Reviving 'Desert Spirituality': Ecocritical Insights from Postcolonial Great Saharan Literature—A Case Study of al-Batoul Mahjoub's Mined Places (2016)

Azzeddine Tajjiou & Erragab Eljanhaoui

Introduction

This study examines the postcolonial narratives of the Great Sahara with a particular focus on literary outputs from the Sahara of southern Morocco, using Moroccan writer al-Batoul Mahjoub's *āmākinu mlg̈wmā* (Mined Places 2016) as a pivotal text. This novel not only anchors the thematic discussions prevalent in the region's literature but also serves as a lens through which the enduring environmental impacts of historical legacies of imperialism are explored. By employing a comparative literary approach that juxtaposes Mahjoub's narrative with local Hassani writings and broader postcolonial literary

traditions of the Sahara, the analysis offers a profound understanding of how the novel contributes to both regional and global discussions on postcolonial ecocriticism and identity. This structured methodology allows for an in-depth examination of the novel's thematic resonance within the Saharan literary corpus, thereby setting a comprehensive stage for the nuanced engagement with themes of memory, identity, and trauma.

In particular, the study delves into the transformative effects of Spanish colonialism (1884-1975,) which catalyzed the urbanization of traditionally nomadic tribal societies in southern Morocco. This segment examines the dire consequences of such colonial urbanization policies, notably the devastating legacy of landmines that persistently mar the landscape and impact its communities. The analysis addresses how these policies not only disrupted but also dislocated the Sahrawi nomadic identity, as part of a broader Spanish colonial agenda aimed at fostering a more capital-efficient, productive modernity. This imposition starkly contrasts with the Sahara's traditional settle and nomadic lifestyle, highlighting a profound misalignment with the inherent social and economic structures of the region. As the analysis transitions into a focused literary dissection of *Mined Places*, it scrutinizes how Mahjoub's narrative articulates the dual impacts of environmental degradation and forced urbanization—both direct legacies of colonial intrusion. Furthermore, the text poignantly addresses the traumat-

ic scars borne by new generations of these tribal societies, scars that are continuously struggled with and are yet to be fully reconciled.

Through this exploration, the research defines Mahjoub's significant role in the literary field of the Great Sahara and highlights her narrative's critical engagement with postcolonial concerns of Sahrawi identity and environmental dislocation in the face of expanding global capitalism. This investigation not only highlights the significance of the narrative but also deepens our comprehension of the enduring influence that colonial legacies have on postcolonial conditions across the Great Sahara. This enhancement of understanding is pivotal, as it elucidates the specific ways in which colonial interventions have persistently molded social, cultural, and environmental realities in this expansive region.

Orientalist Depictions and Misrepresentations of Southern Moroccan Sahara in Western Literature

Historically, numerous narratives have characterized the Sahara of southern Morocco during the pre-colonial and early imperial colonial periods. A primary observation from this corpus is the frequent use of the term "captured," reflecting the experiences of Western explorers who ventured into the Sahara during these times. The second notable point is that as these narratives of captivity in the Sahara emerged in the West, they often

portrayed, in line with the tradition of Orientalization, images of barbarity and savagery. This not only cast the desert as a realm of cruelty but also depicted its inhabitants as barbaric and ruthless, thereby labeling them as "uncivil." Such representations, as post-colonial critiques would argue, played a critical role in the imperial agenda to dehumanize the 'other'—serving as a justification for conquest and domination. In this context, Aimé Césaire articulately observed that "{above all else,} we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him" (Césaire 1955).

Camille Douls, a French explorer, uniquely navigated the Sahara, captivated by its enigmatic allure, as documented in his 1888 work, *Cinq Mois Chez Les Maures Nomade Du Sahara Occidental*. Unlike typical narratives of the period, often penned by those enduring the Sahara's harsh conditions involuntarily, Douls' account offers an insightful perspective on his five-month stay and interactions with the local people. This narrative, among others, is crucial for scholarly analysis of Western travel accounts in the Sahara during the nineteenth century. There are essential academic studies of these narratives such as Mohamedou Ould Mohameden's *La Société Maure Au XIXème Siècle Vue Par les Voyageurs Français* (2001) and Maurice Barbier's *Voyageurs et explorateurs au Sahara Occidental au XIXème siècle* (2000). These works document the experiences of around twenty-one explorers and captives from

diverse backgrounds, highlighting the prevalent theme of 'captivity' that reinforces Orientalist depictions of the Sahara and its inhabitants as 'exotic,' 'savage,' and 'merciless.' Although rooted in some historical truths and personal experiences, these accounts often exaggerated aspects of the Sahara to appeal to a Western audience craving exotic travel tales, thereby shaping perceptions that supported colonial motives to 'civilize' the depicted 'Others.'

During the 19th century, narratives from the Sahara primarily focused on themes of survival, isolation, and endurance, painting a vivid picture of the severe human conditions within its vast emptiness. Central to these accounts is Robert Adams, an American/British seaman, whose story significantly shaped the Barbary Coastal Captivity Narratives. Western figures—merchants, seamen, travelers, and diplomats from nations including America, Britain, Spain, France, and Portugal—depicted the desert as a domain fraught with danger and disorder. Through an Orientalist lens, these narratives served a purpose beyond conveying exotic images of the Sahara; they underscored the perceived need for Western intervention to impose order on what was viewed as an inherently chaotic and ungovernable space. Noteworthy among these accounts are James Riley's *Authentic Narrative* and Archibald Robbins's *Memoir of Captivity*, while Alexander Scott described his experiences among the Sahara nomads as both enlightening and terrifying (Trail

1821). Together, these stories portrayed the Sahara not just as a land of mystery, but as a territory primed for exploration and intervention.

