

Political Violence Portrayed in *Maps of the Soul*

Mr. Pawar Baliram Pandurang

*Asst. Professor, Department of English, Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil College, Sector 15, Vashi,
Navi Mumbai, (M.S.) India*

Abstract

Maps of the Soul, a historical fiction written by Ahmed Fagih is undoubtedly such a book which tells the story of a young man's journey from rags to riches and then back to rags again! The book contains the first three parts of a twelve-part piece of work. The story is set in Libya, in the early 1930's under the rule of the Italian colonialist Italo Balbo, who plays a significant role in changing the fate of the protagonist. The book starts with a bone-chillingly terrifying scene in which the protagonist Othman al-Sheikh is covered in the blood of his beheaded companions, while he himself is waiting to be executed. His group of Italian Army recruits had been captured and taken prisoner by the Abyssinians. They were bound and tortured till a tall Negro, named Sanko, methodically slashed the throats of the prisoners in an alternate pattern, slaying one and leaving the other.

Key Words: violence, Italo Balbo, cultural chaos, Othman, Libyans etc.

The great thinker, Michael Berg says, 'As long as people use violence to combat violence, we will always have violence.' The same picture of the manslaughter is described in a nightmarishly disturbing manner that chills your blood. Also, the narration in second person gives the novel a sense of urgency that effectively succeeds in pulling the reader into the events unfolding, making them experience the ongoing moment in the protagonist's life. The massacre had continued till it was Othman's turn to get killed. But fortunately, and quite astonishingly for him, Sanko changed his mind and spared his life, and killed the two on each of Othman's side. "That moment changed your view on a variety of subjects, becoming a dividing line between two eras and two different lives. You felt as though you had grown decades in a single second,

and your way of thinking changed accordingly. Your vision of the meaning of life broadened, just as your understanding of hope and salvation, failure and success, good and evil, happiness and misery, pain and pleasure – even life and death – shifted. In that pivotal moment, all of these concepts assumed a single meaning, futility." Chapter two onwards, the book takes us back in time in order to understand how Othman al-Sheikh ended up being at the verge of death. Othman's story begins in Awlad Al Sheikh, a tiny, dusty village in the Libyan Desert. An educated young man who had learned the Quran by heart at the Sunni Mosque, he had found his life in village dull and meaningless.

He finds an opportunity when he is accused of sexual indiscretion with Aziza, a water carrier's daughter, and leaves the village for

the city life he always aspired and dreamed of! He arrives in Tripoli, his dream city, with nothing but the clothes he wore and the dreams of leading a successful life. But as he strolled around the city, he found himself disillusioned with the reality it portrayed. Everywhere he looked, he saw people of foreign descent – fair skinned, wearing clothes of multifarious foreign fashions unlike what the people in his village wore. Then the realization struck him, that Tripoli was no longer the home of the native Libyans but of the newly migrated Italians! Bewildered, he set out to find Libyans of the city till he finds a mosque along the back streets of the town that the Libyans got after the Italians took over Tripoli.

He also found the stark contrast in various parts of the city- the city centre presented a glamorous face of the city while the outskirts of the city showed the poor, depressed state of the city. For the first 4 days, he survives on bread and tea while searching for a suitable job. While tackling hunger for the next few days, he gets the job of collecting firewood. One day, he sees Abdel Mowlah, a rich businessman from his hometown, standing outside the mosque, begging for alms. Othman hears his story, promises his secrecy and leaves, disgusted. The next day, after finishing his job and searching for more work, he comes across an old shoemaker named Haj al-Mahdy, in Kushat al-Safar. On finding out that Othman was educated in the Quran, the Haj hires him as an apprentice. This new profession had offered him the opportunity he needed to become successful. He learnt the art of shoemaking, while maintaining the records of the clients. While ensuring his survival,

he finds himself falling in love. Sometimes, the Haj offered him to have lunch together, and thus he gets acquainted with his daughter, Thuraya, who regularly brought her father's lunch to the shop. Thuraya was beautiful, shy, innocent and kind – the kind of woman to spend a lifetime with. Their brief encounters gave him joy, and with each meeting he felt much closer to her. But before he could broach the subject of marriage to her father, he gets kidnapped by Italian soldiers in search of young men to join the Italian Army in a fight against Abyssinia. After finding a way to escape, he flees from the clutches of the Army to his village.

