

## The Aesthetics of Place in Malek Bennabi's Novel *Pilgrimage of the Poor*

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### **Abstract:**

Place assumes a pivotal and essential role in the structure of Malek Bennabi's novel *Pilgrimage of the Poor* ; Its presence is not confined to that of a static geographical frame; rather, it becomes an active narrative element that exerts a tangible influence on the dynamics of events. The contrast between open spaces, with their symbolism of openness, and closed spaces, with their isolating particularity, generates a distinct narrative rhythm whose effects are reflected in the trajectories of the characters and in their psychological and social development. The function of place does not stop at containing narrative events; it also appears as a semantic vessel that carries the intellectual and spiritual structures forming the backbone of the novel. This makes place an expressive device that Bennabi employs skillfully to consolidate the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of his fictional text, transforming it from a mere physical setting into an imaginative space charged with meanings and symbols that reflect the intersections of the self with its surrounding world.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, place, Malek Bennabi, novel, *Pilgrimage of the Poor*.

### **Introduction**

Spatiality within the narrative structure of the novel constitutes an ontological pillar that goes beyond being merely a geographical frame for events. *Space* is one of the vital components that grant the text its structural coherence and symbolic meanings. In contemporary literary criticism, place is no longer regarded as a mere physical container for events; rather, it has become a narrative agent that interacts with time to form the *chronotope*, and contributes to directing the paths of characters and determining the dimensions of their psychological and social conflicts.

Within the context of Malek Bennabi's *Pilgrimage of the Poor*, place emerges as an advanced narrative strategy that transcends straightforward description. Bennabi employs place as a bearer of meaning and as an aesthetic instrument that endows the narrative with philosophical and existential depth. The duality of "open places" and "closed places" appears as an oppositional structure that reflects the dynamism of the narrative.

Open places in the novel often translate states of liberation, openness to human experience, and existential wandering, whereas closed places function as symbolic containers of enclosure, isolation, or even self-centeredness and identity. This gives scenes and events a semiotic dimension that deepens the recipient's aesthetic experience. Thus, the interaction between place and narrative does not merely draw geographical maps of the event; it becomes a critical tool that explains the transformations of characters in light of their historical and social context.

### **1. Definition of Aesthetics**

Saïd Alloush, in *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, maintains that aesthetics represents a tendency with ideal dimensions concerned with probing the formative and aesthetic backgrounds of creative

production. The essentialist dimension of this proposition lies in its transcendence of the ethical and functional dimension of the text in favor of invoking the notion of “art for art’s sake,” whereby creativity becomes an end in itself. This vision also affirms the relativity of aesthetics: there is no absolute and immutable aesthetics valid across all ages; rather, it is a civilizational and creative process shaped through the accumulations of successive generations, and its effectiveness is measured by the extent to which the text can touch the aesthetic consciousness of the contemporary recipient (Alloush, 1985, p. 62).

On a parallel level, aesthetics goes beyond being merely a “tendency” to become a comprehensive critical method (*the aesthetic method*), deriving its reference from *aesthetics* or *Aesthetica*. This term finds its roots in the Greek word *Aisthetikos*, which denotes sensory perception. This method is considered an essential evaluative tool used by the critic or rhetorician to issue qualitative judgments on phenomena, whether natural or linguistically and artistically constructed creations, on the basis of a careful examination of the aesthetic structure—form and content—within the literary work (Hasan Jum‘a, 2005, pp. 12–13).

In critical thought, aesthetics is not a one-dimensional phenomenon; rather, it is an interconnected system of manifestations, appearing in various forms, including:

1. **Aesthetics as a view of life:** that is, treating existence from an artistic perspective that transcends straightforward realism.
2. **Aesthetics as a creative tendency:** represented in the autonomy of art (*art for art’s sake*).
3. **Aesthetics as a structural characteristic:** namely, the aesthetic qualities inherent in artistic and literary works themselves (Abd al-Wahid Lu’lu’a, 1983, p. 260).

Thus, aesthetics transcends simplification and becomes a set of interrelated phenomena stemming from a philosophical conviction, namely that “the enjoyment of beauty” possesses a power capable of granting life a special value and existential meaning (Abd al-Wahid Lu’lu’a, 1983, p. 281).

## 2. The Concept of Place

### A. Linguistically

The word *makān* (place) is defined by Ibn Manzur in *Lisān al-‘Arab* as follows: *al-makān* means site or location; its plural is *amkina*, and *amākin* is the plural of the plural. Tha‘lab states that it cannot be on the morphological pattern *fa‘āl*, because Arabs say: *kun makānak* (stay in your place), *qum makānak* (stand in your place), and *uq‘ud maq‘adak* (sit in your seat), which indicates that it is derived from *kāna* or denotes its locus (Ibn Manzur, vol. 13, p. 414).

What is meant here is that *place* signifies location. In *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīt*, al-Fayrūzābādī defines it as: location, with the plurals *amkina* and *amākin*, and notes that speakers came to treat the letter *mīm* as a root letter, to the point that they said: *tamakkana min al-makān* (to become firmly situated in a place) (al-Fayrūzābādī, n.d.).