Following Ghislaine Lydon's (2005) critique of Sahara representations in colonial ethnographies, where the desert is depicted as an 'empty-quarter' only traversed by nomads on their camels and used to underscore the Sahara as a 'natural' boundary between North Africa and the rest of the continent, we confront the complexity of these portrayals. This question intertwines with various elements, especially those related to colonial dynamics, which will be further explored in subsequent sections. The discussion of these narratives necessitates acknowledging the historical misperception of the desert as a lifeless void, devoid of culture—an error perpetuated in both literature and philosophical discourse. Tynan offers a poignant analysis, referencing T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to illustrate how the desert emerges not as an environmental caution or a spiritual diagnosis but as a profound aesthetic revelation. Tynan argues that in 20th-century thought, the desert transitions from a space imbued with historical theological and metaphysical meanings—termed "desert spirituality," which fostered a life apart from nature and created a paradoxical "world outside of the world"—to an "epiphany" stripped of these deeper connotations (Tynan, 112, 24). This shift highlights the evolving perceptions of the Sahara within contemporary discourse, where its spiritual and metaphysical heritage is often overshadowed by aesthetic interpretations.

Aidan Tynan elucidates the role of the desert in modern literary and philosophical contexts with his insightful analysis:

> If the desert has functioned for thousands of years as a space of theological yearning and ordeal, as a site more spiritual than geographic, in the twentieth century it comes into its own as an environment in which exhaustion seems to coexist with forms of abundance and plenitude unique to Western capitalist society. Writers from Yeats and Eliot to Baudrillard, Carter and DeLillo privilege the desert precisely because it seems the spatial correlate of twentieth-century capitalism (2022: 21).

Tynan connects the reimagining of the desert to reflections on modern capitalist experiences, emphasizing a transformative shift in how the desert is perceived and represented. He argues that the portrayal of the desert in literature and philosophy offers profound insights into the modern condition of our age. This is why he posits that the desert "can tell us some important things about the experience of being modern," highlighting a crucial connection between modernity and the desert that traditional ideas of nature and oikos (home) fail to capture. This is because modernity itself involves a significant redefinition of concepts like place and dwelling (Tynan, 2022: 8). Through this lens, Tynan underscores the intricate relationship between geographic and metaphorical interpretations of the desert, illustrating how modernity

reshapes our understanding of space and place, particularly through the lens of desert imagery.

Emergence and Evolution of Postcolonial Saharan Literature: Ecological Insights

While imperial colonialism and modernist portrayals have often romanticized the Sahara as a perilous landscape for heroic quests, reinforcing negative stereotypes of danger and hardship, this archetype is being actively challenged by post-colonial narratives. Emerging from the vast expanses of the Great Sahara Desert, a diverse array of writers including, but not limited to, Ibrahim al-Koni from Libya, Moussa Ag Assarid from Mali, and Hisham Matar from Libya, along with al-Batoul Mahjoub Lamding from Morocco—whose novel Mined Places serves as a pivotal case study in this discourse—have embarked on a literary mission to challenge entrenched perceptions about the Sahara and its peoples. Al-Koni, through works such as *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990) and *Gold Dust* (1992), delves into the mystical and existential dimensions of Tuareg culture, revealing its spiritual and environmental facets. Moussa Ag Assarid articulates the experiences and adversities of the Tuareg people in Mali with meticulous detail. Hicham Matar, renowned for his novels *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *The Return* (2016), masterfully explores the emotional and political landscapes of post-colonial Libya. Mahjoub also adds a distinctive Saharan perspective from the South of

Morocco, enriching the discourse on Saharan identities across North Africa. Together, these authors contribute significantly to a literary movement that redefines Saharan identities in postcolonial contexts.

Al-Koni, often hailed as the godfather of contemporary Sahrawi literature written in Arabic, honed his literary skills at the Gorki Institute in Russia. Upon his return to the desert communities of Libya, al-Koni embarked on a mission to counter the colonial misrepresentations of his people and, in a manner reminiscent of postcolonial Anglophone writers, to imbue both the language and the medium of his writing with profound significance. His extensive body of work, which includes over 130 novels set in the Sahara, challenges György Lukács's assertion that the modern novel is inherently urban and relational (Lukács 1963). Contrary to this, for al-Koni, the novel should not merely echo the dynamics of urban settings but, since the human is at the heart of the narrative, it should encompass the human condition in its entirety, including experiences of nomadic Sahrawis in the Great Sahara which, until al-Koni began writing in the 1970s onwards, has never been given a chance to enter the scope of the novel genre.

Al-Koni, along with many Sahrawi writers, infuses his narratives with a "spirituality" identified by Tynan as lacking in modern literary and philosophical depictions of the desert (2020:21). This spirituality is deeply root-

ed in the socio-cultural fabric of Sahrawi society across the Great Sahara, where, despite the imposition of urbanization, there persists a profound longing for the nomadic, rural desert existence. This existence, framed in Byung Chul Han's ontological terminology, allows for an authentic dwelling within the space of the Sahara, contrasting sharply with our modern and urban "narcissistic achievement society" (2015). Here, the Sahrawi lifestyle promotes the abandonment of egocentric achievements for a life of existential inquiry and transcendence, fostering a deep ecological consciousness that recognizes the Earth not as a possession but as an experiential realm. This environmental awareness is pivotal in postcolonial Sahrawi literature, which not only critiques the forced urbanization of indigenous nomadic tribes but also challenges the purported benefits of such urbanization. By reinvigorating the image of the Sahara in their writings, these authors assert that what has long been mislabeled as 'savage' has, in reality, been attuned to ecological sensibilities for ages, thus breathing new life into the Sahara as a vital and conscious space within the literary canon.

