Vegetarianism in Modern Arabic literature

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If it's so rare to see vegetarian characters in the international fiction, it's even rarer in the contemporary Arabic narratives. Yet it's common to find them in classic Sufi and religious literature (al-Rūmī, al-Maʿarrī, Iḫwān al-Ṣafāʾ) and collections of tales. After a historical survey about the Prophet's and Sufis' positions on vegetarian food, excerpts from *Kalīla wa Dimna* and other fables, we start with Maḥfuẓ's *Bidāya wa Nihāya* ("The Beginning and The End;" 1949), where vegetarianism comes "from necessity," is marginal and treated with humour. The real focus of this article is the novel *Nazīf al-ḥağar* ("The Bleeding of the Stone;" 1991), by the Libyan writer Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī. From Sufism it draws its themes and suggests sustainable models for human interactions with nonhuman animals and environments. This novel helps us to link ecocriticism, in its vegetarian/vegan declinations, with decolonial or postcolonial theory. Apart from that, it can be analyzed through the lens of eco-feminism, human-animal studies and biopolitics approaches. To better understand the context that underlies vegetarianism in the Arabic literary arena, I try to analyze two other contemporary novels that offer interesting insights and perspectives, even if they don't present this theme as pivotal. *Min ḫašab wa ṭīn* ("Made of wood and clay;" 2021) by the Moroccan writer and poet Muḥammad al-Aš'arī, suggests a selective vegetarianism, connected to a perspective of ecocritical philosophy of life, adopted by two socially different characters. The last text to be analyzed in this article, *Krīsmās fi Makka* ("Christmas in Mecca;" 2019), by the Iraqi writer Aḥmad Ḫayrī al-'Umarī, carves a young vegan character to shed light into issues of social identity in the Western countries diaspora.

Keywords: animal, meat, ecology, desert, novel, sufism.

1. Introduction: vegetarianism and the ecocriticism field

Despite the abundance of novels focusing on dystopian environmental catastrophes, Arabic literature remains still at the margins of the global dialogue on ecological and environmental concerns in literary

studies.[1] Ecocriticism has been defined as "the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach, or conversely, the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text" (Slovic 2000: 160).

In recent years, theories of ecocriticism have been applied to a number of Arabic literary texts (Elmusa 2013; Sinno 2013; Fouad and Alwakeel 2013; Ramsay 2014).

These theories are used to a certain extent in studies of Arabic speculative fiction (Rooke 2017), as well as novels that focus on encounters between humans, animals and the land (Olszok 2020), but Arabic ecocriticism needs to be explored further.[2] Inside this specific area, vegetarianism in modern and contemporary Arabic literature lies in a waste land, without any specific research.

In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism,*[3] Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin examine relationships between humans, animals and the environment in postcolonial texts, such as the politics of eating and representations of animality and spirituality, and the place of the human and the animal in a 'posthuman' world.[4]

To better understand the cultural context in which the very few contemporary Arabic literary texts are inserted, it seems necessary to provide a short overview of vegetarian practices from ancient times and the Islamic background.

Nazīf al-ḥağar ("The Bleeding of the Stone;" 1991)[5] by the Libyan writer Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī[6] seems not disconnected from this cultural heritage, and it still represents a very rare, if not unique, case in

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[1] It's worth mentioning that the 15th EURAMAL (European Association of Modern Arabic Literature) conference, hosted by Charles University in Prague, in May 2024, had the title 'Ecocritical Approaches and Environmental Issues in Modern Arabic Literature.'

[2] In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryll Glotfelty stresses the need to open up to a realm beyond Anglophone literatures, including languages such as Arabic. See the brand-new essay by Savvas (2024).

[3] Divided into two sections, the first one considers the postcolonial from an environmental and the second a zoocritical perspective.

[4] Postcolonialism is often seen as anthropocentric, primarily concerned with social justice and emphasising concepts such as hybridity and displacement. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is often considered to be earth-centred, primarily concerned with animal rights and environmental conservation, emphasising natural purity and 'belonging.' Postcolonial writers and activists were focusing on the environment long before ecocriticism as a field had developed. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin demonstrate the complementarity of these two fields in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment.*

[5] When not otherwise specified, translations from Arabic are mine.

[6] Born in 1948 in Libya's Fezzan region, he learned to read and write Arabic only at the age of 12. Later, he went to Moscow to study comparative literature and worked as a journalist. Since 1993, he has been living in Switzerland. He has written over 80 books, including novels, short stories, poems and aphorisms. His works have been translated into more than 35 languages.

the Modern Arabic Literature. Its story offers a perfect example of representation of a specific environment (the Sahara desert) that might deeply affect both the cultural and material relationships between human and non-human animals. Even our complicated socio-political relationships with other humans as well as with the environment, tend in fact to reflect such complexity in the treatment of non-human animals.

The novel suggests in an effective way that speciesism,[7] the belief that humans have the right to use non-human animals in exploitative ways, also tends to endorse racist, sexist, and other prejudicial views, which arrive to justify systems of inequality and colonial oppression, or horizontal colonialism.

Derrida (1991) coined the term 'carnophallogocentrism' to identify the social, linguistic, and material practices that imply being a meat eater, a male, and an authoritative speaking self.

The biopolitics perspective foregrounds that biopower, relying on the species divide, symbolically 'animalizes' different social groups to provide ethical justification for their exploitation.[8] Therefore, it affirms a connection between human and animal exploitation. The message of the novel, supported by on Sufi and ethical religious principles as a form of affirmative biopolitics, can challenge the present cultural system and even break the epistemological categories that legitimise both forms of exploitation.