After 3 months, he returns to Tripoli, with the hopes of reuniting with Thuraya, only to learn from the Haj that Thuraya had been married off to their relative, Fathy, who was also captured by the Italian Army. In utter despair, he heads toward the Army base, and joins the army voluntarily. As a result, he is regarded differently by both the Italian officers and the Libyan conscripts. The months spent in the Army barracks changed Othman's life for the better. He meets a companion from his village, Salem, who makes his life in army bearable. The hopelessness and meaninglessness of life had begun fading, and with efforts and cunning, he raised his ranks in the Army. In order to survive and raise his rank, he even whips and punishes his fellow recruits. He starts learning Italian and even enrolls in the Fascist Party that he detests, gaining the trust of the higher ups in the Italian army while earning the scorns and curses of his fellow Libyan conscripts. One day, in one of the higher-ups' club, he happens to see

Houriya, a bewitching woman of Libyan origins, wearing a glamorous dress and sipping wine. Elegant and free like the Italian women, she was also fair, a rarity among Libyans. He learns from others that she was Balbo's favourite mistress and hence, her ranks were above all the others in the room.

By coincidence, they converse, and after another meeting with her, she hires him as her temporary driver. This opportunity allows him to leave the barracks to learn driving. He meets Mario, an automobile technician and his driving instructor, but who also influences him to give in to the temptation of sex. Mario then takes him deeper into the world of pleasure with each passing day in his company. Because of him, he meets Nuriya, a prostitute, and regularly hires her to fulfill his physical cravings. After becoming Houriya's driver, he became the direct employee of the Governor-General Balbo who delays his departure to the war. He also meets the pious Sheikh al-Balbal through Houriya, who believed in his visions and took his advice. With each visit, he becomes closer and more attracted to Houriya. As the story progresses, circumstances bring them close enough that Houriya proposes him for marriage, and thinks the deal done, without giving him the opportunity to object or reply. Upon her request, he gets exempted from going to the war and he leaves the army camp to live in the old city. He befriends AlKubran, the owner of the hotel he stays in and also gets visited by Nuriya and Abdel Mowlah. After a few days, on the orders of the Marshal,

Othman takes him on a tour around the old city. Seeing the bad state of the old city, the Marshal starts developing and reforming the city which benefits the people and they consider Othman with high regards, even bringing their petitions and complaints to him, after learning of his connection with the Marshal. On Houriya's request, the Marshal appoints him as in charge of the people's complaints office in the Government instead of the job of Houriya's chauffeur. This further elevates his position in the eyes of his people, who believe him as the second important person after the Marshal himself. But jealous and anxious of her continuing relationship with Balbo, Othman doubts her feelings for him and rejects her proposal. This decision changes his life for the worst. He turns himself an enemy of Balbo, who strips him of his high post and Othman becomes jobless again. He visits his hometown for a while, and after he comes back to resume his duties, he gets falsely accused and arrested for impersonating a government official and is led to the prison. After a week of imprisonment in the revolting prison cell, visitors are allowed to meet him.

Al-Kubran, Nuriya and Abdel Mowlah visit him regularly and bring news to him. After the second week, Houriya's employees, Mukhtar, Ayyad al-Fezzany and Hawaa come to meet him. They tell him how Houriya's life had taken a turn for the worse after he left, that she had married a Libyan Fascist Youths member who beats her after the Marshal's visit. They also tell him that their mistress was aware of his current state, but she wasn't the one who wished for it. Othman acknowledged the truth behind it,