Thus, in language, *place* is used to denote location.

The *Philosophical Dictionary* indicates that place is location, its plural being *amkina*; it is the specific locus occupied by a body. We say: a spacious place, a narrow place. It is synonymous with extension, and among theologians it is the imagined void occupied by a body and traversed by its dimensions; it is synonymous with *space* or *expanse* (*ḥayyiz*) (Saliba, 1982, p. 412).

### B. Terminologically

Place is regarded as a fundamental structural component in narrative, since it is impossible to imagine a story without a spatial frame that contains its events. Events do not occur outside place; rather, they

acquire existence within a specific spatial domain and a given temporal frame (Bouazza, 2010, p. 99). From this perspective, the semiotic scholar Yuri Lotman defines it as “a set of homogeneous objects, phenomena, states, functions, or variable forms...” organized by relations analogous to familiar spatial relations such as contact and distance (Bouazza, 2010, p. 99).

If real space is determined through direct spatial concepts and relations such as above and below, inside and outside, connection and separation, then novelistic space—although sharing some spatial dimensions with it—possesses qualitative characteristics that make it more complex. First, it is a verbal space that exists only through language; that is, it is a linguistic space *par excellence* (*espace verbal*), different from the spaces presented by visual and auditory arts such as cinema and theater. This space is not perceived directly by the senses; rather, it is formed in the reader’s mind through the words with which the novelist constructs his imaginary world in all its details (Bouazza, 2010, p. 99). Second, it is an imagined space constituted within a narrative world that contains imagined events and characters, and it derives its meaning and symbolism from the network of relations characters project onto it. Hence, narrative space is not limited to its topographical or geographical structure; it transcends these to an imaginative narrative dimension that rises above its purely geometric features (Bouazza, 2010, p. 100).

On this basis, even when place in the novel refers to locations that exist in reality, its true value in narrative lies not only in its real-world referentiality but in its narrative and textual function—that is, in the role it performs within the narrative structure. In this sense, place is not merely a fixed external space; it is a semantic and aesthetic element that contributes to the production of meaning.

In this context, place is viewed as a system of abstract relations. It is not derived solely from tangible objects; rather, it is also founded on mental abstraction and conceptual effort. Accordingly, it is considered a medium of an external nature within which the loci of our perceptions are organized. It includes various finite extensions and is based on relations of presence, adjacency, contiguity, and comparison among things in existence (al-Sa’dun, 2012, pp. 18–19).

Hamid Lahmidani emphasizes that the development and transformation of events necessarily presuppose a multiplicity of places and their expansion or contraction according to the theme and structure of the novel. Therefore, one cannot speak of a single novelistic place as a fixed and final given, because the image of the same place varies according to the perspectives through which it is presented. A single house, for example, may appear in multiple narrative shots that differ according to the focus on its angles and details. Even novels whose events appear outwardly confined to one place can create diverse spatial dimensions within the consciousness of the characters themselves (Lahmidani, 1991, p. 63).

Gaston Bachelard linked the concept of place to the house, especially the childhood home, with all the affective and existential meanings it carries. He argues that the intimate place is that first house in which we were born, within which we practiced daydreaming, and in which our imagination was formed. Thus, spatiality in literature is represented in that artistic image which recalls in the النفس memories of the first house or awakens its emotional trace, to the point that the spatiality of literature is, to a great extent, centered on this intimate locus (Bachelard, 1984, p. 6).

From this, it becomes clear that place plays a highly important role in the creative process. A literary text must have a vessel that contains its events and forms the artistic incubator and general framework within which characters move and interact. Therefore, no text—whatever its literary genre—can dispense with the element of place (al-Sa’dun, 2012, p. 19). Indeed, place represents the ground upon which all the particulars of the novelistic work are built. It is the primary material basis on which the

text stands, through which events, characters, and time are accommodated, and it forms the scenic screen that reflects the movement and effectiveness of the text (al-Sa‘dun, 2012, p. 19).

Accordingly, abstracting an event from its spatial context means, in essence, abstracting it from an essential part of its significance. There are no events without places, and there is no meaning to a novelistic space through which no acts and movements pass. Hence arises the importance of place as an autonomous narrative element, no less important than the other artistic components of which the novelistic text is made.

The function of place does not stop at being an external frame for events; it is also an active factor in the formation of character. It influences the character just as the character is influenced by it; it is linked to the character’s movement and propels actions in certain directions. Place contributes to determining and distinguishing the general features of character: the desert character differs from the mountain character, and the urban character differs from the rural one, not only in terms of spatial belonging, but also in terms of the physical, psychological, and social qualities that result from that belonging (al-Sa‘dun, 2012, p. 20).

Based on the above, place does not merely represent a background against which events occur and characters develop. Rather, it is a system of close relations and a semantic medium that contributes to conveying a sense of the meaning of life. Its value emerges through its function as a center of the event, a title of the character, a revealer of the character’s traits and social belonging, in addition to its capacity to carry ideas and emotions. In this sense, place interpenetrates with the other elements of the literary work in a relationship of mutual influence and interaction, and through its textual language both an aesthetic and a semantic function are achieved (al-Sa‘dun, 2012, p. 21).

