

# A Travel Through Oases in French and Arabic Literature

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**Abstract** The Arabic or French novels of Gamal Ghitani, Ibrahim Al-Koni, Pierre Loti, Charles Wallut, Eugène Fromentin, and André Gide are legendary stories located outside of time and linked to a mystical quest. The travel to reach an oasis is symbolical, and the life within it an *oasisnade*, or oasis narrative. As a dream or a mirage, the oasis is an important imaginary representation for orientalist literature linked with the French colonial process. The main problem for the writer is how to describe poetically such a geographical reality as an oasis inside the complementary reality of the desert, using colours, the “écriture artiste”, or patterns such as the foundation story, the Garden of Eden, or the maze. The identity of the traveller is completely changed through the encounter with the oasis in a spiritual or cultural way.

**Keywords** Oasis • Novel • Travel • Quest • Desert • French • Arabic • Writer

## 1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on four French novels and two contemporary Arabic novels, by Gamal Ghitani (*L'Appel du couchant*)<sup>1</sup> and Ibrahim Al-Koni (*L'Oasis cachée*).<sup>2</sup> The historical context of these novels, apart from their cultural and linguistic differences, has completely changed, but Gamal Ghitani and Ibrahim Al-Koni have

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<sup>1</sup>The Call of the West.

<sup>2</sup>The Hidden Oasis.

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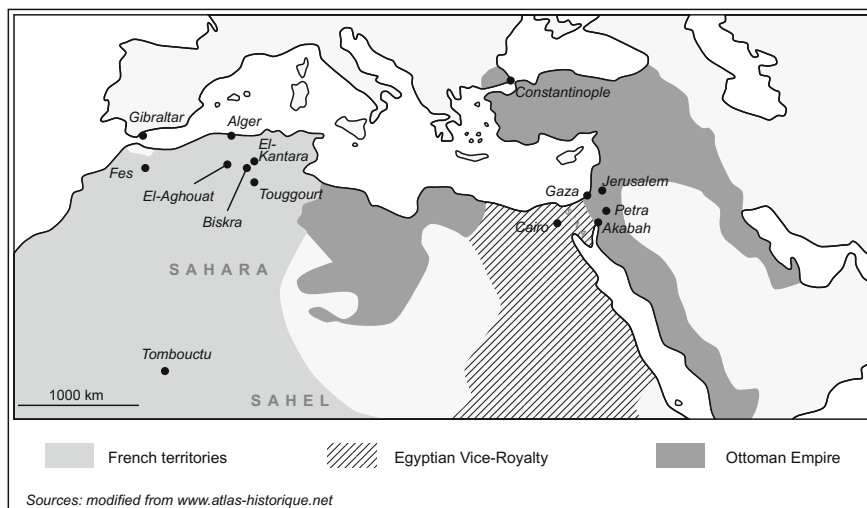
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not written historical novels, in a realistic way. They create legendary stories about oases, which cannot be understood with reference to the postcolonial situation in Egypt or Libya (Fig. 1). Their novels are located outside of time, in a sort of eternity. A journey is described, but it cannot be clearly seen on maps or on a calendar. Some differences can be seen with Western writers on the subject of oases. In the case of the Arabic novels, the origins of oases are often legendary, although they are not easily located in space. They exist in contrast to deserts as a divine miracle as well as a fragile human creation. The desert and its oases are linked with a mystical quest in Islamic civilisation, as we will see in this essay. The oasis opens up a holy dimension in space. The traveller is a pilgrim who has heard a “call” that will change his life completely, as is clearly represented in the two Arabic novels. This mystical call is not absent from the French novels we chose to read, especially the one by André Gide, but the Islamic aspects are not relevant. Despite the aesthetic and historical differences, the French novels were chosen because of the central importance of the oasis in the story, just like in the modern Arabic novels described above, while the comparison between the two cultures and two distinct periods of time is somewhat interesting, because it shows how the travelogue is a shared creative pattern. Travel literature is a common field, but the travel is immediately symbolic in the case of the Arabic novels, whereas it has a geographical and conquest meaning in the case of those authors very close to the colonial administration of the French empire. However, even Pierre Loti and Eugène Fromentin move from conquest to quest, whatever this might be: a religious or an artistic achievement. Thus, some aspects of their works are perfectly in tune with the contemporary Arabic novels. The reasons are to be found in the physical nature of the oasis itself, as we will try to show. Basically, the geographical



**Fig. 1** Maghreb and Mashriq oases in French and Arabic literature. Geopolitical context at the beginning of the 20th Century

characteristics of oases have not changed over time, so they can dictate the same ideas to many writers and produce the same words in order to describe a similar reality.