In this manner, al-Koni introduces into the heart of Great Sahara postcolonial literature the perennial question of human culture and society. Nearly in every interview, al-Koni revisits the biblical story of Abel and Cain. He draws a metaphorical link between their narrative—particularly the aspect where God favors Abel's sacrifice over Cain's—to argue against the longstanding misrepresentations of the desert and the Great Sahara in

existing literature. To him, this issue is even more critical in philosophy, where the desert has not been adequately explored, neither as a space nor as an entity where nomadic culture also thrives. For al-Koni, Abel symbolizes the Sahrawi individual who is not confined to one place and does not claim ownership of land or a farm as Cain did. Because he views the entire universe as his home and is driven by a relentless desire to find life in the next mile, the Sahrawi has had to develop a nomadic lifestyle distinct from that of urban dwellers.

For al-Koni, human society is perennially divided into two tribes—the one that remains static and claims ownership, which he associates with the genesis of contemporary capitalism, and the one that is nomadic, constantly in search of not ownership, but a higher spiritual truth akin to the poet's truth. This perspective is evident in an interview he conducted with Bilqis Ansari.

> The desert liberates because it was liberated the day it denied its nature as nature itself, to transform into spirit; it's just that it is embodied. If the world is a letter that kills, then the desert is its spirit that gives life. Its message is to alert us to the treasures within us, as opposed to the false treasures that lure us, and we will not awaken from our coma unless we properly question ourselves. For this reason, the desert people are innately poets, because their transparency is borrowed from the transparency of the environmental reality that permeates them, settling within

> them from where they thought they were the ones who settle it (Al-Koni: 2022, my translation).

Al Koni's conceptualization of Sahrawi literature in postcolonial times—or, more precisely, literature that does justice to the Sahara and acknowledges its significance—is fundamentally rooted in recognizing the desert as a spiritual space where time and habitation are perceived differently than in the capitalist construct of the metropolis. In other words, postcolonial literature from the regions of the Great Sahara is characterized by a profound connection to the land as a space where human life is merely a component, and where humans are not in control but are perpetually engaged in survival. This form of survival, as al-Koni has noted in several interviews, elevates human life to a higher dimension, one that transcends the physical and material realms.

Furthermore, it is crucial to view this body of literature, as this paper argues, as an entrance to a canon that not only writes back against previous misrepresentations of the Great Sahara but also challenges the philosophical disregard of the desert as merely a void to be endured. More importantly, this literature serves as a reclamation of Sahrawi nomadic identity, which has been compromised by forced urbanization during imperial colonial times—such as the Spanish case in Morocco—and addresses environmental concerns, making it a vital site for ecocritical artistic exploration in the works of postcolonial Sahrawi writers.

Colonial Disruptions: Analyzing the Spanish Impact on Sahara's Socio-Ecological Framework

Contemporary views, which are typically informed by pre-colonial, colonial, and modern perspectives, frequently undervalue the Sahara of Southern Morocco's significant historical and cultural significance. Contrary to perceptions of it as a barren wilderness, the Sahara, as a desert-place everywhere in the world, has been a vital cradle of civilization, significantly shaping diverse cultural, religious, and philosophical developments. This section intends to rectify these misunderstandings by delving into the socio-historical significance of the Great Sahara, specifically within the Moroccan context, which is further explored through a case study later in this paper.

The Sahrawi region, located to the south of Morocco, has witnessed significant transformations since the arrival of Arab-Islamic expeditions in North Africa in 647 CE. Marked by the Spanish unearthing of substantial phosphate reserves in 1947, with an output of 2.6 million tonnes per year, the area's mystique was amplified. This mystique is often reflected in travel literature and termed by Nabil Matar (2000) as *corpus captivitis*. Historically perceived as barren and secluded, these portrayals delayed colonial engagement until 1884, when Spain, as part of its wider imperial ambitions, established colonial rule along the Sahara's coastline (Boubrik 2021:

128). The utilization of skewed, orientalist narratives by former captives served not only to misrepresent the region but also to justify the colonial exploitation of its resources and the harsh treatment of its people under the pretext of delivering "civilization" to the "uncivilized." The colonial portrayal of the Sahara's nomadic inhabitants in southern Morocco as chaotic significantly misrepresents the genuine character of those who live across the Great Sahara and their pastoral way of life, which is essentially dynamic. Rahal Boubrik, a Moroccan anthropologist from the Sahara region, warns against the uncritical acceptance of Western portrayals of the Sahara, noting that these accounts often simplify the complex interactions among Sahrawi tribes and between these tribes and outsiders. Boubrik contends that the portrayal of the Sahara as a zone of chaos serves a specific ideological purpose, supporting a colonial narrative that contrasts the 'civilized' against the 'uncivilized' and thus justifies colonial intervention as a means of reinstating an alleged natural order and discipline (Boubrik 2012: 349).