Thus, it may be said that place is of great importance in constructing the novel as an artistically coherent whole. It interacts with characters, contributes to their intellectual, psychological, and emotional formation, and affects their movement from one domain to another, which enables the novelist to transform it into an expressive device capable of representing multiple positions within the novelistic text.

In this framework, Michel Butor draws attention to the centrality of place in the novelistic experience when he observes that reading a novel represents a journey into a world different from the one in which the reader lives. From the moment the book is opened, the reader is transported into an imaginary world fashioned by the novelist’s words, and this world is situated in regions distinct from the reader’s immediate physical reality (Siza, 2004, p. 103). Accordingly, reading the novel—especially from the perspective of place—is a passage into an imagined world produced by narrative language.

From another angle, the novel shares with the plastic arts, such as painting and sculpture, the ability to shape and construct place artistically. The reader moves from his or her actual position into multiple worlds created by the novelist through language, so that the novel becomes a journey in both time and space (Siza, 2004, p. 103). For all these reasons, place remains one of the fundamental pillars of the novelistic work, and a decisive element in developing its structure and achieving the coherence and artistic balance of its components.

### 3. Types of Place

The classification of types of place is subject to a number of measures and criteria according to the efforts of scholars. In this regard, Hamid Lahmidani states that “places, in addition to differing in their character and in the nature of the things found within them, are also subject in their formations

to another criterion related to breadth and narrowness, or openness and closure” (Lahmidani, 1991, p. 72).

Based on this statement, the most important criterion according to which place is divided is that of broad openness versus narrow closure. Hence, place is of two kinds: open place and closed place.

The binary of open and closed is formed by the nature of place, which may be limited by barriers, borders, and restrictions that obstruct human freedom, movement, activity, and passage from one place to another. On the other hand, it also represents the nature of the relationship with others, and the degree to which this relationship is open or closed according to rules, controls, and conditions that may or may not be transgressed (al-Sa’dun, 2012, p. 64).

#### **A. Open Place**

Open places play a major role in the novel, as they suggest spaciousness, freedom, movement, expansion, and release.

Hasan Bahrawi calls them *places of transit* and sees them as the stage for the movement and mobility of characters. They represent the spaces in which characters find themselves whenever they leave their fixed places of residence, such as streets, neighborhoods, stations, and places where people meet outside their homes, such as shops and cafés, etc. (Bahrawi, 1990, p. 40).

Neighborhoods and streets are therefore considered transit spaces—open places that form the stage for the movement of characters as they come and go when they leave their residences or workplaces (Bahrawi, 1990, p. 27).

Open places include all individuals, which allows the character to perform his or her role fully, since they constitute a stage in which characters move and circulate freely.

#### **B. Closed Place**

To speak of closed place is to speak of a place whose space and components are delimited, such as the rooms of houses and palaces. It may be a chosen shelter and a social necessity, or, like prison enclosures, it may be a temporary compulsory place. Closed places may reveal intimacy and safety, or they may be a source of fear (Obeidi, 2011, p. 43).

Closed place is the place of dwelling and habitation that shelters the human being and in which he or she remains for long periods of time, whether by personal will or by the will of others. It is therefore framed by geometric and geographical limits. Through it appears the conflict between place as an artistic element and the human being who inhabits it, and this conflict ceases only when harmony between the human being and place emerges (Obeidi, 2011, p. 44).

Muhammad Bouazza has called closed place *places of residence*, which in turn are divided into places of voluntary residence and places of compulsory residence (home versus prison), elite residences (palaces and villas), and popular residences (huts and shantytowns) (Bouazza, 2010, p. 104).

Each of these closed places has its own significance in the novel, insofar as it embodies something within the writer’s self or within the social self.

From the foregoing, we find that place in the novel oscillates between narrowness and spaciousness, closure and openness.

### **4. Open and Closed Places in Malek Bennabi’s *Pilgrimage of the Poor***

Place acquires heightened importance in *Pilgrimage of the Poor*, where it is transformed from mere geographical sites through which pilgrims pass into a set of symbols carrying different meanings.