The French colonial novels about oases, like Charles Wallut's *Grandeur et décadence d'une oasis*, republished as *L'Oasis – scènes du désert* in (1883), are close to the genre of the "Robinsonade", which is a kind of narrative born after the success of Daniel Defoe's novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, where the action takes place in an exotic context, generally on an island, but, in our view, an oasis is very close to an island in the human imagination. The term first appeared at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Robinsonade themes are isolation and the origins of civilisation, or human culture. This kind of narrative has a didactic value, especially for educating young people, according to J.J. Rousseau. It is a kind of adventure novel, which uses the main ideas of Defoe's novel, but the Robinsonade also includes the values of colonialism, in the framework of exotic or colonial literature. Our writers are travellers in the Near East, or in Africa close to Europe, like North Africa. They travel to reach an oasis, or they come across oases during their travels. May we suggest another word instead of Robinsonade, such as "oasisnade", in the sense of an oasis narrative? Then, we could have the right word to describe a common literature field. The oasis is an image of colonisation without any meta-physical sense apart from Providence. For Pierre Loti, travelling through deserts between Cairo and Jerusalem, the oases encountered during his travels are linked with a personal image of Eden, purity and sensuality. It is this image that we can find in *Le Désert* (1913). Eugène Fromentin, with *Un Été dans le Sahara* (1887), gives a very original version of the visual aspects of the oasis due to his artistic status. André Gide, with *L'Immoraliste* (1985), is in search of a moral climate, hot of course, where the human body can be healthy and beautiful at the same time. His hero finds it in Algeria, especially in one oasis, Biskra, after having left southern Italy.

First, we describe the French literary vision, before focusing on a few Arabic examples, in order to see how far their perceptions can be compared, in the common perspective of oasis narratives, or oasisnades.

## 2 French Colonial Novels

Can we associate the oasis novels with a general reflection about travel accounts in what was used to be called in France "*L'Orient*" (the East), or "Levant", or the Ottoman Empire? In a sense, yes, because oases are linked with the general theme of the desert, the Sahara or Sinai. The Algerian oases and the desert, as a theme, are often described in these travel accounts (Berchet 2001: 1020). The desert, and the oases within it, is a space represented, read, and written about, but it is not very easy to find specific oasis novels, like those written by Bahaa Taher or Ibrahim Al-Koni. This does not mean that they do not exist, but they seem to lack originality, like Charles Wallut's novel, whereas their ideological purpose is obvious. Thus, the

desert is a global scene where the oases may appear but as a detail in the picture, not as the main subject. We find a real link between the general rules of travel accounts in the “Orient” and the description of oases as part of the travel. In several famous travel accounts, such as *Un Été dans le Sahara* or *Le Désert*, the oasis is not the centre of the story, but it plays a very important role, especially for Fromentin, as a pictorial topic, a challenge for both the painter and the writer. Then, in the famous French novel *L'Immoraliste*, the life of the main character finds its deepest truth under the palm trees of Biskra. Through these four French novels, we will see that within a general colonial framework, literary achievements can be very different. The value given to oases can be very personal according to the writer.

## 2.1 Grandeur et Décadence d'une Oasis by Wallut (*Second Printing 1883*)

This French novel gave birth to a shorter version under the title *L'Oasis – Scènes du désert* (1883). First, we can summarise the novel and read it very quickly; Captain Onésime Lafourche leaves Gibraltar on 1 March 1815, but only reaches Fes in February 1816. The novel thus begins like a travel account in the desert because the captain and his group of fellow travellers cross the desert between Fes and Timbuktu. The Sahara is soon described as a “*mer figée*”<sup>3</sup> (Wallut 1883: 70) which is an Arabic image: the desert as a sea. The author also reminds the reader of the words of Ptolemy, who compares the desert to a panther's fur, yellow-like sand, and black-like oases (Wallut: 71). Generally speaking, orientalist literature is considered a dream, an imaginary representation: the so-called oriental mirage, according to Louis Bertrand (Berchet: 10). Right away, Wallut uses the potential quality of the Sahara: a place where the traveller meets mirages. We can find various statements about hallucinations in chapter VIII: “*Les Phénomènes du désert*”. The mirage is a reverse image; for example, the tops of palm trees are seen upside down. The scientific allusion to mirages in the desert precedes the encounter with the oasis announced by the title, as if it was itself a sort of mirage, and a reverse image, which is the main originality of this description. The oasis was abandoned a long time ago and is completely dry. The novel becomes didactic with a typology between three types of oasis. The old oasis used to be irrigated by an artesian well, but this well has been filled with sand. The oasis is dying; it will come to life again because, as quoted in Arabic, “*Bahar toht el erd*” (the sea is under the earth). So, the oasis is symbolically the place where man can be born a second time. The oasis is feminine, like the “Orient” (East) for the whole nineteenth century. It was like a sleeping beauty, and the small group of Europeans will awaken this lady through skilful and technical activity. Their energetic digging (140 m deep!) enables the oasis to come back to life in a few days. Then, the author alternates between a

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<sup>3</sup>A frozen sea.

