gold rings, on small hands shone silver bracelets, pearl and diamond necklaces around their necks, sapphire ear-rings hang down from their ears. They brought the best meals on gold plates and they placed silver spoons and put gold cups with the best beverages beside the wanderer. The guest understood that the inhabitants of the oasis did not use words but communicated using the language of thought and soul.”<sup>20</sup>

In the paradise oasis, the wanderers find luxury which they cannot get in the desert and meet women who do not threaten them with a chain and trammels. The opinions about Wāw differ: everybody is looking for this oasis, but according to an old Tuareg woman it is a *fata morgana*.<sup>21</sup> In both cases the ancient holy myth of paradise speaks the stronger, the more arid is the land under the wanderer's feet. The myth fills the emptiness. The experienced Tuaregs know this truth and even though they yield to the magic of the desert like others, they can infallibly tell the laws of nature from mythology. They are fully aware of physically measurable emptiness of the desert. The wanderer overcomes it thanks to his strength, courage, resistance, dexterity etc. He derives joy from these successes and the free wandering over large areas of the desert gives him a chance for successive victories. Only due to their own perfection do the nomads praise a difficult desert freedom. And the old clever Tuaregs, while not neglecting the expression of the paradise oasis, see it deeply in human heart:

“Who of us did not look for Wāw? I, too, looked for it at one time. That’s my secret.

Then he touched his chest with his hand and said:

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *Al-Mağūs*, vol. I, pp. 312 - 313.

<sup>21</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

And if you do not find it here, you will not meet it in any other place even though you would fast for a thousand years.”<sup>22</sup>

Wāw cannot be reached because of the burden, dependence and longing rising in the contacts with the world. The seclusion in the desert brings one closer to the paradise which has the shape of a sanctified nature with all its virtues and without its vices. For thus conceived sanctity the realities of life must be rejected. Freedom is the means to the end, while love, as perceived by the inhabitants of the desert, becomes an obstacle. The prose of Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī owes its dramaturgy and reflectiveness to this way of perceiving. Acute and dynamic clash of the various values, including love and freedom, keeps one in suspense until the moment when it turns out that it leads to nowhere. The prize for the hardships and sweat is the *fata morgana* and this is the dramatic dimension of the prose of Al-Kawnī. Then the reflection arises that philosophers and wise men may be right in saying that love and freedom are a pair of friendly and mutually indispensable values.

<sup>22</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 186.