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The Desert From the Margin to the center in the Contemporary Algerian Novel, Timimoun's Novel as a Model

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the developments in narrative discourse, emphasizing its flexibility and ability to evolve through the new questions it raises. It focuses on the movement of the desert from the periphery to the center, following a period when the city, with its contradictions and bourgeois character, dominated the global and Arab literary scenes. Algerian literature today has made a significant shift, breaking free from conventional writing forms and striving to align form with content. It has succeeded in presenting the desert in a new light, surpassing the stereotypical portrayal it once received in classical literary traditions. Timimoun is one of the novels that uses the desert not merely as a static, spatial setting but as a vibrant cultural, civilizational, and human heritage worthy of attention. The desert is positioned as a central theme, not only in the narrative but also in the real-life quest of the Algerian individual for salvation and self-affirmation, after struggling with disorientation and experiencing the pain of loss in a city that left him feeling empty, lost, and fragmented.

Keywords: The desert, The periphery, The center, The novel, Timimoun

Çağdaş Cezayir Romanında Kenardan Merkeze Çöl: Bir Model Olarak Timimoun'un Romanı



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Öz

Bu makale, anlatı söylemindeki gelişmeleri incelemeyi, esnekliğini ve ortaya çıkardığı yeni sorularla evrilme yeteneğini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çelişkileri ve burjuva karakteriyle şehrin küresel ve Arap edebiyat sahnelerine hakim olduğu bir dönemin ardından, çölün çevreden merkeze doğru hareketine odaklanmaktadır. Günümüz Cezayir edebiyatı, geleneksel yazım biçimlerinden sıyrılarak ve biçimi içerikle uyumlu hale getirmeye çalışarak önemli bir değişim geçirmiştir. Çölün klasik edebi geleneklerdeki basmakalıp tasvirini aşarak onu yeni bir ışık altında sunmayı başarmıştır. Timimoun, çölü yalnızca durağan, mekânsal bir ortam olarak değil, ilgiye değer canlı bir kültürel, uygarlıksal ve insani miras olarak kullanan romanlardan biridir. Çöl, sadece anlatıda değil, aynı zamanda Cezayirli bireyin, kendisini boşlukta, kaybolmuş ve parçalanmış hissettiği bir şehirde yönünü kaybetmenin acısını yaşadından sonra kurtuluş ve kendini onaylama arayışında da merkezi bir tema olarak konumlandırılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çöl, Çevre, Merkez, Roman, Timimoun

Introduction

The novel has long been associated with the city, which has served as both the setting and the stage for its events. However, with the emergence of experimental novels, and in the search for alternative narrative worlds that challenge the conventional, moving beyond narrative estrangement and the imitation of foreign models alien to our Arab society and its aspirations, new novels began to establish a fresh approach to writing, regarded as "a high cultural product" or "a call to intellectual thought," as Milan Kundera aptly put it (Akkar, 2000). The Arab self and all that affirms its pride in its identity and belonging were increasingly represented, leading to the marginalization of the city with its indulgence, recklessness, nihilism, and bourgeois ideology. In its place, the desert emerged, with its cultural and civilizational depth, becoming the central focus of the narrative. The desert entices both the narrator and the reader with its secrets, depth, vastness, authenticity, purity, safety, and dynamic renewal. This new form of writing became popularized by desert-born novelists, led by Ibrahim al-Koni with his distinguished works such as *Al-Tibr*, *Al-Majous*, *aw al-Sughra*, and *The Sorcerers*, as well as Sidiq Hajj Ahmed with his remarkable contributions, including *Kingdom of Zaywan*, *Kamarad*, and *Mina, the Resurrection of Desert Dispersal*, among others. The novel *Timimoun* represents an example of the desert seen through the eyes of a city dweller. We have chosen it for this discussion to explore the paradox it presents: the desert's centrality in contemporary narrative imagination is not tied to ethnic or geographical affiliation, but rather to a cultural and intellectual choice, as well as experimental narrative intent. By contrast, things become clear. The writer, himself a son of the city, casts a glance at the desert, seduced by the magic of its sands, captivated by the beauty of its oases and palaces, and drawn to

the distinct, authentic culture of its people. Thus, he narrates the desert as a longing to discover and harmonize with it, positioning it as the central theme of the narrative. In doing so, he envisions the desert as an alternative to the harshness of the city and as a possible solution to the disillusionment he feels, seeking fulfillment and peace, as envisioned by Plato for humankind.