2. The road to vegetarianism, from the Prophet Muḥammad to Sufism

Although the majority of Muslims are meat eaters and vegetarian philosophy finds difficulties to open its way in the Arab world, the Prophet's earliest biographies showed his universal compassion for all the creatures. He spoke out against the mistreatment of camels and the use of birds as targets of marksmen. Muḥammad was said to prefer vegetarian foods, such as milk diluted with water, to eat only pomegranates, grapes, and figs for weeks at a time. Some sayings attributed to the Prophet concern this theme. One of these says: "Do not allow your stomachs to become graveyards!"

[7] Philosophers and animal rights advocates state that speciesism plays a role in the animal–industrial complex, factory farming, animal slaughter, blood sports, taking of animals' fur and skin, and experimentation on animals. For further insights into speciesism see many essays by Donna J. Haraway, in particular *When Species Meet* (2008).

[8] Michel Foucault was the first to theorize biopolitics, in the final part of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), entitled "Right of Death and Power over Life."

This was considered a *ḥadīṯ*,[9] but the attribution is uncertain and devoid of a chain of narration (*isnād*). Others maintain it's a saying of his cousin 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.[10] At another time, when his companions asked him: "Shall we be rewarded for showing kindness to the animals also?" Muḥammad said "A reward is given in connection with every living creature."[11]

Sufis believe that by pledging allegiance to Muḥammad spiritually they may connect with God and purify their heart. Rumi attributes his self-control and abstinence from worldly desires as qualities attained by him through the guidance of Muḥammad.

Apart from their strict observance of Islamic law, Sufis have also developed a detailed system of food practices and etiquettes, since eating is both an intimate and social activity.[12] Restricting their food intake was therefore seen as a very practical step in order to prepare the body and soul to approach the divine. Prescribing abstinence from the pleasures of food at the beginning of the Sufi path is almost universal in the early sources. The addiction to meat is even compared to that to alcohol at times (Karamustafa 2007: 40; Abuali 2022: 56).[13]

Rumi was a staunch vegetarian, even vegan, shunning milk and dairy products. He believed that all lives are sacred and therefore refrained from sacrificing animals on religious feasts. He was convinced that what we eat directly influences our thinking. If we eat an animal, its blood and gore would make us act like a slaughterer.

If we consider only two excellent examples of classic popular literature, we may quote *The Animals' Lawsuit Against Humanity,* and one story of *Kalīla wa Dimna*.

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[9] Muhammad al-Munawi, Fayd al-Qadīr. *Sharh al-Jami' as-Saghīr* 2/52

https://islam.stackexchange.com/questions/47165 (assessed June 2024).

[10] Mohammad Nasr ad-Dīn Muhammad 'Uwaida, *Fasl al-Khitāb* 2/526, quoted from source identification – What is the authenticity of the hadith "do not make your stomach a graveyard of animals"? • Islam Stack Exchange.

[11] Literally for "every animal having a moist liver," quoted from Riyad as-Salihin 126 – The Book of Miscellany, in: http://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:126.

[12] Food is one of the most commonly mentioned themes in Sufi biographies and hagiographies The bodily practices that govern eating, from the tools that are required during meals, to the way in which people sit around a table-spread, and to the order in which food items are consumed, serve to reshape the experience of eating into an expression of belonging to a community. For further studies, see Blankinship (2019).

[13] The same issue is discussed in the Libyan novel here discussed. Sufis looked upon excessive eating and copulation as the major media of distraction. In *Kasr al-šahwatayn* ("Curbing the Two Appetites"), al-Ġazālī (1058-1111), the leading theologian and synthesizer of Sunni and Sufi perceptions of Islam, gives us the key on how to fight the urge to indulge food and sex. See Salamah-Qudsi (2019: 420).

In the first text, an ecological fable by one member of the *Iḫwān al-Ṣafā'* ('The Brethren of Purity'), written in the tenth century, representatives of all members of the animal Kingdom come before the respected Spirit King to complain of the dreadful treatment they suffer at the hands of humankind:

> Sheep jumped in, adding: "If you could see with your own eyes, our Lord and King, how they steal our infants and young, separating mother from child in order to drink our milk; and how they bind up the legs of our children and carry them away to be killed; how our young are beaten and left hungry and thirsty, crying and moaning in suffocating fear. If you could see how we are slaughtered and our skins stripped away and our bodies cut open... Then in their markets, there are merchants selling meat cooked in pots, meat roasted on spits, meat baked in ovens or fried in pans!" (*Iḫwān al-Ṣafā'* 2005: 4)

The antecedents of this tale are thought to have originated in India, exactly like the collection of *Kalīla wa Dimna*, following a long tradition of animal fables used for didactic and religious purposes. Here one can detect Buddhist influences, or it's likely that Indians selected and modified it from other fables, in order to illustrate the virtues observed by the Buddha in each of his lives, on his road to enlightenment. The (tenth) story recounts of a lioness that went out hunting. While she was gone a horseman, armed with bow and arrow, killed and skinned her cubs. When the lioness came back and saw them she wept and wailed. When the jackal, that was close to her, heard the lioness' story, instead of sympathizing, told her that the action of the horseman was no different to her own actions, as her prey also had parents who grieved the loss of their children. The easy moral is sinthesized in the ending lines of the story:

> ولما علمت اللبوة أن ذلك بما كسبت يدها من ظلم الوحوش رجعت عن صيدها وزمت نفسها وصارت تقنع بأكل النبات وحشيش الفلوات[14].

