

Applying the Thematic Approach in Studying the Connotations of The Desert and its Symbolic Transformations Within the Narrative

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Abstract: The desert landscape appears as a mirror reflecting the existential crises experienced by the characters, including alienation, identity fragmentation, and emotional and social detachment. In the novel, the desert is not merely a backdrop to events, but rather a reflection of the individual's isolation and loss of self amidst rapid transformations and conflicts between tradition and modernity. The study concludes that the desert wandering is, in essence, a symbolic representation of the search for self and the recovery of meaning in a world in crisis.

Keywords: Desert connotations, symbolic transformations, narrative, themes.

INTRODUCTION

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 characters' psychology. It focuses on how the novelist Mohammed bin Munif, in his novel *Between the Shelves of the Unseen*, utilizes the central theme of the desert as a symbolic representation of psychological alienation, existential conflict, and loss. Significance of the Study

The social and cultural transformations in the Arab world – particularly in recent decades – have contributed to deepening the symbolic significance of the desert. In many novels, it has become a space for contemplation and spiritual purification, and a mirror reflecting experiences of oppression, exile, and fragmented identity. This study attempts to examine the artistic representations of the desert and understand its complex relationship with the human self, which seeks salvation and a fragmented sense of self.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is the conflict between isolation and the search for self manifested in the desert setting?
2. To what extent does the desert influence the development of the central character and their psychological transformations?
3. How does the thematic approach reflect the symbolic significance of the desert in the novel?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to:

- Apply the thematic approach to examine the symbolic significance of the desert and its transformations within the narrative.
- Determine the relationship between the desert and the states of isolation, alienation, and loss in the novel.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Through the thematic approach, this study will explore how the desert transforms from a spatial backdrop into a psychological and philosophical symbol reflecting the experience of the fictional character. Previous Studies

- Belkacem Zouggar, & Ali Mellahi. (2020). Desert Representations in the Saudi Feminist Novel: Amal Nasser Al-Faran's "Divers of Al-Ahqaf" as a Model. Al-Khitab, 15(2), 175-200.

This study concluded that the Saudi novelist Amal Al-Faran embodied her theme within the text with remarkable tranquility, the tranquility of the desert, without chapter titles or introductions. The novel expresses itself through the shattering of the protagonist's dream and emphasizes the fragmentation of her personality into other personalities, sometimes between dream and wakefulness. This adds rich psychological dimensions to the text, in addition to the fragmentation of many minor events within the novel.

- Sarwa, Younes Ahmed. (2020). Desert Significance in the Novel "Searching for the Lost Place". Adab Al-Rafidain, 81, 399-416.

This study underscores the multifaceted meanings associated with Ibrahim Koni's desert in his novel. Beyond its role as a refuge and sanctuary, it serves as a source of tranquility and comfort, representing his homeland. Furthermore, it embodies the connotations of

travel, wandering, migration, and movement, which have been preserved in his collective consciousness and linked to his search for the elusive truth.

Despite the numerous studies on this subject, the current research focuses on the representations of the desert in the Saudi Arabian novel set in the Najran region. It seeks to offer a novel approach centered on the central theme of the desert in the novel "Between the Shelves of the Unseen" from the perspective of psychological and existential alienation. This approach employs thematic methodology to facilitate a deeper understanding of the desert's significance in Arabic literature.

The Desert and the Search for Self

The use of place reveals a network of relationships that connect the characters to their living environment, linking them to existence, belonging, and identity. The search for self within the desert space reflects humanity's desire to understand its identity and the meaning of its existence, and simultaneously to realize this understanding and its purpose. The desert becomes an inner journey reflecting the turmoil of identity and belonging. In the novel "Between the Shelves of the Unknown," the desert represents a transitional phase experienced by the protagonist between the loss of identity and the search for it. The desert manifests itself in several thematic forms representing the search for self, the protagonist's confrontation with his inner fears, and his re-examination of his identity in the pursuit of truth.