Contrary to portrayals of the Sahrawis as mere isolated survivalists, their society displays a sophisticated communal structure. Vibrant markets such as *Amhairich* and *Lamkhakh*, along with social gatherings like *Jma'a*, underscore the communal nature and societal complexity of the Sahrawis, challenging the colonial stereotype of them as solitary and savage. This misrecognition by co-

lonial powers of the diverse societal and cultural systems outside their domain highlights their failure to appreciate the Sahrawis' dynamic lifestyle, which necessitates constant movement in search of sustenance. In stark contrast to the colonial view that labels this nomadic behavior as barbaric, the Sahrawis' approach embraces heterogeneity, a stark deviation from the colonial desire for a homogenized world mirroring Western norms.

In the colonial landscape of Morocco, particularly in the Rif and Sahara regions where Spanish influence prevailed, authorities adeptly fostered divisions within local communities as a tactic to quell social or revolutionary solidarity. This approach, common in other parts of Africa, was designed to stabilize indigenous populations and suppress unplanned rebellions by managing them through orchestrated disruption. Colonial agents employed a combination of incentives and threats—known as "carrot-and-stick" strategies (Tirado & Correale 2020)—to co-opt tribal chiefs, transforming them into covert collaborators who ultimately betrayed their own communities. Although this practice remains underexplored, it marked a pivotal shift in distorting the nomadic lifestyles in the Sahara, initiating a process of forced urbanization.

One example of these colonial strategies in action is seen in the Beirouk family of Wed Noon, who skillfully navigated the complex political landscape dominated by

Spanish and French colonial powers alongside the Moroccan Sultans. Under the leadership of Cheikh Beirouk, the family epitomized Sahrawi Emara, employing strategic diplomacy to secure and maintain their influence. Despite their political savvy, their eventual downfall was hastened by internal strife and conspiracies, underscoring their precarious position within the colonial framework and illustrating the enduring impact of colonial divide-and-rule tactics on societal structures and relationships in the Sahara of southern Morocco.

The strategy of Spanish colonization toward the Sahara's nomads was marked by deceit and evasion. As the imposition of military control coincided with the nomads' coerced urbanization from their traditional tented living, urban centers emerged as symbols of survival amid extreme famine and water shortages during the 1950s. Promoted by Spanish colonial powers, these cities were portrayed as the sole refuge for tribes that had historically migrated across the Sahara. Spain's dominance over the phosphate-rich Bou Craa basin was framed as a humanitarian intervention, including efforts to transport large quantities of water from the Canary Islands to alleviate the nomads' thirst, ostensibly as benevolent aid. However, this apparent humanitarianism obscured a deeper colonial agenda that was consistent with Spain's strategies from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century (Enrique Bengochea Tirado & F. Correale, 2020; Jesús M. Martínez-Milán, 2017). These efforts not

only aimed at controlling the Sahrawi way of life but also exploited the region's natural resources under the guise of modernization and development, revealing a complex interplay of economic exploitation and cultural disruption.

Spanish colonialism in the Sahara encompassed more than territorial domination; it represented a profound threat to the indigenous populations through the extensive extraction of phosphate and the systematic erosion of the Sahrawi people's cultural identity. These actions were part of broader colonial strategies aimed at manipulating and controlling local communities through economic exploitation and cultural disruptions. Edward Said's (1978) analysis in *Orientalism* critiques this process, highlighting the neglect of non-Western perspectives in scholarly discourse, which contributes to significant gaps in the representation of less-explored regions such as the Sahara. Despite these challenges, Boubrik (2015) suggests that engaging critically yet receptively with Orientalist texts can yield invaluable statistical and observational insights into these complex dynamics. This is exemplified in *Sanmao's Stories of the Sahara* (1976), which, while primarily a travelogue, provides essential insights into the daily lives of the Sahrawi people during the height of phosphate mining in Laayoune.

Sanmao, better known by her chosen moniker, emerged as a pivotal figure during her sojourn in the Sahara in ear-

ly 1970s. Initially venturing alone before being joined by her Spanish husband on his assignment to the Spanish Sahara, Sanmao offered a singular external lens through which to view the evolving Sahrawi identity. This identity formation unfolded against the backdrop of Laayoune, the territory's capital. However, as Sanmao's observations reveal, Laayoune, despite its official status, lacked the hallmarks of a bustling metropolis. Instead, it bore a closer resemblance to a small, isolated settlement. She writes

> I found it hard to believe that this was a capital city. It was clearly just a small settlement in the middle of the great desert, with a handful of streets, a few banks and a couple of shops. The desolate scenery and atmosphere reminded me of the towns in Western films. The usual flourishes of a capital city were nowhere to be seen (1976: 1).

The abrupt removal of nomadic Sahrawi populations from their broad desert expanse and subsequent confinement within newly developed urban areas in the heart of the Sahara has had a dramatic impact on the socio-historical setting of southern Morocco's Sahara. Today, these forcibly urbanized communities grapple with a yearning for the ancestral Sahara, a way of life now inaccessible. This longing extends beyond a disrupted past; it encompasses the very essence of their selfhood and identity, rendered precarious by the imposed urban environment. While the injustices perpetrated by Span-

ish colonialism in the Sahara cannot be understated, the forced severing of a people's cultural roots and traditional way of life in favor of homogenization within manufactured urban spaces may well constitute a more egregious offense.

In his exploration of early 19th-century Sahara, American anthropologist Dean King documented a poignant tradition among the inhabitants of Sahrawi cities, a practice that reveals the deep-rooted connection between the Sahrawi people and their ancestral environment.

> Modern Sahrawis share this affinity with their ancestors. Some, now *forced to live in cities to earn a living*, fill their terraces with sand, on which they pitch tents and prepare tea at various times during the day. In a remote part of the Saguia el-Hamra, where I was camping during my research for this book, I saw other city-dwellers who had ventured out from Laayoune to spread blankets and have tea on the dunes. One of my guides told me that they did this because they missed the sand (2004: 332, my emphasis).