> When the lioness knew that this (the killing of her cub) was due to the injustice she had caused to the wild beasts, she stopped hunting and restrained herself and began to be content with eating plants and wild grass (*Kalīla wa Dimna*).[15]

Abū'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (973-1057), syrian philosopher and poet, the most famous vegan of his time, advocated for the protection of animals in his works. In a couplet he wrote: "People catch the flea and

[14] نفحة اليمن فيما يزول بذكره الشجن - ذَهَبِ - مكتبة الشاملة - صفحة - 186 (thahabi.org)

[15] The story has a sequel: "One day, two doves approached her and scolded her for eating all the fruit, thus depriving many animals of their daily food. The lioness profusely apologised and from that day on only ate grass and plants."

kill in; with the other hand they give alms to the poor. Better it is to free the flea (and not to kill it) than to give alms to the poor."[16]

The real reasons for his behaviour towards animals are clearly exposed in his epistles and even in his *Luzūmiyyāt*. He renounced meat out of pity for the animals[17] and urged people to treat them well and protect them.

The influences which led al-Ma'arrī to asceticism and, in particular, to veganism, can be situated mainly in Hinduism and Greek philosophy. Many had attributed his veganism to the influence of Brahmanism. Laoust has pointed out that Hindu ideas were so widespread that he could have been inspired by them. According to others, the ideas of the Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Diogenes the Cynic, had been transmitted to the Islamic world through Arab translators and commentators. Some even claim that in the *Luzūmiyyāt* one could find the influence of the doctrine of the Stoics, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus (Ghali 1981: 102).

3. *Bidāya wa Nihāya:* vegetarianism out of necessity

Reflection about vegetarianism in a completely different atmosphere is present in the novel *Bidāya wa Nihāya* ("The Beginning and The End")[18] by Nağīb Maḥfūẓ (1949).[19] The treatment of the theme is limited to only one scene, where the writer mentions the Syrian philosophy al-Ma'arrī, and the general tone is very humouristic. It's a vegetarianism out of necessity, for people who could not afford buying meat, in other words a synonim of poverty.[20]

In Cairo, a petty bourgeois family in the early thirties of the last century suddenly became poor after the death of the father. Ḥasan, the eldest son, complained about the monotony of the poor food they are obliged to eat:

[16] Quoted from World Vegetarian Congress 1957 (www.ivu.org)

[17] "Yet he believed that well that God has given man the freedom and power to treat animals as he pleases" (Blankinship 2019 and Ghali 1981).

[18] The novel tells the woes of a petit bourgeois family, sort of microcosm of the Egyptian nation's, during the third decade of the XX century. When the father dies, the economic stability collapses and one of the sons gets involved in drugs and illicit sex. Even Nafīsa, the only daughter, falls prey of prostitution and pays for that sin, prompted by one of her brothers, to save the family honour.

[19] The English translation is referred to by BAE all throughout this text.

[20] In the Egyptian dialect the word *qurdaḥī* stands for a 'simple food, without meat' (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 692).

"الفول غذائي الوحيد، فول، فول !الحَمير تجد شيئًا من التنويع"

(Maḥfūẓ 1965: 118)

"I eat nothing but beans. Beans. Always beans. Even donkeys get a change in diet" (BAE 1989: 137).

The suggestive and humorous link between fava beans, humans and animals,[21] will remain a common denominator in many Egyptian novels and films.

In a later scene of the same novel, an exciting dialogue takes place when Ḥasan unexpectedly visits his family after a long break, with a purse in his hand. Ḥasan asks them:

"متى أكلتم اللحم آخرَ مرة؟"

فيرد حسين ، أحد ألإخوة ، ساخرًا :" الحقُّ أنَّا نسينا، دعني أتذكَّر قليلًا .. تتخايلُ لعيني شريحةُ لحم في ظلام الذكريات، ولكن لا أدري أين ولا متى؟". ثم يضيف ضاحكًا " نحن أسرةٌ فلسفية على مذهب المعرّي".

فيتساءل حسن: " ومَن يكون المعري هذا؟ .. أحد أجدادنا؟"

" كان فيلسوفًا رحيمًا، ومِن أي رحمته أنه امتنَع عن أكل اللحوم رحمةً بالحيوان!"

(Maḥfūẓ 1965: 164)

"When did you last eat meat?"

"To tell you the truth, we've forgotten. Give me a moment to try to remember," Hussein said sarcastically. "If I draw on obscure memories, I'm able to visualize the last slice of meat I've eaten. But I don't remember when or where. We're a philosophical family. Following the principles of al Maarri," he added with a laugh. "Who is this Ma'arri? One of our forefathers?" Hassan inquired.

"A merciful philosopher. So merciful toward animals that he abstained from eating their flesh" (BAE 1989: 194).

Ḥasan's conclusion is: "Now I understand why the government opens schools. It does this to make you hate eating meat so as to have all the meat for itself" (BAE 1989: 194). It is functional in that scene to expand its humourous mood, moving directly to a socio-political issue, stressing with a strong irony the invalidness of culture and education in Egypt, and suggesting that the parallel humans/ animals springs from the food that they are obliged to eat: in common people's minds *fūl* (fava beans) is supposed to devaluate the person and reduce a human to an animal condition, specially a donkey.