2. The desert from the margin to the center in contemporary Arab novels

Arab novel writing has historically been intertwined with the concept of the city, largely due to the influence of Western novels. The Arab novelist found himself grappling with two conflicting impulses: the desire to emulate the narrative forms originating from the West, recognized as the source of this modern literary genre, and his own cultural and social ties to the Arab world. (Tahri, 2022) (Ibrahim Mahmoud, 2003). "Therefore, he had no choice but to write for a reader of his kind, an Arab reader belonging to the modern Western world," as has been pointed out. Consequently, the contemporary Arab novelist turned to the desert as a space that reflects both the writer's identity and that of the reader. The desert emerged as a prominent setting for many novels, highlighting its unique and distinctive characteristics. Authors such as Abderrahman Munif, Raja'a Al-'Alam, Hanan Al-Sheikh, and Sabri Mousa have drawn attention to the desert, making it a focal point in the works of Ibrahim al-Koni with his renowned novels like *Al-Tibr*, *Al-Majous*, *Aw al-Sughra*, *The Sorcerers*, and others, alongside Sidiq Hajj Ahmed, whose significant contributions include *Kingdom of Zaywan*, *Kamarad*, and *Mina, the Resurrection of Desert Dispersal*.

This new direction led to a reconsideration of some ideas that had long regarded the novel as a literary genre that could only emerge in cities: "Contemporary novels, in several advanced artistic and intellectual models, have turned their focus to the desert, and this shift has resulted in the following outcomes: the desert setting has transcended its usual negative stillness found in traditional narrative patterns and has integrated into the essential elements that shape the structure of the novel, giving its inner world an additional sense of transcendence, vitality, and unique aesthetics" (Blili, 2020). The Arabic novel that has taken the desert as its subject or setting for its events possesses distinctive characteristics that set it apart from city-based novels. "This difference likely stems from the nature of the desert itself, which is: a mystery and a riddle whose symbols are only possessed by a select group of writers and authors who are descendants of those regions within the Arab world, where the desert constitutes a large and significant part of the overall geography, in addition to its unique cultural and symbolic heritage that rejects any new, foreign culture attempting to change or influence it" (Saleh, 1996). It also represents a human identity for

certain intellectuals, including a group of novelists who have emerged recently and who have developed a narrative identity despite being shaped by the rapid industrial development. This development is slowly draining contemporary human existence of its spiritual values and leading it into a conflict that, while unavoidable, these intellectuals do not wish to become part of. Despite this, they find themselves in a central position, tasked with presenting the issue of a fading world and a particular case to a broader audience, as well as to ideal readers, when other means fail to communicate it (Berranin, 2011). Thus, the novel derives its distinctiveness from the unique characteristics of the desert space, which is "vast and expansive, offering vast distances, the beauty of flowing light, eye-fooling mirages, and the special ability to combine both movement and stillness." The desert, once a marginalized and submerged space, has now been transformed into a central one, with the novel adopting it as the stage for its events (Zoukar, 2020). The desert is celebrated as a fascinating subject, full of secrets and symbols, and this shift has been well-received by the audience. The reader, intrigued by the adventure of revelation, embarks on a journey through the pages of the novel to understand its mysteries, decode its symbols, and uncover its secrets.

3. Desert representations in the novel "Timimoun"

The novel is titled after Timimoun, an ancient village in the heart of the Algerian desert and a well-known tourist destination. As the title is a central element in the entire narrative, it encapsulates the meanings and implications within the text. The mere reading of the title, before any attempt at interpretation, immediately evokes the desert in the reader's mind, narrowing their perceptions of the connotations of the name, thus highlighting the first signs of the desert's centrality in the text. When we move to the body of the narrative, we find that the plot of *Timimoun* revolves around two key events that emphasize the desert's centrality and the marginality of the city. The novel begins with the departure from the city toward the desert/Timimoun and ends with the departure from the desert back to the city, with the narrative abruptly halting at the outskirts of the city as the return bus continues its journey. This suggests an opening in the narrative and the continued centrality of the desert in reality, even if it is left behind narratively. Between the departure and return, the remaining events unfold exclusively in the desert, narrated in the present, past, and future tenses, while the city is only represented through painful memories of disorientation, loss, and fragmentation. These memories deepen the narrator's sense of isolation and disillusionment with life. The narrative also ties the city's depiction to tragic news, conveyed in a factual, journalistic style akin to daily newspapers and media outlets, offering nothing beyond this. This approach presents an alternative vision, sidelining and battering the city, while

celebrating Timimoun as both the present and the future, an ideal refuge, a civilizational choice, and a promised paradise. Through multiple symbols and perspectives, which may initially seem contradictory or even opposing, the careful reader can discern their underlying harmony and support for the final portrayal of the desert as the promised paradise. In the end, Timimoun serves as both the title, the narrative, and the vision.