FIRST: THE DESERT AND THE CROWS' STRUGGLE WITH THE DOVE

The novelist attempts to embody the desert as a space for the search for a fragmented self, torn apart by the separation from his friends and his arrival back home. He depicts the scene, saying: "Suddenly, the desert appeared before me, and... some black crows were in control... dominating the place. They were tearing at a white dove... and the dove's feathers would grow back each time the crows tried to pluck them, hoping to devour it. Its cooing suggested a cry for help".

This scene carries rich symbolic dimensions, reflecting a struggle between opposing forces: purity and pollution, life and death, hope and despair. It can be interpreted within the following themes:

1 .The Desert: A Space of Isolation and Existential Testing

The desert is not merely a physical space, but a symbol of psychological and existential emptiness, where a person confronts themselves without protection. The desert represents a place of purification and testing, where the protagonist embarks on a journey to search for truth. The desert is also a space of resistance and internal conflict, where the protagonist struggles with... The forces of nature and fate, and this scene served as an arena for the symbolic struggle between good and evil,

where nothing alleviates the cruelty except the hope embodied by the dove.

2 .Black Crows: Symbolism of Death and Dark Forces

Black crows are often associated with evil, destruction, and death. In this scene, they represent aggressive forces attempting to devour the white dove, but failing to completely destroy it. The crows represent the unconscious fears that haunt the protagonist and attempt to destroy him, but they may also reflect a part of the self trying to control inner purity (the dove). Therefore, the crows here are not merely birds of prey, but represent the forces of evil and aggression, both on an individual and societal level.

3 .The White Dove: A Symbol of Renewed Purity and Spiritual Resistance

The white dove symbolizes peace, spirituality, and innocence. In this scene, it is the victim of evil forces attempting to devour it, yet it regrows its feathers each time, reflecting its continuous resistance. The dove is an image of violated innocence, embodying both weakness and strength. It represents inner hope and the desire for purification despite the pain and constant attack. The novelist personifies the dove as a symbol of resistance despite suffering and persecution, constantly renewing itself despite the violence it endures.

4 .Renewed Feathers: A Factor of Continuity Despite Pain

The regrowth of feathers each time the crows try to pluck them lends the scene a magical dimension. It symbolizes spiritual renewal after every ordeal and signifies an unbreakable will to live. It also reflects the idea of psychological resilience, the protagonist's ability to recover from trauma and painful experiences. Thus, the conflict in this scene is not merely between good and evil, but between annihilation and rebirth, between oppression and resistance.

5 .Cooing and Crying for Help: A Symbol of a Voice Unheard

The dove coos with a cry for help, but no one answers. This image carries powerful artistic connotations:

- The dove's cooing may be a call for justice or truth in a deaf world.
- This scene can be interpreted as a portrait of an oppressed society, where pure values cry out for help but find no one to rescue them.
- The cry for help reflects an inner pain that remains suppressed and unheard. It is an expression of repressed suffering and of ongoing resistance despite the surrounding indifference and silence.

Thus, this scene reflects a struggle between opposing forces: good and evil, life and death, purity and pollution. Ultimately, however, it represents a recurring tragedy and carries a message of hope and continuity, because the dove does not lose its existence despite the ongoing violence.

SECOND: ESCAPE AND LIBERATION IN THE DESERT

The protagonist describes his reunion with his friend Hadi in his homeland, where his fear transformed into reassurance. However, "my heart raced again... and the image of the barren desert returned to me, and then that dove... had finally flown away, escaping the clutches of the murderous crows." This scene completes the preceding symbolic narrative, where the desert transforms from a closed space of conflict and death into an open space of escape and salvation. The dove's withdrawal and survival open the door to interpretations of freedom, salvation, and resistance against the forces of darkness and evil, as follows:

1 .The Desert: From a Place of Testing to a Space of Liberation

Initially, the desert was a barren space dominated by crows, making it a symbol of isolation, cruelty, and oppression. But with the dove's escape, the desert transforms into an open space offering an opportunity for liberation and freedom, suggesting several meanings:

- The desert is a place of existential testing, where the individual confronts themselves before deciding their fate.
- The desert is a place of existential testing, where the individual confronts themselves before deciding their destiny.
- The desert is a space for spiritual liberation and detachment from material constraints.
- The desert is a place of wandering and hardship, but it also holds the promise of salvation for those who understand it and adapt to its harshness.
- The desert initially appeared as a prison, then transformed into a gateway to freedom and self-realization.

