

## **Creaturely Memory: Animal Tales as Deep History in Modern Libyan Writing**

This work was supported by the Wolfson Foundation.

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### **Abstract**

This article explores animal tales in two modern Libyan childhood narratives: *Sarīb* (2001) by Aḥmad al-Faytūrī and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* (2011) by Kamal Ben Hamed. Examining the context of 1960s' Libya, in which the tales are told, as well as their female tellers and young recipients, it relates them to notions of creaturely memory and deep history. It argues that the tales, interwoven with other layers of history in the narratives that frame them, represent ways of recuperating collective memory from experiences of vulnerability, while also testifying to the violence at the heart of civilisation, empire and nation. The narratives are seen as responses to the brutality of Gaddafi's rule, leading to broader meditations on the shared experience of human suffering.

### **Key Words**

Libyan literature, Arabic Literature, Creaturely Poetics, Deep History, National History

## Introduction

Much has been said about the role of recovering, rewriting and transforming history in the process of creating what Benedict Anderson terms the ‘imagined community’ of nation, as well as the role of the novel in doing so.<sup>1</sup> Within the Arabic novel, as Wen-chin Ouyang observes, there is a strong impulse to theorise and establish a concept of ‘nationness’, drawing on cultural heritage to shape the present through the past, and give historical legitimacy to political entities whose borders, as we know them today, are barely a century old.<sup>2</sup> Being granted independence by the UN in 1951, and emerging from a long list of foreign occupiers, Libya would seem to be a case in point, and there are indeed examples within its modern literature that seek to consolidate a notion of ‘Libyanness’. Nation is imagined as ‘sovereign and limited’, history deployed to affirm its authenticity, and what Anderson, drawing upon Walter Benjamin, terms ‘homogeneous, empty time’ deployed to express its linearity and cohesiveness.<sup>3</sup>

In many Libyan narratives, however, there is a striking absence of references to an official heritage. Instead, history is depicted in terms of a material struggle for survival against the elements, emphasising the close relationship of creatures – both human and nonhuman – in the desert and evoking a past deeper than written history, stretching back to a time before nation could even be imagined. The history of Italian occupation and colonisation (1911-1943), WWII and Independence, meanwhile, is portrayed through landmines lurking beneath the desert, petroleum extracted from its core, and the bones of creatures dotting its surface. These are the landmarks through which the Libyan nation is traced, its citizens described as ‘Homo sapiens’, ‘sons of Adam’ and ‘human beings’, and depicted as entangled with the creatures from which they emerged, and the creatures which, for better or worse, have partaken in their evolution. In some cases, this imagery may represent a strategy for evading the tight censorship of Gaddafi’s reign (1969-2011). In others, imagining the human through the nonhuman, and voicing solidarity with the nonhuman, represent ways of conveying the long suffering of the land and its inhabitants, under political oppression and climactic extremes, and relating this suffering to the breadth of history.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25-30.

<sup>2</sup> Ouyang, *Poetics of Love*, 273.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24.

This tendency, I suggest, represents an expression of what Anat Pick terms ‘creaturely history’, a concept emerging from her broader research, within the field of animal studies, on ‘creaturely poetics’, which consists in identifying the vulnerability shared by human and nonhuman, and reading literature for, as she puts it, an ‘expression of something *inhuman* as well: the permutations of necessity and materiality that condition and shape human life’.<sup>4</sup> In exploring ‘creaturely history’, Pick draws on Benjamin’s ‘natural history’ (*Naturgeschichte*), as well as his concept of the ‘creature’ (*Kreatur*), to evoke a history that looks to what she calls the ‘fragmented and catastrophic past’, focussing on the vanquished and not the victors, and firmly disavowing the principle of rational progress implied by movement through ‘homogeneous, empty time’. This history, as Pick puts it, ‘replaces the agent – the one who, as we say, “makes history” – with the creature overtaken by or lost in history’. In this way, it ‘reabsorbs the human in nature and paves the way for radically other histories inclusive of nonhuman life’.<sup>5</sup>

In Pick’s own study, she analyses William Golding’s *The Inheritors* – which recounts the last days of the Neanderthals – as an example of creaturely history, demonstrating its further affinity with the ‘deep historical’, the vast swathes of time predating written history and the ‘advent of civilisation’. Both work contrary to official, national imaginings. As Andrew Shryock and Daniel Smail argue, the reluctance of many disciplines, and above all history, to deal with the deep past is to a large extent entangled in the process of writing nation.<sup>6</sup> To counter this, Smail argues, we must move beyond the ‘sacred history’ of modern historiography, which, like the scriptural traditions from which it emerged, asserts a ‘beginning’ from which to trace humanity’s linear rise.<sup>7</sup> Instead, we must begin to investigate humanity’s ‘speechless past’, from the hominids to the Paleolithic.<sup>8</sup>

While Smail’s study does not account for the role of literature in this process, it does flag the central role of imagination, as have others:

Since the majority of deep time predates human existence, the concept lies not only beyond our individual experience but beyond the experience of the entire human race. Yet we yearn to find ways to comprehend it and this desire provides ground

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<sup>4</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Shryock and Smail, *Deep History*, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Smail, *On Deep History*, 12-14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

for artists to investigate. Understanding deep time lies, perhaps, in a combination of the rational and the intuitive.<sup>9</sup>

In Libyan fiction, as will be seen, there is no reluctance to engage with humanity's deep past, dwelling on its ignominy, exploring how it arrived where it is today, and questioning whether this place is to be celebrated. In retrieving deep history, some authors draw on evolutionary imagery, and others employ folklore and myth. In all, human and nonhuman are interwoven, and a radically creaturely poetics generated.

This paper explores the trend further through comparative analysis of two childhood narratives: *Sarīb* (2001; *A Long Story*) by Aḥmad al-Faytūrī (1955-) and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* (2011; *Under the Tripoli Sky*, trans. Adriana Hunter, 2014) by Kamal Ben Hameda (1954-). The first is an explicitly stated autobiography (*sīrah dhātiyyah*), and the second the fictional 'coming-of-age' of a boy nicknamed Hadachinou whose childhood bears striking resemblance to that of Ben Hameda. In both, return to a former perspective (childhood), a former era (the 1960s) and a former location (Tripoli and Benghazi) prefigures return to both recent and deep history, conveyed through the voices of female relatives, narrating their experiences of war and colonisation, alongside animal tales that emerge organically from them. Through both, I explore how the creaturely emerges as a way of making communicable experiences of vulnerability, and bearing witness to the fundamental violence of civilisation, dating back to humanity's first subjugation of the nonhuman, and man's first subjugation of woman. It also, however, emerges as a form of solidarity among creatures, united in vulnerability, and freed from the divisions of ideology.

The two texts have been chosen for the striking parallels they present in their depictions of coming-of-age and Libya's move to nationhood, and how, in both, these depictions are juxtaposed to deeper temporalities and nonhuman perspectives. In the decade following Independence, when oil revenues were dramatically transforming the national landscape and Gaddafi's coup was still in the making, both narrate monumental shifts in consciousness: that of boy becoming adult; that of the land becoming nation-state and oil state; and, implicitly, that of Libya becoming dictatorship. For Anderson, such shifts, often expressed in autobiography, tend to lead to the articulation of new narratives,

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<sup>9</sup> Talasek, *Imagining Deep Time*, 2.

identities and ‘imagined community’.<sup>10</sup> In both *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, however, coming-of-age and imagining community are ambivalent and incomplete processes, disrupted by the collision of creaturely history with the present, as shifts to adulthood and nationhood are tempered by deeper shifts of human subjugating animal and man subjugating woman.