This nostalgic attachment to the desert landscapes is not limited to the older generation. Boubrik's studies highlight that this yearning spans generations, affecting even those who have never experienced nomadic or pastoral life directly

> Nostalgia is not exclusive to the parents' generation but extends to touch on the next ones, which have

> never had the chance to witness a nomadic and pastoral life. In weekends, some young people go back to the Badia/desert for the leisure of drinking camels' milk. In recent years, this ritual has become widely spread among families and friends groups to escape the city's boredom and routine. This short stay revives real or imaginary memories for most dwellers (2021: 235, my translation).

The rapid urbanization of the Sahara during the 1970s, often under coercive circumstances, further underscores the Sahrawi population's persistent nostalgia for a disappearing way of life. This longing for the past is a recurring theme in the writings and observations of several Sahrawi writers. Together, these narratives form a vivid tableau of a community caught between the pressures of modern urban life and the enduring call of their ancestral lands.

Narrative Longing and Identity Reclamation in Postcolonial Hassani Literature of the Sahara

The advent of urban centers in the Sahara of Southern Morocco has precipitated both physical and psychological suffering. This pain articulates a profound longing for a lifestyle and identity that were subsumed by the disruptive power structures of colonial influence. This theme is palpably expressed in various Hassani writings from southern Morocco, spanning folktales, short stories, and novels that predominantly explore themes

of death and the struggle in the post-colonial context. These narratives reveal a romantic yet intricate connection to the desert, a sentiment that transcends mere nostalgic yearning.

Laghla Bouzid's short story "Asmaimee Enda" is a poignant example, using symbols from the Sahara to highlight a deep connection to the past. Rich in transfiguration and metamorphosis, the narrative adds a layer of nostalgic mystery to the Sahara. Bouzid, alongside many African writers—not exclusively Sahrawi—contests the imperial narratives that have long marginalized Saharan people. "Asmaimee Enda" delves into complex familial relationships, tribal dynamics, and ecological issues within a rich nomadic setting. Bouzid's literary choices resonate with a return to mythological elements, indicative of a Sahara replete with cultural symbols that colonial urbanization has obscured. His characters seek tranquility by rivers and lakes, epitomizing an idyllic existence far from contemporary turmoil, yet some authors delve into realms where death and agony are pervasive, drawing a stark contrast to times devoid of colonial domination. Between depicting a past comfort and a present turmoil, Hassani literature expands on several dimensions.

Al-Batoul Mahjoub, another significant voice in this literary tradition, is explored through her novel *Mined Places*. Written in Arabic rather than the local Hassani dialect—a reflection of shifting linguistic trends in region-

al literature—Mahjoub's work confronts the lingering dangers in the Sahara, even in what Ben Okri describes as the "long after-years of sunlight" post-colonial period (Okri, 2012: 6). Her critique focuses on the threat of explosive mines, a grave risk to the Sahrawis, juxtaposing the extraction of life-giving phosphates with the deadly imposition of mines. Through this, Mahjoub presents the Sahara in a starkly different light from traditional portrayals, weaving life and death themes into a call for social and political change.

This body of Hassani literature, along with broader narratives from the Great Sahara region, seeks to reclaim and restore the essence of the Sahara narrative—distorted and altered by colonialism, modernity, and capitalism. It aims to depict the Sahara of Southern Morocco, particularly the tribal societies of *Rgaybat, Ait Oussa, Ait Moussa w Ali*, and *Azargaying*, not as inherently chaotic but as a region with a dynamic, organic social order. While these descriptions of tribal conflicts may hold some truth, they must be differentiated from the violence introduced by systematic colonial intervention, which not only disrupted traditional lifestyles but also alienated the Biddani society by transforming these nomads into urban dwellers. The destructive impact of such forced urbanization, including the embedding of hazardous practices like explosive mines, is a central theme in Sahrawi literary outputs, prominently featured in Mahjoub's *Mined Places*.

Continuing Colonial Impacts in Sahrawi Contexts: Exploring Landmines and Identity in Mahjoub's *Mined Places* **(2016)**

Structurally, Mahjoub's *Mined Places* diverges from traditional novelistic norms; it does not aim to develop an engaging plot but instead halts time to present multiple perspectives on the same theme simultaneously. The scene Mahjoub portrays is set in a postcolonial Saharan environment in Morocco. This paper argues that her choice is intentional to carve out space for a hybrid genre that merges memoir and novelistic elements, enabling the author to address a deeply personal experience unique to her community. This artistic strategy allows her to convey these experiences to readers. For instance, through her main character, Mariam—who serves as Mahjoub's alter ego—the author revisits childhood memories of the Sahara, exposing the trauma of growing up under the shadow of colonial injustices, persisting even in postcolonial times.