2 .The Dove: From Victim to Liberated Being

At the beginning of the scene, the dove was trapped in a cycle of violence, but ultimately managed to escape. This reflects its transformation from a vulnerable being to a symbol of survival and triumph over death. Here, the dove represents the being capable of surviving and redefining its own destiny, suggesting the following meanings:

- The dove can represent the soul that is freed from earthly constraints after prolonged suffering.
- Its escape reflects the liberation of the self from its internal conflicts and its passage towards a new stage of psychological growth.
- The dove symbolizes the oppressed character of Hadi, who finally succeeded in breaking free and achieving her freedom.

In the first scene, the ravens held sway and controlled the space, pecking at the dove and attempting to devour it. However, they ultimately failed to kill it. Ravens often represent oppressive forces that try to destroy hope and purity, but they don't always succeed. They may also symbolize the protagonist's inner fears that haunt him, but they cannot completely control him. The ravens'

failure to kill the dove reflects the weakness of evil in the face of the determination to survive, as brute force cannot triumph over the will for freedom.

4 .Flight and Escape: Symbolism of Liberation and Ultimate Emancipation

Flight expresses salvation, freedom, and liberation from constraints. Doves often represent pure souls ascending to heaven after overcoming their earthly trials. Flight symbolizes liberation from psychological obstacles and the launch into new horizons of self-awareness. Therefore, the dove's flight away from the desert and the ravens represents ultimate liberation from all forms of injustice, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual. This scene depicts not only an escape from death, but also a symbolic victory over all forces of oppression and tyranny. The desert is no longer a prison, the dove is no longer a victim, and the crows are no longer an absolute power. There is a transformation in the scene that reflects a transition from pain to hope, from fear to freedom, and from oppression to liberation.

THIRD: THE BLACK DESERT AND THE FLAMING SKY

The search for truth drives Muhammad, the protagonist, to strive to uncover the reasons behind his friend Hadi's disappearance in Britain and his return home. During Hadi's account of his disappearance, Muhammad becomes delirious, and the image of the desert reappears before him: "As if it were covered with black trees, densely foliated and towering! And the sky above it is ablaze, as if fire has gradually spread through it..." This scene conveys a symbolic image charged with emotion, transforming the desert from a traditional space of aridity and drought into a world saturated with paradoxes and contradictions. The black color represents the intense density of the trees, the towering height blocks out the sunlight, and the blazing sky. These images, taken together, create an atmosphere charged with awe and symbolism, making it a scene open to multiple interpretations.

1 .The Desert: A Space of Transformation and Turmoil

The desert is typically associated with emptiness and aridity, but in this scene, it is filled with black trees, shattering its stereotypical image. This transformation symbolizes a state of violent change in the protagonist's psyche, where the familiar becomes strange and unsettling. This desert reflects a state of loss that exposes the protagonist and places him in a distorted world where things change without logical explanation.

The desert is often a space for the search for spiritual truth, but when it becomes saturated with blackness and fire, it represents a harsh experience of suffering and reflects psychological turmoil and profound transformations in reality.

2 .Black Trees: Mystery and Unknown Forces

The black color of the trees contradicts their usual image as a symbol of life and fertility, giving them a mysterious and frightening dimension. The black trees suggest hidden or unseen forces, and their towering height indicates their dominance over the scene, as if they are trying to occupy the space and strip it of its desert nature. These black trees symbolize death, lurking danger, or the supernatural forces that surround the protagonist and restrict his freedom. 3. The Flaming Sky: An End or a New Beginning?

The flames gradually engulfing the sky add a symbolic dimension to the "end of the world," representing either imminent destruction or rebirth from the heart of the fire. The blazing sky reflects an internal explosion within the central character, where the external world mirrors the turmoil within. Fire symbolizes purification and the ultimate test, for purity is born only after passing through great tribulation. Thus, the blazing sky serves as a sign of the complexity and entanglement of events, signaling the beginning of a breakthrough and resolution. It reflects an internal struggle and an existential explosion that alters the entire course and sequence of events.