In their depiction of coming-of-age, *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* may be seen within a larger body of Libyan narratives that return to childhood memory, with the most well-known being Hisham Matar’s *In the Country of Men*. These narratives are characterised by the appearance of being a *Bildungsroman*, alongside the expression of a profound cynicism towards what, following Matar, might be termed ‘the country of men’, manifested in violent fathers, teachers and state representatives.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, all express the official histories and cultural and linguistic identities that mask the underlying violence of civilisation, nation and, whether implicitly or explicitly, Gaddafi’s regime.

Through female voices, indicated in the texts’ very titles, both al-Faytūrī and Ben Hamedā align themselves to other ‘countries’. ‘*Sarīb*’, a Libyan dialect word, evokes the tales told by al-Faytūrī’s Berber grandmother, Buraybish, to whom the memoir is dedicated. The text itself is divided between the narrative voice of al-Faytūrī’s younger self and her memories and tales, emerging imperceptibly from it. *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, through its feminine ending ‘-aines’, indicates the female relatives and neighbours who raise Hadachinou, and whose voices, similarly combining memory and tale, he absorbs for most of the narrative. The authors’ linguistic choices also convey this. Ben Hamedā writes in French rather than Modern Standard Arabic which, he states, has little in common with the Tripolitanian dialect of his youth, while al-Faytūrī’s language is infused by regional dialect.<sup>12</sup> In labelling the texts ‘Libyan literature’, I am, to a large extent, belying the plurality of each. While both authors celebrate the resilience of the land’s people and evoke nostalgia for childhood lost, they also fall into the class of narratives, which, as Ouyang further observes, move beyond nation to form other identities and embrace other perspectives.<sup>13</sup> These perspectives are inscribed in the creaturely and deep historical, and

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 204.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of Hisham Matar, born into Libya under Gaddafi, see John Kearney ‘Traumatised Narrator’s in Hisham Matar’s novels.’ *Journal of Literary Studies* 30:3 (2014): 124-148.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Hamedā, *La mémoire de l’absent*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia*, 225-226.

expressed through the context of Libya's violent history, drawing upon its nomadic, oral heritage.

Eric Santner, in his study of German-Jewish literature, observes that expressions of 'creaturely life' emerge most intensively through exposure to the biopolitical<sup>14</sup> forces of violence and authority, what Giorgio Agamben theorises through concepts of 'the open', 'bare life' and 'states of exception'. Such exposure, what Santner describes as 'a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field', characterises modern Libyan history.<sup>15</sup> Such, in fact, has been specifically argued by David Atkinson, who explores Italian colonisation as a close echo of Agamben's 'bare life', with concentration camps used to widespread and devastating effect, as the land's nomadic peoples were 'dehumanised, excluded and persecuted'.<sup>16</sup> WWII was no less violent, with Benghazi, in particular, being almost entirely demolished, and the country, one of the poorest in the world, left in the grip of drought, famine and contagion.<sup>17</sup>

Gaddafi's reign then brought its own extreme 'state of exception'. Historian Dirk Vandewalle evokes how the regime pursued a deliberate policy of 'statelessness' within the country, preventing any lasting stability and rendering any genuine political participation impossible.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, he submitted all to the full force of a police state, sowing distrust and fear amongst the population. Al-Faytūrī and Ben Hamedā's memoirs, like the tales told by their female relatives, emerge from exposure to these biopolitical forces. The adolescence and adulthood of both authors were indelibly tied to Gaddafi's rise, after which nation and manhood became potentially deadly territories to navigate. After early rebellion against the regime, al-Faytūrī was imprisoned for ten years in the notorious Abū Salīm Prison (1978-1988), while Ben Hamedā left for France in the early 1970s, after an enforced internment in a psychiatric hospital.<sup>19</sup>

In literature, Libya, as postcolonial nation-state rapidly transformed to dictatorship and rentier state, compels a hunt to imagine not the modern nation, but the land's

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<sup>14</sup> Understood through what Foucault terms 'biopower', 'the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.' Michel Foucault. *Security, Territory, Population* (1). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, xix.

<sup>16</sup> Atkinson, 'Encountering Bare Life in Italian Libya', 155.

<sup>17</sup> See Vandewalle, *A History of Modern Libya*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Hamedā, *La mémoire de l'absent*, 45-50.

imprisonment by one ideological force after another, from the Phoenicians to the Romans, Arabs, Ottomans and Italians. The land's desert terrain and fickle climate, un conducive to settlement or development, further contribute to expressions of creaturely life, as does its oil, thrusting it into the global market. Narratives emerge which depict the modern nation through a deeper perspective, whether this be myths of human fall and animal sacrifice, the power games of humanity's primate ancestors, or the formation of oil over millions of years.<sup>20</sup> Both *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* articulate a multi-layered creaturely poetics, exploring the force of law in personal memory, recent history and the deep past, and the potential of story and collective memory to counter them. Through this memory, the violence of Libya's recent past is entangled with the primordial violence of deep history, and, in both, Gaddafi's reign is silently pointed to as one more chapter to be survived by creatures of all species, resulting from centuries of betrayal, chaos, war and decay, and belying humanity's steady ascent.

Childhood emerges as a particularly rich focal point for these dialogical expressions of violence, signifying an innocent stage, a paradise lost before violence and creaturely vulnerability, but leading inevitably to it. The decade in which childhood is located furthers this impression, with the 1960s representing a brief – though not entirely peaceful – lull in the land's long history of empire, colony, warzone and dictatorship. In both narratives, Benghazi and Tripoli emerge as microcosms for the potential of harmonious community, their vibrancy and plurality emphasised, but simultaneously laced with forebodings of loss.

Childhood also emerges as particularly productive of creaturely memory. In the majority of cultures, animals feature prominently in tales told to children, who experience an affinity with them often lost in adulthood. As Sālīm al-'Abbār observes, animals also feature particularly prominently in Libyan folklore, and are often presented as morally superior to humans. For al-'Abbār, this signifies a deep lack of faith in the human condition resulting from the land's long exposure to war and suffering.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on both perspectives, the tales told to children in *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* may be seen to attempt not only to communicate the horror of history, but to do so in a way that a child

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<sup>20</sup> For examples of these themes, see: Najwā Bin Shatwān's *Wabr al-Aḥṣinah* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ḥaḍārah al-'Arabiyya, 2007); al-Ṣādiq al-Nayhūm's *al-Qurūd* (Benghazi: Maktabat al-Tumūr li-l-Kitāb, 2010); 'Abdallāh al-Ghazāl's *al-Saw'ah* (Sharjah: Iṣḍārāt Dā'irat al-Thaqāfah wa-l-I'lām, 2005); and Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī's *Nazif al-Ḥajar* (London: Riyāḍ al-Rayyis li-l-Kutub wa-al-Nashr, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Al-'Abbār, *Maqālāt fi-l-Turāth al-Sha'bī*, 19.

might hear, drawing upon his affinity with the creaturely to initiate him into the violence of 'the country of men'.