human and a divine vision of reality. The oasis is classically compared to Eden, “*le Paradis terrestre*” (Wallut: 120), and is also named “*La Terre promise*”. The Promised Land was reached by the Jews after crossing the Red Sea, just like the small troop left Fes and crossed the Sahara. At the same time, the author describes the cattle grazing and the date palm culture, and the organisation of the small colony with an elected government. So, the oasis is described according to Robinson Crusoe’s patterns. It is a Robinsonade, one among many novels written after Defoe’s, especially for teenagers. Although the oasis is like a safe island, isolated in the desert of sand (which is another common image associated with oases), several dangers appear: clouds of grasshoppers, ostriches, “*Targui*” or “*Touaregs*”, a large desert tribe. This is a typical vision of the colonialist period, when local inhabitants are considered either friends or foes, facing the European power. The haven of peace becomes a battlefield, and the oasis is destroyed. The small group of travellers leaves the oasis after fourteen years. It is now 1830, precisely when Algeria is defeated by French troops. We can deduce from this coincidence that the main argument of this novel, apart from desert exoticism, is to justify, in a mythical way, the French colonial process in Algeria.

## 2.2 Le Désert by Loti (1913)

The trip described by the famous French writer is one of the most interesting among his various travel books, although the general idea is very common too: Chateaubriand invented the “*itinéraire circulaire*”, Egypt–Palestine–Lebanon–Asia Minor–Constantinople–Athens–Greece, which was destined to be written about so many times later on (Berchet: 10). The first part of this journey ends at Gaza and Jerusalem on Easter Sunday. Pierre Loti quotes the Bible before every chapter, and he visits the Saint Catherine monastery in the Sinai mountains, but he offers the reader something very different: the beauty of the desert, which is the outermost borders of the world, a typical oriental space (Berchet: 1042). Following the sandy road through Sinai, Akabah, and the Petra desert, the travellers meet the most difficult road to Jerusalem. Once they have climbed Mount Sinai, they shelter for a few days in the “*demeure de la solitude*” (Loti 1913 : 46) or the “*le couvent âgé d’une quinzaine de siècles*” (Loti 1913: 45): Deir Sant Katreen. The famous writer is invited to visit the “*jardin muré*” (69). The gardens of Saint Catherine are built in terraces with high walls around them, near the community’s cemetery. Cypresses, olive trees, a vineyard, and citrus trees grow there. Pierre Loti compares his experience with an oriental spring (75), or an artificial garden: “*Et il est singulier, ce printemps-là, qu’on sent venu uniquement pour ce jardin artificiel [...] puisque nulle part ailleurs, il ne trouvera rien à reverdir, dans l’infini des sables et des pierres mortes [...]*” (75). These gardens are not an oasis, but they work as if they were: they are a green, artificial, closed, and isolated area surrounded by dry mountains. Once the travellers have left Mount Sinai, they cross a desert land and come across a few valley oases, such as Oued-el-Aïn, the valley of the fountain.

The main problem is how to describe poetically such a geographical reality as an oasis. However, Loti is a prominent writer because he created for his readers a personal variety of the “*pittoresque exotique*” (Mougin-Haddad-Wolting 2002: 536). In fact, it is not necessary to be really original: the reader accepts with pleasure the same other or “*le même autre*” (Berchet: 10). The repetition gives him/her great pleasure, “*le plaisir de la répétition*” (10). So Pierre Loti uses the same adjectives, “*un lieu enchanté*” (Loti: 90), “*l’oasis charmante*” (93), or the same comparisons with Eden: “*Avec quelles images de fraîcheur empruntées aux poètes de l’ancien Orient peindre cet Eden caché dans les granits du désert?*” (92). This is the beginning of chapter XIX, which repeats the previous chapter, word for word. The oasis exists by its contrast with the surrounding desert. So it is characterised as “small” as opposed to the greatness of the desert: “*En route, le long de la mer, – et sitôt disparue la petite oasis charmante, le grand désert vous ressaisit*” (119). It is a very narrow and restricted area, whereas the desert is described everywhere as “*étendue*”: “*Et nous recommençons à faire route vers le Nord, dans ce désert d’un gris jaunâtre qui semble n’être plus rien que l’étendue, – l’étendue sous sa forme la plus simple, mais aussi la plus excitante à courir*” (198). A large stretch or expanse of sand is seen everywhere as the desert area, and within it, the traveller discovers a tiny and closed space completely apart: the oasis. The traveller approaches the complementary reality of the desert and oases according to a physical experience, such as a phenomenology of the desert. Pierre Loti is a modern author in that sense: he tries to find a language suitable for a phenomenological experience. He emphasises the sudden change when one leaves the desert and enters an oasis such as Oued-el-Aïn. The traveller is delighted by this transformation of the landscape, like the opening of the curtain when the play begins: “[...] *quand elle s’ouvre tout à coup comme un décor qui change entre deux hauts portants de montagne*” (90). The world of the theatre and geophysical reality mix to recreate in words the intensity of a unique perception of the changing desert space. The writer may be helped by geology, the volumes and shapes of the rocks, such as walls or circles, and above all by botany. The great pleasure of tired eyes is to gaze at plants and trees, associated with water, because it is a new sensation for the traveller, so pleasant that the author can list the various plants several times. He compares this natural phenomenon with cultivated areas such as gardens (“*jardins sauvages*”, or “*bocages*”, Loti: 94). Of course, for this special problem of how to describe an oasis, colours are of great help, as we will see with the example of Eugène Fromentin, a painter and writer at the same time. The oasis has a special colour. The rocks are red, but the other components are “painted” using cold colours (blue or green). The oasis is described as “[...] *ce triple cirque de rochers sanglants parmi les verdure bleues*” (Loti: 91). The blue colour is given by the tamarinds, reeds, and palm trees. The restricted area of the oasis is blue, whereas the great extent of the desert is grey and yellow. The latter is even the colour of lizards, “*couleur du sol et de l’étendue*” (198). We can say that this original discourse on colours is very modern, because it relies on the psychological effect of the desert landscape on the traveller.

