

Analysis of the Narrative Functions of the Desert in Najrani Literature

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Abstract: In Arabic literature, the desert transcends its geographical boundaries, becoming a symbol rich in meaning that reflects individual and collective identity, social and cultural transformations, and profound psychological dimensions. This study adopts a thematic approach, focusing on imaginative imagery and its symbolic dimensions, moving beyond a direct reading of texts to a phenomenological horizon of imagination. The study examines the representations of the desert in Najrani literature.

Keywords: Identity, Desert, Alienation, Search for Self.

INTRODUCTION

The desert is one of the most prominent spaces in Arabic literature, having transcended its role as a mere spatial backdrop to become an essential element reflecting psychological, existential, and cultural transformations. It is a space of isolation and alienation, of the search for self and internal conflict. Therefore, this study is significant in revealing the representations of the desert in the Saudi Arabian novel and its role in constructing the narrative structure and shaping the psychological make-up of its characters.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of this study stems from its examination of one of the most profound semantic elements in the Saudi Arabian novel set in the Najran region: the desert landscape. It is not merely a silent backdrop to events, but rather an active force shaping the narrative structure and the psychological and symbolic dimensions of the characters and events. In the novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen," the desert becomes a mirror reflecting internal conflicts, a stage for manifestations of alienation, a yearning for freedom, and a detachment from harsh reality.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The central problem of this research revolves around how the desert is employed in the novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen," and the extent to which it expresses isolation and psychological and existential alienation. Does the desert remain simply a place, or does it transform into an active narrative element in the construction of characters and events? And how do its connotations reflect the psychological transformations and internal turmoil of the individuals?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To answer this problem, the research seeks to address the following questions:

1. How is the desert employed in the modern Arabic novel, specifically "Between the Shelves of the Unseen," as a symbolic space?
2. What is the relationship between the desert and the experience of psychological and existential alienation in fictional texts?

STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

- Analyze the narrative use of the desert in the Saudi Arabian novel, using "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" as a model.
- Uncover the psychological and existential dimensions reflected by the desert in the narrative text.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employs a thematic approach, focusing on studying recurring themes within literary texts and analyzing how they are formed and developed within the narrative.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

The study of the desert setting in the Saudi Arabian novel, specifically in the Najran region, is relatively rare. However, numerous studies have addressed the presence of the desert in the Arabic novel in general, most notably:

- Saifi, Afaf, Ashour, & Omar. (2025). The Desert in the Modern Algerian Novel: Between Reality and the Marvelous. Arabic Language, 27(1), 257-274.

This study examines the presence of the desert in the modern Algerian novel from two perspectives: an external perspective represented by novelists who do not belong to the desert, who see it as a wondrous space

through which they address certain issues via philosophical reflection; and an internal perspective represented by a new generation of novelists who are geographically connected to the desert and see it as a lived reality whose issues are presented from a realistic perspective.

- Al-Arabi, & Abdelkader. (2023). The Aesthetics of Employing the Desert Theme in Jamila Talbaoui's Novel "Al-Khabiya". *Al-Umda fi al-Linguistics wa Tahlil al-Khitab*, 7(1), 503-513.

This study examines the presence of the desert in one of the Algerian novels by the writer Jamila Talbaoui, as one of the women's texts that focuses on the paradox between the desert as a vast space that accommodates everyone, and the hidden aspect of the desert's value as a refuge for security, peace, and tranquility.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THEMATIC CRITICISM AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN LITERARY STUDIES

The application of thematic criticism and its approach to investigating the fundamental and pivotal points that constitute a literary text, and revealing the transformations it has undergone through the transition from a specific level of experience to a broader and more comprehensive one, is embodied in the intersection of philosophical and critical perspectives—hermeneutics, existentialism, and phenomenology—aimed at studying texts from multiple and interconnected conceptual angles. This approach seeks to uncover recurring symbolic themes within the text. To this end, a statistical approach to thematic frequency can be proposed through the process of repetition, as a method that allows for lexical or semiotic familiarity with the primary and secondary themes in the text. This contributes to revealing its apparent or hidden features and understanding the keys to its components, which serve as an indicator of its comprehensibility and interpretability. However, merely enumerating the expressive forms and recurring lexical shapes of the text's author contradicts the thematic inventiveness. Therefore, repetition is merely a sign, as it is not the sole criterion for revealing thematicity, which always carries a semantic value embodied in the structure of its placement.