> I always listened to my mother's advice to avoid playing on roads that no human foot had ever trod..! Why, Mom..? *The roads that have no trace of them are mysterious and hide behind their mystery a landmine that lies in wait for children, my little one*.. If you find a piece of iron, avoid playing with it..? My mother's ten commandments, I memorize them at the moment of instruction in the morning.. And as soon as I leave the house, I forget them out of love for playing, *and I forget her fearful*

> *words always about something I don't know? It didn't occur to a small mind that can accommodate playing in a vast desert, and sandy dunes that we roll on its surface, that it hides death under its golden dunes.* (Mahjoub: 2016, 34, my translation & emphasis)

Originally deployed to suppress resistance movements against Spanish colonialism and to facilitate forced urbanization, landmines remain a lethal hazard, disrupting Sahrawi lives even today. Mahjoub gives the following description in her work to landmines,

> Generally, an anti-personnel mine consists of a plastic structure or a material that is resistant to corrosion. It has a wide top and a trigger underneath that is activated when stepped on by an individual, detonating the explosive charge. The effectiveness of the mine increases with age. It contains a filling of quick-burning gunpowder and toxic pellets. When the ground vibrates, the spring-loaded needles strike, igniting the fuse and leading to a rapid explosion, a process that takes just a moment. (2016: 21, my translation)

The novel portrays landmines as symbolic disruptors of the Sahrawi way of life, traditionally characterized by freedom, boundlessness, and safety—qualities compromised by man-made hazards. This disruption is vividly illustrated when Mahjoub laments, "How can you be well without an arm to lean on … without a leg that

yesterday raced the wind, a stray mare in a boundless desert, with no borders to confine it, no wires to fence it in, and no mined wall of distances lurking for the lives within" (2016: 35). This imagery of the Sahrawi as a free bird trapped within artificially urbanized confines recurs throughout the novel, serving as a critical archetype. This motif is prevalent in postcolonial Sahrawi literature from the Great Sahara, symbolizing the distorted state of nomadic tribes in contemporary times. Ultimately, the question arises: what forces keep this metaphorical caged bird confined in modern times? What prevents its escape? The answer is succinct: modern capitalism, particularly when viewed as a continuation of an imperial colonial legacy.

The disruptive impact of colonialism on the Sahara of Southern Morocco reaches far beyond the immediate physical dangers of landmines, profoundly affecting the cultural and spiritual fabric of its people. Forced migration from nomadic lifestyles to urban settlements not only represents a loss of physical freedom but also signifies deeper themes of cultural assimilation and environmental degradation. This transition, propelled by colonial agendas, is inherently tied to the broader mechanics of modern capitalism, which seeks to homogenize and exploit. Further elaborating on this historical continuum of exploitation, Neel Ahuja asserts, "environmental injustices must be understood as components of longer processes of colonialism and racial disposabil-

ity generated by extractive capital development" (Planetary Specter, 2021:11). Despite the extensive influence of capitalist exploitation, the desert preserves elements of resistance to total capitalist control. This resistance is primarily rooted in the enduring presence of nomadic cultures, both at the margins of the Sahara and in the collective memory of those displaced into urban spaces.

These nomadic cultures, as al-Koni (2022) notes, are distinguished by their indifference to rapid, tangible profit, promoting a deeper, metaphysical engagement with their environment. This connection surpasses the materialistic impulses of capitalism, embodying a spiritual and transcendent relationship with nature that defies complete commodification. This enduring resistance to capitalist values highlights a fundamental misalignment with Western perspectives, particularly during the colonial and industrial periods, when the spiritual significance of the desert was largely misunderstood or dismissed as incompatible with the emerging industrial mindset. This historical misunderstanding underscores the distinct and enduring essence of Saharan identity, which remains spiritually rich and profoundly connected to its natural surroundings, despite the ongoing challenges of postcolonial reality.

In *Mined Places*, Mahjoub succinctly summarized the interests of the capitalist system in keeping the Sahara in a fragmented state. For it serves the purposes of continu-

ing a long colonial legacy of abusing the land's natural resources at the expanse of keeping its people hostage to urbanized caves, unallowed to return to a lifestyle of nomadic dwelling in a space that knows and helped in the development of their genetics for thousands of years. If such a people were to return to their way of life, this would defy the already mentioned qualities of modern capitalism: on top of which is ownership of things, mainly a land in the case of the Sahara. The Sahrawi individual owns only their soul and the whole desert is his home. Not a single spot is his own property, but he belongs to the whole desert as a participant natural element there, showcasing a high consciousness of environmental concerns of our age and which, with huge finance, capitalism is trying to appear as a force which promotes them. If this is the case, why stand in the way of a people ready to implement these environmental ethics in the attempt of regaining their way of Being in the world? Why, indeed, having stopped these people from their own way in the first instance? On all these issues, Mahjoub writes both in a way similar to Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect optimism of will".

> Mariam's homeland groans in pain. I remember Mariam's words and her veiled accusation against those who benefit from prolonging the fires in the desert. Mariam told me, with displeasure ... The earth is never free from brokers of wars and their traders. Just as it is never free from lovers of peace and those who fight mines as well. (2016: 49, my translation)

Mahjoub, drawing on prior analyses of the Sahara as an entity wounded by imperial colonialism and the rise of modern capitalism, captures the profound sense of loss that defines the postcolonial Moroccan Sahrawi identity. This loss is vividly personified through the character of Cheikh, the wise old man. Amidst a society plagued by landmines and widespread dissatisfaction with their disrupted lives, Mahjoub explores a deep longing that represents both a missing part of their identity and a significant force shaping their collective memory in modern times. Here, Cheikh responds to Mariam as she inquires why the connection to the Sahara remains vital despite the tragedies it inflicts on its people.

