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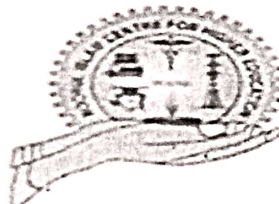
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### Mythological Aspects in Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Seven Veils of Seth*

#### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore the Libyan indigenous nomadic tribe, the Tuaregs and their change in their lifestyle due to modernization. Ibrahim al-Koni, the world renowned Arabic novelist portrays the tension between nomadic and sedentary life in his novel *The Seven Veils of Seth*.

The Tuaregs are found in the Saharan region of North Africa. They are Bedouins who keep travelling from one place to another in search of their paradise. In this novel, through the character Isan, the author encourages nomadic life and shows that he is against sedentary life. It is brought out through the use of mythology and the famous Egyptian mythological character Seth, god of desert and confusion. The paper explores the fact of nomadism and the consequences of sedentary life in the Sahara.

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Bedouin had the skill to survive in the desert and were very loyal to one another. (Losleben 5).

Ibrahim al-Koni, the eminent Libyan writer and a Tuareg by birth usually depicts the nomadic life of the Tuaregs in his works. As the Tuaregs are losing their traditional past by abandoning nomadism and moves towards sedentary life due to colonization, Ibrahim al-Koni depicts the importance of nomadism in *The Seven Veils of Seth* through the use of mythology. Ibrahim al-Koni brings out the Ancient Egyptian god Seth, god of the desert to portray his opposition towards sedentary life.

Seth also known as Set and Suetekh is the Egyptian god of desert, war, chaos and storm. He is one of the first five gods created by the unification of Geb, the earth and Nut, the sky after the formation of the world. He is known for his evil nature as he slays his brother Osiris, the good god of agriculture to in order to seize the throne. He is the iniquitous brother who not only murdered Osiris but also dismembered his body and scattered the parts of the body in various places. "he came to be best known as the first murderer, who killed his older brother Osiris to reign over the world and then tried to murder Osiris' son Horus" (Mark).

Isan, the protagonist of the novel *The Seven Veils of Seth*, is a desert wandering seer who extends his stay in the oasis. Isan is considered Seth himself in the novel who turns the desert topsy-turvy to prove that nomadic is the right choice to lead a good life. "Al-Koni creates in Isan a character that resembles the Egyptian god Seth in many respects" (El-Zein).

The first resemblance of the Egyptian god Seth and Isan, the protagonist of the novel is their ugly appearance. Seth, also known as Set animal is portrayed as weird, strange and a mystifying creature in the Egyptian art. He is portrayed as a red-haired beast and an amalgamation of peculiar features. "Sometimes, he is shown having a canine body with a curved snout, square ears, and forked tail, while at other times, he is portrayed as a human

body with a head that contains the features of the set animal" (Bora). The features of Seth are usually compared to donkeys and jackals.

In the novel, Isan is depicted as ugly and also like Seth compared to certain animals and animal features. Isan has an encounter with the six belles of the desert. Tuareg men usually wear veil to cover their faces which is one of their unique custom. But when he meets the six belles, he is in the spring immersing himself, enjoying it without the veils. The belles insulted him by saying that his face resembles camel, ears resemble donkey and his nose is like a bird's beak. "If men realized how repulsive their faces are, they would never take their veils off" (Koni 12). Ibrahim al-Koni portrays the importance of wearing veils through Seth, the desert god warning not to lose their preserved age old culture.

The second resemblance is that the Egyptian Seth is the symbol of infertility. He is married to the god of fertility but had no children. It is said that he became infertile in a fight. It is also said that one of his testicles is thrown off by Horus when Seth plucked one of Horus' eyes. "Set was considered infertile, just like the desert" (Bora).