FOURTH: THE DESERT BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY

The final desert scene in Chapter 13 of the novel comes after the protagonist learns of his mental state and that he suffers from schizophrenia. He describes the desert landscape: "But this time, the sky was in a constant state of flux... and turbulent winds lashed my face with sudden blows... revealing Ali standing before me, with that shy smile of his, which contrasted sharply with his ragged appearance and blood-stained clothes. That smile! It was as if I saw him receding from me... I reached out, hoping to touch him, but to no avail... Then I burst into tears... until I awoke from that stupor..." This scene reflects a state of profound psychological turmoil, where the desert transforms from a static space into a dynamic environment full of movement and change. The fluctuating sky and the stormy winds symbolize a state of inner chaos and psychological tension, while the appearance of his friend Ali, with his contrasting smile and blood-stained clothes, is a stark contrast. The intertwining of memory, loss, and a sense of helplessness, culminating in the weeping and awakening from a coma, adds another dimension, intensifying the tension between dream and reality, between shock and acceptance.

1. The Desert as a Stage for Psychological Transformations

- The desert was not a neutral backdrop, but a shifting environment reflecting the character's inner conflict.
- The wind and the fickle sky conveyed a sense of instability, as if the external world mirrored the character's own turmoil.
- Vast spaces like the desert and the sky often symbolize the unconscious, where one confronts their inner fears without barriers.

- The desert can be a testing ground, where the character is placed in existential situations that reveal their inner truth. Therefore, the desert here is not an empty space, but a psychological field teeming with tension and turmoil, forcing the central character to confront reality.

2. The Friend Between Life and Death: A Symbol of Loss and the Struggle with Memory

- The appearance of his friend (Ali) with a shy smile and a disheveled, blood-stained body creates a stark contrast between life and death, intimacy and terror, memory and reality.
- A smile conveys a sense of nostalgia or forgiveness, while blood-stained clothing suggests suffering and the bitterness of a loss that has not yet been overcome.
- People who appear in this way often represent the ghosts of the past that live within them, haunting them between dream and reality.
- The appearance of a friend symbolizes guilt, unaddressed loss, or even a part of the self that has been repressed in the unconscious, embodying the internal struggle between nostalgia, loss, and the inability to reconcile with the past.

3 . Attempting to Touch and Failing: Helplessness in the Face of Truth

- Reaching out to a friend reflects a desire to connect with the past or to mend what cannot be mended.
- Failing to touch reinforces a feeling of helplessness and detachment, as if there is an invisible barrier between the person and what they are trying to reach.
- This gesture reflects an attempt to reclaim a lost person, clinging to an illusion that will not return, or refusing to accept reality. This scene evokes the attempt to grasp a mirage in the desert, reinforcing the symbolic nature of the dream as a space of self-deception and impossible longing. Thus, Muhammad's attempt to touch his friend Ali expresses his desire to reclaim him, but also underscores the impossibility of this, deepening the sense of despair and helplessness.

4. Crying and Waking Up: The End and the Revelation of Truth

- Crying symbolizes the collapse of the barrier between dream and reality, as the protagonist realizes that their friend is no longer physically present.
- Tears often reflect a gradual acceptance of truth, or a moment of self-confrontation.
- Waking from the coma adds a new dimension, embodying the dream resulting from unconsciousness and the coma itself, which served as a bridge between two worlds: the world of the subconscious where the friend is present, and the world of reality where they no longer exist.

This scene represents the moment the illusion shatters, as the protagonist returns to consciousness with a new understanding of reality. The crying and waking from the coma symbolize the moment of confronting truth, where the past cannot be escaped or changed, only accepted and