[21] We will find the same theme at the beginnings of the Iraqi novel of which we will write in this article, as vegan food is described by the protagonist's mother as 'not human.'

4. *Nazīf al-ḥağar* [22]

> There is not an animal on the earth, nor a flying creature on two wings, but they are peoples like unto you.
>
> The Koran (Sura 6, vs. 38)

It's not by chance that the first epigraph chosen by al-Kawnī to start his novel is taken from the Koran, since the intimate religious spirit that overwhelms it can give a key to understand many nuances of the whole text. Neither is casual the choice of the main character's name, Asūf, that means in 'mankind' or 'solitude,' in the writer's Tuareg mothertongue. Another strange coincidence is the writer's surname, al-Kawnī, means also 'universal' in Arabic. His birthplace, which forms the geographical center of this fictional universe, is situated between two diametrically opposing social and philosophical forces.

Southern Libya is a desertic world of myth, magic and superstition. The Northern area, including many Arab cities of the coast, is a place associated with mechanized technology and warfare. The cultural gap between the natives of the Sahara and the northern Libyan ones is huge, due to the presence of foreign colonizers.

The diegetic time of the novel is not so clear, but can be situated between the Italian conquest of Libya and the Fascist defeat of the Second World War.

The protagonist Asūf not only guards the *waddān* (the mouflon), around which humans weave myths of sacredness, magical abilities, ferocity and superb meat, but is also spiritually united with the desert and its creatures (Colla 2018).

Asūf's father once made a vow that he would not hunt *waddān*, because it saved his life. As a true Sufi, he used to admire the beauty of the gazelle. But to feed his family, during a famine, he broke his vow and killed a *waddān*. Then he was killed by another *waddān,* as atonement for his sin. One day, after his father's death, Asūf sees him through the eyes of the *waddān*.

[22] Asūf is a young Bedouin who lives in the southern Libyan Desert, tending to his goats. His father taught him that the *waddān* (mouflon), a type of wild sheep, is the spirit of the mountains of Massak Satfat. Asūf's father, while hunting the animal, finds himself in a perilous situation, hanging between life and death. A *waddān* rescues and saves him, causing him to vow to never hunt or go near the animal again. However, after years of harsh drought, he has to break his vow and hunt for food. Eventually, a *waddān* kills Asūf's father. Since only Asūf knows exactly where the *waddān* is to be found, two ruthless Arab hunters (Cain and Mas'ud) ask him to find the *waddān* for them, but he refuses to give them any information. When they return from their search, Cain ties Asūf up, drags him to a rock and kills him.

Al-Kawnī calls here and in many other writings (al-Kawnī 1999: 40) for a spiritual relationship and understanding between man and eco-system, made of respect, reverence and balance for a harmonious existence. One of the main devices used in the novel is the blurring of line between human and the non-human. And even the forementioned quote from Koran highlights the oneness between man and the non-human world.

The writer points out how nature's balance is broken due to the humans' selfishness. Al-Kawnī wrote a sort of ecological fable "teeming with mythical and mystical undertones and a celebration of traditional, intuitive practices in preserving the desert and its inhabitants against systems of corruption instigated by modern (Western) technology" (Almwajeh and Neimneh 2022: 121).

4.1. Virility and vegetarianism

In one of the first dialogues between Asūf and one of two Arab hunters (interestingly, the narrator doesn't reveal his name, then the reader discovers he is Cain, son of Adam), when Asūf get bewildered by his craze for meat, he gets his immediate answer:

و هل في الدنيا ألذ من اللحم؟ كل شيء يبدأ و ينتهي باللحم. المرأة أيضًا لحم. هل سبق لك و ذقت لحم المرأة؟

هز أسوف رأسه بالنفي ، و تألقت عيناه بالقلق، فأضاف الرجل ضاحكًا:

ـ أنت مسكين إذن. لم تأكل لحم المرأة. إنه ألذ اللحوم، باستثناء لحم الغزلان، باستثناء لحم الخرفان، باستثناء لحم الودان. ها . ها. كل اللحوم لذيذة. هل تذوقت لحم ال ؟

صرخ أسوف في هلع :

ـ لا لا أنا لم أذق اللحم . أنا لا آكل اللحم.

ـ لا تأكل اللحم؟ و ماذا تفعل بحياتك إذن؟

تفكر الرجل قليلاً ثم قال:

ـ و لكن معك حق. من لا يأكل اللحم لا بد أن يبتعد عن الناس. ليس من العبث أنك اخترت الحياة في هذا الخلاء الخالي. لأن من لا يأكل اللحم لا يحيا. أنت لست حيًا. انت ميت.

(al-Kawnī 1999: 20)

"Is there anything in the world tastier than meat? Everything begins and ends with meat. Woman's meat too. Have you ever tasted a woman's meat?"

Asūf shook his head, the anxiety shining in his eyes.

"You're a poor devil, then," the man went on, laughing. "You've never enjoyed a woman's meat. It's the tastiest of all. Apart, that is, from gazelle's meat and lamb's meat and the meat from the waddan." He laughed again. "Every sort of meat's tasty. Have you ever eaten?"

"No," Asūf cried out, dismayed. "No! I haven't had any sort of meat. I don't eat meat."

"You don't eat meat? What sort of life's that?"

The man reflected for a while.