In the novel *The Seven Veils of Seth*, Isan makes the women of the desert infertile. He poisons the spring where the women draws water. "Today oasis dwellers, an affliction has settled on our homes; a malady has affected women's bellies" (Koni 83). He poisons the oasis water by his magical talent which causes miscarriages. The women became infertile due to the epidemic. This evil act of Isan is to warn the people of the desert of sedentary life. At first, the intentions of this act is not understood but it becomes clear when the people start migrating after this disaster. The diviner of the desert said, "life in a land without water is easier than life in a land where the water is polluted" (Koni 220). This is one of the main reasons for the tribe to decide to follow nomadism rather following sedentary life. "What harm would it do us to shake off lethargy's dust and to try living as nomads again?" (Koni

232). This is the incident which makes the tribe to believe that nomadism, their proud tradition is the best for their life.

The third resemblance is that in Egyptian myth, Seth is known as the "Lord of the Desert". He is not only the god of desert but also nomadic life. The Tuaregs keep moving and don't have a fixed place. The Tuaregs believe that nomadism helps them to search for their true self. They believe that they travel to find the purpose of their life. "We're nomads, but not because we search for pasture in arid lands; we migrate to search for ourselves" (Koni 112). They also believe that sedentary life is lethargy which means death. Ultimately they don't believe or accept sedentary life. "Yes, I'll never be ashamed to repeat that sedentary people are really dead even while alive and that nomads live on even if they perish" (Koni 112).

Tuaregs are known for nomadism and freedom but due to modernization the lifestyle changed. In *The Seven Veils of Seth*, the tribe settles in the desert and they face the consequences and realize that they could attain deliverance only through their traditional nomadic lifestyle.

Nomadic people, who never stay anywhere or settle down on the earth, own nothing to provoke the earth or arouse its greed. They possess nothing: no gear, no walls, no bodies, not even dreams. All they possess is their voyage, nothing more. They possess a single riddle, over which the earth holds no sway and for which the lowlands can offer no explanation. This is deliverance (Koni 60, 61).

Seth, being the god of the nomadic tribes believes that deliverance is through nomadism and does evil acts in order to encourage the tradition. In the novel, the tribe starts believing that nomadism is happiness after the spring being poisoned. "Indeed, any man who heard their songs forever lost his mind and his way. The men of that age were nomadic and destined to

live happily, provided that they did not settle down" (Koni 49). The tribe realized the importance of nomadism after the evil deeds performed by Isan.

The fourth and the important resemblance is that Seth is known as the "storm god", "god of chaos" and "destroyer". In Egyptian myth he destroyed his brother and created chaos and confusion among the people. Likewise, Isan in the novel created confusion. He is the reason for miscarriages of women in the desert. Not only that, he creates a storm and scatters everyone in the desert. "The tempest separated them and the demonic wind carried them into the air after breaking up their terrestrial congregation. They were forced to travel long distances to find one another again" (Koni 289). He created it in order to save the 'fool' of the desert. So many were found dead but they couldn't find the trace of the fool.

This incident again proves the resemblance of the characteristic of Seth and Isan. Seth is portrayed as evil god but he was good once. It is said that he stood for his people and bestowed love upon them. Likewise, though Isan is portrayed as evil, he brings out his goodness out of evil. He reveals the significance of nomadic life out of his evil deeds. "Al-koni's skill in re-narrating the myth of Seth in the character of Isan lies not in his fusion of myths, but rather in using these myths to dramatize the values of nomadic versus settled life" (Zein).

In *The Seven Veils of Seth*, the Tuaregs start to settle down due to the impact of modernization. They thought that they could find happiness in sedentary life. But at a point few started to feel suffocated. "He could feel the band tighten around his neck as if it were a python. He began to feel he was being strangled" (Koni 116). This symbolically represents the consequence of sedentary life. Thus the author through the character Isan created disorder and chaos to bring out the goodness of his age old tradition. It is better to stick on to what is right for each individual, choose what is best and not to decide or make choices in an impulse and later face the consequences.



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