lived on. This scene offers a powerful vision of psychological alienation and the struggle with loss, where the desert becomes a mirror to the self, the friend an embodiment of an unfinished past, and waking from the coma a painful moment of reconciliation with reality. The desert emerged as a dynamic space, transcending its role as a mere backdrop to become an essential element reflecting the psychological contradictions within the novel. Initially, the novelist depicted the desert as adorned with candles that the rain could not extinguish, reflecting a struggle between cruelty and tenderness, annihilation and survival, despair and hope, as if it were refusing to submit to the usual laws of nature. It then transformed into a space teeming with dreams and the strange, where the blond foundling appeared, writhing in its flames, symbolizing loss, isolation, and the search for identity amidst a hostile and heterogeneous environment. In a later development, the desert became a stage for a struggle between life and death, as exemplified by the image of the dove being devoured by crows yet surviving, signifying enduring hope despite repeated threats, as if life itself refused to surrender no matter how intense the forces of destruction. With the evolution of the imagery, the desert donned a somber, surreal guise, with black trees filling the expanse and a fiery sky that gradually shifted, expressing an inner turmoil that reflected the transformations of the soul within a world undergoing incomprehensible change. In the final scene, the desert became a space for personal confrontation, where the protagonist found herself face to face with her friend, whose appearance was a stark contrast between a smile and his blood-stained robe.

Here, the desert served as a stage for memory and longing, but also a space of helplessness, where what is lost cannot be reclaimed, and the boundaries of reality cannot be transcended, even in dreams. The attempt to touch the friend reflected an impossible desire to grasp the past, while waking from the coma was the moment of confronting reality and returning to a world where there is no escape from loss.

Ultimately, these diverse images reveal that the desert is not merely a geographical space, but a symbolic representation of the transformations of the self, its struggles between alienation and the search for meaning. Between the candles resisting the rain, the dove refusing to perish, the sky slowly burning, and the untouchable friend, the image of the desert emerges as a space encompassing both pain and hope, solitude and searching, dreams and heartbreak. It is not simply a desert, but a space that reflects humanity's deepest struggles with itself and with the world.

CONCLUSION

As the images progress, the desert becomes a stage for the confrontation between life and death, as embodied in the scene of the dove being devoured by crows yet surviving, reflecting the nature of human existence between persistent pain and renewed hope. The desert

also takes on a nightmarish character in the scene of blackened trees and a blazing sky, representing the turmoil of the human psyche and internal conflicts.

The final image, in which the deceased friend appears, his clothes stained with blood yet smiling, places the desert within a cycle of loss, memory, and longing. In this scene, the place embodies the impossible desire to reclaim the past and the clash with the inevitability of separation, where the dream encapsulates the complex relationship between reality and desire, between the present and the past, between the possible and the impossible.

The analysis of these images reveals that the desert is not merely a geographical space, but a transformative symbol bearing profound psychological and philosophical connotations. It is a place of isolation and alienation, but also a space for self-discovery, a place of harshness yet also one that holds the seeds of life and resistance. It is also a stage for existential contradictions, where the boundaries of death and life, hope and despair, dream and reality intersect.

The desert's significance shifts according to the different contexts within the narrative texts. At times, it is a place of salvation and contemplation, while at others, it transforms into a space of nightmare and psychological turmoil. Its significance also intertwines with the characters and events, becoming a fundamental element in constructing meaning rather than merely a spatial backdrop.

In this novel, the desert appears as a fluid concept reflecting the crises of contemporary humanity. Its connotations range from isolation and alienation to the search for self, existential struggle, and resistance. By deconstructing these connotations, it becomes clear how the imagery of the desert contributes to shaping the narrative structure and the psychological dimension of the novel, exploring the depth of this relationship between humanity and place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study urges comparisons between Arabic literature and its global counterparts in the use of the desert, such as comparing its use in the works of Ibrahim al-Koni and Tayeb Salih with its presence in the texts of Albert Camus or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Such comparisons reveal differences in philosophical perspectives, narrative techniques, and cultural contexts in dealing with place

In an academic framework, the study recommends integrating the theme of “the desert and identity” into university literary criticism curricula, particularly in courses concerned with narratives, symbols, and narrative space, given the profound impact of the desert on shaping character structure and existential meaning in literary texts.

Finally, the study calls for drawing inspiration from the symbolism of the desert in contemporary visual arts, such as theater, cinema, and poetry, as the desert possesses immense expressive potential that can be employed to address issues of humanity, identity, and internal conflict, both visually and dramatically. It also recommends creating a digital archive dedicated to “desert” novels, which would contribute to documenting and analyzing this literary presence using computerized thematic research tools, to reveal the major patterns in relation to psychological and symbolic transformations in modern Arabic narrative.

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