#### **A. Open Places**

Open places in Malek Bennabi's novel reveal a highly significant structural and semantic presence. They are not employed merely as backgrounds through which characters move; rather, they perform aesthetic, symbolic, and intellectual functions that contribute to shaping the overall meaning of the novelistic experience. These places are closely tied to the pilgrimage journey, insofar as it is both a bodily transition from one location to another and a spiritual and ethical transformation that reshapes the characters' awareness of themselves and of the world around them. Thus, open place in Malek Bennabi is not to be read from a purely geographical perspective, but through the religious values it contains, the human significations it produces, and the civilizational and social dimensions it reveals. Mecca and Medina stand at the forefront of these places as the spiritual center and final destination of the journey. In the novel, they do not merely represent two sacred spaces toward which pilgrims head to perform rituals; they embody the supreme realm in which the values of purity, repentance, detachment, and equality are concentrated. As Malek Bennabi portrays it, pilgrimage is not simply a spatial journey ending in arrival at the Sacred House; it is also an existential and spiritual trajectory through which the truth of the human being is disclosed in the face of weakness, sins, and hopes for salvation. From this perspective, Ibrahim's dream of the Kaaba acquires a special symbolic significance, because invoking this place in a dream points to the presence of the sacred in the depths of the character even before reaching it physically, as in the statement: "... Yes, I dreamed of the Kaaba ..." (Bennabi, 2009, p. 38). This indication shows that sacred space in the novel is built not only at the level of external reality but also within feeling and the unconscious, becoming a space for the desire for purification and spiritual rebirth.

Through his representation of Mecca and Medina, Malek Bennabi foregrounds a fundamental quality of sacred places: that they are open places in their human and spiritual dimension, accessible to all people regardless of class or social position. These sites are not governed by the logic of private ownership or class monopoly; rather, they are organized according to the principle of equality before the sacred. This idea has profound intellectual value in the text because it makes novelistic place the bearer of a civilizational message that views pilgrimage as a practical image of Muslim unity and the transcendence of artificial differences among them. In this sense, open place here becomes a vessel for a collective experience affirming that true belonging in sacred space is not to class, rank, or prestige, but to a shared faith identity.

Annaba—or Bône during the colonial period—performs a different yet complementary function. It represents a social and human point of departure where groups of pilgrims meet before crossing into the sacred realm. The novel describes the city as it receives arrivals by train and ship, who then spread through its neighborhoods to stock up on provisions or to pray, as in the phrase: "... On that day, Annaba was celebrating the pilgrims ..." (Bennabi, 2009, p. 30). This image reveals the vitality of open place as a space of movement, gathering, and passage. Yet Annaba's importance does not stop at its descriptive dimension; it extends to a historical and political one, for it is a city under the weight of colonialism. Hence, the pilgrims' departure from it is charged with an implicit significance: a transition from a space constrained by colonial domination to a spiritual space symbolizing freedom and liberation. It may thus be said that Annaba performs a dual function in the text: it is a real place of gathering and movement, and a symbolic place that reveals the tension between the reality of political alienation and the dream of spiritual emancipation.

Port Said bears a clear transitional significance, representing a geographical and psychological threshold through which the sacred journey opens onto a new horizon. The novel refers to this place in a phrase imbued with symbolic resonance: "... An old tale had changed the name Port Said into the

Happy Shore ...” (Bennabi, 2009, p. 145). This expression does not remain at the level of wordplay; it points to a process of renaming with semantic implications, whereby the place is transformed from a mere transit port into a symbolic herald of happiness, deliverance, and nearness to the desired goal. Here Malek Bennabi’s mastery in employing open places becomes evident: they are not fixed points on the map of the journey, but psychological stages through which the self moves gradually from waiting to hope, from anxiety to reassurance, and from everyday life to the horizon of sacred ritual. Rabigh occupies a distinctive place in the spatial construction of the novel, because it represents the space of actual ritual transformation. There the pilgrims disembark, purify themselves, and don the garments of *ihram*, announcing their entrance into the special ritual state of pilgrimage. Consequently, this place is not merely a geographical station; it becomes a ritual threshold separating two states: the state of the human being in ordinary life, and the state after entering the rites of pilgrimage. Thus, the mention of its name in the novel is charged with collective emotion: “... Rabigh ... Rabigh ... this name that ignited the spark of excitement on the vessel ...” (Bennabi, 2009, p. 146). This emotional tension reveals that place here is not neutral; rather, it possesses the power to mobilize the collective consciousness of the pilgrims, because it announces their nearness to the sacred domain and drives them toward psychological and spiritual preparedness. In this sense, Rabigh performs the function of a liminal space or ritual threshold in which the self is reconfigured in preparation for crossing into the station of sanctity.

As for Mount al-Tur, or Mount Sinai, its presence in the novel opens the spatial structure onto a broader symbolic and historical horizon. The distant reference to it as the mountain where Moses received the Tablets of the Law, as in the phrase “... It is Mount al-Tur, or Mount Sinai, where our master Moses received the Tablets of the Law ...” (Bennabi, 2009, p. 146), grants the place an intertextual function that exceeds the limits of the immediate pilgrimage journey. Here, place evokes not merely a geographical memory but the grand religious memory of prophethood, revelation, and legislation. Its importance stems from the fact that it links the pilgrims’ individual journey to the larger faith narrative within religious history, thereby situating the lived experience within a spiritual and civilizational continuum that transcends the present moment. This widening of the spatial horizon reveals the writer’s awareness that open space can carry collective memory and express the continuity of the sacred across time.