Beyond exposure to political oppression, both authors thus offer perspectives on the creaturely, which have not yet been extensively considered, primarily the relationship of the creaturely to childhood, old age, orality and plurality. Oral traditions, in particular, are a major inspiration for modern Libyan fiction, and provide a connection to the land before nation, populated by nomads and their livestock. Rather than legitimising the official discourses of nation, these traditions struggle against it, cyclical and devoid of grand narrative. The term '*kharārīf*' (folk tales) is commonly used to evoke them, related both to '*khurāfah*' ('superstition; fable, fairy tale') and '*kharaf*' ('feeble-mindedness, dotage, senility; childishness (of an old man)').<sup>22</sup> Conveying the nonofficial histories from which *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* emerge, the term combines the old, the child and the nonhuman, all of whom come to bear witness against the 'country of men'.

Deeply entwined with orality is plurality. Located between the Sahara and the Mediterranean, Africa and Europe, the birthplace of the hominid and that of the nation-state, Libya draws the world's histories together. In their texts, al-Faytūrī and Ben Hameda combine Berber, Arab, European and sub-Saharan myth, interweaving recognised literary heritage with unfamiliar, unconventional and even fictional intertexts. Like many Libyan authors, they combine the present with the past, the creaturely with the mystical, and the human with the nonhuman, through stories which transcend time and borders. My analysis examines the hybrid, oral, animal tale, and the shifting temporalities and memories it brings together, focussing first on those of women story-tellers, and then on the boys' coming-of-age, tracing the movement of boy to adult, land to nation and humanity to civilisation.

### **Animal Tales and Female Experience**

Many have examined the process of imparting wisdom from old to young through tale. Some, such as Jack Zipes, explore how folklore and fairy tale are used to encode social values and national narratives, encouraging children to accept certain norms.<sup>23</sup> Others suggest that they help children resolve psychological issues that emerge as they grow to

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<sup>22</sup> Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 273.

<sup>23</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 11.

maturity.<sup>24</sup> In *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, tales, told orally, above all testify to the creaturely past, doing little to justify or redeem it. They exemplify Benjamin's exploration of the story-teller as the one who 'takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others'.<sup>25</sup> As P. Gabrielle Foreman remarks, Benjamin's story-teller is 'the counsel, the link to a precarious but necessary past'.<sup>26</sup> David Ferris, in particular, highlights the element of collective experience within Benjamin's conception of story-telling, and it is, above all, this collective experience that emerges in *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*.<sup>27</sup> Stories are told in which humanity's early origins are imagined through animal tales, with al-Faytūrī using the perspective of a porcupine, and Ben Hameda the voice of a fly. In both, female story-tellers associate their traumatic pasts with these nonhumans, and, in both, the tales, like the texts that frame them, have unhappy or open endings. The communication of deep truths about the creaturely condition to a child thus involves departure from traditional story-telling conventions.

As Zipes, among others, observes, the traditional fairy tale is characterised by a quest for the 'real home', which involves overcoming oppression and establishing a more just space. Drawing upon Ernst Block, he describes how, 'the underdog, the small person, uses his or her wits not only to survive but also to live a better life'.<sup>28</sup> However, as Zipes further comments, 'happy endings' and concepts of 'home' may also be disrupted to powerful effect.<sup>29</sup> Such is the case in *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, where animal tales reject both the optimism of fairy tale and teleology of sacred history, denouncing clear beginnings and happy endings as nonhuman voices return to a time before myth, and a space outside 'home' and nation.

### *Underdogs and Unhappy Endings*

Central to my examination of *Sarīb* is the final tale that Buraybish tells her grandson, narrating the beginning of human domination of animals. To a large extent, this tale is incongruous to her initial stories, in which underdog triumphs and utopia is established, as well as to her overall portrayal as a magical, fairy-tale creature. As will be seen, it marks a

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<sup>24</sup> Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', 87.

<sup>26</sup> Foreman, 'Past-on Stories', 287.

<sup>27</sup> Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*, 111.

<sup>28</sup> Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

broader process in the narrative in which the fairy tale universe of childhood increasingly gives way to politics, violence and hard truths about the creaturely condition. Through the intertwining of both strands, the creaturely simultaneously emerges as a symbol of solidarity among the vulnerable, and a grim recognition of the fate of all to live within the law of predator and prey.

Said to love ‘all things small’, Buraybish is consistently associated with creatures gentle and magical.<sup>30</sup> Prompted by their strong work ethic and mention in the Qur’ān (27:18-19), she is particularly fond of ants and, so close is her connection to them, that her grandson, returning home to find her absent one day, even believes her to have metamorphosed into one.<sup>31</sup> Language connected to birds is also used to describe her. With a high-pitched voice, ‘like the cheep of a bird’, and an ‘inhuman face’, she is said to ‘twitter’ to lambs passing with their shepherd. When lost in thought, she reverts to Tamazight, which Aḥmad, unable to understand, calls the ‘speech of birds’ (*manṭiq al-ṭayr*), echoing Solomon’s ability as described in the Qur’ān (27:16), and echoed in Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s *The Speech of the Birds* (*Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*).<sup>32</sup>

The nonhuman, the not-completely-human and the underdog are also the heroes of her tales, where the underdog emerges victorious through use of wit, and the help of animal companions. ‘Nuṣ Anṣiṣ’ (‘The Halfling Boy’), for example, is a well-known Arabic folktale, which tells of a child born as half a boy, who embarks on adventures with his ram companion and manages to defeat his evil older brothers as well as a flesh-eating ghoul. The protagonist of Buraybish’s second story, ‘Āisha, receives seven scales from a fish, which provide protection from her wicked stepmother’s evil schemes.

In each story, the underdog is empowered by the ‘liberating magic’ of fairy story and animal companion. Each suggests that honesty and hard work will reap their rewards and both stand in sharp contrast to Buraybish’s final tale, which replaces the notion of coming ‘home’ with that of irrevocable flight and resignation to tyranny, symbolised by early man and his first defeat of the nonhuman. While ‘Nuṣ Anṣiṣ’ is a well-known intertext, this tale, combining the scope of myth and motifs of fable with harsh, creaturely reality, lies uneasily between the unfamiliar and the only too familiar. It moves from the stability of official history and ‘home’ to that of the creature ‘overtaken and lost in history’.

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<sup>30</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 31 (all translations of *Sarīb* are my own).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

The story recasts humanity's subjugation of animals in the garb of etiological fable, but does little to sugar-coat it. Returning to 'the land of human and jinn', when Ibn Adam (the Son of Adam) began to dominate other species through his wiliness, it tells of how he failed in the process, to become a noble master.<sup>33</sup> In this, there is perhaps an echo of the Qur'an where 'ungratefulness' and 'arrogance' have been identified as 'recurring themes in the discussion of humans'.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the Qur'an, Buraybish does not suggest humanity's ability to transcend these flaws:

Ibn Adam, dagger in hand, was in hot pursuit of Bull. Like a flash, he took hold of him and threw him to the ground. But, as he was readying himself to slit Bull's throat, the animal bellowed into his face: 'You have forgotten all the goodness I have given you! And now you plan to be my executioner, devouring my meat, and gobbling my hide and hooves'.<sup>35</sup>

Shocked by the monstrosity of Ibn Adam, the wild animals send Porcupine to investigate. After much searching, Porcupine locates the culprit. Ibn Adam first serves him milk from Goat, only to then slaughter Goat's son, Kid, in honour of his guest. Appalled, Porcupine flees to the other beasts where he refuses to tell his tale until they dig him a deep burrow in which to hide. Having done so, the animals listen to his tale before themselves scattering in fear. Each finds his own refuge in mountain caves or burrows.

