

Space and Its Significations in Modern Arabic Poetry: The Desert as a Model

Khatoui Aifa ¹, Hamidou Saliha ², Bendaoud Mebrouk ³

¹⁻²⁻³ Faculty of Arts and Languages, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Amar Telidji University, Laghouat, Algeria

Email: el.khatoui@lagh-univ.dz , s.hamidou0303@gmail.com , mebroukzeid@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The desert has constituted a central axis of reflection and creativity for the modern Arab poet. For him, the desert is the space of the absolute and the infinite; it silences the clamor of the world, rendering isolation within it akin to that of a vessel adrift in the open sea. It is also associated with experiences of absence, separation, distance, passage, exile, wandering, loss, and silence. Yet, there is always a longing to return to the desert, for it is a space of freedom, a retreat from the triviality of the everyday, and an embrace of what is grand of luminous intensity, solitude, and openness to the total and the infinite. Thus, the modern Arab poet has embraced the desert, which in turn has embraced his words. In the desert, words are created, tracing invisible labyrinths and cities amid the sand.

Research Problem:

Is the desert that vast expanse and virgin land where time embraces space?

Is the desert always associated with solitude, isolation, and loss? Or is it a beautiful myth within the collective imagination?

Keywords: Desert, Space, Signification, Modern Arabic Poetry.

Introduction:

Embrace me, and let my feet roll upon the carpet of your sand. Let the heat of your sun scorch my face, and the chill of your winter gnaw at my bones... Let me ride the ship of the desert and sing of the beauty of a graceful Bedouin maiden... Let me... embrace me and bind me with a compelling force... For I have grown weary of life in the city... weary of my estrangement within it... I have come to loathe the life of numbers and papers and the tension of nerves... How beautiful is your serenity, how sweet is life within your embrace, how vast your horizon... How pure my soul feels within you, how tranquil and at peace... Embrace me, that I may drink from the spring of your clarity, guard the stars of the night, and converse with the full moon... Embrace me, O beautiful, tranquil desert.

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The desert has bestowed upon humankind an undeniable influence in shaping life, thought, and behavior. It is both a place and a condition; yet, despite this, it has left an indelible mark upon human memory one that time cannot erase in the formation of life and the construction of glory and civilization. The human being, a child of the desert, was nurtured in its womb and set forth from it to build the edifice of civilization, contributing essential foundations to its grandeur, generosity, and direction. The harshness of the desert endowed him with strength, instilled in him an unyielding resolve, granted him keen intellect and vibrant intelligence, and clothed him, through its vastness and expansiveness, with the qualities of tolerance, generosity, and noble character. Thus emerged the human being whose brilliance, uniqueness, distinction, and contentment are attributed to the desert.²

**The poet said:
When the god of poetry descends, calling aloud:
"Come, to the enchanted mountain that sings,"
I found in the desert the echo of my feelings,
In its mystery and in that mystery, what appears.
The sand stretches out until it meets
The horizon between glow and decline.
The sun weeps in anguish, as though
Grieving the departure from this valley.
It stirs, and the breezes are sweet,
Offering peace to the passerby and the returner.** ³

The desert thus mobilizes paradoxical significations that enrich its expressiveness and intensify its meanings. When it is employed as a signifier of life, it is equally employed as a signifier of death. This duality reflects its paradoxical condensation of meaning and non-meaning. To the extent that it appears as an infinite, uncontrollable space, it may also signify confinement and closure.⁴

The desert is enchanting and captivating. Once you come to know it, your soul clings to it for eternity. Yet it is not easy to grasp the secret of its charm or the source of its allure. All one knows is that it calls to you, and its call penetrates the depths of your heart, summoning you until you find yourself compelled to journey toward it in humble submission. Within that tranquil infinity, the body and mind are purified, the soul refined, and the human being feels closer to God Almighty.⁵

The text of the desert has occupied a wide space within the Arabic poem, forming part of a poetic trend that views the desert as a stimulating poetic subject a pristine imaginative space. It also draws upon the expansive geography of the desert as an equivalent to a poetic structure open to multiple interpretations.