The last quality attached to the oasis by the author is its peaceful atmosphere, as if it was a protected sanctuary: “*il y a une paix spéciale, une incomparable paix dans cette oasis non profane, que de tous côtés l’immense desert mort environne et protège*” (Loti: 95). This peace has to be compared with a general quality of Eastern people for Westerners: it provides mental peace, like the “keif”<sup>4</sup> of perfect moments of meditation, “[...] *le pur plaisir de savourer son existence*” (Berchet: 15). However, the East is motionless, like Islam. It is eternity according to Loti: “*l’orient éternisé dans son rêve et sa poussière*”. (181). This means that somebody has to be an active agent. Somebody is moving in that peaceful and motionless space: the Western traveller. He is the one in search of the oriental source. He takes off his shoes and walks on worn rocks or sand soft as velvet: “[...] *où l’on marche comme sur du velours*” (95). Nevertheless, the sacred approach, in which the oasis is considered a temple, is contaminated or polluted by another oriental theme: the oasis is feminine. It is associated with a very common dream among travellers in the East: the harem. Pierre Loti is a passionate lover of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire. Because of the soft texture of the rocks, and because of their pink and red colours, he imagines that the pink granite natural pools are like those found in oriental palaces: “[...] *dont le fond transparait comme celui des artificielles piscines pour les ablutions des sultanes ou des houris*” (93). The oasis area with its natural assets has completely transformed the Western traveller into someone else: an oriental or Arabian inhabitant.

### 2.3 Un Été Dans Le Sahara by Fromentin (1887)

With Eugène Fromentin, the very famous orientalist painter and, at the same time, a renowned novelist, we turn back to Algeria, where he wrote his travel notes about the Sahara and the Sahel, in a French colonial context. The area is a very conflictual zone, even nowadays, a country at war. Despite this, and even though Fromentin suggests the negative aspects of French colonisation for the towns under French rule, he is considered an artist whose main interest lies in landscapes. He is a good example of the importance the oasis can have in a literary descriptive system applied to the desert. An empty space is not easy to describe whether you are a writer or a painter. Fromentin travelled in Algeria like so many other orientalist painters, in order to improve his works with a picturesque reality, but he wrote a very interesting diary at the same time, in which he tries to give a literary account of what he sees as a painter. So, instead of describing the monotony of dry areas, Fromentin highlights the times when the travellers stop at night, and sometimes for several days. This means that the desert is not a desert at all, at least the Sahara beginning in Algeria. We enjoy the

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<sup>4</sup>The keif in Arabic culture is a word that gives the idea of a feeling of emptiness and fullness that can be felt when one is outside ordinary reality with the help of commonly used drugs, such as hashish. It also has a more general meaning of living to the full.

discovery of oases, but most towns are linked with gardens, green outskirts, suburbs covered with gardens, and urban greenery without which no town could survive. As we have already seen with the enchanting novelist, Pierre Loti, everything is a question of colour. The oasis causes the writer real difficulties. Moreover, in the case of Fromentin, the painter is not just eager to reproduce the outside world. What is more important is the harmony between the inside and the outside. He seeks an “*accord d'impressions*” (Mougin-Haddad-Wolting: 339). This concern, in a multi-disciplinary way, as a painter and writer, can explain the strange feeling of the reader who, through the narrator’s eyes, sees life as a play performed by another (339). *Un Été dans le Sahara* begins just like the usual travelogue. Fromentin leaves Alger for one of the most famous oases in Algeria, Biskra, at the end of February 1848.