> "Well," he said finally, "it makes sense. If you don't eat meat, then you have to live apart from other people. I see now why you've chosen to live in this empty wilderness. If a man doesn't eat meat, then he doesn't live. You're not alive at all. You're dead!"
> (BOS 2002:14)

In her seminal text, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams addresses the cultural and epistemological structures that connect the literal use of animal bodies for meat and the cultural representation of women's bodies as meat. When feminists protest that women are treated like animals, or like pieces of meat, such as in the case of the abovementioned passage, she emphasizes the analogies between women and animals, that , according to her "far from being harmless wordplay, reflect and reinscribe the lowly status of both" (Adams 1991: 42).

Asūf 's case can be clearly described by her words: "Men who decide to eschew meat eating are deemed effeminate" (Adams 1991: 34). To be more precise, "in a sexist society that symbolizes woman as meat, as a sexually consumable object, the man who declines to eat [her] is effectively announcing his failure as heterosexual" (Bailey 2007: 44, 45). As Bailey remarks, "if eating meat itself has been regarded as a masculine activity,[23] then the animal lover is a sissy, contemptibly weak, feminine, with all of the qualities that entails, including being overly emotional" (Bailey 2007: 46).

So far the narrator hasn't revealed why Asūf is vegetarian, and that choice seems very rare in a environment like the desert, devoid of natural vegetal resources.

4.2. Reincarnations

Asūf's mother has warned him to stay away from the *waddān* and reminds him of his father's fate. At first, Asūf follows his mother's advice, but eventually he forgets it. He feels a strong compulsion to hunt, without any apparent reason. He thus experiences many dangerous and critical situations, that makes him change his food habits. One day, in the dimness of the dawn, in a state between life and death, he sees his father in the eyes of the great *waddān*.[24]

[23] While meat eating has long been considered a sort of brain food, necessary for intellectual beings, people of color were thought to be able to get along with very little. One late nineteenth-century medical doctor concluded that "savages" could live without much animal protein because they are "little removed from the common animal stock from which they are derived. They are much nearer to the forms of life from which they feed than are they highly civilized brain-workers, and can therefore subsist on forms of life which would be most poisonous to us" (quoted in Adams 1991: 31).

[24] Towards the ends of the novel, even Cain sees in the eyes of the gazelle a human being, but "that night Cain, Adam's son, is not satisfied with killing 'his sister,' but he also eats her flesh.

بعدها عاف اللحم كل اللحوم. لاحظ هذا التغير أول مرة عند موت جدي، فوجد أمه تقوم بطبخه في القدر عند مدخل الكهف. عاد من الرعي، فغزت الرائحة أنفه من مسافة بعيدة . شعر بالدوار والغثيان، وأفرغ أمعاءه الخاوية في العراء عدة مرات قبل أن يبلغ البيت . أصبحت اللحوم تثير تقزّزه واندهش كيف كان يستطيع أن يستطعم أكل اللحم . كيف يستطيع المخلوق أن يأكل لحم مخلوق؟ ما الفرق بين لحم الحيوان ولحم الإنسان؟ من يقدر أن يأكل لحم الودان يقدر أن يأكل لحم الإنسان أيضاً. لقد حل الأب في الودان، والودان حل فيه .هو والمرحوم والودان العظيم الآن شيء واحد. لن يفصل بينهم شيء

(al-Kawnī 1992: 75)

After this he felt an aversion to meat, to meat of all kinds. He noticed the change first when a small kid died and he found his mother cooking it in the cauldron at the mouth of the cave. He'd returned from herding, and the smell assailed him far off. He felt fizzy and nauseous, and retched repeatedly before finally arriving home.

Meat aroused his disgust now. He was astonished he'd once been able to enjoy it. How could 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 *waddān,* then he could eat human flesh too. Had his father come to dwell in the *waddan,* and the *waddan* in his father?[25] He, his father, and the mighty *waddān* were one now. Nothing could separate them (BOS 2002:65-66).

Metamorphosis (*masḫ* in Arabic) is considered in the orthodox Islam a kind of divine punishment in which a person is transformed into an animal. The human identity is not lost, while its appearance changes into an animal figure. The title of the chapter, in the original *al-Taḥawwul*, has been translated as "transformation," while the French translation uses the term *La Mètamorphose,* but I didn't find that change till the end of the novel, when he is transformed not only into a waddān, but also a "sacrifical animal" (McHugh 2019: 107).

In the abovementioned passage the writer uses the verb *ḥalla,* to stand for 'reincarnation:' actually his died father reincarnated in the *waddān,* and this reincarnated in Asūf, so they become only one. The novel emphasizes the strong bond that exists between humans and animals, a unique bond that, according to Fouad and Alwakeel is to be found "at the intersection between religion and mythology" (Fouad and Alwakeel 2013: 50). It seems to me that al-Kawnī goes beyond the monotheistic religions limits, since the communion and oneness between animals and humans in the novel is shown to be intimate in a way that would eventually lead to reincarnation. This explains clearly why he becomes unable to palate meat and remains vegetarian for the rest of his life (Mchugh 2019: 109).[26]

[25] It should be more correct to translate "and the *waddan* dwelled in Asuf," so that it makes sense that they are three in one, unseparable. I'd also cancel the question mark of this phrase, that doesn't exist in the original.

[26] Porphyry's treatise *De abstinentia* offers, among various arguments to adopt a Vegetarian diet, the transmigration of the soul, that is a belief common in Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

4.3. Post-colonial issues

The novel is set in a period where Libya is under colonial powers, first Italian then Anglo-American. The narrator writes: "The foreigners seem to have beaten us everywhere in the desert. Wherever we've been, we've found they were there before us. These foreigners are devils" (BOS 2002: 12). But woes come also from insiders: the two arab hunters, Cain (Qābīl) and Mas'ūd, work at the service of the Italians so that they can help him to satiate his voracity for the riches of his country, and he is ready to offer his country to the Italians occupiers, the Americans and their companies in search of oil" (al-Ğābir 2023).