The poet Suleiman Al-Issa says in his poem "A Tent in the Desert":

Let your neigh resound this sand and these ruins,
These are your roots, blazing within your eyes.
O abode of 'Abla, I am a tear that has overflowed,
And I journey through the sigh of the desert.
My childhood in my hands, scattering its innocence
Upon the road my life verdant and flourishing.
The blue tent awakens my vision,
For the melody between me and time is unbroken.
Leave Hurayrah no, I shall not bid her farewell,
Yesterday's embrace still resounds in kisses.
The walls of the past collapsed in murmurs
Upon the lips, and the drunken smile went mad.
Let me remain upon the balconies of sand
My blood, yes, what remains of it, is washed by the sand.⁶

The desert is not a deviation between the sign and its signified or its signifier; rather, it is a named place, a point located upon the map, bearing the name "desert" and encompassing numerous concepts philosophical, literary, and sociological. The desert is emptiness; yet it is an emptiness filled with light, where each of us projects his fantasies from afar. There is always a prior projection. As is well known, in any other place we find more than what we bring with us, whereas in the desert we

encounter only what we carry into it. For our joys and sorrows accompany us wherever we go. As much as the desert is vast enough to contain the imaginations of all people, it is equally narrow, for it rejects everything that is artificial: no place for ornamentation, no place for affectation. The wind, sand, pebbles, sun, thirst, and mirage leave no room for improvisation.⁷

Magic lies in choosing something while being compelled to choose it; it is a blend of the judgment of will and the decree of fate. It is not magic to choose something while being able to abandon it, nor is it magic to be forced into something one does not desire. Rather, magic is to believe that we are honored by that thing, to grow weary of it, to long for release from it, and then, when release is near, to realize that we loathe freedom from it just as we loathe remaining within it.

Such, too, is the magic of the desert... You ask: why do its people dwell within it? Why do they grow accustomed to it while it is barren and desolate scorching them in the heat of summer, freezing them in the cold of winter, leaving them thirsty and hungry when rain fails to come, as it often does, unpredictably and without appointment?

Tell them that they do not understand the desert, even as they live from it, amidst memories of camels and valleys, and the legends of mares and steeds. Tell them, in brief, that they do not understand:

The mirage of the desert this masterful sorceress,
The wine of the desert this radiant, overwhelming force,
The trance of the desert this lofty, lulling slumber,

The antiquity of the desert ancient in moments, ancient across ages and horizons, ancient in veins and in blood.⁸

The desert has left a profound mark on the themes and purposes of poetry that Arabic literature has conveyed to us. Among the most prominent of these is the description of the desert's nature its paths, trails, atmosphere, winds, rains, animals, birds, vegetation, and all that pertains to its environment, as well as the patterns of life and living within it. This was followed by the desert's influence on the content of poetry in terms of meanings and ideas, and on its artistic imagery images abundantly drawn by the Arab poet from the desert environment and its landscapes. These are especially evident in the poetry of the pre-Islamic and Umayyad periods, and in the works of many poets across the ages who were influenced by those traditions. Through such imagery, the researcher can infer the essential characteristics of the desert.

The desert is a magic that resembles its inhabitants. It belongs to no one, for nomads do not belong to the land but to their likeness. They are drawn to all that moves; nothing binds them to the earth neither tree, nor house, nor cultivation. All their homes are carried upon the backs of their beasts. They leave no traces upon the sand, for they know that everything is transient, like a cinematic image from which we retain only a memory often more beautiful than reality itself. This vision emerges from a place beyond reality; thus, the desert is life.⁹

Thus did the poet seek to surprise his reader from the very opening of the poem:

You are the legend of the desert

And what would make you know what the legend of the desert is?

They say it is sand without water...

And I say:

It is the beloved of the sky.

God loved it,

**And made it the mother of His miracles.
From His heights He gazed upon it,
And showered it with revelation and prophets.¹⁰
The sun and the galaxies were set free when it became Eastern,
From it poetry rises,
Purity adorns it,
Imagination portrays it
A queen of beauty,
It is grace, it is grace.**

The Arab poet continued to sing of the beauty of the desert and his love for it. He discovered the depth of its richness when the artery of knowledge began to flow through its cracks, penetrating its depths until it overflowed into meadows blossoming with the sweetest poetry poetry that carries the fragrance of the desert and the scent of life that one inhales when the lips of the earth receive water after drought.