> Do you know, my daughter, that we are of this land? From its womb we were created, and to it we return. I have lost my support, my son, the delight of my heart, like all the sons of the dark earth, the desert. Since time immemorial, it has carried the history of its pain in its palm and walked on. This is our fate, my daughter. There is no escape from the fate of the desert. Even if mines pulverize our bodies, and the bodies of our children and our women, we will not leave *our land*. It is the mother. *Who leaves his mother and departs is punished by God, yes, punished by God in this life and the next, a wretch is he who leaves his land...* Mariam interrupts me.. But the cities are safer, how long will you fortify yourself in tents, my sheikh..? And the danger of the mine threatens your fate..? *My tent*

> *made of camel hair,* I prefer it to cement houses that block from my eyes the color of the sky, I am not the undutiful son, my daughter. The dutiful is in the warm embrace. When the embrace of strangers casts us out, the desert opens its arms welcoming, despite the mined places, along the expanse of our homeland that we accept no substitute for, my daughter..? *Neither the cities tempt me nor their peace, I want peace for the desert where the tent encampments are.* (2016: 99, my translation)

The Cheikh's expression of a desire for "peace for the desert" reflects his acute awareness of the identity crisis afflicting his community. Having endured the ravages of colonialism and witnessed its deliberate disruption of nomadic life through urbanization, the Cheikh understands the profound dislocation inflicted upon his people. His concerns are particularly poignant in the context of cultural homogenization, a recurring theme in our discussions. He cautions against accepting urban life as a permanent condition, imposed by external forces that render the desert—once home—dangerous and unreachable. Through his discourse with Mariam, the Cheikh strives to instill a yearning for their ancestral "mother" land while also justifying for himself why, despite all good reasons, he must stay, in essence, a son of the desert.

Mahjoub seems to focus heavily on the problem of landmines in the Sahara context and how it, alongside several

other issues, fragments the lived experiences of postcolonial Sahrawi society. Indeed, if one is to contemplate the title, Mined Places, it already is explicit about what type of environment is to be found inside the text. Still, Mahjoub's narrative transcends mere documentation of suffering, exploring the resilient and hopeful dimensions of the desert even amid turmoil. She writes

> Neither the father nor the mother nor you are well..? *Why*, doctor, do you embellish the *truth*? The daughter of the desert, despite her young age, is capable of *enduring*. The desert has taught her from a young age to remain *dignified despite the hardships*. Such is the nature of the harsh and dignified desert. *Those who know the desert refuse to be broken... and walk on thorns with their feet*. (2016: 35, emphasis added)

"Those who know the desert refuse to be broken." But who truly knows the desert? Do the contemporary Sahrawi generations, born into urban settings and engulfed in nostalgic longing and present melancholia, really know it? The answer, strikingly, is yes. Mahjoub's protagonist in *Mined Places* has never experienced the Sahara untouched by colonial or political strife, yet she is restless throughout the novel. Her unrest stems from belonging to a community deeply scarred by tragedy—a tragedy that, despite her resistance, is inherited. The protagonist's sole familiarity is with the urban environment, yet she carries the weight of her nomadic community's past sorrows. This pervasive dissatisfaction is also epit-

omized by Cheikh, who views urban living as an ill fit for Sahrawi life. Reflecting on this through the lens of environmental and social sustainability, and recalling al-Koni's theory of two tribal systems—nomadic and settled—raises a crucial question: What happens if the nomadic lifestyle, long cherished and mourned by the Sahrawi, suddenly vanishes? What are the consequences of enforcing a uniform urban existence on a diverse society? This scenario mirrors the flawed colonial mindset that labeled the 'other' as savage and reflects capitalism's tendency to overlook diversity for profit.

Mined Places eventually emerges as a seminal work within the canon of postcolonial Great Saharan literature, embodying both national and spatial dimensions. By "national," I refer to the text's deep engagement with the experiences of local Moroccan Sahrawi people, who navigate the enduring legacies of colonialism that markedly shape their current realities. Spatially, Mined Places transcends national boundaries, inviting a transnational and comparative analysis alongside other Saharan literatures. This approach positions the Sahara not merely as a setting but as a critical temporospatial dimension within the narrative. This paper posits that such dual readings highlight an underexplored facet of postcolonial Sahrawi literature: its ability to unify diverse narratives across varying nationalities, cultures, languages, and identities of the Sahrawi people throughout the Great Sahara. This unification is not driven by ideological or

political alignment but by a desire to bring back what Tynan (2022) identifies as the absent "desert spirituality" in contemporary literature. Furthermore, by delving into how Mined Places portrays the trauma and longing of the postcolonial Sahrawi, the text enables a broader, cross-national understanding of how the Sahara, despite historical injustices, continues to resonate and be reinvigorated through the literary expression of its people.

Concluding this analysis, while *Mined Places* distinctly embodies the unique ethos of its people, culture, and temporal milieu, it articulates a message that transcends its localized setting—the universal yearning for peace. This is powerfully encapsulated in Mahjoub's evocative plea: "I scream for life, a triumph over the obsession with mined places, and I dream of a homeland of peace. We want love, we want peace, enough with mines and wars, we want love and peace... Will peace prevail one day?" (Mahjoub 2016: 63, my translation). Her words do not merely lament a disrupted past; they call for a present where peace is not just a dream, but a palpable reality. As we reflect on the narrative's profound layers, we are reminded that literature not only mirrors societal conflicts but also serves as a beacon for potential reconciliation and understanding. In the echoes of Mahjoub's questioning—"Will peace prevail one day?"—we find not just a rhetorical query, but a challenge to the reader, an invitation to engage with the possibility of peace both within and beyond the pages of Saharan literature.