The train station appears as an open place par excellence in its transitional and kinetic function. It is a space for the intersection of human trajectories and for the intensification of movement, waiting, and departure, as in the statement: “... The movement near the train station was extraordinary ...” and “... when the travelers came out of the station ...” (Bennabi, 2009, p. 30). The significance of this space lies in the fact that it embodies the moment of transformation from stillness to movement and from stable location to journey, and thus represents one of the sites in which the dynamism of the group becomes visible. In its symbolic dimension, the station also reflects the reality of modern humanity, whose mobility has become governed by means of transport, organization, and collective rhythm. This lends the pilgrimage journey a modern civilizational character without depriving it of its spiritual dimension. Hence, the train station combines the everyday and the transitory on the one hand, with the symbolic and the preparatory on the other.

In contrast to places of passing or transition, the mosque occupies a special status as an open space regulated by the values of purity, reverence, and spiritual elevation. When Ibrahim spontaneously heads toward the mosque and climbs the entrance steps, the moral and religious authority of the place becomes manifest, as in the statement: “... He knows that force which prevents any Muslim from

crossing the threshold of the mosque or touching the Qur'an unless he is in a state of purity ...” (Bennabi, 2009, p. 53). Here, the mosque appears as an open place not in the sense of looseness or unboundedness, but in the sense of reception conditioned by moral and spiritual preparedness. It is a collective space in which selves are unified in worship; yet at the same time, it imposes upon whoever enters it an inner discipline that elevates conduct to the level of sanctity. Thus, the mosque differs from other open places in that it combines social openness with symbolic closure governed by conditions of purity and respect.

Accordingly, the open places in the novel are transformed into a living and active presence within the text, so that the reader no longer stands before silent geographical names, but before palpable spaces with which one interacts emotionally and intellectually. The value of this construction lies in the writer's ability to make place both perceptible and imaginable at once: perceptible through movement, gathering, and transition; and imaginable through the spiritual and symbolic charge it acquires. This is what gives the novelistic experience in Malek Bennabi its distinctive depth, because place is not presented as an external frame but as one of the elements that generate meaning.

From an analytical perspective, these open places perform four basic functions within the text:

1. **A narrative kinetic function:**

They help propel events forward by linking the stages of the journey to one another. The station, the port, the city, the road, and Rabigh are all spaces of transition that move the characters from one phase to another.

2. **A symbolic-spiritual function:**

This appears especially in Mecca, Medina, Rabigh, and the mosque, where place is associated with purification, repentance, and the passage from ordinary life to the horizon of sanctity.

3. **A collective-social function:**

Through these spaces, the image of the Muslim community is embodied in its shared movement and in the meeting of its members across differences of class and belonging, which makes open place a space of equality and human communication.

4. **An intellectual-civilizational function:**

Place reveals Malek Bennabi's vision of the Muslim human being in relation to history, religion, and the world. Places are not invested only in their descriptive dimension, but in their capacity to express the values of unity, liberation, awareness, and renewal.

If we discuss the data related to the study, we can observe that the presence of open place in this novel goes beyond the traditional perspective that confines it to being merely a stage for events. Here, place participates in the construction of character itself. Characters appear more exposed to their truth the more they move in open spaces. This is because open spaces, unlike closed spaces, place the human being in confrontation with the community, history, the sacred, and nature, thereby helping to lay bare inner dispositions and reveal positions. Thus, Ibrahim, for example, cannot be fully understood except through his relation to these places, because his passage among them reflects, at a deeper level, a shift in consciousness and in the degree of closeness to the spiritual meaning of pilgrimage.

These data also reveal that Malek Bennabi employs open place according to a logic of semantic gradation. There is no arbitrary accumulation of places; rather, there is an implicit arrangement that begins with places of worldly transit, such as the station, Annaba, and Port Said; then passes through places of transformation and preparation, such as Rabigh; and finally reaches the places of spiritual culmination, such as Mecca, Medina, and the mosque. This gradation grants the spatial structure an

internal coherence and makes the pilgrimage journey an ascending path moving from exterior to interior, from outward appearance to inward essence, and from sensory hardship to spiritual serenity. From another perspective, one may note that the novel gives open place a critical civilizational dimension, because the pilgrimage journey cannot be understood apart from the historical context in which the novel was written. The references to colonial Annaba, the crowds, means of transport, and ports reveal that the religious experience is not isolated from social and political conditions. Here the distinctiveness of Malek Bennabi becomes evident, for he does not separate the spiritual from the civilizational; rather, he links them organically. For him, pilgrimage is not merely an individual rite, but an occasion for the community to become conscious of itself, to perceive the unity of the ummah, and to reflect on the conditions of its renaissance and decline.

The study also shows that open places produce a mobile narrative rhythm in the text. The more these spaces multiply, the wider the vision becomes, the more varied the scenes, and the more renewed the emotions. Thus, the text knows stillness only as a passing moment within a broader movement. This is consistent with the nature of pilgrimage itself, as an act of worship founded upon movement, transition, and organized hardship. Consequently, the spatial structure in the novel is not merely a formal construction; it is a reflection of the nature of the experience it describes.