Thematic criticism aims to extrapolate the basic thematic ideas and elements in the conscious and unconscious realm of literary works, and to identify their semantic axes, contents, and relationships to their forms in an analysis that blends the objective with the subjective for all the dominant objective values and features that control the content of the text's semantic structure. The basic and secondary thematic themes appear as a sender that allows access to the directions of the text's internal space, in anticipation of a dynamic and harmonious and flexible grouping governed by the law of similarity and contrast, stability and transformation, openness and closure, directness and implicitness.

This criterion is crucial because thematic reading is not merely a report on instances of repetition and frequency, but rather seeks to map a network of significant and recurring connections. Meaning does not emerge solely from repetition, but rather from the sum of the connections established by the literary text. Based on this general concept, each critic guides their reading according to their own intuition, selecting the thematic ideas and elements to comment upon.

The thematic approach is the center of gravity in literary work, the authority of meaning and value. It explains the balanced decision of the analyst who selects the recurring themes in the text and determines their order of importance. This is because it is a meaningful understanding in every sense of the word: a threefold embodiment, as the thematic approach encompasses generalization, external connection, and intertextual connection. It examines repetition to generalize the thematic vision to variations, connects externally with the author's reality, and engages intertextually due to the possibility of the text existing within other texts. It is the point of convergence for all the relationships encompassed by the text, as distilled by the reader. To grasp the subjective, "impressionistic" aspect that constitutes thematic thought, one must delve into the ambiguous textual fields. Meanings exist only in a holistic way, and all thematic determinants are relative. Therefore, the critic must study and analyze different models to reach the core of the theme, determine its value, and understand the rhetoric of repetition within the text.

Thematic criticism focuses on dual relationships, the reciprocal interaction between subject and object, between the world and consciousness, and between the creator and their literary work. Nothing demonstrates this critical approach better than the constant return to the concept of imagination. This allows proponents of this method to move away from a purely functional view of the human psyche and instead elevate imagination to a faculty, based on Bachelard's view that imagination is an organized movement. The concepts of imagination, dream, and presence intertwine in the formation of thematic criticism. From the reality of the dream, the poet seeks to develop the problematic of presence, and from the reality of presence, the dream draws its raw material for constructing imagination. Imagination is embodied in the relationships it weaves between creative themes and in the diverse values disseminated by a given thematic element. Perhaps the importance of imagination lies in the "growth of relationships," for it is this growth that defines the uniqueness of creativity. The task of the thematic critic is to discern its nuances, delve into the imaginative networks, and select an internal framework for its horizons, because the creative experience is not defined by its content, but rather by the arrangement and organization of that content.

Thematic criticism focuses on imaginative imagery, attempting to transcend the apparent meaning of texts and resort to broader reading. The critic must capture the imaginative image in its very genesis during the writing process and experience it in its subsequent manifestation. Turning to the phenomenology of imagination means studying the apparent form of the poetic image as it enters consciousness as a direct product of the human heart and soul. Bachelard describes the poetic image as naive consciousness, and that poetry is more a phenomenology of the spirit than a phenomenology of the mind. Therefore, documents on the subject of dreamlike consciousness must be collected, and a distinction must be made between thematic and psychological approaches, since "reading in both involves the task of bringing meaning to the text, or what can be called amplifying meaning. Both readings amplify meaning, unlike traditional philological reading, which was concerned with reducing it." A theme can be defined as a fixed structure of semantic features recurring within a text and applicable to various lexicons. This definition must be established by describing these features, the text, and the lexicons. Then, questions can be raised about the interrelationship between themes and about the formation of thematic or thematic models.