Narrating how animals first found their lairs, the tale may be termed a 'just-so story' whose harsh realism nevertheless contrasts the flights of fantasy usually expected of the genre. Animal dens, the story goes, are simply the product of human oppression, while Ibn Adam is the only flesh-eating ghoulish creature around. Gone is all 'liberating magic', while the animal companion has morphed into a fearful prey. As Benjamin observes, animal companions in many fairy tales serve to align human and nature, but in Buraybish's story they merge more fundamentally.<sup>36</sup> Concluding her narrative of Ibn Adam's ascent, which is at the same time his fall, she reveals that it is not the human-animal divide that is in question, but that of predator and prey, regardless of species. After first assuming the nonhuman's perspective, she continues seamlessly into her own memories, identifying

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>34</sup> Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an*, 242.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', 101.

with the nonhuman's flight, and using the word 'refuge' (*malja'*) to describe both animal habitats and the bombed building where she shelters after WWII:

Since then, all wild beasts have fled, each one choosing a hiding place and refuge (*malja'*). Some retreated to mountain caves, some dug into the ground and some escaped to deserted terrains. They scattered across the land just as we did, settling in Benghazi where hunger had rooted itself, and war had razed everything to the ground. We sought refuge (*malja'*) in a dilapidated building, its walls crumbling.<sup>37</sup>

Shortly after arriving in Benghazi, Buraybish begins to hear the word 'Libya' for the first time on the radio and to see people campaigning for independence in the war-torn streets. She rejoices, but without understanding why, simply trying to survive the manmade and natural obstacles that continue to threaten her existence as the city is shaken by flooding, and the Palestinian *nakbah* threatens to return her sons to another warzone. Her story of Ibn Adam with his dagger, meanwhile, serves as a haunting reminder of humanity's first, shared act of violence, and its history, based on the scattering of creatures. In the face of this deep, creaturely perspective, civilisation, empire and nation are rendered tenuous indeed.

Buraybish's '*sarīb*', combining memory, fairy tale and myth, exemplifies the features of Benjamin's 'story teller' as well as Santner's 'creaturely life'. Her own memories, conveyed in a stream-of-consciousness interspersed with tale, chiefly comprise her flight across the desert from Gharyan to Benghazi during WWII, fleeing war and starvation with her six young children. This flight makes her poignantly aware of her own mortality as, so immersed in memories that her former voice emerges into the narrative, she questions:

If my children and I truly come from you, Lord, why must we consume other beasts (*hādhihi al-dawābb*) to survive? Why must I consume other life in order to live, obeying the call of the wastelands as my belly hounds me and I hound anything with a belly of its own?<sup>38</sup>

Hunger subsumes Buraybish's being, as she states that 'food distracted us from ourselves [...] from every other part of our bodies'.<sup>39</sup> In her reminiscences, she repeatedly evokes the word '*dābbah*', a Qur'ānic term for 'beast' or 'animal', as she describes how the 'Christians in

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<sup>37</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 90.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

their tanks attacked every beast' and the Italians planted landmines 'not wanting a single beast to live'.<sup>40</sup> War is personified as a flesh-eating monster, and she, as creature, oscillates between predator and prey, and, hounded by her hunger, even embodies both at once. Ultimately, her memories slip into fragmented and nightmarish visions, where the physical vulnerability of the human-creaturely condition is foregrounded:

Howling all around. A headless man seeking a sip of water. A naked woman, her hands protecting her young, her lower half gone. Cackling and whispered speech. An Italian, his belly open, running mad and trouserless [...] Everything on fire, everything emerging before me from within the sand.<sup>41</sup>

At another point, Buraybish explicitly mentions the worst of the Italian concentration camps, 'Aqilah:

They told me that that Italian, Graziani, the governor of Cyrenaica, had packed the tribes in there, row on row, from Tobruk to Abyar. Them, their camels and goats, with no water, food or protection from the burning sun and bitter night wind.<sup>42</sup>

Buraybish's reference to the Eastern tribes of Cyrenaica being 'packed [...] row on row' (*raṣṣ fihī al-qabā'il al-barqāwiyyah raṣṣan*) is intimately entangled with her reference to them being imprisoned with their 'camels and goats', a historical fact echoed in all sources dealing with the camps. In total, 600,000 livestock and 100,000 people were interned, and human starvation was indelibly linked to that of animals, deprived of areas large enough to graze in.<sup>43</sup> The camp, with its human and nonhuman prisoners, became productive of the creaturely on multiple levels. While people were submitted to the brutal treatment of livestock, they keenly felt the misery of their own animals, which had shared and allowed their formerly free and nomadic life. A poem written by Rajab Bou Houaiche al-Mnefi, a famous oral poet and prisoner of 'Aqilah, translated into French by Ben Hamed, laments, among a list of other torments, the loss of a beloved camel.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Buraybish's journey through the desert makes her keenly aware of all its creaturely inhabitants, equally subject to human violence and the vagaries of nature.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>43</sup> Atkinson, 'Encountering Bare Life', 163; Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices*, 44-45.

<sup>44</sup> Ben Hamed, *Le livre du camp d'Aquila*, 38.

Juxtaposing the idyllic world of childhood, located in her courtyard where ‘security’ (*amān*) reigns, to memories of violence and suffering, in which she is increasingly immersed, Buraybish abandons fairy tale quests for a story of perpetual flight where the human intrinsically lacks ‘trustworthiness’ (*lā amān fihi*).<sup>45</sup> As will be seen, these narrative strands parallel those of al-Faytūrī himself, as he both dwells in memories of childhood harmony and confronts the processes of its loss. His memoir is infused with the collective memory of Buraybish, the underdogs of her tales, and the creatures she encountered in the desert. The changing nature of his reception of this memory, inscribed in his writing process, will conclude my discussion of the text.

### *Flytopia*

In *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, exposure to violence renders Hadachinou’s grandmother unable to tell stories altogether: ‘You always want me to tell you stories, but I only know stories about war and suffering. You’ll learn them soon enough from books... or by yourself’.<sup>46</sup> In the broader scheme of the fictional memoir, this inability may also be traced in the use of a nonhuman storyteller in the narrative’s sole tale-within-a-tale, entitled ‘The Story of the Little Fly of Flies’, and told by Hadachinou’s Great Aunt Nafissa. The story simply narrates the memories of a little fly – at some unspecified point in Libyan history – delighting in the war and drought plaguing the land: ‘That year, the drought was ravaging the land for our benefit, but there was much more: much to our delight, Homo sapiens went to war against each other. Our tribe had a great deal to do’.<sup>47</sup>

While Buraybish’s tale negates the possibility of ‘home’, Aunt Nafissa’s replaces human home with fly home, located in the ‘putrefying bodies’ of humans, and the little fly, dwelling within human suffering, becomes a particularly evoking narrator of creaturely history. As Steven Connor remarks in his study of flies, they have evolved alongside human civilisation, flourishing on its waste and thriving on its decline, highlighting the messy underbelly of society and the carnage that humans elevate through ideology, legend and official discourses of progress. Flies represent our ‘constant fellow-traveller and provoking other [...] our familiar-stranger, our dis-similar’.<sup>48</sup> Aunt Nafissa’s tale, filled with orifices, excrement and decay, presents a ‘fly utopia’ where human importance is radically

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<sup>45</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 31, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 95-6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>48</sup> Connor, *Fly*, 7.