In light of all this, it may be said that open places in Malek Bennabi establish a novelistic vision that makes place a meeting point of three dimensions: the real, the symbolic, and the spiritual. It is real because it refers to known cities, stations, and ports; symbolic because it transcends its geographical reference to signify transformation, passage, and rebirth; and spiritual because it is linked to the experience of pilgrimage as a purificatory practice and a path of faith. These three levels interpenetrate and make place a central element for understanding the text and approaching its intellectual and aesthetic vision.

### **B. Closed Places**

Closed places in Malek Bennabi's novel appear as a narrative and semantic component no less important than open places; indeed, they may reveal more deeply the psychological structure of the characters, the nature of social relations, and the tension between lived reality and the aspiration to spiritual salvation. If open places in the novel are associated with movement, passage, collectivity, and openness to the sacred, closed places, by contrast, refer to isolation, narrowness, marginalization, and social suffocation. They also reveal the value-based hierarchies occupied by characters within society. Therefore, the study of these places should not stop at their descriptive or architectural level, but should proceed to analyze their narrative, psychological, symbolic, and social functions.

#### **The House and Its Social and Psychological Significance**

The house occupies a highly important position in the novel, not as a mere material shelter, but as a social space within which the individual's relation to family, belonging, and acceptance or exclusion is determined. The house opposite the coal shop, inhabited by Uncle Muhammad, is the very house in which Ibrahim had once married; yet he was later expelled from it after becoming unwelcome because of his deviant behavior, as indicated in the novel's statement: "... And in the house where Uncle Muhammad is now residing ..." (Bennabi, 2009, p. 46).

In its deeper dimension, this indication reveals that the house is not merely a place of residence, but also an index of the character's standing within the community. Expulsion from the house does not mean only the loss of shelter; it also signifies the loss of social legitimacy and separation from the sphere of intimacy and acceptance. In this sense, the house becomes a signifying space of familial

and moral belonging: whoever resides in it enjoys a certain status, while whoever is expelled from it is symbolically declared to have undergone moral downfall and a disruption in his relation to society. From a psychological angle, the house here appears more as a lost space than as a lived one. For Ibrahim, it represents the memory of a stability that has vanished and the bond that has been severed between him and a more orderly and balanced mode of life. Therefore, the value of this place is derived not only from its material presence in the novel, but also from its presence as a place retrieved through memory and as a sign of personal fracture. In narrative consciousness, the house becomes a symbol of what the character should have been had he not gone astray; thus it turns into a space through which the text measures the magnitude of the deterioration that has afflicted Ibrahim.

It may also be said that the house performs a critical social function, since it reveals that society does not deal with the individual as an abstract self, but through the person's behavior and the extent of adherence to prevailing moral standards. Ibrahim's departure from the house is not an isolated individual event; rather, it is an expression of the mechanism of social regulation exercised by the community over its members. Thus, the house transcends its material meaning and becomes a symbolic structure of acceptance and exclusion within the social order.

### **The Shop as a Space of Marginalization and Degradation**

If the house symbolizes lost belonging, the shop in the novel represents an alternative to that belonging—but a poor and distorted alternative. The shop is a coal shop owned by Ibrahim, and he also uses it as a place of residence. The novel describes this space in a dense manner that conveys its gloom, neglect, and suffocation: "... Cobwebs hung down from the wooden ceiling, whose coat of lime plaster could no longer be discerned because of the accumulated coal dust that had dyed the place there inside ..." (Bennabi, 2009, pp. 34–35).

This description reveals that the shop is not presented merely as a commercial premises, but as a concentrated spatial image of Ibrahim's psychological and social condition. The accumulated coal dust, the cobwebs, the darkness, and the neglect all transmit to the reader a feeling of decay, extinguishment, and suffocation. Here, place is not separate from character; it is almost a material extension of the character's inner state. It is as though the novelist wishes to say that the corruption of behavior and the collapse of moral balance are reflected not only in a person's actions, but also in the space the person inhabits and by which he is surrounded.

From a symbolic point of view, coal is a substance with a particular significance: it suggests blackness, burning, and residue. Therefore, Ibrahim's use of the coal shop as a place of residence intensifies the symbolic load of the place, because the character becomes continually surrounded by signs of blackness, pollution, and inner burning. The place not only describes the life Ibrahim lives; it also interprets it and frames it semantically.

In its social dimension, the shop reveals one form of urban marginalization, in that the workplace turns into a dwelling place, indicating poverty, the collapse of the minimum humane conditions of life, and the overlap of basic needs within a single narrow space. This overlap between the economic and residential functions of place expresses the fragility of the character's social condition, while at the same time exposing an aspect of the dysfunction of the social structure that allows the human being to be reduced to a mere creature living on the margins of decent life.

### **The Room as a Space of Isolation and Brokenness**

The significance of closure deepens further in the room that forms part of the coal shop, for it represents the most intensely private level of closed space. This room is nothing more than a cramped spot containing a miserable bed, a few personal belongings, and a box surmounted by a weak candle

that barely illuminates the place, as the novel indicates in the statement: "... This shop, which also serves as his bedroom ..." (Bennabi, 2009, p. 35).