he knows that even though she hadn't ordered it, she had taken down her veil of protection, as both knew that he was undeserving of it. He dreams of the day of his release, to reunite with Thuraya and her family, and all the people close to him, but is visited by Basher Bey al-Ghiryani, the petition's officer who caused his imprisonment. He tells Othman that on his family's plea, he will soon be released and return to his previous post in the army. However, the complete opposite happens. A week later, the prison warden informs him that he would be sent to fight the Abyssinian army in the very near future until which he is free to roam around the prison. He tells Abdel Mowlah, Al-Kubran and the members of his family who come to visit him of this doomed fate. And finally when the time of his departure arrives, his friends, along with his parents and family members visit him. He meets and greets them, exchanges kisses and embraces. They bid him farewell with tears in their eyes, while Othman sets on a new journey. The book ends with the following lines: "You saw Tripoli walking and weeping. The shore wept and moved, the ship wept and sailed, the sun wept and moved across the dome of the universe, and you too wept, walking towards your unknown fate."

The role of Religion: Religion plays a very important role in this book. The book revolves around 2 religions i.e. Islam and Christianity. The protagonist follows Islam, thus we see his opinion on things related to traditions, marriage and relationships closely bound to Islamic rules. Christianity is the religion followed by the antagonist Italy's Governor-General Marshal Italo Balbo.

Islam is the religion of the native Libyans, while Christianity is looked upon as the religion of the colonizers and oppressors. Hence, we see a subtle clash between the two religions. Othman considers the institution of marriage as sacred. He detests the thought of sexual relations without the involvement of marriage. But after a certain time, he falls prey to temptation and relishes sexual pleasures. But being a traditionally educated man of faith, he knows that he is sinning and prays for forgiveness, firmly believing in the Islamic law and that he is bound to get punished for all his sins. He abhors the Christian tradition that allowed keeping mistresses and allowing sexual intercourse without the need for marriage. This clash in the religious views is seen during his conversation with Houriya.

Houriya talks about their sexual union in terms of a sin, wishing that it had happened after their marriage according to the Islamic law. This leaves him speechless, as he's unable to fathom how Houriya could speak about lawfulness and sinfulness, when she herself being the mistress of Balbo, is breaking the Islamic law. Also, he wants to ask her if it was due to common religion and homeland they shared, that she wants a lawful relationship with him, while the foreigners (Italo Balbo) enjoyed the privilege of exemption. His contempt of the hypocrisy of the uneven laws between the two religions is very obvious. One religion allows sexual indiscretion while the other considers it a punishable crime.

Cultural Aspects: The book talks about the cultural heritage and the heritage sites throughout the novel, and each part talks about the various different places of cultural

importance. The highlight of the first part is the author's description of the vibrant city of Tripoli that creates a picturesque image in front of our eyes. Othman had only heard of wondrous tales of the city, but he finds Tripoli beyond any comparison. He was amazed to see the architecture, the foreign shops, the markets, and so on. The city was filled with a mixture of unique fragrances, and the glamorous splendor of the magnificent architecture, the busy streets, the markets and its nightlife. He saw perfectly trimmed and pruned decorative trees, tall buildings, and decorative water fountains.

The Turkish market, the Musheer market and the Rabba Market fascinated him. Tripoli, meaning 'three cities' had derived its name from these three markets, whose fame and prestige was ever-increasing through every generation. All the sights he saw were captivating, but what spellbound him was the view of the sea, which was far beyond his imagination – the sea crashing against the walls of the Red Castle, the waves racing and splashing. Othman had never seen the sea but from what he had heard, and now finally witnessed, he realized that his coming here was worth it, if only to witness this beautiful scenery. "Aspects of the sea made it seem almost like a counterpart of the desert, that vast space of red sand contrasted with this range of blue curving waves crowned by white foam, both stretching on seemingly without end. Each of them was a frightening enigma, a maze, and as the well-known saying held, nothing compares to the treachery of the sea but the treachery of the desert." The second part describes the Old City where Othman lives

after his discharge from the army. The old city was famous for its ancient bazaars and one of its famous places, Babal-Bahr, where the hotels once welcomed caravans and their cattle. Also, the two cultural symbols of the old city included the ancient Mosque of Gorgi, a religious, historical and archaeological landmark, and the Arch of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a Roman monument said to be the oldest edifice in the city. The third part of the book starts with the Marshal's tour around the old city with Othman as his guide. The places they visit mention the centuries old monuments in the city, a living proof of the invaders of the past leaving a mark behind to be witnessed by the future generations. The greater part of the old city comprised of the Arab Islamic districts – its most important thoroughfare being Kushat al-Safar Street. The focal point of the old city – the four ancient Roman columns – al-Araba Arsat – were what remained of ancient 'Oya' and stood as a testament of the passing ages.