He leaves the Tell of Constantine, one of the richest and wettest areas where agriculture is easy, at El-Kantara (it means the bridge) with 25,000 palm trees and a deep river. The painter and writer uses a lyrical tone to celebrate an early spring in what is called “*un petit village couleur d’or*” (Fromentin 1887: 5) or “*ce village en fleurs*” (5). The colours are essential: gold for the sun, green for the trees, and white for the flowers. A distinctive touch in the description is the importance of sounds (birds, a flute, a “muezzin”), and we find again the comparison with the rise of a theatre curtain when the travellers enter the desert: “[...] *cette subtile apparition de l’orient par la porte d’or d’El-Kantara*” (6). The costumes and the decor are borrowed from the Bible, especially the “[...] *pays de Chanaan, moins l’abondance*” (39). For the writer, the question of “*la couleur locale*” is very important. The words used to increase the local effect are toponyms, such as “*rass-el aïoun*”, the spring head (69), and the transliteration of Arabic words (“*douar*”, “*bordj*”, and “*oued*”).

The first big town is finally reached after having crossed the Ouled Naïl mountains. At the beginning of June 1853, Fromentin is in El-Aghouat (today Laghouat), between the “Hauts Plateaux” and the “Grand Erg Occidental”, in the Saharan Atlas. From El-Aghouat, Fromentin has a view over the green palm trees, but he is first interested in another great enigma: the desert, which he tries to define. It is a heart-rending landscape: “[...] *ce tableau ardent et inanimé, composé de soleil, d’étendue et de solitude*” (121). It cannot be compared to any other. Then, the author describes the town, apparently asleep. At first, two realities mingle, because the oasis, which surrounds the town of El-Aghouat, is “[...] *aussi muette et comme endormie de même sous la pesanteur du jour*” (124). However, the oasis is more difficult to describe because it mixes contradictory qualities. It is cohesive, made of a single stuff, but at the same time, it is discontinuous, made of different pieces, such as a patchwork. The oasis of Al-Aghouat is compared to “*deux carrés de feuilles enveloppées d’un long mur*” (124). It is drawn like a park on the “*plaine stérile*”. So, it is characterised as a walled, closed island, isolated from the desert, which is the most usual way to describe an oasis.

The author adds that “[...] *vue de cette hauteur, elle apparaît comme une nappe verte*” (125). He notes “[...] *quelques maigres carrés d’orge d’un jaune ardent*” (125), and he sees the desert trying to invade the gardens. Green and yellow



surfaces are the oasis as seen by an observer who is a painter. The first impression is one of discontinuity. This is confirmed by the differences in colours, to which can be added the darkness of birds hidden in the trees. The desert is thus not separated from the oasis. On the contrary, it penetrates the oasis but in a way that enables the writer to introduce a comparison with a French landscape: “[...] à chaque instant, une nouvelle trombe de poussière passait sur l’oasis et venait s’abattre sur la ville; toute la forêt de palmiers s’aplatissait alors comme un champ de blé” (128). Later on, Fromentin compares the oasis of El-Aghouat with a “Normandie saharienne” (139) encircled by the desert. Still concerning El-Aghouat, the author assimilates the oasis to a town, but more probably to an Arabian architectural and urbanistic reference: the “medina”. In colonial or Western novels about North Africa, the medina is often compared to a maze. The oasis is also compared to a maze. “Malheureusement, l’oasis ressemble à la ville; elle est resserrée, compacte, sans clairières, et subdivisée à l’infini. Chaque enclos est entouré de murs, et de murs trop élevés pour que la vue s’étende de l’une dans l’autre” (138). It is a general statement to compare the oriental town with a labyrinth, which gives an ambiguous pleasure (Berchet: 15). The Western traveller is often looking for his deepest truth in the medina (or in the oasis), and he needs to get lost in the many lanes and narrow streets to find his way, and symbolically to find himself, like the hero of André Gide in *L’Immoraliste*. Fromentin emphasises the subjective meaning of his impressions of Algeria. He says that what he wrote many years ago has no meaning except for himself and a few friends; it is a personal knowledge.

The second oasis visited by Fromentin was born because of “Oued M’zi”, described as a “[...] chemin de sable, couleur de lavande, entre deux rangées verdoyantes de roseaux et un double taillis de bois touffus [...]” (152). Its name is Tadjemout. The town is surrounded on three sides by gardens, following the path of Oued M’zi. The writer repeats his remarks about El-Aghouat, but in another way; he is obsessed with the green colour, a very special green. “Une seule chose résiste à la consommation de ces terribles étés [...] c’est la couleur verte des feuillages, couleur extraordinaire dont nous n’avons pas l’expression dans les harmonies ordinaires de la palette” (166). This colour that cannot be reproduced by a painter is described with words using an original comparison between palm trees and toys: “[...] ce badigeonnage de vert émeraude, entier, agaçant, et qui fait ressembler tous ces arbres à des joujoux de papier vert qu’on planterait sur du bois jaune” (166). The yellow colour is introduced because the gardens at the foot of the green trees are very dry. A last quotation will prove that, finally, the writer is perfectly in tune with the painter by suggesting, in a colourful way, the beautiful landscape of the oasis gardens, or “ksours”<sup>5</sup>: “Par-dessus tout cela, les aigrettes des palmiers d’un vert froid, légèrement jaunes ou rougissantes au point de jonction des palmes, voilà les jardins de Tadjemout, c’est-à-dire de tous les k’sours du Sud” (167).

