



Desert in Literature and Culture

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Abstract:

Desert has been the setting of many literary and visual arts because of the romanticism associated with barren landscape. It has been used in different forms to describe positive and negative emotions. The term ‘desert’ is used in various senses to denote a particular place as well as the barrenness of people. It is a source for many to get relief from worldly depression without saying anything. Desert magnetizes people who come near it and it is where one loses one’s ego. The concept of desert is generally used in two ways, one in as a distinct and real physical space and second as a conceptual and metaphysical space. Physical desert denotes a terrain where little precipitation occurs and consequently living conditions are hostile for plant and animal life. In the second sense, it acts as a metaphor for situations like wilderness and loneliness.

The concept has different meanings in different ambience and circles. Several civilizations have emerged in proximity to the desert. The desert has been the backdrop for numerous significant narratives, including mythological tales. Many religions and their cultures are, in various ways, connected to the desert. It has also served as a rich source of literary inspiration, playing a pivotal role in shaping some the greatest love stories of ancient times. Numerous modern literary works from around the world have utilized the desert as both a physical landscape and a metaphysical and conceptual space. The paper investigates the etymology of the word and examines its representation in different literatures and cultures.

Keywords: Desert, Literature, Culture, Myth, Landscape, Religion.



Desert has been the setting of many literary and visual arts because of the romanticism associated with barren landscape. It has been used in different forms to describe positive and negative emotions. The term ‘desert’ is used in various senses to denote a particular place as well as the barrenness of people. It also signifies profound silence, as Neruda says “The desert does not speak. I could not comprehend its tongue: its silence...(Warner, 2004, p.271). This eloquent silence has its own pleasure. It is a source for many to get relief from worldly depression without saying anything. Desert magnetizes people who come near it and it is where one loses one’s ego.

The concept of desert is generally used in two ways, one in as a distinct and real physical space and second as a conceptual and metaphysical space. Physical desert denotes a terrain where little precipitation occurs and consequently living conditions are hostile for plant and animal life. In the second sense, it acts as a metaphor for situations like wilderness and loneliness. The concept has different meanings in different ambience and circles. The paper investigates the etymology of the word and examines its representation in different literatures and cultures.

The image of the physical desert and the notion of conceptual desert have been widely used in daily conversation and in literature from the ancient times. Physical desert is a region so arid of little rainfall that it supports only spars or no vegetation. It is also a synonym for wasteland in which few forms of life can exist because of the lack of water. Conceptually desert signifies the lack of circumstances that are believed to be vital in human life such as communication, knowledge and moral values.

The etymological meaning of the word ‘desert’ is “things abandoned.” It is derived from the Latin word ‘desertum’. During the Middle English period, desert referred to “waterless, treeless region” (Simpson and Weiver, 1991, p.514), now it has gradually become the main meaning of the desert. Desert has different senses. It can mean ‘deserving’ which signifies becoming worthy of recompense, like reward or punishment. Sometimes it implies good sense meritoriousness or excellence. It signifies an action or quality that deserves appropriate recompense; geographically it



applies to an uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country, wild region or any wild inhabited region. It implies abandoned, habited, unpeopled, desolate, lonely place. It can also mean to forsake someplace or somebody.

Nobody knows exactly when civilization came to desert. Although many cities were destroyed and many great empires rose and fell desert remains unaffected. The Roman civilization, the Egypt civilization, the Greek civilization and the Harappen and Mohenjo-Daro civilizations are examples. Desert gets adjusted to everything but remains unchanged. There are different references to desert from the pre-historic to the present literatures. In the Greek myths the people who lived in desert needed gods to protect them while crossing the desert. The largest desert in the world is the Sahara. Many myths originated from there. The great contrast in the Egyptian landscape gave credence to the myth of Seth and Osiris. Seth performed the dark, barren desert and Osiris was personification of fertile. In the Egyptian mythology Seth is the god of desert, storm and chaos (Velde, 1977, p.67). Seth appeared as red god representing hostile desert, and he killed his brother. Osiris was resurrected. However this horrifying incident signifies temporary victory of barrenness over fruitfulness. In the Egyptian art, Seth is considered a fabulous animal and was worshiped. He represented a manifestation of evil. In the Greek mythology also Seth was compared to typhoon, evil force, and storm and was always depicted as the god of bad things. According to ancient Egyptian myths desert was something bad. The Egyptians also had other deities who personified the arid landscape: the lion headed goddess Sekmet, whose hot breath represented the hot desert winds; Ha was the god of the western desert, an area the Egyptian believed led to the underworld; and Min the god of eastern desert protected people from hostile desert forces and travellers frequently his aid invoked before beginning journeys. Sahara myths described demons who lived as reptiles in the desert and often took the form of snakes, scorpions, owls, leopards or whirlwinds. Often the people thought that these demons were set to punish people for their sins.