In this sense, the room is not merely a place for sleeping, but a space of extreme isolation in which the character is revealed in his weakness and brokenness. If the shop expresses external marginalization, the room represents internal and private marginalization, because it reduces Ibrahim's life to the bare minimum of material existence. The wretched bed, the dim candle, and the narrowness of the space all establish an atmosphere of misery and desolation, giving the place a high emotional density.

From a psychological perspective, the room may be interpreted as a reflection of the inner void from which the character suffers. The dim light fails to illuminate the space adequately, just as Ibrahim's own life appears deprived of clarity and direction. In this context, the flickering candle acquires symbolic significance, suggesting the lingering traces of light in a life on the verge of being consumed by darkness. This constitutes one of the most striking features of Malek Bennabi's artistic technique, whereby simple details are transformed into semantically charged signs that contribute to the production of meaning.

From a structural point of view, the room constitutes an appropriate setting for intensifying the sense of loneliness and estrangement from the world. It is not a space of social interaction; rather, it deepens the feeling of isolation. Accordingly, the character's presence within this enclosed environment reflects a stage of existential and moral confinement that either precedes or accompanies the search for redemption. Thus, the room performs not merely a descriptive function, but also anticipates the trajectory of transformation that the character will later undergo in the course of the journey.

The Governorate Office: The Significance of Institution and Procedure

The governorate office belongs to the category of enclosed spaces marked by an administrative character. Ibrahim goes there in order to complete the official procedures related to the pilgrimage, as indicated in the phrase: "... Ibrahim headed to the governorate office ..." (Bennabi, 2009, p. 63). Although this place may initially appear to be no more than a transient functional setting, its presence in the novel carries important significance, as it reveals the intersection between the sacred and the institutional, and between the spiritual and the administrative.

Although pilgrimage is, in essence, a spiritual act of worship, the novel presents it as passing through procedural and organizational channels imposed by modern social life. In this sense, the governorate office represents a space that demonstrates how the path to the sacred is inseparable from the administrative structures that regulate individual life. This grants the novel a realist dimension, since it does not portray pilgrimage as a purely spiritual experience detached from historical and social conditions, but rather as an experience mediated by institutions, documents, procedures, and waiting. On a symbolic level, the governorate office may also be viewed as a transitional space through which the individual moves from marginalization to official recognition. Ibrahim, who lives in conditions of exclusion in the coal shop and his narrow room, finds himself compelled to enter a regulated institutional environment that governs his movement and grants him, through formal procedures, the possibility of embarking upon the sacred journey. In this way, the governorate office reflects a tension between the disorder of individual life and the discipline of public order.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the governorate office among the enclosed spaces suggests that modern society does not permit major human experiences to unfold in a wholly spontaneous manner; rather, it surrounds them with systems of regulation and supervision. Consequently, this space is not without

a critical dimension, as it exposes the bureaucratic aspect that accompanies even the most spiritually pure experiences.

#### The Kitchen

In the novel, the kitchen represents a distinctive type of enclosed space insofar as it is associated with service, preparation, and the fulfillment of everyday needs. The child Hadi works there by order of the governor in the context of preparations for boarding the ship. It also appears when the muezzin asks Ibrahim to go there and fetch water for ablution: "... *Go to the kitchen, for there are people there serving the pilgrims, and they will give you water*" (Bennabi, 2009, p. 84) as well as in the narrative statement: "... *The imam headed toward the kitchen, accompanied by one of the men ...*" (Bennabi, 2009, p. 86).

The importance of this place lies in the fact that it reveals the hidden structure of the journey. Behind the visible spiritual scene lies a network of services and small tasks that ensure the continuity of the pilgrims' collective movement. In this sense, the kitchen is not a secondary or marginal space; rather, it is a site in which the necessary daily functions are carried out, functions that make the larger experience possible. It connects the sacred with the everyday, the spiritual ritual with material need, and transcendence with lived reality.

**From a social perspective, the kitchen emerges as a space of work, service, and cooperation**, where groups that may not stand at the forefront of events nevertheless perform an essential role in sustaining them. Hence, this place reveals the practical and collective dimension of the pilgrimage, showing that the religious experience is not merely a moment of individual contemplation, but also a system of mutual support and distribution of roles.

**Symbolically, the kitchen's association with water—particularly water for ablution—grants it a significance that exceeds its being merely a space for food preparation or service.** Water here is an element of purification; consequently, the kitchen becomes, indirectly, a place that provides the characters with what assists them in purifying themselves and entering the appropriate spiritual state. In this way, the significance of the place shifts from a simple functional level to a symbolic level connected with the preparation of both body and soul.