<sup>5</sup>Ksours (singular: ksar) are granaries to store wheat, corn, and many food items; they are usually divided into cells called “ghorfas”. They can occupy a very wide area and become real towns. Fromentin probably uses the term in the colonial sense, because French colonialists developed “ksours” to control the space.

Eugène Fromentin is a special example because the painter became a writer who wanted, above all, to express his personal feelings for the East, the Arabian world, and especially the desert landscape. He presents himself as one of the “*écrivains descriptifs*” (Fromentin 1887: VI). However, his method of expression, as a writer who describes what the painter cannot say, is based on “*l’image réfractée*” or “*souvenirs condensés*” (IX).

## 2.4 L’Immoraliste by Gide (1985)

The story of *L’Immoraliste* takes place in “189...”, as it is written, and a large part of it is located in Algeria, between El-Kantara, Biskra, and Touggourt, not far from the itinerary of Fromentin. The description of the oasis is less important than the use of different elements associated with it, like the wind in the palm trees, or the paths and gardens inside the oasis, again considered a maze. The structure of the novel is more or less repetitive. Michel and Marceline first go to the Biskra oasis and stay there for one winter. Then, they take a second trip in spring, first in Italy going south until they reach Sicily, and then again to Biskra and Touggourt. They go south in order to find some heat as both of them are sick. Michel recovers from tuberculosis, but then Marceline becomes sick and dies in Touggourt after the second journey to the oasis. The oasis, a very fertile land, with the importance of the orchard theme (*le verger fertile*), is surrounded by death associated with the desert. *L’Immoraliste* is a story of rebirth for Michel and of death for Marceline, and the centre of it is in the Biskra oasis. The relationship between the French hero, Michel, and the Arabian world (or the East in a wider sense) is one of desire. The young scholar Michel desires health and initiates a sexual coming-out in the oasis. The Biskra hotel is the place where he recovers his health and meets very young Algerian boys who are like the fruits in the oasis. At the same time, this sexualised relationship takes place in a holy and religious context, associated with the New Testament, another reference to the East. The young children have a golden skin, like in the case of Gauguin, and they give Michel the taste of Antiquity, as if they were Theocritus shepherds in Sicily. As a protestant, but at the same time as a specialist of Antiquity, he is delighted when he meets the Arabian world, where he can feel a biblical atmosphere. He becomes aware of the physical beauty of these young men. His own body becomes the centre of the oasis. Health and beauty are equal in Bachir’s body for example. Thus, the oasis, with its gardens and orchards, is the perfect scenery for his rebirth. His recovery from illness could not have happened elsewhere than in the oasis. The setting of their stay is perfectly beautiful. More than that, it is an Eden-like place: the scent of flowers, luminous air, turtle doves. These normal aspects of an oasis in the twentieth century are transformed into a mystical phenomenon. The palm trees and the wind swaying the palms play an important part before the appearance of a young shepherd playing the flute. The sun filtering through the palms onto Michel’s face is a mystical symbol: “*je sentais le soleil ardent doucement tamisé par les palmes [...] le vent léger dans les palmes*”

(Gide 1985: 49). This means that Michel is healed by the wind and the sun in the palms, and not only his body but also his soul is invigorated. The second time in the Biskra oasis, Michel remembers his first experience: “*Je reconnais l’immobilité des palmiers*” (179). At that time, he was reading Christ’s words to Saint Peter: “*Maintenant tu te ceins toi-même et tu vas où tu veux aller; mais quand tu seras vieux, tu étendras les mains...*” (57). The stillness and silence within the gardens in the oasis are the reasons for Michel’s experience. The wind passing through the palm trees is very different from what we have seen with Fromentin. Here, a spiritual presence encourages Michel to listen to the voices of his desires. This very positive experience in the oasis is unique. The second experience is one of disappointment. The oases are presented as “*peu riantes*” (179), and the narrator prefers the desert. The wind is no longer the sign of the presence of God but an image of hell and death. This wind is destructive: “*simoun ardent*” or “*sirocco aride*” (182). The experience of the oasis in Touggourt is completely negative and in tune with Marceline’s agony. Finally, the stay in Algeria becomes a nightmare for Michel who suffers from the ambiguity of the East, and here of North Africa: “*Entouré de splendeur et de mort, je sens le bonheur trop présent et l’abandon à lui trop uniforme*” (185).