Cain's hunting skills are improved when he meets John Parker, an American army captain, after he quotes from an obscure Sufi traveler these words: "In the gazelles God placed the secret and sown the meaning. For him who tastes the flesh of this creature, all impotence in the soul will be swept away, the veil of separation will be rent, and he will see God as He truly is" (BOS 2002: 106).

The fact that he misunderstands Sufi teachings on the oneness of existence (*waḥdat al-wuğūd*)" (Wiesberg 2015: 49), and convinces the Arab-Muslim Cain of that, can symbolize the incapacity of those co-nationals to interpret their culture, letting others and foreigners do this job for them.

Asūf, who, through the vision of the meat-crazed hunter Cain, emerges through the second half of the story as his 'mirror-opposite,' is not the only vegetarian in the novel. Also Šayḫ Ğallūlī, who is called a "heretic dervish" (BOS 2002: 110) , doesn't eat meat and lives on only barley's bread.

The mystical union, according to this wise man, cannot happen through ingesting the flesh of other creatures, which necessarily entails violence and domination, but through a metaphysical bonding that can occur when one is spiritually open to it. And when Parker asks if God dwells in gazelles and he answers: "God dwells in all souls. To limit it to gazelles is heresy" (BOS: 108).

John Parker also provides Cain with Land Rover and an automatic rifle, two tools that upset the balance of nature. The process of every form of decolonization can be triggered by the respect of the animals. It's a cultural process towards postcolonialism, to pass beyond the phase when previously subjugated individuals want to assert control over their own coniationals and style of life, with the help of new forces, symbolized by Parker.

Cain and Parker are the new wicked forces of misguided neo-colonialism anchored in Western ideas of values that put humans at the top of the chain making them blind to the laws of nature.

Cain, with his addiction to meat, stands as a symbol of limitless consumption associated with modern forms of life. The big issue at stake is the extinction and depletion of natural resources, so the novel "seeks to warn us of the environmental threats emanating from governmental, industrial,

commercial and neo-colonial forces" (Sharmilla 2018: 323). The novel signals a possible way of overcoming colonialism, and even new forms of domination or subordination.

4.4. Asūf as a new Francis of Assisi or Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya

When Asūf is obliged to accompany the two hunters to the mountainous area of the desert where the *waddān* is supposed to live

> في تلك اللحظة حدث ما خشي منه أسوف طوال النهار. من خلف صخرة، أمامه بالضبط، أطل ودان برأسه، ووقف يتفرج على حركتهم في الوادي. (...) أحس بأن الحيوان لا يزال يقف خلف ظهره، ويراقبهم من التجويف الصخري. لقد اشتم المسكين رائحته فاطمأن إلى الضيوف. أصبح الودان ينقاد إليه ويرتع بجواره في قطعان كبيرة منذ أن توقف عن أكل اللحم (...) تجيئه القطعان في المرعى تختلط بالماعز، وتقبل نحوه ذكورها تشمشم ثيابه بخياشيمها وتتأمله بعيون وديعة غامضة، تنطق بألف لغة، وتتحدث بألف لسان دون أن يصدر عنها صوت، ثم تمضي لترتع في الأحراش. في البداية كان يخرس، وتنشل أطرافه من الدهشة. ومع الوقت تعود، وأصبح يداعبها، ويحادثها، ويقص عليها الحكايات،
>
> (al-Kawnī 1992: 88)

> "... what Asūf had been fearing all day happened. From behind a rock, just opposite him, a *waddan* peered out, following their movements in the wadi. (...) He sensed the animal was still there behind him, watching them from the hollow in the rock. The poor beast had scented his presence and felt safe from the guests for the *waddan* had begun to trust him now, grazing close to him in large herds. Ever since he'd stopped eating meat. (...) The herds came to him in the pastures, mixed with the goats. The males came right up to him and snuffled his clothes, gazed at him with meek, mysterious eyes that conversed in a thousand languages, spoke with a thousand tongues, without making so much as a sound, then went off to graze among the thickets. At the start he'd been struck dumb, paralyzed with amazement. With time, though, he'd grown used to them, and begun playing and speaking with them, recounting stories to them" (Al-Koni 2002: 78-79).

This excerpt reminds us of what the religious tradition says about the mystic Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801): she was supposed to live in harmony with nature and wild animals, loving and respecting them, so that she is considered "an ecofeminist before her time" (Ghosn 2022). Many historians attribute to her a complete abstinence from the consumption of animal products. One story about al-ʿAdawiyya goes that as she was climbing a mountain, gazelles gathered around her without showing the slightest fear, apparently feeling safe. But when her friend Ḥasan al-Baṣrī came to join her, the animals ran away. He asked her:

> "How come the gazelles are running away from me and not from you?"
>
> "What did you eat today?," Rabi'a replied.
>
> "A dish cooked with a piece of fat," Hasan said.
>
> "How can they not run away from you when you eat their fat?" she retorted (Ghosn 2022).

Beyond its historical reality, this story indeed reveals a benevolent respect for all creation, the same that displayed Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). In Thomas of Celano's *Vita Prima* his encounters with nonhuman animals open, as Pratt (1992) has demonstrated, a 'contact zones' between human and nonhuman animals that challenge traditional social hierarchies. Asūf's, Rabia's and Francis's actions towards animals reimagine horizontal relationships between human and nonhuman animals.