undermined, represented as an organic whole and, literally, seen from the inside out: ‘My father liked nostrils best. He would sneak inside them with my older brothers and sisters, and spend ages in there. Sometimes they would have their siesta inside, and they even defecated there [...] Those were feast days’.<sup>49</sup>

In many respects, Aunt Nafissa’s tale is reminiscent of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the ‘carnavalesque’, liberating society from hierarchy and etiquette and, through confronting the grotesque physicality of the human, productive of a temporary utopian ideal. In particular, Bakhtin describes the carnival feast as embodying processes of human and social death and rebirth, and emphasises its affinity with the folkloric.<sup>50</sup> In Aunt Nafissa’s story, however, human decay alone is in question and utopia restricted to flies. It therefore draws equally close to Benjamin’s concept of natural history, which, as Santner observes, ‘ultimately names the ceaseless repetition of such cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning [...] always connected to violence’.<sup>51</sup>

The story, as darkly disturbing as it is unsettlingly entertaining embodies both carnivalesque ‘flytopia’ and catastrophic human past, and both impulses are necessary to understand the ways in which it is received by the characters of the memoir itself. Firstly, it is said to be Hadachinou’s favourite, told in order to lift his spirits and distract Siddéna, his family’s sub-Saharan maidservant, from the loss of her family. At the same time, however, Aunt Nafissa impresses its seriousness upon them, telling them it contains what she calls the ‘memories of our countries, particularly the country of women’.<sup>52</sup> At first, it is unclear why the fly’s history should be related to that of women. Flies are, after all, not just humans’ ‘dis-similar’, but their long-time nemesis.

When considered in the light of Hadachinou’s grandmother, however, the little fly’s tale simply points to the difficulty of telling stories about Libya. Provoked by Siddéna’s suffering, and emerging from the suffering of women before her – as what Pick would call ‘creatures overtaken by or lost in history’ – the story both acknowledges this suffering and transforms it into a story that can be told to a child. Flies, humans’ ‘dis-similar’, come to the rescue, providing a ‘world-upside-down’, allowing for laughter and feasting, but ultimately signifying the chronic fracture of human society. Readers, meanwhile, find themselves torn

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<sup>49</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 93.

<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 92.

between delight in the vision of a plentiful 'flytopia' within human destitution, and horror at the idea that the flies' feast is human in nature. In the final line, the fly remembers its own grandmother telling it 'about the world' at night as it lay happily replete, a universal image of one generation imparting wisdom to another that stands in poignant contrast to Hadachinou's own grandmother's inability to relay such wisdom to him.

### *Fly Nation*

Within the broader narrative, Aunt Nafissa's tale-within-a-tale, told near the end, stands out prominently against other layers of personal and historical memory. In particular, it recalls the fictional paratext which introduces the entire work, an extract from the fictional 'Book of Flies', which moves from the homely voice of the 'little fly' to the official discourse of a 'fly nation' and dispassionate tone of a historian. To a great extent, this paratext, narrating the history of Libya from before the arrival of the Phoenicians, appears incongruous to the rest of the narrative, with the fly's perspective recurring only in Aunt Nafissa's tale. Through this connection, however, Ben Hameda signals his absorption of childhood tales, allegiance to the collective experience within them, and transformation of them in his writing.

Transforming the folkloric fable through the discourses of modernity, the extract moves from the microscopic view of nostrils and eyeballs to the panoramic view of eras. On one level, it can be read as a straightforward parody of nation and empire, with the 'Book of Flies' and 'Free Nation of Flies' mimicking Gaddafi's *Green Book* and *Jamāhiriyyah*. Flies are, however, no typical allegory for human society. Unlike ants and bees, they have no swarm mentality through which to explore the workings of human society.<sup>53</sup> They also thrive on decomposition, a fact which must surely make them a site of existential angst rather than political allegory. The 'Book of Flies' indeed provides a view of human history whose allegorical dimensions are undermined by the fact that, at its heart, the chronicler's chief concern is feasting on human flesh. As allegory, it may therefore best be understood through Benjamin's concept of the term, in which, as Bainard Cowan remarks, the abstract idea is infused with the messiness of transient reality, and 'the signs perceived strike notes at the depths of one's being, regardless of whether they point to heaven, to an irretrievable past, or to the grave'.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Connor, *Fly*, 92.

<sup>54</sup> Cowan, 'Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', 110.

Combining mythic, colonial and pseudo-scientific discourses, describing Libya's 'indigenous inhabitants' as monstrous, hybrid demons, the extract further blurs the categories of human, animal, real and fantastic. Libya's ancient ancestors are called 'savage, hairy, toothless barbarians', 'cannibals', 'Cyclops', 'pygmies' and 'hermaphrodites'. The term 'Homo sapiens' is also frequently used and reference made to the people's 'monkey neighbours'.<sup>55</sup> This vision of Libya's hybrid past again upsets the notion of a discrete, homogenous nation and its cohesive history. So too does the overall use of a fictional paratext, placing an inhuman perspective where one would expect to find a bona fide historian, and frustrating the inter-textual process in which official history is recovered to legitimate nation. Amongst all the peoples that settled in Libya – from the Phoenicians to the Italians – flies alone have remained constant, undermining the fleeting ideologies of empire, what Ben Hamed elsewhere critiques as 'expansionist visions', using divine right or historical legacy to impose one narrative on all others.<sup>56</sup> Against such homogenising ideologies, the fly nation is a reminder that the root and destiny of all is brute matter, in the ultimate process of homogenisation.

#### *Tripolitaines and Human Men*

Alongside this vision of Libya's hybrid past, the extract also presents a first example of the profoundly negative vision of males that emerges in the text, the chief way in which tale-within-tale and paratext are connected to other strands of memory. Women, the fly reports, were originally the 'warriors' and 'hunters' while men guarded the children. Growing bored, the men venture to the coast where they encounter the Phoenicians arriving by sea. Tempting the men with delicacies and alcohol, the Phoenicians establish trading posts, bringing the curse of gold to the land. The men renounce their prophetess, Maboulah, and submit to the foreigners, relegating women to 'bellies into which they emptied their desires'.<sup>57</sup> This original betrayal, the fly reports, marks the beginning of Libya's colonial history as, dying, the prophetess Maboulah, curses the men and their descendants: 'You will be damned until the end of time. Other men will come to humiliate and enslave you. You will only ever be slaves and the sons of criminals'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ben Hamed, 'Dans les sables libyens', 50.