### 3 Mystical Arabic Novels

We will leave aside Bahaa Taher, *L’Oasis du couchant* (2007, translated in 2011), because we have devoted a conference, published online, to this Egyptian author among others.<sup>6</sup> Its scenery is the famous Siwa oasis. Two other Arabic novels, *L’Appel du Couchant*, written by the renowned Egyptian disciple of Naguib Mahfouz, Ghitani (2000), and *L’Oasis cachée*, written by the Libyan novelist, Al-Koni (1997, translated into French in 2002), will be enough to understand how far the imagined world of the oasis can go when it is rooted in pre-Islamic thought or in Islamic mysticism; the desert and its oases are part of a mystical quest.

#### 3.1 L’Appel Du Couchant by Ghitani (2000)

In this novel, we have another travelogue, but it is difficult to identify the itinerary precisely and where the traveller first met the oasis. The Egyptian context influences the beginning of the story, but afterwards? A man is responsible for writing down the story of a foreigner (“*L’étranger*”) who came from the East to the West

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<sup>6</sup>Marc Kober, “*Fiction des oasis dans la littérature égyptienne contemporaine*”, CRESC and PRODIG. Conference “*Oasis dans la mondialisation: ruptures et continuités*” December 2013, HAL Id: hal-01024367 <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01024367>. Submitted 16 July 2014, pp. 13–20.

(“*le pays du couchant*”). “*L’Étranger*” is an Egyptian born in Cairo. The writer explains how the journey began and how the lonely traveller decided to go west, and came across an oasis called “Oumm El-Saghîr” (*La mère du petit*) (Ghitani 2000: 67). This oasis is very strange, because it remained unknown for a very long time: “[...] *demeurée jusqu’alors inconnue des autres contrées*” (69). No precise description is given apart from palm trees and good smells; no traveller has entered the oasis for seven generations. In its eastern part, there is what is called “*Le Campement*” (the camp). The unique wealth in the oasis is the spring, “*sans pareille dans le monde habité jusqu’alors*” (71), because its temperature changes three times in a single day, and an old man called “*L’Éclaireur*” who lives under two palm trees. This man is able to cure sterility and knows meteorological changes. In these Arabic novels, including Ibrahim Al-Koni’s, the origins of the oasis are always mentioned. In this case, somebody happened to know where the spring was under the sands, and one date stone gave birth to a palm tree with a female branch and a male branch. The spring is called “*adhâra*” (“*les vierges*”/the virgins). The story of the oasis has never been written. Symmetrical to the oasis is “The camp”, but it used to be only inhabited sands. “*Le Campement est une sorte de mirage*” or “*une vibration de la lumière*” (96). It is a mental space where one can draw the figures of one’s mind. Some words can give the image of it, such as sentries (“*sentinelles*”), voices, or lines, stretching towards infinity. There is a misty atmosphere above “The camp” that hides it, and a man-made wall separates it from the oasis. The oasis cannot exist without the camp, or it is a reflection. The oasis is very uncanny. The traveller will leave after having met a woman from the oasis who wanted to become pregnant, in order to maintain the exact number of inhabitants in the oasis. The traveller goes towards the west, because the oasis was only one step in his journey and in his life. He tries to locate the oasis because he wants to come back one day. After a short walk, he enters a country where he becomes the “Prince of Deserts”, but when he talks about the oasis, nobody believes him. He finally leaves that powerful country, without being able to separate the reality from the illusion. He loses the sense of time too: “*Il flottait dans un vide sans limites*” (331). The writer understands that this old traveller was full of nostalgia and homesick because he had lost his past. This novel ends in a very enigmatic way, especially if we know that this traveller was first received personally for several days by Ibn ‘Arabi himself. A Sufi wisdom may explain the deep meaning of the whole story.

### 3.2 L’Oasis Cachée by Al-Koni (2002)

The novel is centred on an oasis called “*wâw*” (Al-Koni 2002: 15). Birds and men from the desert look after this oasis. Just like in Ghitani’s novel, a voice is calling. A hidden voice urges the nomads to meet the desert, and at the same time, “[...] *lui agitant sans cesse la promesse de l’oasis, du rendez-vous jamais accompli*” (Al-Koni: 9). This nomadic group comes with a flock of birds migrating towards the North. Twice a year, the birds leave the oases and land in the camps. They are