The Old Testament describes the desert in detail especially in the book of Exodus. The Pentateuch generally conceives desert as a 'desert of Sin'. The most referred to deserts in the



Book of Exodus are the deserts of Sinai, Cades, Pharan, etc. The book discusses the geography of these regions in detail (Howlett, 1908). The desert of Judea also has importance in the Bible. The other considerable deserts that have been represented in the Bible are the deserts of Engaddi, Thecua, Jericho, Arabia, Moab, and Idumea near the Dead Sea (Schaff, 1878, p.283). The New Testament also refers to the desert, the scene of Christ's temptation (Zangin, 2000, p.116). The gospel of Mark refers to the same event in the conceptual sense of desert that "He was with wild beasts" (Leal, 2004, p.49).

Desert has a vital part in the creation and recreation of Jewish beliefs and characteristics. The desert, as a site both allegorical and material, has been a key trope in Jewish literature from the Bible to contemporary works. As a transitional space between Exile and nation, between slavery and liberation, desert challenges both the collectivity and the individual.

In the Quran desert is mentioned as a geographical area (Nadwi, 2009, p. 32), through which prophet Muhammad travelled during his exile from Mecca to Medina. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad struggled in the desert and it was where he was given the message for the humankind. This Quran also includes a number of allusions to the hot, dry and contemplative space. The representations of the desert that are present in the Quran reflect diverse ideas, ranging from metaphorical uses of the desert as symbol of other things to literal descriptions of the desert as an environment in which humans are able to live. It is also described as the symbol of devotion.

In the Quran desert is metaphorically a symbol of the obstinacy, a symbol of outright ignorance; generally the desert interpreted in the Quran almost the opposite of Paradise, that is, as a symbol for the hell. Sometimes desert is referred as a place of bad activities and later as a purifying agent. "Some of the Arabs of the desert around you are hypocrites, and some of the people of Medina are stubborn in hypocrisy. You are not aware of them; We know them, and will punish them twice, and they will be sent to a harrowing doom"(Ahmed, 2007, p.104) Desert in the Quran demonstrates the weaknesses and the strengths of the Arab peoples, the



unreliability of the human spirit, the will and power of Allah, and the range of pain and punishment. The desert is both a metaphor for the tortures and discomfort that await sinners in hell and a revered creation of God. The desert is at once a hellish and a splendid sphere.

Desert forms the background for many great love stories. *Layla and Majnu*, *Dhola Maru* and *Heer Ranjha* are the most popular stories of legends set in desert. *Layla Majnu* is an orally transmitted tragic love story set in the Arabian Desert during the seventh or the eighth century. Later, it spread throughout the Islamic countries and in Islamic literature. Both the hero and the heroine were born and brought up in the desert. Desert is sometime portrayed as a messenger of separation. *Dhola Maru* in the Thar Desert and *Layla Majnu* in the Arabian Desert are the prominent examples of it. In both text protagonists suffer and cross desert and achieve their dreams. *Layla Majnu*, *Dhola Maru* and *Heer Ranjha*, represent deserts from different continent. All the stories belong to the local culture. Deception of local culture and day-to-day life is a feature of these stories. All stories have similar descriptions and influences about the local culture and special philosophy regarding desert. They connect us from their everyday life. The Desert changes the lovers, as Majnu's mother finds when she visits him in the desert. Seeing the completely changed state of her son, she takes him in her arms and cares for him. Story described about the desert as realm and unbound passion.