Their alternative ways of communicating with them can reshape relationships between God's creatures, breaking down the hierarchical chain of beings.

5. Selective vegetarianism in *Min ḫašab wa ṭīn*

Ecocriticism, primarily concerned with animal rights and environmental conservation, emphasises natural purity and belonging. We can detect this element in *Min ḫašab wa ṭīn* ("Made of wood and mud;" 2021),[27] by the Moroccan writer and poet Muḥammad al-Aš'arī (1951), who criticizes the values of the decadent technological and individualistic civilization, invoking a return to the values of the collective interest. This apparently realistic novel with fairy-tale and Kafkaesque elements, undoubtedly inspired by Kalīla wa Dimna, intends to denounce in a more provocative way the distancing of man from the laws of nature.

While al-Kawnī tries to reshape the relationship between man, animals and nature in the desert, here in al-Aš'arī's novel, the forest is the protagonist and the raw materials of the title 'wood and clay' that should be used to build a house, recall the prophet Ibrāhīm (or Abraham for Jews and Christians) who with his house begins a new phase of relationship with the Creator.

One day Ibrāhīm, a former bank clerk, comes across a wounded hedgehog in a forest, and is ready to have it cured at a veterinarian. At that moment a herdsman asks him, with trepidation clearly evident on his face, if he would have eaten it. Ibrahim is terrified at the idea and remembered that he knew the hedgehog for months. He admired the way it ran, its young body and cunning looks, and he feels to be bound to it in a sort of silent friendship, a 'brotherhood in the forest' (*uḫuwwa fī l-ġāba).*

[27] Ibrāhīm, in the midst of an existential crisis, decides to leave a career as a banker to go and live in the forest Maamoura. One day he comes across a seriously injured hedgehog and decides to make him cured by a French veterinarian. A love story is born between them, breaking the mold of tradition. In the forest he is arrested by mysterious police forces and spends almost six months in a secret prison. In the meantime, the members of the urban community organize the reconciliation with his wife, the return to the bank and the divorce from the French.

لقد أصبح إبراهيم جزءًا من حياة الغابة . و لا يتصور أن يخذل شريكًا له في هذه الحياة، مثلما لا يتصور و لو للحظة واحدة أن شخصًا سويًا يستطيع أن يقتل كائنًا بهذه الغموض و الهشاشة بغية طبخه و أكله.

(al-Aš‘arī 2021: 8)

Ibrahim had become a part of the forest life. He could not imagine disappointing a partner of that life, as he could not have imagined, not even for a single instant, that a normal person could kill a being so mysterious and fragile to cook and eat it.

The herdsman implores Ibrāhīm to free the hedgehog telling him that the souls of the Ait Mimoun tribe would be be satisfied with him, because he had abstained from eating the animal, because his tribe's members were milk brothers with hedgehogs.

A double selective vegetarianism is at stake in this novel: from one side the new perspective of an ecocritical philosophy of an ex banker, who sees in the hedgehog of the forest a new brother in a new life; from the other side, the herdsman, that is the original dweller of the area and sees in the hedgehog a 'milk brother' (*aḫ raḍā‘a*), according to a legend of his tribe. In a similar way, his colleague Asūf followed the teachings and pieces of advice of his parents.

6. Veganism and a developing identity in *Krīsmās fī Makka*

In the Egyptian novel, we saw that abstinence from meat was not a choice. After more than a half century, food choice can be a way for people to express their ideals and identities in *Krīsmās fī Makka* ("Christmas in Mecca," 2019), by the Iraqi writer Aḥmad Ḫayrī al-'Umarī. Undoubtedly the choice of a plant-based diet shapes one's personal and social identity and is likely to influence values, attitudes, beliefs, and well-being, but this choice is also the result of strong beliefs and values. When Wright argues that meatless diets are always situated at the social margins and have "never been the dominant ethical and dietary position in any culture at any time" (Wright 2015: 6), maybe she has not in mind the Hinduist and Buddhist strong traditions, but for sure vegans and vegetarians in the Arab world, who are still object of derision and stigmatization, Exactly like in *Bidāya wa Nihāya* they are even deprived of humanity, so closer to animal world that the common idea is that "their diet is not considered of humans beings" (al-'Umarī 2019: 3): this is the opinion of the protagonist's mother.

The young Mariam, the novel's narrator in first person, is an Iraqi expat who lives in the United Kingdom with her mother, after her father was killed in a confessional murder in Iraq.

A trip to Mecca to perform the *'umra*, the small pilmigrage, during Christmas period, turns into a journey to know her family, origins and religion. It's not sure whether she will accept her Iraqi

relatives, considering that she has absorbed many prejudices on Muslims and Arabs. No doubt that this journey will leave an impact on everyone.

In the first chapter of the novel, Miryam's mother seems anyhow open to new life styles, in comparison with the old generation. She warns her daughter:

> إياك أن تخبري جدتك.. كل شيء فيغان، لن ترحمني.. دولمة وكبة بلا لحم؟.. ستنشرني على حبل الغسيل في كل مجموعات الواتس التي تتصدرها.
>
> (al-'Umarī 2019: 5)

> Don't tell your grandmother that everything is vegan, she won't have mercy on me. Dolma and Kebbeh without meat? She will mortify me in all the WhatsApp groups that she tops.