considered a good omen; the men hear a voice calling them. They are reminded of the nomadic law: they never end their quest because they are looking for what is hidden by the large area of the desert. The nomads expect their chief to leave the camp because he can only be the poet of the oasis, “[...] *car le nomade se contente de la wâw du poème lorsqu’il découvre qu’elle est sans existence ici-bas*” (Al-Koni: 30). The whole story of Ibrahim Al-Koni is based on a very old Saharan legend, according to which the “*petite wâw*” existed somewhere in the Great Libyan Desert, where there were two other real oases, but this small *wâw* decided to appear or not to save the nomads from thirst. The small *wâw* was an image of Paradise. An old crane (*une grue*) was left behind by the tribe as a negative sign but, at the same time, the old bird has a very important value as it is an ancestor (*amgâr*). So the bird is protected by the tribe’s chief against the cruel children who want to kill it. This Libyan novel is written like a poetical myth. The story is not very important compared to the different aspects of a real oasis legend. The chief finally leaves the camp and goes down into the valley. The description of the valley is a comparison with Eden, a sort of garden of beauty and innocence: “*Il était descendu dans la vallée encore vierge, tapissée dans son fond d’un sable lisse et soyeux, strié de plis charmants comme au premier matin du monde où l’ancêtre est sorti de son royaume et a marché pour la première fois dans le désert. Sur ce tapis se pressaient les genêts [...]*” (Al-Koni: 33–34). Again, the hero hears the singing of the birds. The oasis is associated with youth and freshness, and it works like a Fountain of Youth, but the chief feels old and tired as if his power has vanished. The old crane dies, which is a bad omen according to him. In the “*Hamada du couchant*”,<sup>7</sup> the nomads hope to find an escape from the persistent drought; they walk towards shallow valleys, “*miroitantes d’eau [...] à la lisière des nuages passants*” (103). These hidden and wet valleys are all in the “Erg of Zellaf”, rich in water. People from the eastern part of the hamada never visit the “hamada of the west”. Apart from the chief, there is also an augur who goes to the “*hamada du couchant*” as well. This novel is very difficult to understand according to Western standards because, for example, the augur’s departure is mental. The psychic forces are as important as the physical forces. We are in a magical world where all elements are double. A black kid is slaughtered as a sacrifice, and the augur has his throat cut together with a crow. It is the voice of the knife. Then, the oued flood begins and, after three days of rain, the land is green. Murder is associated with floods and blood with water in what is called “*le genie meutrier des crues*” (138). As is often the case in this poetical novel, many characters are poets, singers, and birds, and the poets sing of the beauty of the red hamada. They compare it with “*l’amante du ciel*” (194). “*Al-hamâda al-hamrâ*” (the red hamada) is at the same time precisely located and identified as “*le grand plateau pierreux à l’ouest du désert lybien*” (44). As is usual, a well is needed (*le puits de la hamada*) to create a real oasis, an old and mythical well. Some ropes and stones are used to help search for it. After the bird, the chief, and the augur, a new character comes onto the stage: a sort of supernatural road

<sup>7</sup>The “hamada” is a rocky plain in the desert. It is sometimes associated with a “reg”.

worker called “*Le Terrassier*” who will give birth to the oasis. He explains the death of the augur and the secret meaning of earth and water: “*l’eau est l’offrande de la terre. Et rien n’a autant besoin d’offrande que le sang*” (160). He has a special relationship with earth, considered a sacrificed body. The earth is like a victim, and water is the blood of the earth according to him. Even the mysterious call from the beginning of the story finds its meaning. It is a gift from the sky but also the language of the earth (166). The story of Ibrahim Al-Koni is obviously based on a poetical and metaphysical approach of geographical realities of the desert area. The history is presented in a mythical way since the origin of the oasis, its foundation, relies on the art of digging a well. The “*Terrassier*” and his only son discover wet clay. Then, the “*Terrassier*” disappears in the well, because his blood is the price for the water in the oasis. It is the mythical birth of the oasis called “*la petite wâw*” (171). Inside the small valley, the broom is green again and its perfume can be smelt all over the desert, but the author then imagines an endless forest. Once the natural and luxuriant green setting is there, the author imagines the human settlement: “*l’oasis se peupla d’artisans, de marchands, de filles et des vanniers*” (176). The oasis will be called “*petite wâw*” or “*Tân Amgâr*” (“*la terre du chef*”) and that is the way the author explains the mythical origins of this hidden oasis.

In the case of a storytelling, the origins of an oasis, a foundation story, like that of Ibrahim Al-Koni, or Gamal Ghitani’s novel, the naming of the oasis is very important. In fact, it represents, in the original language, the story of its origin, exactly related to the local reality and to the mental background of the people living there. For writers from the West, the question of the origin is not so important and, most of the time, they just ignore the legendary context. They are less sensitive to the internal qualities than to the external appearance of the oasis, which can easily be related to the Garden of Eden and the Bible. This idea of a pure area, preserved from any kind of pollution, which would help the desert inhabitants (or those who only cross it, such as nomads or travellers) to survive, is not reserved to Europeans. When it comes to the question of how to describe an oasis, there are many common elements, such as the different types of oasis according to the origin of the water and vegetation, the proximity of a town or not, and the organisation of gardens and orchards within the oasis. In the case of writers who consider literary description an art, such as Pierre Loti, André Gide, or Eugène Fromentin, we can feel the influence of a common ideal at the end of the nineteenth century, the “*écriture artiste*”, the importance of colours and painting, the priority given to art, but also a physical experience, a very deep change in the body and mind that is part of the oriental, colonial, or exotic experience.

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