Yet, despite all this, the matter of this beloved remains strange. In her eyes are flashes and dawns that no word can fully encompass, for the poet himself is consumed within his veins. She is poetry itself; she is the cloak of beauty and the keffiyeh of love. When he speaks to her of passion, she recoils from such a narrow title, for love admits no conditions. His love for her transcends myths and expressions, for she is the line, the phrase, and the flower; she is the alternation of night and day, of light and fire. The expanses of the desert draw him out of his silence and usher him into realms of enchantment where everything is transformed.¹¹

"Indeed, the desert is writing, and between every grain of sand there exists an unexpected relationship."¹²

The Algerian poet Al-Khathir Ben Al-Sayeh, in his poem entitled "Our Desert", says:

**O Knower of the unseen, unheard by anyone,
O You whose gates none can guard,
O You who revive flesh once devoured by worms,
And breathe life into it after it had been dust,
This poet stands here, keeping vigil and longing,
Hoping in You today, seeking Your answer,
I own neither ewe nor goat that gives birth,
Nor valleys to till, nor ravines to cultivate,
I ask of You that this desert be blessed,
That people may rejoice in it, near and far,
Grant it mercy so it may return fertile as before,
And let the clouds of mercy pour upon it,
That what was once dry and cracked may turn green,
Parched by estrangement, now renewed,
That what withered and scattered its leaves
May soften again and bear ripe fruits,
That al-‘ajram, al-shīḥ, and al-rimth may bloom,
And al-mathnān with al-‘adham cover the plains,
And al-fijil, kaddād, and al-ṣirr with their shoots,
While in spring the earth stirs like a mist,**

**Darīn, ‘arfaj, and al-ja‘īdah when they abound,
Become remedies for the afflicted soul.¹³**

The Arab has been shaped by the desert, transformed through it. From it, he drew the experiences of his life and the patterns of his living, forming through it his culture and his vision of existence. He came to know its breezes and winds, endured its cold and the fluctuations of its climate, and shared with its animals and birds the struggle for survival. Among them were the domesticated and the tame, as well as the wild and the fierce. Thus, he dealt with it in harmony with the nature of his life and his mode of being, seeking from it what sustains him and suffices his livelihood.

**The light between its sands and hills
Is melting snow and flowing silver,
Upon the banks of its majesty and beauty
Desire dances and expression blossoms.
What shall I say? What lover’s heart
Finds not in it a dawn of life?
The horizon beyond its sands gazes at us,
A radiant, luminous expanse.
How many lovers has passion slain,
While love within it laughs and rejoices!
In solitude, I find a moment of grace
Silence and joy entice my heart.
Intoxicated here I bury my weariness
Where else but in this sand is wine poured?
Ecstatic, I plant my fingers in the sand
They are the wine, and they are the cups.
Leave me, as I lie down, to forget my world
Here, wounds are healed by sand.
In my solitude, all worlds vanish
Where are those who once cried out in mine?
The dunes adorn themselves in waves,
Winds embellish them for life.
To the desert I complain of my misery,
Of those whose voices filled my ears with lament.
This is an age of meanness known to youth,
Where spears of doubt pierce the lover’s chest.¹⁴**

Arabic poetry abounds with artistic images inspired by the desert images drawn by poets from its environment and the nature of life within it. How could a poet who has lived his entire life in the desert borrow imagery from outside the environment he has known and inhabited? It is a milieu whose paths, plains, rugged terrains, mountains, valleys, and oases he has experienced intimately. Thus, what we describe as "desert poetry" naturally derives its similes and metaphors from the desert itself.¹⁵

This is evident in the poem of the Algerian poet from Laghouat, Abdullah Ben Kriou, in his poem "Moon of the Night":

**The moon of the night my thoughts find solace in it,
In it I see qualities that please my soul.
O seeker, I have a beloved like it,**

**In longing for it, my sleepless nights grow sweet.
I remain awake, dividing the nights, gazing at it,
Yet the coming caution separates me from it.
I fear lest some clouds conceal it,
And if its light fades, my state is disturbed.**

When we reflect upon the poetics of desert space, what emerges on the horizon of analysis is the distinction between its poetics as a signifier that is, as an aesthetic perspective and its poetics as a signified, that is, as a theme. In this way, space becomes a poetic image in a manner akin to other poetic images formed through language, sound, rhythm, and color. This is precisely what modern poetics seeks when it transcends traditional poetics. Within this framework, the poetics of the image is characterized by the need to delineate its boundaries and features.¹⁶