Her mother tries to indulge her daughter. But even in Iraq habits and mentalities are changing and it seems that internet groups of Vegans are widespread even there. The paradox I notice is that her grandmother 'tops' many groups in WhatsApp, but is very rigid about food choices. Maryam's monologue explains the stressful situation she lives at home, in the Western diaspora, because of her veganism, but she is confident in the future scenario:

> منذ أن "تحولت" قبل ثلاث سنوات إلى اليوم (...) واجهت كل أنواع الضغوطات العاطفية وغير العاطفية لكي أعود إلى تناول المنتجات الحيوانية. واليوم أمي تتابع حسابات الإنستغرام الفيغان وقنوات اليوتيوب الخاصة بوصفاتها. لن أستبعد أن تتحول هي أيضاً عن قريب.
>
> (al-'Umarī 2019: 5)

> Since I 'transformed' three years ago till now (...) I faced all sorts of emotional and unemotional pressures to go back to eating animal products. Today, my mother follows the vegan Instagram accounts and YouTube channels with their recipes. I wouldn't rule out that she will transform soon, too...

Here the trasformation to which she refers (*al-taḥawwul*) has a very different meaning from that one of the chapter title of al-Kawnī's novel, since it just refers here to a changing of food habits, i.e. becoming vegan.

In the novel the writer doesn't explain why she became vegan. Veganism has been suggested to constitute an 'emergent identity' which develops through the interaction of various internal and external factors (Rosenfeld ands Burrow 2017): maybe the fact of living in a Western country, or an unconscious or semi-conscious marker of civil progress. The big surprise happens at Christmas:

> سأعد مائدة الكريسماس، وستحتوي على الديك الرومي. أنا النباتية التي لا تقرب أي منتج حيواني، سأكسر هذا المبدأ، وأقدم ديكاً رومياً، مسكيناً ولا ذنب له، على عشاء الكريسماس الذي أعده للعائلة. الكريسماس الوحيد الذي يمكنني أن أقضيه مع جدي وعمي. قررت التضحية بمبادئي – وبالديك الرومي - من أجل العائلة. فاتحت أمي أولاً بإمكانية تقديم "البدائل الفيغان ويكون تغييراً أيضاً عما تعودوا أكله". لكن أمي قالت إن أي وجبة "نباتية" ستعامل في بغداد كإهانة – أو نكتة في أحسن الأحوال
>
> (al-ʻUmarī 2019: 201)

> I will prepare the Christmas table, and it will include turkey. I, the vegetarian who does not eat any animal products, will break this principle and serve a poor, sinless turkey for the Christmas dinner I prepare for the family. The only Christmas I could spend with my grandfather and uncle. I decided to sacrifice my principles—and the turkey—for the sake of family. I approached my mother first about the possibility of offering "vegan alternatives that would also be something different from what they are used to eating." But my mother said that any "vegetarian" meal would be treated in Baghdad as an insult—or a joke at best.

Maryam decides to sacrifice her veganism to cook a turkey. That seems to be a clearly contradictory behaviour, but in her mind it's justified 'for the sake of the family.' The writer himself declares that it should be seen as a part of Maryam's double identity, as we can even ascertain from the title of the novel.[28]

7. Conclusions

Derrida, Agamben, Butler, Adams, among others, explained the way in which carnivorism operates as an ideology of violence, and explored the processes of humanization and animalization, to denounce the power hidden behind the bar of the human/animal dichotomy, still considered "natural" and, as such, immune to critical thinking. The role of fiction writer seems even more effective than that of the essayists to convey the same message by building stories and new characters who can help changing human habits or just caring indifference.

The focus of al-Kawnī's and al-Aš'arī's novels on kinship between humans and animals reminds me of the wolf's call to the Little Prince of Antoine de Saint'Exupery to be 'tamed.' Here 'taming' means a slow process of establishing mutual respect and trust.

The Egyptian novel, written in a period of time where even the term *nabatī* as vegetarian was not known, and the Iraqi one, share the function of vegetarianism/veganism as a marker of social identity. Vegetarianism of necessity in the first case, implemented by a family that lives in distress, while it's a

[28] Declarations of the writer in an interview of mine. It's worth mentioning that the title of the novel aroused a lot a protests and bans by Saudi Authorities, who imposed a new one in the version for their internal market, canceling "in Mecca."

choice in the Iraqi's novel where the young protagonist wishes to express her belonging to a culture distant from her Arabo-islamic roots.

In this quantitatively poor literary context *Nazīf al-ḥağar* seems an unparalleled and courageous novel that, according to Ramsay "helps to instill and reinforce human concern about the importance of adapting lives and policy to life-styles which (...) strive towards ecological harmony" (Ramsay 2014: 171).

In al-Kawnī's novel animals represent potential human beings, and their transmutation, or reincarnation, seems crucial for the sake of salvation from the cruelty of the wars and new dominations. McHugh stresses that "desert-born but oasis-raised Cain relentless hunting strictly to feed his craving for meat appears to be a retrograde turn, as it leads to the destruction of humans and animals, and along with them of intrahuman and human-animal relationships" (McHugh 2016).

The Libyan writer defies some principles of Islam that contradict Sufi views, in particolar the separation of humans' from animals' sphere, a strong anthropocentrism which also characterizes the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, source of immense suffering for sentient beings, according to Schopenhauer.[29]

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[29] Shapsay (2017) writes that animals in general play a pivotal role in Schopenhauer's philosophical system and in his ethical thought in particular, offering a less anthropocentric approach to ethics.

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