<sup>57</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

Unlike the introductory theme of flies, recurring at only one striking juncture, that of women's betrayal by men is a recurring one, and coincides with another process within the narrative through which gender divide is transformed into species divide, mirroring Buraybish's dichotomy of predator and prey, overriding that of human and nonhuman. Already seen in Aunt Nafissa's reference to the 'country of women', aligned with flies, this process first appears in the 'Tripolitaines' of the text's title, distancing women from their male compatriots, and placing regional identity above that of 'Libyan'. In addition, 'Tripolitaine' becomes a marker of plurality, encompassing Arab Muslims, Italian Catholics, Berbers, Arab Jews and sub-Saharan Africans among others. The product of Libya's waves of colonisation, women embrace this plurality, and reject the men who have long used it as an excuse for violence:

Apart from their bellies and their pricks, the only thing men are interested in is destroying with one hand what they've just created with the other. I remember the war, the famine and the way women were raped when the Italian soldiers entered Tripoli: they spread shame and loathing through the city. After the Greeks, the Romans, the Vandals, the Arab tribes and the Turks, it was their turn to try out their virility on our bodies. And they're still at it now, they're just wearing different clothes. Sewer rats, the lot of them.<sup>59</sup>

This diatribe, uttered by Aunt Nafissa, attributes Libya's colonial past and patriarchal present to a combination of 'belly', 'prick' and ideology, and is accompanied by numerous tales of domestic abuse that locate these past impulses in the present. Again, the victims of these impulses are described in creaturely terms, through use of animal imagery. Hadachinou's Aunt Zohra, abused and starved by her husband, has two daughters described as 'a couple of starving kittens'.<sup>60</sup> Aunt Hiba is raped by her husband to the horror of Hadachinou who inadvertently witnesses the scene: 'Aunt Hiba was wailing like a camel being slaughtered for the Feast of the Sacrifice, a poor creature dying in public ignored by passers-by'.<sup>61</sup> Hadachinou's mother, meanwhile, imagines herself as a 'gazelle' transformed into a 'monkey' after years of hardship.<sup>62</sup> Memories of Italian colonisation are similarly marked by the creaturely. Hadachinou's mother tells him how the experience drew her

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 41.

close to her childhood friend, Jamila, with their creaturely vulnerability tying them indelibly together:

When Mussolini came and we had years of scarcity and abject poverty, we both lost our hair at the same time, and when it grew again we checked each other for lice, the only creatures that benefited from the situation.<sup>63</sup>

These descriptions of women are, however, significantly paralleled by another trend in which women embrace the nonhuman, voicing alternative narratives of creation, and claiming ancestry from fantastical and natural elements. Like the 'Story of the Little Fly', the narratives are in equal part liberating and grimly deterministic. While freeing women from the tyranny of the human, they all contain episodes of betrayal, ordaining their exilic fate.

The first to narrate her genealogy, although not strictly concerning women, is Siddéna, the descendent of former slaves, who informs Hadachinou that she belongs to the 'Chosen People of the Light' and has trees for ancestors. Banished from their kingdom after searching for the source of the light, her people were submitted to the punishment of 'rootlessness and slavery', escaping only in death.<sup>64</sup> Fella, the family's Jewish neighbour, then claims to be an angel, immersed in a state of mystical love for the Divine who rejects her all-encompassing passion, revealing Himself instead to humans, 'made of clay and filth'.<sup>65</sup> Dissociating herself from the elements of Abrahamic creation, Fella later incorporates all women into the category of unwitting angels:

'Your mother and the others are angels too', she said, 'But angels who don't know it. Their punishment is to have forgotten because they deserted God when they realised he was a male god and all he was interested in was his prick and his belly, like all men, his faithful creatures'.<sup>66</sup>

Tibra, a Berber, claims descent from the once powerful amazons of the Sahara: 'I'm from a different species, a wilder, more ancient creature. Like all women (even if some have forgotten it), I'm directly descended from the Amazons, the warrior goddesses promised to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 80.

the wind and wedded to the Infinite'.<sup>67</sup> Finally, the sorcerer, Hadja Kimya, also of Sub-Saharan descent, imagines herself 'born before time, born of a sugary flower the colour of silk' and further portrays herself as a force of both creation and apocalypse, directed exclusively against men:

I am Kimya, the woman from the end of time that will soon come for all men [...] in my vagina lies the secret of the universe and from my breath whole worlds are born and wonders, dreams and wind.<sup>68</sup>

Each of the narratives follows in quick succession, with Hadja Kimya's shortly preceding 'The Story of the Little Fly'. The disparity between it and them is striking, rendered more so by the fact that Aunt Nafissa laughs and mocks Hadja Kimya's prophetic words, while Hadja Kimya derides her earthy tale, each ridiculing the other's vision of history. Contrasting fly paradise to paradise lost and materiality to mythology, the stories are, however, only superficially at odds, with all similarly revealing a need to imagine history through nonhuman eyes and alternative origins, while also accepting the alienation and suffering inherent to it. As with Buraybish, the enchantment of fairy tale and myth combines with the grim facts of the creaturely. This is further paralleled by the coming-of-age process in both narratives, in which the world of childhood is recovered, but its loss inscribed in the process.

### **Coming-of-Age in Creaturely Memoir**

Both *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* are structured around the boys' increasing movement into the 'country of men'. For both, the trauma of this process is contrasted to the former harmony of childhood. *Sarīb* begins by evoking, in detail, the shared existence of boy and grandmother, living alone on a hill overlooking Benghazi, their courtyard filled with birds, which Buraybish lovingly tends and Aḥmad watches in fascination. In *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, Hadachinou revels in female attention and lies for hours on the tomb of Sidi Mounaïder, contemplating birds overhead. Immersion in nature, story and female attention is then strikingly contrasted to pivotal scenes of animal slaughter, conducted by men, and marking first departures from childhood. Aḥmad is tricked by his father into eating the meat of a beloved gazelle he had been caring for, while, in *La*

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 89.

*compagnie des Tripolitaines*, Hadachinou's circumcision is paralleled to the slaughter of a sheep at Eid.

In both memoirs, the move to adulthood must also be seen alongside the country's move to dictatorship, which coincided chronologically with it. Not only is loss of childhood depicted, but also that of childhood cities. Images of the boys wandering through Benghazi and Tripoli, immersed in sights, sounds, tastes and smells, are poignant reminders of subsequent loss. Under Gaddafi, these cities were irrevocably transformed, and the authors imprisoned or banished from them. Through the ambivalent process of coming-of-age, and the nostalgia expressed for cities lost, both patriarchy and political oppression are critiqued. In my subsequent analyses, I examine how allegiance is expressed instead to the creaturely.

### *Too Long a Story*

Buraybish's final tale of human subjugation of the nonhuman emerges, to a large extent, from Aḥmad's increasing violence and rebellion as he leaves her courtyard for the world of school and market-place. With his cousin, he lays her yard with bird traps and, echoing Qur'ān 6:38, and, more importantly, the word '*dābbah*', he declares: 'There was not a beast (*dābbah*) that crawled on the ground which did not become my prey'.<sup>69</sup> Buraybish's final tale may thus be read as a cautionary one. Its immediate context is, in fact, Aḥmad's disappointment over not being able to go to the zoo. Meanwhile, as Buraybish concludes, meandering into fresh reminiscences, her train of thought is rudely interrupted as he demands: 'Who are you talking to grandma?'.<sup>70</sup> Now enraptured by the Greek and Roman legends he learns at school, and their remnants in the surroundings of Benghazi, his grandmother's disappointingly creaturely history fails to capture his imagination, and he is amused at how she sees chickens, lizards and sheep in the written text of his schoolbooks.<sup>71</sup> Growing up, Aḥmad seeks the superhuman, heroic and, most importantly, written, rather than his grandmother's '*sarīb*', which signifies not just a 'long story' but an 'overly long one', fractured, repetitive and with no satisfactory beginning or ending:

Her memory was made of sand, blown about by the *Qiblī* wind, while my memory stood to attention before me, in neat lines and printed shapes. Filled with pride, I

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<sup>69</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 60-61.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

pitied the old woman, forgetful, shaken by every passing breeze and repeating her tales again and again. So in the end I decided not to tell her about my youngest cousin's assessment of her as a senile old bat (*'ajūz khārifah*)!<sup>72</sup>