The poet Al-Khathir Ben Al-Sayeh also says in his poem "Lāli Qāriḥ":

**My steed is noble, never sold before,
Raised in the wild with its mother,
With it I cross this vast open land,
And this weary one counts its few traits,
Clearly born of noble camels and a generous dam,
It traverses the earth as though none surpass it,
Sa'doun is refined, and my small field is planted
O my camel, your groans echo,
O my camel, behold these flowing tears,
From my eyes, a river overflowing,
They have settled in my heart, dwelling within my ribs,
My pulse forever seeking them,
O questioner, this kind is not easy,
Their separation burns one from within,
One of them spoke of the desert and hunger,
Departing without farewell, leaving sorrow behind,
Another mounted, restless like my steed,
A wanderer of paths that is his nature.**

The desert, in its present form, constitutes the largest expanse of desert lands and the most intense in heat and aridity in the world. It is vast as it is harsh; in the extension of its sands, stones, and pebbles, it preserves within its memory a time when it was moderate in climate and abundant in flora and fauna.

It occupies a quarter of the African continent and is composed of diverse and breathtaking landscapes: oceans of shifting dunes, endless stretches of dense and compact minerals, dry lakes, stone quarries, tranquil oases, and inward-looking cities. The desert is also rich in diverse ethnic groups, each with its unique and fascinating way of life, and a heritage abundant in music, dance, sounds, and traditional craftsmanship.¹⁷

The discourse on the desert has no end much like its expanse, its vastness, its harshness, and its boundlessness. It is, in essence, the discourse of life itself, with all that it contains of expansion, rigor, and infinity.¹⁸

The poet Sheikh Al-Sammāti says in his poem "Jabal Kardāda":
Transform, O rock of Kardāda, and depart

The mountains of hardship have weighed heavily upon me.

Without my gazelles, I found no path to set forth,

Your clouds have fallen, and the leaves have bewildered my lions.

The influence of the desert on Arabic poetry has not been confined merely to providing names and attributes associated with it, nor to the imagery directly drawn from it. Rather, its impact extends far beyond to the themes, meanings, images, imagination, and even the rhythm of poetry. One may go so far as to say that Arabic poetry itself is a child of the desert: it was born upon its soil, grew within it, and gradually attained its full form as seen in pre-Islamic poetry and its collected anthologies. It is no exaggeration to claim that in every pre-Islamic poem there appears a clear imprint of the desert. Indeed, this influence persists across all poetic eras that followed the pre-Islamic model in diction, meaning, and imagery.

However, the researcher does not encounter independent poetic themes devoted exclusively to the desert; rather, its presence and inspiration are diffused throughout various poetic subjects. To fully and accurately comprehend the desert's influence on the "Diwan of the Arabs," one must undertake a comprehensive survey of Arabic poetry in all its forms and collections, extracting from them what pertains to the desert.¹⁹

**The land of the palm God willing never lies barren,
Its owner shall never know hunger in this world.
Its dates are sweet like the honey of bees,
Pure and wholesome without need for refinement.
Its planting with the pits, rooted with the date clusters,
Makes its owner among the wealthy elite.
Even a glance at it delights the eye,
Uprooting worries from the heart and bringing peace.
Look at the hanging cluster its yield amazes,
Half of it ripe, the other yet to mature.
When distress tightens, visit it and take a moment
In its basin, shade offers repose.**

Many poets have approached the desert, interacting with it and listening to its secrets. They have left us works filled with intense emotions and overflowing feelings, returning from their desert journeys transformed by what they saw and lived. They began to reveal the power of what the common people once considered merely a place of emptiness and death.²⁰

The poetess Wahida bint al-Rif says in describing the beauty of the tent and the son of the tent:

**The son of the tent he is no hidden man,
Ask anyone, and they will recount his traits.
Generosity and bounty are the customs of the Bedouins,
Known since ancient times ,their virtues widely spread.
His land is fertile, a pasture for gazelles,
East and west adorned by the braids of its maidens.
His house is woven of silk and linen,
Its threads reveal the fineness of its making.
Its ropes are firm, set with precision,
Its pegs anchored deeply into the earth.
Its furnishings are soft, its colors vibrant,**

**The carpets offer comfort in every gathering.
Established upon truth, its pillars strong,
Its structure stands clear in its noble form.**

Conclusion:

Place this force that the desert translates within it emanates from within the human being without his awareness, drawing him toward a love of monotony and silence. The desert imposes its colors, its sands, and its chains of mountains upon the poet; and whenever he yearns to move away from it, he finds an unknown force pulling him back.