She washed him with the tears of her eyes, and then she combed the locks of his hair. From head to toe, she crashed him with love, and touching every swollen wound she moaned feeling the pain. She carried her hands over every corner of his body, rubbing a blister here and closing a wound there. Now she washed his head full of dust, then she took the thorns out from his tired feet (Yamanaka, 2001 p.150).

Desert is a place of formation and reformation. Inner desert exists within the human spirit. Inner desert is sometimes experienced as restlessness, or as feeling of desolation, loneliness, darkness and despair. All desert stories portraying encounter the difficulties, sufferings and spiritual revival when the protagonist experiences spiritual awakening. Jesus, Muhammad,



Dhola, Majnu, Ranjah and Mirza wander throughout the desert and suffer a lot in their quest till they fulfil their destiny.

Desert is represented well in English literature. Desert appears in many literary works. Desert has different meaning in their works. Wyatt applied it in sense of ‘reward’ “such sauce as they have served to me without desert”(Simpson and Waiver, 1991, p.514). Christopher Marlow’s *Tamburlaine* portrays it as excellence ‘if you retain desert of holiness’(Simpson and Waiver, 1991, p.515). Shakespeare personified desert in his sonnets ‘to behold desert a begger borne and needie nothing trimd in iollitie’(Simpson and Waiver, 1991, p.515). Sometimes desert represents action or quality of a man as William Cowper says, ‘the characters of a great men, which are always mysterious while they live... sooner or later receive the wages of fame or infamy according to their true deserts(Simpson and Waiver, 1991, p.515). John Barrell, a British scholar of eighteenth and early nineteenth century says that desert is “the dark side of landscape” (Goehring, 2003, p.437). He says that desert is a landscape painting like ideology that promotes a particular view of reality among those who see it.

Desert’s beauty lies in its diverse and conflicting nature. It requires external values and goals to make it determinate. Although it is not purely internally defined, writers unwittingly add external values of it. Writers of very different persuasions believed that examining desert itself would yield the conclusion they desired. Desert has different values for different situation. Every continent literature features desert. Desert plays a crucial role in transportation and commerce. Desert changes everyone whoever became part of it. Wilfred Thesiger, the British explorer of Arabian Desert, says that whoever lives in desert will get affected by its atmosphere. The real desert is a great social lovelier.

No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate clime can match. For this was the real desert



where differences of race and colour, of wealth and social standing, are almost meaningless; where coverings of pretence are stripped away and basic truths emerge. It was a place where men live close together. Here, to be alone was to feel at once the weight of fear, for the nakedness of this land was terrifying than the darkest forest at dead of night (Warner, 2004, p.159).

In American literature, desert represented in stories, essays and poetry. Mark Twain, Mary Austen and Edward Abby describe American desert and its nature in their writings. For Mark Twain desert is a secure place, and he portrays the desert landscape of Mississippi river in his famous work *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Desert is an essential part in the representation of national identity. American writers used the deserts of the Middle East and the American west to make connections between wilderness and national identity.

Twain mythologizes the desert through which he travels just as much as the grassland's and describes seeing "thirteen hundred miles of desert solitudes...limitless panoramas of bewildering perspective... [and] rocks...splendid with the crimson and gold of the setting sun" (qtd. in Clary 33). Every individual has freedom to express his own opinion about the particular land, culture and religion. Sometimes twain described sentimentally about desert but on the other hand he described desert as a fragment of the Holy Land.

we entered upon one of that species of deserts whose concentrated hideousness shames the diffused and diluted horrors of Sahara—an 'alkali' desert....Imagine a vast, waveless ocean stricken dead and turned to ashes; imagine this solemn waste tufted with ash---dusted sage brushes....The sun beats down with dead, blistering, relentless malignity(qtd. in Clary 33).

Desert played a great role during American civil war. Mark twain reveals the diverse view of the American public, during a period of unrivalled extension, of the dry lands of the western United States. Desert region is characterized as providing unimagined attractive wonders,



limitless economic opportunity, and people that are strange and often revolting. Desert is a place that is both celebrated and feared.

Desert is very hot place without water. It signifies something unknown, unknowable, about to be revealed. Derrida calls desert, third place as he says “the most anarchic and an-archivable place possible,” which is neither an island nor the Promised Land, but a third place “that makes possible, opens, or infinitizes the other” (Damai, 2005, p.83).