3.1 The desert in the beginning

The desert may initially appear as a refuge for escaping the life of the city, a life the narrator refuses to die within. He turns from one form of exile to another, seeking to vanish into its vastness. Numerous interpretations have been offered for the novel, often seen as tribal projections, that describe the narrator's evocation of the desert as a form of escape from the terrorism that pursued him in the city and threatened his very existence. However, the text suggests deeper layers that point to the desert's connection to a range of symbolic meanings, which we will trace to ultimately assemble a coherent image within the novel. This representation, however, is not one of flight from the city or from the tragedies he endured. This is revealed through the growing narrative of the desert and its latent implications.

The narrator states: “...*At a time when I thought my life had ended, I felt this the day I bought this old bus from the city of Geneva. At that moment, I decided to bury myself in the desert and wait for my death. The desert both fascinated and terrified me. I chose the desert because it was elusive, far more so than the swollen, overcrowded, and inflated cities. I decided that the desert would be my way of dying, my suicide, a desert that would gnaw at my body, scratch my skin, burn my eyelids, and scorch my chest from the intensity of the dry air*” (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 42).

This discourse positions the city in contrast with the desert: a place of familiarity, distant and absent, buried in a marginalized and paralyzed memory. The city is transformed into an alien, hostile, and oppressive place, which objectifies and distorts the protagonist's character. Through this lens, the narrative tracks the gradual, daily destruction of the protagonist's identity, subjecting him to a range of exclusions, prohibitions, and concealments (Boudjedra, 2002). Through this description, the author aims to undermine a dominant and deeply ingrained cultural mindset among city dwellers, which has contributed to the creation of a distorted image of the desert. Over the years, a series of rumors, delusions, and misconceptions have accumulated, obscuring the true nature of the desert and casting it as a place inhabited by jinn, magic, and superstition. This image

evokes fear and repulsion, suggesting that the people of the desert are irrational, living in a world of legends and fantasies, as though their minds are incapable of producing knowledge.

This leads to their marginalization, as they are portrayed as backward. The narrator brings this tribal view into focus, showing how it was shaped in the minds of the people of the north, before transcending it: *"They sometimes believe that they will remain in the desert for days without help, dying from thirst, hunger, heat, and cold. They imagine some will perish while others survive, eating the flesh of the dead, as they read in adventure books, cheap magazines, or saw in horror films. But I repair the damage..."* (Thamer, 2004, p. 17).

Tourists, drawn by the thrill of adventure, delight in witnessing these strange and mythical things they've read about in books and magazines. They come to revel in the spectacle of the legendary, embracing what they've been taught through mass-market culture, culture that has never been based on experiencing and testing reality. This culture has consistently marginalized the desert and the East in general. *Timimoun* transcends this by presenting the desert as "an expression of something described through rational analysis," and it simultaneously seeks to rationalize the techniques and approaches through which this narrative reality is conveyed, far from mere illusions (Boudjedra, 2002).

Thus, the narrator takes on the role of an enlightened guide, revealing the desert's true face. This is evident in his role within the story as a tourist guide, saying: *"This role assigned to me as a guide leading my clients across the vast desert meant that I always sought to break the preconceived notions that were so widespread among tourists. They came carrying a kind of naivety and spontaneity in their minds, so I would avoid the beaten paths and prefer the rough, dangerous trails..."* (Akkar, 2000, p. 33).