The essential condition for achieving this complete immersion—which alone enables the scholar to undertake the process of "deconstruction" and reconstruction—is the capacity for empathy and admiration for the text. This allows for a profound connection with the text, enabling one to listen to its subtle nuances and whispers, and then grasp them in order to construct a clear and precise understanding of its thematic elements that formed the core of its emergence, and its continuous transformations that shaped its overall organized and harmonious structure: the "thematic idea." Meaning can only be activated when the critic internalizes and re-experiences it.

Accordingly, the thematic approach is based on not referring to anything outside the literary text, whether it pertains to the author or society. At the same time, it demands that the text be treated as a complete and self-contained entity, independent of anything else. It is self-evident that the text is a historical and intellectual product, but before connecting one level to another, one must connect it to the complete structure of all these levels. In this light, thematic reading can exist within the framework of its intentionality, independence, and coherence. It is important to emphasize that considering the relationship between a text and its external circumstances in thematic studies does not mean focusing on the external circumstances instead of the text itself.

The task of thematic criticism is to uncover the hidden meaning of a creative work. Meaning exists, but it is implicit, and the critic must bring it to light. It is present yet concealed, and the critic must reveal it. The more

obscure a creative text is, the deeper the critic must delve into its interpretation to understand and master it. The "ordeal of meaning" is manifested in the depth of creativity, which demands profound criticism, and all of this is reflected in the relationship between form and content.

Microscopic reading is one of the fundamental procedures upon which the thematic approach is based. It involves focusing literary analysis on a small part or parts of the literary text. This part might be a period, a comma, a letter, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a scene, an event, or anything else that contributes to the formation and construction of the text's world. This work is at the heart of the concept of thematics, which is the central nucleus from which the literary text emerges, growing through modifications until it becomes a beautiful imaginary world. Based on the emphasis on "microscopic reading," the thematic approach no longer suffers from a lack of focus on minute details in a literary work due to its holistic aim. Instead, it gains from combining a holistic perspective with microscopic reading in its analytical process within the literary work. This includes studying traditional elements such as the author, context, meaning, and overall form, among others, according to causal relationships, examining them in relation to one another.

Repetition in the thematic approach is based on the premise that the textual units that recur in a text are of great importance and play a vital role in guiding the critic toward the text's thematic focus. It can be argued that some thematic elements recur throughout the creative work. "Recurrence" is the criterion for determining a text's thematic focus. The major themes in a literary work are those that constitute the invisible architecture of that work (the thematic idea), and thus provide the critic with the keys to organizing and structuring the text. The thematic elements in the text are those that develop throughout the literary work and are observed with exceptional abundance. Highlighting the importance of studying repetition in thematic criticism lies in its role as an entry point for understanding the narrative text on two levels: the micro (the small details) and the macro (the overall idea). This is achieved by deconstructing the linguistic structure of the text into recurring semantic units that reveal the dominant structures within the literary work. This approach is relevant to the theme of desert representations in the modern Arabic novel (using the novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" as a model). The significance of the desert as a transformative symbol can only be revealed by tracing its images, words, and repetitions throughout the narrative. The desert does not always appear in a single form, but rather in diverse guises such as drought, wandering, wind, flame, stillness, emptiness, cooing, crows, burning, and expanse—all semantically charged words that are repeated and transformed to establish a lexical field that reveals the profound symbolic and thematic nature of the desert.

Using mechanisms such as repetition, frequency, juxtaposition, and parallelism, it is possible to analyze how central themes like isolation, alienation, and the search for self are reformulated in different contexts. This allows for the differentiation of the symbolic transformations of the desert within a single text or through the comparison of several texts. This enriches thematic reading and gives it a profound interpretive dimension. Therefore, this methodological approach is not merely a technical tool, but rather essential to reading narrative texts that have made the desert a symbolic center of psychological fragmentation, existential anxiety, and inner transformation. The connotations of the desert will also be analyzed through scenes of candles, crows, the friend, and the blazing sky. Studying repetition in this way contributes to building a comprehensive picture of the literary text, revealing the deep themes implicit behind linguistic structures and recurring images.