Place cannot be separated from literature, for the writing self cannot detach itself from its surroundings, nor can it situate itself except through the space it knows and within which it manifests. Among such spaces is the desert that vast expanse of emptiness and openness which has itself become a form of literature, lending its name to it by virtue of its specificity. Yet, the artistic formations of the desert within the literary text reveal it as a broad stage upon which events unfold mere adventures within a vast aesthetic space inhabited by both material and symbolic representations.

The desert is an expansive place where sharp vision fades, while the horizon stretches wide and open before it. It is a realm of intellectual emergence, creativity, and renewal. It embodies contradictory values: on the one hand, it symbolizes poverty, drought, fear, wandering, mirage, deception, illusion, and backwardness; on the other, it stands as a symbol of vastness, openness, contemplation, enchantment, and beauty.

The desert has its hardships, yet it also offers refuge. It captivates its lovers and draws them irresistibly toward it. Whoever has traversed its expanses becomes enthralled by its grandeur manifest in its boundless space, its profound stillness, and its perilous nomadic life.

The significance of the desert varies according to our proximity or distance from it. Its negative connotations are often constructed from a rejecting standpoint, where it is viewed as a domain of drought, thirst, meaninglessness, and the annihilation of life.

Unity with place opens broader horizons for life and its meanings. The desert neither advances nor ages; it remains constant in time, untouched by decline. It is a place where we forget our ages, for it too is ageless like an original and final birth, the earthly point of origin from which we came. It places between us and the passage of time a curtain of sand, concealing it.

The desert is the place where imagination is set free unbound and expansive. It remains a virgin land, largely unexplored, a void that retains its secrecy and enigma upon maps. As a cultural sign, it is governed by particular codes, almost iconic in its references and indications, shaping the desert human being in his relation to himself, his environment, his practices, his expressions, his representations, and his memory.

The aesthetic dimension of the desert has never been absent from artistic employment. Indeed, the space of the desert, from all that has been indicated, can be seen both as a formative aesthetic framework and as a domain open to deeper interpretation.

The desert possesses a compelling allure in extending the dominion of its emptiness over selves intertwined with its essence. Yet, when we stand at the threshold of this void, we return to meaning within the "limited." The desert's vastness does not signify dissolution into the infinite, but rather the discovery of the limits of interaction with the finite. From this emerges a sense of freedom within its dual horizons.

The desert continues to inspire both fear and admiration, until it becomes a part of the self its form and its substance. The vocabulary embedded within desert-inspired themes is abundant, forming a vast lexicon drawn from life itself, leaving no alternative beyond it.

The desert has had a clear impact on shaping the themes of poetry that express its environment and the activities and practices of its inhabitants. These have reached us bearing its distinctive imprint.

The world of the desert has also imposed itself powerfully upon the contemporary Algerian novel, owing to its attraction and the richness of its rituals, customs, and captivating traditions.

The environment undeniably influences human activity, as well as the totality of social and behavioral customs and traditions, and literary production. Within this framework of environmental influence, this brief study has examined the impact of the desert on the emergence and development of Arabic poetry.

Recommendations:

To restore recognition to the desert its memory and its symbolic, spiritual, and existential dimensions through the organization of specialized tourist journeys to desert regions, particularly during the winter season.

To reassess and correct the superficial general perception of this space, demonstrating that the desert is not, as many imagine, a desolate and abandoned place where civilization dies; rather, it is, on the contrary, a space for dialogue among civilizations, for encounter and communication.

To encourage desert tourism by organizing activities and events related to the cultural components and potentials of the desert, through the optimal exploitation of its unique features.

To work toward providing tourist facilities capable of attracting visitors from various countries, especially given that the Algerian desert is a focal point of attention due to its breathtaking landscapes.

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