Roland Barthes' concept of the attentive, contemplative reader is required here, one capable of bridging gaps, following the twists and turns of the narrative, and distilling the meanings and connotations embedded within the text. The reader must be astute when decoding this narrative, as it contains veiled meanings, hiding more than it explicitly states. The writer leaves subtle clues that guide the reader to uncover the figurative speech embedded between the lines of the story (Boudjedra, 2002). The novelist identifies with the narrator, adopting his guise, and the tourists are nothing more than his reading audience, following his tales. His goal in the novel is to familiarize them with this paradise whose blessings, gifts, beauty, and magic have been hidden from them. The narrator, through the knowledge he provides, demonstrates, unlike his clients, that he has truly come to understand the desert. He realizes that it carries pain, but a different kind of pain than the

city's, a pain born from its marginalization and the neglect of its people. In this way, the desert refuses to share its treasures and has earned the wrath of nature. It remains proud and unyielding, perhaps even exercising its own form of repression against any attempt to dominate it.

There are indications of a shift in the perception of the desert in modern Orientalist literature, which seeks to destabilize the centralized thinking of the West, thinking that has long justified the invasion and dominance of the East, relegating it to the margins. Nietzsche's existential perspective aligns with this view, as he stated: "...*And if he turns, and the sands of the desert burn his feet, to the oases where fresh water flows, the cool shadows stretch, and life rests, casting aside the traveller's staff*" (Thamer, 2004, p. 25). The desert has thus become a terrestrial paradise, a symbol of eternal happiness.

He also says:

Honestly, I must admit that I was once taken by a similar scent when I sang what was inspired by the winds of the desert. I filled my chest with the fragrant breezes of the East, pure and fresh, far from old Europe, whose air is clouded, burdened by its humidity and its melancholy.

"That was the time when I fell in love with the East, with its desert. There is a sky unlike this one, where clouds do not gather. Oh, if only the lion of virtues could roar in front of the daughters of the desert, for the roar of virtue, O daughters of the desert, is the strongest call to awaken Europe and urge it to rise. Here I am, the son of Europe, and I can only bow in reverence and focus on the clear sound of these divine verses. The desert expands and stretches, woe to anyone who seeks to seize it..." (Nietzsche, 1938 p. 87).

In this discourse, there is an evident bias toward the desert, particularly in its natural aspect. This reflects how some Western philosophers and thinkers have reformulated their concepts of the East. While the text implicitly critiques the spiritual qualities of the East and its religious aspects, it remains a testimony to the allure of the desert, with its beauty, grandeur, and natural harshness, which has captivated the other. This message warns the colonial West against attempting to dominate it, suggesting that such attempts are illusions, driven by sadism and a desire for superiority. The East is East, and the West is West.

When we return to interrogate the text and uncover its hidden meanings, we can clearly see that positioning the desert as the central element in the narrative signifies the collapse of the illusion of the center and the periphery, a concept the West promoted in its colonial war against the desert and the East as a whole. For the desert is the East, and the city represents the West.

The narrator says: "Initially, I refused to sell the magnificent desert to tourists, whether foreign or not, because I knew full well that they came here searching for happiness, while I believed the opposite. I thought the desert was the central place of torment, suffering, and anguish. I refused to sell the desert, at first, as something to be used to estrange visitors... They come in crowds, hurried, with faces brimming with joy. People do not understand suffering unless they witness the cosmic disorder and celestial chaos that constitute the Hoggar region, where the sands, dunes, and mountains accumulate in an intimidating and mysterious way, making one inevitably think of suicide from the overwhelming awe and prayer. The desert is the cacophony of the universe and its contradictions; it is also a geographical and geological upheaval at the same time" (Nietzsche, 1938). This passage is laden with numerous linguistic layers. On the surface, the language highlights the spiritual side of the desert, attempting to align the narrative with an experience of mystical integration and annihilation. This might lead the reader to think that the text affirms the spiritual dimension of the place, imbuing it with a sacred essence, linking the desert to the sky and the paradise. However, this impression is an illusion, a result of the repression exerted by the external reality and its authority over the novel and its central narrative. (Boudjedra, 2002) It also reflects the writer's tendency to leave more room for sensitive spaces and to include them within the unsaid, appealing to the reader's sensitivity and reception.

In reality, the linguistic structure suggests another meaning: annihilation here refers to the annihilation in the desert, driven by admiration for the beauty of the described scene. Moreover, the text borrows the states of "sorrow and pain" from the mystical context to signify this annihilation. While sorrow and pain are states that afflict the mystical self as it yearns to break free from the body's shackles and ascend to the absolute, reaching the point of annihilation, according to Sufi thought, the narrator's desire for self-destruction here is synonymous with annihilation, but not in the sense of a Sufi transcendence. It instead represents a repressive act under the spell of the natural, savage beauty of the desert, so powerful that it compels the narrator to offer up the self as a sacrifice to it. Though the passage conceals the spiritual aspect of the desert, nature is present, exerting its dominance over the linguistic structure and the narrator's consciousness.