THE DESERT: A SPACE OF ISOLATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPTINESS

The Identity of the Desert in the Novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen"

The desert has entered the realm of the novel as a new theme, serving as a broader space for reflection that allows for the interpretation or re-reading of existential dilemmas posed by the urban setting. He could no longer justify or explain its existence, whether from the perspective of novelists who have taken refuge in this space to escape the city, or from the perspective of the desert dwellers (a new generation of novelists) who have adopted it as an objective correlative to address the issues of their reality.

The novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" is considered one of the modern narrative works in Saudi Arabian literature from the Najran region. It is the first publication by the author Mohammed bin Munif. The novel's events revolve around the central character, Mohammed, who suffers from a mental illness following the death of his close friend, Ali, and the character of his friend Hadi, whom he met in London. Hadi suddenly disappears, leaving the protagonist fearful and anxious about losing him as well. The events and scenes unfold between Saudi Arabia and Britain, as the narrator travels to London for a scholarship and medical treatment. Through the technique of flashbacks, he recalls the past in Najran and the present in London, Wales, and Riyadh. The framework that connects them all, or the vast world that encompasses all the novel's events, is the desert space, where desert scenes appear in a state of unconsciousness and absence of awareness.

Psychological Isolation and Alienation in the Novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" The Unseen Alienation and psychological isolation are among the most complex themes in Arabic literature, reflecting the psychological and social conditions suffered by fictional

characters due to their internal conflicts or external pressures. These concepts are clearly manifested in the Saudi novel, particularly within the context of the desert, which serves as a powerful symbol of isolation and psychological disorientation. The desert is linked to the concept of psychological isolation experienced by individuals due to emotional pain, loss, or an inability to adapt to reality. In the Arabic novel, the desert is not merely a natural environment; it transforms into a psychological space reflecting the separation of individuals from their society and their inner selves.

Psychological isolation is a state of feeling in which an individual experiences emotional or social detachment from others, whether voluntary or forced. This may stem from a painful personal experience, such as the loss of a loved one, or from a feeling of not belonging to society. In the novel, the desert is depicted in multiple forms, representing the stages of psychological dissociation experienced by the protagonist, Muhammad, following the loss of his friend, Ali. He suffers a nervous breakdown, resulting in a split in his personality, allowing him to be both Muhammad and Ali simultaneously. The narrator embodies the character of Ali as if he were real. The psychological emptiness and inner fragmentation suffered by the protagonist are reflected in the vastness and seemingly endless expanse of the desert, embodying his sense of loneliness and the profound sense of loss he experienced after the death of his lifelong friend.

Psychologist Erich Fromm points out that alienation is one of the most destructive psychological states, stemming from a loss of identity, fundamentally rooted in the individual's relationship with themselves. This leads to a deep sense of emptiness and loss, manifested in a feeling of estrangement from one's society or inner self. Alienation occurs when one loses their essential connection with themselves or their social and cultural environment. It can be argued that "the contemporary Arabic novel, for the most part, contains elements of alienation in its various forms: psychological, spatial, temporal, and dualistic, combining multiple themes of alienation."

The desert as a symbol of psychological isolation and alienation: The novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" reflects a set of thematic themes, employing the desert as a space that embodies isolation and psychological alienation. The protagonist suffers from a loss of self, a sense of being lost between past and present, and a schism between belonging and rejection.

FIRST: THE THEME OF THE DESERT AND CANDLES

The desert appears in its first appearance in the novel as a place reflecting inner solitude, where spaces of silence and emptiness stretch as far as the sand itself, and where real time is absent. The narrator recounts the event, saying: "I felt a very strange sensation... my heart began

to race! ... A shiver ran through my body! It was as if the sound had faded away and the stadium had completely disappeared from my sight in what I would describe as a mere few seconds... I saw a vast desert with countless candles scattered across its expanse... and before I knew it, a gasp followed my breath! ... and parts of the stadium returned, and the sounds of the commotion returned once more"...

It seems from the preceding text that there is a symbolic connection between the desert and the candles. This theme can be analyzed through several possible interpretations of this connection:

1. The desert symbolizes isolation and existential emptiness.

- The desert represents boundless expanse and emptiness, where one finds oneself in direct confrontation with oneself.
- The desert reflects psychological alienation, which the novelist portrays as a place of solitude and spiritual contemplation.