Conclusion

This article has shown that postcolonial literature from the Great Sahara, particularly Mahjoub's *Mined Places,* offers fresh perspectives on the desert as a historically overlooked and misrepresented space. Our analysis identifies both national and transnational dimensions. On a national level, Mahjoub's work delves into the societal impact of imperial colonialism on Sahrawi communities in Southern Morocco, examining the disruptions to traditional nomadic life due to urbanization and landmines. This investigation highlights the novel's exploration of identity and reconciliation within a postcolonial framework. On a transnational scale, the narrative connects these local experiences to wider debates about the spiritual and metaphysical significance of the desert, contesting its depiction as merely a scenic element and asserting its agency in global environmental conversations. Additionally, the narrative prompts a reassessment of the archetype of the Sahara, urging us to see it not only as a geographic area but as an active participant in the healing from colonial damage. This shift in perspective challenges old misconceptions and underscores the resilience and flexibility of the desert's communities. This is also why the article integrates the desert into broader postcolonial discussions, linking it to worldwide concerns of environmental justice and cultural preservation. By contrasting the Sahara's mythical resonance with present-day ecological and social challenges, it in-

vites readers to reconsider desert themes in contemporary discourses, enhancing our understanding of its role in global cultural and ecological debates.

In sum, the literature discussed in this article actively disputes established historical views and encourages a reevaluation of the desert's function in academic and artistic realms. It calls for a sophisticated appreciation of the desert not just as an obstacle, but as a bridge connecting various histories, cultures, and ecosystems. Finally, it emphasizes the desert's importance in the postcolonial Great Saharan literary canon for both regional and global frameworks of environmental consciousness. This canon implores us to reconceptualize the futures we envision, calling for intellectual and imaginative endeavors that perceive the desert not as a limit, but as a nexus of diverse narratives and life systems. Through this lens, it compels our consideration of the profound, universal themes resonant in Saharan literature—themes that alert us to the vital ecological and spiritual tasks before us, echoing and amplifying the Sahara's voices that stir and enlighten us all.

Works Cited

Al-Koni, Ibrahim. 1990. *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Cairo: Egyptian-Lebanese Publishing House.

—. 1992. *Gold Dust*. New York: Viking Books

Ansari, Bilqis. n.d. "Between Being and Non-Being: A Home in the World, A Home in Nostalgia - A Conversation with Ibrahim Al-Koni." *Mana Cultural Platform*. Last modified June 29, 2022. https://mana.net/al-koni/.

Barbier, Maurice. 2000. *Voyageurs et Explorateurs au Sahara Occidental au XIXème Siècle*. Paris: Harmattan.

Bengochea Tirado, Enrique, and Francesco Correale. "Modernising Violence and Social Change in the Spanish Sahara (1957–1975)." *Itinerario* 44, no. 1 (2020): 33–54. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115320000042.

Boubrik, Rahal. 2012. *Zaman Alqabila: Alsulta wa Tadbir Al'unf fi Almojtama' Alsahrawi*. Rabat: Abi Rāqrāq.

—. 2021. *Al-mojtamā' Al-sāhrawi: Min 'Alāmi Al-khaimā ila Fādāe Al-mādinā*. Casablanca: Afriquiā Achārq.

Césaire, Aimé. 1955. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Paris: Édi-

tions Réclame.

Douls, Camille. *Cinq mois chez les maures nomades du Sahara occidental. Le Tour du monde,* vol. 1, 1888, pp. 177-224.

Eljanhaoui, Erragab. 2024. "Asmaimee Enda: A Tale from the Hassani Popular Literature - Written by Laghla Bouzid & Translated by Erragab Eljanhaoui." *Mendeley Data*, V1. doi:10.17632/pc9n5j9h6f.1.

Han, Byung-Chul. 2015. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

King, Dean. 2004. *Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival.* New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Lukács, György. 1963. *The Historical Novel.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Lydon, Ghislaine. 2005. "Writing Trans-Saharan History: Methods, Sources, and Interpretations across the African Divide." *The Journal of North African Studies* 10, no. 3: 293-324.

Mahjoub, al-Batoul. 2016. *Mined Places.* Amman: Dar Fadaat for Publishing and Distribution.

Martinez Milan, J. M. 2017."Empresa pública y minería en el Sahara Occidental: Fosfatos de Bu Craa S.A., 1969-1983". *Boletín Geológico y Minero.*

Matar, Hisham. 2006. *In the Country of Men*. New York: Viking, an imprint of Penguin Books.

Matar, Hisham. 2016. *The Return*. New York: Random House.

Mohameden, Mohamedou Ould. 2001. *La Société Maure Au XIXe Siècle Vue Par les Voyageurs Français*. Rabat: Institut des Etudes Africaines, 2001.

Riley, James. 1850. *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce, Wrecked on the Western Coast of Africa, in the Month of August, 1815, with an Account of the Sufferings of the Surviving Officers and Crew, Who Were Enslaved by the Wandering Arabs, on the African Desart, or Zahahrah; and Observations Historical, Geographical, &c. Made during the Travels of the Author, While a Slave to the Arabs, and in the Empire of Morocco*. Hartford: T. & W. Mercein.

Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Sanmao. 2019. Stories from the Sahara. Translated by Mike Fu. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Trail, Thomas S. 1821. "Account of the Captivity of Alexander Scott, among the Wandering Arabs of

the Great African Desert, for a Period of Nearly Six Years. With Geographical Observations on his Routes, and Remarks on the Currents of the Ocean on the North-Western Coast of Africa by Major Rennell, F.R.S. &c. &c. &c." In *The Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* 4, edited by David Brewster, 38-54, 235-246.

Tynan, Aidan. 2020. *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Wasteland Aesthetics.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474443371

Vitkus, Daniel J., ed. 2000. *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England.* Introduction by Nabil Matar. New York: Columbia University Press.