Then they came across the Consulates built adjacent to one another. The British Consulate had a rooftop garden with trees in large stone planters, with colorful ceramic tiles. The roof was higher than the other roofs, which had allowed Warrington to see everything in the port, within or beyond the city limits. The Abu Leila Tower could be seen from atop an island out of the sea beside the port wall, which was named after Abu Leila, a criminal gang leader during the reign of Ahmed Pasha, and proof that the city was invaded by ruffians and criminals as well. It represented the deep history of the times of Ahmed Pasha. The Spanish Consulate had become the most disgusting

place in the old city after being converted into a tannery. The old building went back to the days of the Spanish rule, when the knights of Saint John had reigned over Tripoli during the 16th Century. The Turkish Market was a place where goods from all over the world were on display in its shops. The Naqah Mosque's focal point was a giant fig tree which gave the visitor a sense of reaching an oasis of tranquility. The oldest mosque in the country. The old Court of Justice, located between the mosque and the Faneedqa Hotel, was the place where most atrocities took place – the criminals, rebels and renegades, were punished using Ottoman methods like impaling. The American Consulate had been built only about a hundred years earlier, and was situated near Bab Al Jaded. It had no historical or archaeological value and had only been used for a few years. It was a large building resembling a fortress, but now was being used as a brothel. The Santa Maria Del Angelo Church, the oldest church in Tripoli, had been built in Bab al-Bahr. The Gorgi Mosque was the architectural highlight of Libyan mosques, not only for its numerous domes and tall eight-sided minaret, but also for its decorations, the arabesques in its mihrab and wooden minbar.

Many people have touched Othman's life but only few had a lasting effect and who affected his life in some way or the other. Some of these important people are: Thuraya: Thuraya is a 19-years old beautiful girl. She is innocent, shy, and kind, with a lovely smile. She becomes friends with Othman after he starts working for her father. Othman falls in love with her and

dreams of a happy future with her. But before he could ask her hand in marriage, she gets married to another man which propels him to join the Italian Army. In the army, her memories give him the strength to overcome difficulties and hardships.

He refuses to give up on her and decides to persuade her to accept him. After raising his rank, he visits the Haj's house in order to see her, and finds out that she is worried sick of her husband's safety. Her face leaves no doubt of her love for her husband, Fathy which despairs him, but he decides to see if he can change her mind. His visits bring them closer to her again and one day, he takes her for a ride around the city of Tripoli. Unable to control anymore, he confesses about his feelings towards her but she refuses him and they return. She remains a good friend until the end, and forever an 'unattainable goal'. He finally convinces himself to carry her pure image in his heart, as she was the only love of his heart – his true love. And at the end, before departing, he requests an Italian photographer, his inmate in the prison, for a picture of her as his last request, and the photographer readily agrees to do it for free.

Houriya is a charming, attractive Libyan woman, of unrivalled beauty. She is also the most favourite mistress of Italo Balbo. Othman meets her while serving the higher ups in their club, and gets a chance to talk to her. She asks him to run an errand for her, and eventually hires him as her temporary driver, in place of Ayyad al-Fezzany, who leaves on a vacation. After this, Houriya requests Balbo to not send Othman away with the army units and his departure to fight Abyssinia gets delayed. As he drives

her, he gets to know her and starts falling in love with her. With each drive and visit to her house, they come closer to each other. Obviously attracted to her, he detests the fact that a beautiful Libyan woman like her, is an Italian leader's mistress. But as her connection with the Governor benefits him, he suppresses his urge to pursue her. Later, as his relation with Houriya strengthens, he is exempted from going to the war at all, and he starts living in the old city. He finds himself drawn towards her each passing day, and finally, both Houriya and Othman make love. But this experience for Othman means more than just a physical connection, as he feels spiritually connected to her. But her constant relationship with Balbo makes him anxious of her real feelings for him.