2. Candles as a Symbol of Hope and Fragility

- Candles symbolize light amidst darkness, that is, hope in the face of isolation, just as the desert represents the harshness of life yet also embraces moments of reflection.
- In spiritual contexts, candles can symbolize asceticism and mystical experience, which is linked to the author's experience when discussing those who adhere to Zoroastrianism, his encounter with the Azerbaijani student, and his letter about purification rituals.

3. The Desert and Candles in Literature and Art

- Candles in the desert may symbolize humanity's attempt to find meaning in life amidst nothingness.
- The symbolic image of a candle burning in the middle of a vast desert may reflect a psychological state between hope and despair, between enlightenment and loss.

SECONDLY: THE DESERT AND THE RAIN

The novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" reflects a number of opposing dualities represented in natural phenomena that play an important role in human life, because they reveal the relationships between existing things. Duality is the assertion of the pairing of principles that explain the universe, such as the duality of opposites and their succession, or the duality of the One and Matter, or the duality of the One and the Infinite in the Pythagoreans, or the duality of the world of Forms and the world of senses in Plato. Duality requires and necessitates the existence of two sides whose relationship is different or similar, and if that other side does not exist, this term loses its meaning. The duality is evident in the experience of losing a friend and the resulting psychological isolation.

The protagonist finds himself trapped between his past memories and a reality that offers him no sense of belonging. One such contrasting image is his description

of the desert: "Here is the desert again, and here is the pulse quickening once more. Everything around me has frozen, and it is as if I see the desert this time raining, with lightning gracing its edges! And the candles are still burning, unextinguished by the torrential rain"!

This image combines numerous contradictions, depicting a profoundly symbolic scene that can be analyzed according to the recurring thematic elements in the text, focusing on the narrator's deep human experience, which it reflects. In this context, the contradictions in this image can be discerned through the following elements:

1. The contrast between aridity and fertility (desert and rain)

- In Arabic literature, the desert is traditionally associated with drought, barrenness, isolation, existential emptiness, and the search for meaning.
- Rain, as an objective correlative for fertility, renewal, and life, is an element that contradicts the nature of the desert.
- The meeting of rain and desert creates a symbolic paradox that expresses an exceptional moment or an inner transformation within a person, where spiritual aridity is combined with emotional renewal.

It can be said that the novelist uses the desert to represent the character's state of bewilderment, while the rain represents a moment of salvation or inspiration. This contrast alludes to a complex spiritual state that combines pain and redemption.

2. The Contrast Between Strength and Weakness (Lightning and Candles)

- Lightning is a cosmic force, violent and sudden, and an objective equivalent to higher powers.
- Candles—despite their apparent weakness—represent inner light, faith, and defiance, and are more steadfast in this scene than the fleeting lightning.
- The paradox in the text arises from the fact that the candles, seemingly the weakest, remain lit despite the rain, making them a symbol of steadfastness amidst storms. In this text, the narrator hints at the profound influence of the detective novel "The Alphabet Crimes," which the protagonist was reading before filming the desert scene. In it, the officer tells his friend, "Road accidents are predetermined and unavoidable, but the crimes of the mad criminal Alphabet can be stopped. You're trying to run away from the fight, my friend".

Lightning represents the overwhelming forces of nature or harsh fate, while candles symbolize resistance and resilience. This is what the narrator subconsciously urges his friend Ali to do: to stand firm and resist the criminals who assassinated him. This duality recurs when hope is small but stronger than the external forces that try to extinguish it.

3 . The Contradiction Between the Expected and the Unexpected (The Rain That Doesn't Extinguish the Candles)

- The natural expectation is that rain extinguishes candles, but the opposite occurs in this image, creating a sense of breaking with the norm.
- This symbolizes the strength of the human spirit in the face of harsh reality, as the candles remain lit despite the overwhelming adverse circumstances. This scene can be interpreted as a liberation from conventional natural laws, giving it a mythical or spiritual dimension.

This contrast reflects the duality of the struggle between despair and hope, a theme found in both Arabic and Western literature through characters who grapple with fate but do not succumb.