The growing disparity between Aḥmad and his grandmother is further conveyed by their alternative visions of Benghazi. For Buraybish, Benghazi is a sanctuary, 'buried in the darkness of time', built to protect the vulnerable from the vagaries of nature and violence, and described as 'the dwelling place of human, jinn and everything in between'.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, it, too, is vulnerable, having been bombed, scattered with landmines and overtaken by flooding and sandstorms. Meanwhile, in her grandson's imagination, Benghazi is personified as a romantic goddess, its wars and struggles transformed into the dramatic rivalries and romances of mythic characters:

Benghazi cradled me in her lap, gently soothing me as I gazed passionately up at her. 'You were born from water, just as I was,' she murmured, 'You have lived on the salt of my bread. Before your father Adam married Eve, Zeus, King of the gods, fell in love with Tanit, goddess of Libya. They were married and I their offspring, created from the merging of the far horizon, the ocean's depths and the earth's clay'.<sup>74</sup>

Aḥmad's coming-of-age is, however, problematized by his own experiences of creaturely vulnerability, witnessing Benghazi demolished and rebuilt with oil revenues, subject to popular protests against the monarchy, outbreaks of cholera, and an ever unstable climate of drought and flooding. The slaughter of his gazelle is, meanwhile, linked to the death of his little brother, hit by a car, which he witnessed first-hand. Both are entwined with his contraction of an almost fatal illness, and all are presented in apocalyptic terms, through reference to the Qur'ān. Watching a truck hauling earth, the boy imagines it to be a 'yellow elephant' towed by a 'red goat', quoting Qur'ān 105:1-5, in which God destroys the 'army of the elephant' with flocks of birds. At another point, he imagines the 'end times' (*al-ākhirah*) arriving, quoting Qur'ān 99:1-4: 'When the earth is shaken to her (utmost) convulsion, And the earth throws up her burdens (from within), And man cries (distressed): "What is the matter with her?"' (Qur'ān 99:1-3, trans. Yusuf Ali).<sup>75</sup> As he describes how the streets

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 120.

become ‘a dough of clay and human flesh’, the boy’s memories, like his grandmother’s, move from the enchanted and folkloric to the fear-filled, infused with human vulnerability.<sup>76</sup>

Apocalyptic imagery continues as the memoir ends with Aḥmad’s disappearance during a patriotic march, where schoolchildren parade through the city, chanting national slogans and the name of King Idrīs. The boy is delighted, considering he has now become ‘one of the men of the next generation’.<sup>77</sup> Soon, however, he drifts from the march and is lost. At the same moment, the narrative voice switches from first to third person: ‘Darkness descended, he did not return, and his grandmother wept’.<sup>78</sup> A terrible storm arises and the text ends as birds return to their nests, dogs and cats huddle on piles of rubbish, and there is no sign of the boy: ‘police cars trawled the streets, and no one came, and there was no news of the missing boy (*al-ghā’ib*)’.<sup>79</sup> Ending with the disappearance of the narrating I, at the moment when manhood and nation are negotiated, *Sarīb* is an ambivalent *Bildungsroman*. Like the characters of Buraybish’s stories, little Aḥmad represents the underdog, attempting to find his way home, but whose ultimate destiny is flight.

In the complex entanglement of mythologies and historical references that the memoir brings together, Buraybish’s tale may appear simplistic, with its characters, Ibn Adam, Bull, Goat and Porcupine, named after their species, and its plotline following a basic fact of deep history. Yet its simple truth that some – most prominently the nonhuman – are consigned to eternal flight haunts all else, just like the hunger and fear of Buraybish’s youth. In her growing infirmity, Buraybish dramatizes the disappearance of the land’s nomadic past, but al-Faytūrī’s memoir announces that it, too, is ‘*sarīb*’, and that its modernity is utterly entangled in the past. The recovery of Buraybish’s *sarīb*, after al-Faytūrī’s youthful rejection of it, represents the memoir’s true coming-of-age, a return to childhood, and allegiance to oral narrative and the land before nation.

### *Seeking a Beginning*

In *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, meanwhile, fly tales, histories of ‘the countries of women’ and genealogies of angels, Amazons and people of light make Hadachinou begin to ponder

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<sup>76</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 122.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

his own origins. Early on, he feels distanced from the women who raise him, observing how his mother begrudges his presence among her and her friends, wanting to be alone with them, ‘without the suggestion of a man’s presence, not even a boy as “sweet and innocent” as me’.<sup>80</sup> Hadachinou’s only alternative is the world of men, located in mosque, shop and drunken parties, and much of the narrative consists instead in him wandering alone through the streets of Tripoli, dislocated and often stumbling into the city’s seedier neighbourhoods. Like Aḥmad, he occasionally succumbs to ‘male impulses’. After being berated by a prostitute that he befriends, he describes how he becomes not just ‘a grumpy child’, but ‘a spurned male’, reflecting that ‘women should be the ones listening to men, that’s the law’.<sup>81</sup> Above all, however, he struggles against the monolithic voice of men, unconvinced by the origins it assigns him.

After questioning the sheikh at Qur’ān school about his identity, Hadachinou is told he is ‘an Arab and a Muslim’, a response which disturbs him. Resenting the ‘frozen, mummified language’ of his Qur’ān studies, he fears that, in rejecting it, he will have no identity: ‘I was a faceless body; in my dreams I no longer even saw my body. I existed without being. At this point I believed that, without Allah’s language, I wasn’t in his world’.<sup>82</sup> Hadachinou’s crisis may be read as an expression of Hamedā’s broader critique of ‘allahlogical time’ which, he suggests, has existed in Libya since the arrival of the Banū Hilāl and Banū Sulaymān:

It is, above all, the tribes of the Banū Hilāl and the Banū Sulaymān who left their indelible trace on the formation of this *homo libicus* in gestation. These occupants of the scorched lands of Arabia, arriving in the second half of the tenth century, to occupy less hostile places in the name of their Absolute and of their Book, and to shape the memory and language of the indigenous Amazighs according to their dictates.<sup>83</sup>

In Ben Hamedā’s own memoir, *La mémoire de l’absent*, he explicitly links the dictatorial approach to Qur’ānic studies to that of Gaddafi’s *Green Book*, with both representing metanarratives unanimously imposed on young minds. As Anna Baldinetti remarks, Islam

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<sup>80</sup> Ben Hamedā, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 52.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>83</sup> Ben Hamedā, ‘*Dans les sables libyens*’, 49 (my translation).

was central to the formation of Libyan identity, both during the monarchy and Gaddafi's *Jamāhiriyyah*.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere, Ben Hamed depicts how both were accompanied by the expulsion of non-Arab populations from the country, obliterating the Tripolitanian plurality of his youth.

Hadachinou's identity crisis is, meanwhile, resolved by Aunt Nafissa who tells him that no one can truly know their origins, and these origins should therefore be sought only in the eyes of others, so long as those eyes are not clouded by 'illusion':

You come in through my eyes, travelling through my kingdom, my gardens, my labyrinths, then you come through my mouth, you emerge, soft kisses... Another person's eyes are your origins and your kingdom. But these other people can't see you if they're blinded by their search for an illusion, for the Invisible One.<sup>85</sup>

Presenting a stark contrast to Hadachinou's sense of rootlessness, Aunt Nafissa's words are, like her fly story, grounded in the physical encounter of human bodies. Suggesting that answers must be sought on a small scale, within the microcosm of each human, it recognises the alterity of each individual and the many universes they conceal, but also the fact that, deep down and far into history, they are united. For Ben Hamed, this attitude alone can allow humanity to recover its unity:

Will these descendants of the *Libous*, along with all the other peoples inhabiting this 'Arab space', living in an '*allahlogical*' time, be able to build bridges to their neighbours in the North, living in their so-called post-ideological time, and create a shared time, that of the human in its diversity and complexity [...]?