He feels unsure of what he feels for her and finds himself unable to accept another man's woman as his wife. This constant turmoil mixed with jealousy and anxiety makes him reject her proposal. He cares for her but cannot trust her enough to marry her. Then he ignores her even though she gets sick from the shock of rejection. His refusal also comes with a bad turn of events for him as he is no longer protected by Houriya. He falls from the good Grace's of Balbo due to whom he was exempted from going with the army. Balbo gets him arrested for the crimes he didn't commit. He is imprisoned until he is sent away to the war with Abyssinia. But before his departure, he finds out from Houriya's employees that her life had changed for the worse. She had gotten married to a man who beats and swears at her. He also finds out that the reason for her hasty marriage was because she was pregnant with Balbo's child, and had chosen

Othman as well for the same reason – to make the child legitimate by giving it a father's name lawful name. Othman pities her but knows that her current state might have been reason why Balbo had him imprisoned. Until the end, both Othman and Houriya never meet each other.

Nuriya is a prostitute who works in one of the brothel houses in Bahloul Alley, parallel to Sidi Umran Street. Othman firstly hires her for Mario upon his constant insistence. But unable to resist her charms, he hires her whenever his body desires physical pleasures. With frequent visits, he becomes friends with Nuriya who starts admiring him and longing for his next visit.

He sometimes brought her a box of sweets and also celebrates her daughter Warda's birthday. As days pass, her feelings for him grow into love and she becomes impatient to express her feelings for him. Due to his busy schedule, Othman visits her after a month, and finds out that out of worry from his absence, she had gone looking for him in the Italian military bases. He fumes at her for her sudden change in behavior, and makes his feelings clear to her in order to dispel her from any delusions she may be harboring about him. On hearing this, she bursts into tears and tells him of her love for him which increased more after his meeting with Warda. The cheerful child had also grown attached to him, like a daughter to her father. She tells him that she wants to leave this life of sin, and lead a life of purity with Warda and Othman, the only man she ever loved. But he refuses her generous offer, escapes from there and decides to end their sexual relationship. After his successful tour with the Marshal ends up reforming the city,

Nuriya visits him again in tears. She was very delighted to meet him nearly after two months and was proud and happy to know that he had raised his status in the society, and had not left for war.

She admits that she had been wrong to ask him to stay with her, without taking his feelings into consideration, and then assures him that she will never do that again. Also, she was content to live with wedding singers, finally leaving that cursed life for good, and would always be there for him whenever he needed her. All she wanted from him was to be treated considerately just like an old friend. Post-imprisonment, when Nuriya visits him, she bursts into tears and tells him that she's been going to Sidi al-Haddar's shrine daily and praying for his release. Othman remembers all that Nuriya had done for him. He now knew that she had a pure soul no one could overcome. Even if the body gets tainted due to certain circumstances, the soul maintains its sublime purity and unbreakable strength. During his departure, she brings her friends as well as Warda, her 7-year old daughter to bid him farewell. She remains his loyal

friend until the end. Othman's relationship with his parents: Othman is the sole offspring of divorced parents. His parents re-marry and have a new family of their own. Thus Othman has 2 different families from each parent's side. He always felt lonely and unwanted. Feeling like a stranger in both the families, he finds a secret hideout where he builds himself a hut, and lives secluded and away from everyone. He was used to being independent and of his parents not caring where he was, hence, even after he leaves the village, he doesn't bother to contact his parents or family. The day when he gets captured by the Italian Army, he somehow flees from their clutches, and finds no other place safer than his hometown. After returning to Awlad al-Sheikh, he gets reprimanded by his parents for leaving the village without any word or notice to either of them, and for not contacting them for so long. They were worried about his safety and whereabouts, which astonishes him. Later, he learns that the rumors about his indiscretion had finally cleared after Aziza's medical reports confirmed that her virginity was intact.

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