THIRD: THE DESERT AND THE DREAM

The desert transforms into an open-air prison, reflecting the character's sense of loneliness and helplessness after the mysterious disappearance of his friend (Hadi).

He says: "But I was soon overcome by a fleeting dream, as if the desert had returned to me once more, this time in broad daylight, without candles illuminating it. My body trembled at the sight of a foundling, blond, green-eyed, rosy-cheeked... writhing in the scorching sands. - My body is burning! Save me! I'm burning! Please save me... I tried to approach to help him... but the closer I got, the tighter the noose tightened around my neck... so I left him, forced to... burning like a forgotten piece of barbecue over embers..." The scene carries powerful symbolic contradictions, combining the barren, deadly desert with the blond, green-eyed child writhing in the scorching sands. To gain a deeper understanding of these connotations, the underlying themes in the previous image can be analyzed as follows:

1 .The Desert: Isolation and Existential Disorientation

- In this image, the desert serves as an objective correlative for alienation, cruelty, and defiance.
- The desert represents the testing ground where his friend Hadi (the foundling) faces his fate alone, and the protagonist fails to help him, leaving him to burn on the embers.
- The heat and flames suggest internal burning, whether psychological torment or a cathartic experience.

2) .A Blonde-Haired, Green-Eyed Foundling): The Other and Double Alienation

- Describing the child as blonde with green eyes makes him a stranger to his environment, reflecting his double alienation. He is a foundling with no clear roots, which deepens his sense of loss. His features also make him an outsider to the desert, preventing him from adapting to it. The embodiment of the

"strange foundling" suggests a lost identity and a duality between East and West.

3 .The Contradiction Between Physical Beauty and Psychological Torment

- The child's features (blond hair, green eyes) evoke beauty and innocent purity, yet they contrast sharply with his harsh reality, as he burns beneath the scorching sand.
- This scene reflects the protagonist's struggle between spiritual beauty and physical suffering, between weakness and strength in the face of harsh reality.

The desert in this image symbolizes the spiritual deprivation the protagonist endures before reaching truth. The image of the child can be seen as a soul searching for its true self, oscillating between pain and redemption, seeking purification from an unknown past through this internal burning. It reflects the duality of beauty and pain, identity and loss, wandering and the search for self. The narrator portrayed the desert space as a psychological equivalent of alienation, as the desert represents the unknown and the fear of annihilation, reflecting the existential anxiety suffered by the protagonist. Psychological isolation and alienation are among the most prominent themes in the novel, where the desert is employed as a symbolic space reflecting the state of psychological emptiness suffered by the main character, while alienation reflects the struggle of identity and the inability to adapt to society. The novelist, Muhammad Munif, succeeded in presenting a scenic portrayal of the state of dissociation suffered by the protagonist, through combining contemplation of the self, the struggle with society, and the looks of others at that character.

CONCLUSION

This research, which explores the representations of desert space in the novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" using thematic methodology, yields several findings. These findings focus on the semantic themes of the desert as more than just a physical space; it is a mirror reflecting psychological, social, and intellectual transformations. These transformations manifest in various expressive forms that reflect multiple dimensions of alienation, isolation, and existential struggle.

In its initial portrayal, the desert appears as a paradoxical place, embodying both stability and change. This is exemplified in the scene of the candles that the rain could not extinguish, where the desert symbolizes continuity despite challenges, reflecting humanity's struggle against the forces of annihilation and survival. However, in the image of the blond foundling tossing and turning on the scorching sands, the desert emerges as a space of loss and identity crisis, where the individual suffers from a rupture between belonging and alienation in a harsh and unwelcoming environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the thematic analysis of the desert setting in the Arabic novel **Between the Shelves of the Unseen**, this study recommends a re-evaluation of the treatment of the desert setting in Arabic literary criticism. It should not be treated as a static place, but rather as a symbolic space charged with psychological and intellectual significance.

Furthermore, the study recommends expanding interdisciplinary research that connects literature, philosophy, and psychology, particularly in analyzing the relationship between the desert and the internal transformations of fictional characters. Many scenes set in desert environments reflect existential crises and internal traumas that are inseparable from the broader human experience.

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