Through his nonhuman narrators and cosmologies, Ben Hamed's work calls for a shared humanity in which embrace of otherness is central. Like *Sarīb*, *La compagnie des Tripolitaines* represents not *Bildungsroman*, but a pledge of allegiance to circular, messy and creaturely history. The text both opens and closes with a nonsensical, open-ended rhyme, which Hadachinou's Aunt Fatima tells him: 'Seven girls inside a flute. The ghouls twirls and twirls and eats one of the girls. Six girls inside a flute. The ghouls twirls and twirls and eats one of the girls. Five girls inside a flute...'. The final lines depict not the physical disappearance of

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<sup>84</sup> Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation*, 144-145.

<sup>85</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripolit Sky*, 99.

the boy, but his absorption in story: ‘Ah here’s Hadachinou! Where’s this little man been, then? He looks tired. Come and sit next to me. I’ll tell you a story... *Seven girls inside a...*’<sup>86</sup>

### **Creaturely Memoir**

The creaturely memoirs of al-Faytūrī and Ben Hamedā may be divided into the dichotomies of past and present, male and female, youth and age, desert and city, and human and nonhuman. Yet all are entangled. The boys’ voices merge with their older selves, as does Buraybish’s with her younger self and Aunt Nafissa’s with her ‘little fly’. Aḥmad and Buraybish’s voices similarly interweave, while Hadachinou’s narrative principally involves him listening to others. Places, too, are intertwined. Desert and city are presented as hybrid zones, where histories, myths and bodies are entangled. As cities are swept by sandstorms and heatwaves, the two even merge into one, with all within them reduced to panting creatures, seeking shelter. The smooth transition of wilderness to civilisation is disrupted through ‘creaturely history’ as well as what Benjamin terms ‘Messianic history’, blasting open the ‘continuum of history’ and disrupting the ‘homogenous, empty time’ of the realist novel.<sup>87</sup> Through shifting temporality and spatiality, history is manifest in its cosmic magnitude, discursive diversity, and utter, physical simplicity. Libya as nation is overwhelmed by Libya as stage for creaturely survival.

In many ways, such narratives may be seen to signal what Baldinetti describes as the ‘failure of an imagined community’ in Libya, resulting, most particularly, from the brutality of Gaddafi’s rule.<sup>88</sup> While *Sarīb* ends with the word ‘*ghā’ib*’ (absent), Ben Hamedā’s personal memoir is entitled *La mémoire de l’absent*, and absence of ‘home’ taints both it and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*. Just as ‘coming home’ is frustrated in tales-within-tales, so it is in the authors’ texts. At the same time, however, the creaturely becomes not just a negative reminder of inevitable violence, but an expression of solidarity and shared experience, a liberating force, resurrecting our shared origins, sufferings and transgressions and freeing us from close-minded ideologies. In both, vitality is located through inscribing orality, plurality and the creaturely in writing. Reviving childhood, collective memory and deep

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<sup>86</sup> Ben Hamedā, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 128.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin, ‘*Theses on the Philosophy of History*’, 254.

<sup>88</sup> Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation*, 143. Both Vandewalle and Baldinetti examine the historical processes leading to Libya’s difficult passage into nationhood, while Vandewalle further explores how Gaddafi compounded this through pursuing a policy of ‘statelessness’. Both discuss regionalism and tribalism as factors affecting the emergence of Libyan identity, and Italian colonisation as rendering the country’s inhabitants suspicious of modern nationhood. The ‘curse of oil’ is also examined.

history is not regression, but renewal, as Ben Hamed states: ‘between the time of childhood and that of exile, I choose that of childhood, for it roots me in life’.<sup>89</sup>

‘Life’, the condition shared by all creatures, is a force that counters ideology in both narratives, and, as a final domain for understanding the creaturely, expressions of spirituality emerge alongside it. In Pick’s study, Simone Weil (1909-1943), the Christian mystic, is a major influence and, in *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, the immanent and the creaturely are also connected to a mystical, Sufi turn. Aunt Nafissa, for example, tells Hadachinou: ‘Allah just means that: it means “Ah!” It’s that moment when an apparition or an event captivates us, or when we’re simply amazed by little aspects of everyday life. That’s when Allah reveals himself’.<sup>90</sup> Aḥmad, meanwhile, takes part in a Sufi dhikr, in which his growing sense of fracture is momentarily overcome: ‘the music seized me, and I grew more and more crazed until I felt as though I were drowning in seas of longing. I felt as though I was the son of the heavens, the child of Benghazi and the fullness of the full. I was not, after all, Nuṣ Anṣīṣ, the halfling’.<sup>91</sup> Creaturely poetics, highlighting shared vulnerability, are thus enunciated within a broader vision of a mystical unity, underlying human and nonhuman existence.

The intertwining of the creaturely and the mystical is a feature of many Libyan narratives, and may even be identified as the defining feature of the country’s fiction. As in *Sarīb* and *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, narratives emerge that depart from nation and ideology into universal cosmologies and creaturely conditions. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the fiction of Tuareg-Libyan author Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī, whose writing is characterised by what Rossetti terms the ‘chronotope of the Sahara in the distant past’.<sup>92</sup> Like al-Faytūrī and Ben Hamed, his work retells human fall in plural, oral and creaturely terms, unsettling dichotomies and antagonisms rather than establishing them. In doing so, he employs a plurality of mystical traditions to evoke the fundamental interconnection of human and nonhuman and forge alternative forms of identity and ethics. As Donna Haraway comments in her discussion of primatology, ‘Destabilising an origin story is perhaps more powerful in the deconstruction of the history of man than replacing it with a more progressive successor’.<sup>93</sup> In al-Kūnī, al-Faytūrī and Ben Hamed, ‘destabilising’ the

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<sup>89</sup> Ben Hamed, *La mémoire de l’absent*, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Ben Hamed, *Under the Tripoli Sky*, 98.

<sup>91</sup> Al-Faytūrī, *Sarīb*, 104.

<sup>92</sup> Rossetti, ‘Darkness in the Desert’, 52.

<sup>93</sup> Haraway, ‘Primatology is Politics by Other Means’, 491.

myth of civilisation, empire and nation takes place through a simultaneous evocation of the creaturely that we all share, and the mystical that we all seek. In both, hope is located.

Moving from origins and deep history to eschatology, Florian Mussgnug's study of 'last man' fictions in European literature similarly locates an unexpected hope in the 'blurring of human and nonhuman life' after apocalyptic occurrences.<sup>94</sup> This hope, he suggests, arises from a 'positive idea of animality, as vitality and renewal, a calm strength, which opposes itself to the frenzy of human self-destruction'.<sup>95</sup> In al-Faytūrī and Ben Hameda, the nonhuman is certainly portrayed as a more innocent state from which the violent human emerges, and into which s/he retreats in times of turmoil. The question remains, however, as to whether, in the intersection of national history, creaturely history and deep history, Libya, and indeed humanity as a whole, can reconcile its shared sufferings and transgressions, to look to a future free from apocalyptic violence and destruction.

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<sup>94</sup> Mussgnug, 'Naturalizing Apocalypse', 339.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

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