In the *Wind Sand and Stars Revisited*, Antonie calls desert, sea of sand. In the desert silence is not silence of emptiness but of plotting, of imminent enterprises. *Wind, Sand and Stars* portray the Sahara, the barren desert landscape and the accompanied isolation and regards the desert having more similarities with sea than with land. It tries to locate man and deserts into a sort of celestial harmony. Despite its differences from other habitable places desert has a beauty of its own

Edward Abby’ *Desert Solitaire* contains about the nature of the Colorado Plateau desert, recounts the wilderness of the desert. He describes the scorpions and snakes of the desert although he claims that desert is the most beautiful place on the earth. He described about the desert of south-eastern Utah the “red dust and the burnt cliffs and the lonely sky- all that which lies beyond the ends of the roads” (The Desert in Literature, 1994). He wrote his travelling experience in the desert which is an absolutely treeless plain, where there is nothing in the sandy expanse but prickly pear, a few sunflowers.

Desert has many types of flowers and wild animals. More and more sunflowers can be seen in the American desert, and it can be called as sunflower desert. Edward Abby in his novel *Fire on Mountain* described how desert has been and is still ruled by remote and hostile command. How the desert is being used for nuclear projects and for dumping radioactive. And large part of desert is used for military operation.



Australian associates with it especially fiction, portrays its desert as a more-or-less undifferentiated barrenness. Australian desert portrays rustic-society based on herding. In Australian writings desert is not an undifferentiated empty space but an economically wealthy region. The literatures of mining suggests desert as exploitable source. Susan Hawthorne's *The Falling Woman* (1992) describes the journey of two lesbian lovers, Estella and Olga, through South Australia into the central deserts in an attempt to sketch a strong feminist portrayal of desert. Desert vegetation is different with cacti and small plants. Different kind of plantation make desert most decorative world. It offers different pictures to our mind to make difference between fancy and reality world.

How plants can exist in the desert without any water and how people survive in the desert appear mysterious. Usually desert is very hot during summer and very cool during winter. Rain has an important role in the desert; whole face of land gets changed by rain. Normally a desert does not have any flowers, grass or green plants. Desert is rather stern, harsh and at first, a repellent. But it has everlasting charm, nevertheless.

Every desert get rain fall each year. The dark thunder clouds that occasionally gather over the desert seem at times to reserve all their stores of rain for one place. There are so many desert rivers, a torrent composed of water, sand, and gravel in about equal parts. It is yellow, thick stream that has nothing but disaster for man or beast that seeks to swim it. Many of life have been lost there. In the desert rainfall comes quickly and goes quickly. The sands drink it up, and it sinks to the rock strata, where, following the ledges, it is finally shelved into some gravel bed. In every desert there are isolated places where water stands in pools, fed by underground springs. These are so called oases in the waste that travellers have pictured as gardens of paradise. Poets have used for centuries as illustrations of happiness surrounded by despair. Desert Mountains gathered in clusters along the waste. During sunset desert mountains warm in color and look fire-red through pink haze.



Adel S. Gamel considers desert greater than a country, that the role of desert is more important and significant than the country. Classical Arabic literature deals with the feeling and association of the desert. Dichotomy among natural world and natural takes the form of contrast between the desert and the town. According to Gamel no other literature portrayed love for desert. Arabic literature describes minute details of the desert life. Literary imagination is moulded and dominated by the desert in the classical Arabic literature. Arab poet depicted every minute aspect with equally sensitive words describing the desert. Arab poets included everything about the desert “Its vast expanse, its sand, dunes, plants, animals, birds, the scorching sun and shivering cold, the moon, the stars, the rain, the water wells, and springs, the challenges while crossing it, the demons that roamed at night”(The Desert in Literature, 1994). Almost all pre-Islamic long poems contain a section on desert. Many poets express their passionate love of desert, peace and tranquillity and freedom. Description of the Arabian Desert fascinated many western scholars. Therefore, it seems that desert have a exceptional relationship with the literature and culture. It is pertinent to observe that the origin of major religions in one way or other are associated with desert.

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