#### The Significance of Closed Spaces in the Structure of Society within the Novel

These examples make clear that **Malek Bennabi did not employ closed spaces incidentally**; rather, he made them artistic instruments for interrogating society and revealing its strata, values, and contradictions. The house, the shop, the room, the governorate office, and the kitchen are not merely separate spaces; rather, they form a spatial network reflecting multiple forms of social existence:

- **The house** represents the space of familial legitimacy, belonging, or exclusion.
- **The shop** embodies marginalization, social decline, and life on the periphery.
- **The room** reveals psychological isolation and inner brokenness.
- **The governorate office** expresses regulatory authority and the institutional framework of public life.
- **The kitchen** embodies service work and the practical structure that supports collective experience.

Accordingly, the closed space in Malek Bennabi's work is clearly linked to **social hierarchy** and to patterns of authority and values within society. It exposes the differences between margin and center, poverty and organization, isolation and community. It also reveals that the life of the individual is not separate from the spaces in which he moves; rather, it is largely shaped by the nature of those spaces and the meanings they generate.

## The Artistic and Aesthetic Functions of Closed Spaces

The importance of these spaces is not limited to their social and psychological dimensions; it also extends to their artistic and aesthetic dimensions. Their most important functions may be summarized as follows:

### 1. The Narrative Function

Closed spaces contribute to organizing the course of events, as the character moves among them according to a logic that reflects his psychological and social trajectory. Each closed space represents a particular stage or condition in the character's experience.

### 2. The Psychological Function

These spaces work to embody the inner world of the characters, especially Ibrahim, so that the psychological state becomes representable through space. Darkness, narrowness, poverty, and neglect are not merely external descriptions, but signs of disturbance and fracture.

### 3. The Symbolic Function

Each closed space carries a symbolic charge that transcends its immediate realism. The house symbolizes belonging, the shop decline, the room isolation, the governorate office authority and organization, and the kitchen service and preparation.

### 4. The Realist Function

These spaces help to consolidate the realism of the text because they provide tangible details about social life, living conditions, and the administrative and service structures that frame the experience of pilgrimage.

### 5. The Aesthetic Function

Through precise description and sensory detail, the novelist grants space an artistic presence that enables the reader not merely to see it, but to feel it. This lends the text a strong imagistic density and deepens its aesthetic effect.

## The Relationship Between Closed and Open Spaces

Within the framework of this study, it is important that **closed spaces not be understood in isolation from open spaces**, because the novel is, to a large extent, founded upon a dialectic of closure and openness. Closed spaces generally represent isolation, suffocation, marginalization, and social constraints, whereas open spaces represent journey, community, liberation, and purification. This contrast is not merely formal; it is essential to the construction of meaning.

Ibrahim begins in narrow and oppressive spaces, such as the shop and the room, and then becomes involved in a path that gradually opens onto broader spaces, culminating in the sacred places. This spatial transition reflects, at a deeper level, a transformation in consciousness and in the character's existential possibilities. Thus, space becomes an instrument for representing movement from confinement to release, from contamination to purification, and from marginalization to integration into the community of believers.

The analysis of closed spaces in the novel leads to a number of important conclusions that enrich and support the study:

- **Space is not a secondary element; rather, it is an active structural component that contributes to the production of meaning and directs the reading of characters and events.**
- **Closed spaces reveal the social dimension of the novel**, as they reflect the nature of society, the mechanisms of acceptance and exclusion, and the differences between classes and positions.

- **Space is a tool for embodying the character's inner world;** Ibrahim is read through the spaces in which he resides just as much as through his actions and speech.
- **The novel combines the realistic and the symbolic;** places are real and tangible on the one hand, yet laden with intellectual, psychological, and spiritual significations on the other.
- **The spatial structure of the novel is founded on the opposition between open and closed, purity and contamination, community and isolation,** an opposition that grants the work its internal coherence. All of this indicates that Malek Bennabi was fully aware of the function of space in narrative: he did not make it merely a background for events, but transformed it into a parallel language that reveals what the characters may not state directly.

## Conclusion

The aesthetics of space in Malek Bennabi's *Pilgrimage of the Poor* emerge on multiple levels, distributed between open and closed spaces within an integrated artistic structure that makes space an active element in shaping the novelistic experience. These spaces do not perform a merely decorative or descriptive role; rather, they contribute to the construction of the event, the formation of character, and the articulation of the text's intellectual and social vision.

The study reveals that closed spaces—such as the house, the shop, the room, the governorate office, and the kitchen—play an essential role in highlighting the psychological and social conditions of the characters. They also expose the deep structure of society, including its inequalities, mechanisms of regulation, and forms of service and organization. By contrast, open spaces represent a horizon of movement, transformation, liberation, and purification. Through the interaction between these two modes, a distinct aesthetics emerges, making space in the novel a living entity vibrant with meaning. Accordingly, it may be said that **the aesthetics of space in the novel are not merely a matter of visual representation or external description of things;** rather, they constitute a dynamic structure that interacts with the characters, affects them, and is affected by them. In Malek Bennabi's work, space is the vessel of the event, the mirror of the self, a sign of social position, a medium for spiritual experience, and an artistic instrument for the production of meaning. Therefore, understanding the novel cannot be complete without understanding its spatial architecture, because space in it is not a subordinate margin, but one of the central axes of its narrative and aesthetic construction.

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