Moreover, the text reveals the pattern of the "Other" and its exploitation of the desert, exposing its colonial tendencies and sadistic desire to seize control of the desert. This is depicted in a tragic manner, tinged with a sense of lamentation and mourning, as it unveils the narrator's pain in the presence of the overwhelming beauty, which has been distorted and mutilated by this other, who confiscated the sculptures and looted artifacts that bear witness to the ancient heritage

of the Tassili people. The narrator states: "...The desert sculptures, very few of which remain, were largely stolen and plundered by the French officers, colonial invaders, and race scientists..." (Thamer, 2004). Thus, the text carries a discourse of identity and self in opposition to the colonizing Other, who has erased its landmarks, appropriated its beauty, and seized its heritage, distorting our culture. It is true that the reader of the novel does not sense any intimacy or nostalgia between the narrator and the place he has chosen as his vision, before it becomes the stage for his narrative events. There is no clear indication in his language that the place belongs to him or that he belongs to it, neither through possessive constructions nor by using the genitive case. He never refers to "our sculptures" or "our desert" or "our palaces and oases" because, by nature, he is from the city. The narrative seems to imply that the desert is a search for safety, driven by his harsh reality. He is the lost son of the city, the bourgeois who was unsatisfied with his father's whims and arrogance, and his city, which threatens his life. Yet, the desert holds a different meaning for him, and he attempts to affiliate himself with it, drawn to it in some way. This identification with the desert, which he unconsciously projects, is revealed through the identity pattern in the text. The narrator, in his rejection of selling the desert to the Other, rejects their arrogance and brutality as they usurp what rightfully belongs to the East. His defense of the cultural heritage that the Tassili region embodies, and which the colonial mindset has destroyed, is a profound expression of self, civilization, and history. Thus, he comes to identify with the desert from a different angle, through identity, homeland, and the pull of the whole to the part, the original to the branch, and the center to the periphery. We all belong to the desert because it represents both the future and the origin, whereas the city is a branch. Geographically, the desert's vastness far exceeds that of the city. Therefore, the desert's centrality undermines the city's dominance, even though it was sidelined for a long period. Contemporary novels aim to reshape concepts within a new civilizational framework, which challenges long-standing certainties and deconstructs them.

Thus, the tourist guide/narrator refused to sell the desert to his foreign or local clients, as it is part of the identity, part of the homeland, and its very spirit. He states: "The desert is something else; it is a collection of shapes and sizes saturated with intertwined lines, all emanating from a dense, tangled network, with elements overlapping and intersecting. It is most evident in the spacious and fertile oases, which offer a fertility unmatched anywhere else..." (Boudjedra, 2002). Timimoun has become a focal point, not only as a space for confession and self-expression, but also as a catalyst for memories and the promised paradise. The passage outlines the desert's unique

features, with its interconnected forms, making it distinct from the conventional and thus a metaphor for the modernity sought by those yearning for the different and the other. In this way, the narrative guides us to the idea that the desert is more in tune with and suited for modernization than the city, which has failed to accommodate and understand modernity, misrepresenting it and thus collapsing into crisis. Although we may reserve judgment on transferring modernity's concepts to the desert in the way advocated by the West, as represented by the author through the architecture of the narrative, this framework remains deeply embedded within the novel, playing a guiding role in its meanings and driving its events. We can almost argue that this was the very objective behind its construction.

3.2 Timimoun and the representation of the desert self

The novel pays homage to the cultural heritage of the desert's inhabitants, chronicling their ancient civilization, traditions, customs, craftsmanship, and their ingenuity in creating the "fouqara" irrigation system and building mud palaces that continue to stand as enduring symbols of desert life. This constant emphasis on the significance of this vast space reinforces its centrality. The narrator recounts: "... I leave them and take a sparrow with me to visit a market in Timimoun, or the village of Fatist, buried in the shifting sands, or one of my friends invites us to have lunch with him, where we are served desert bread baked beneath the sand, and roasted meat wrapped in fig leaves, seasoned with apricot powder and garlic" (Boudjedra, 2002). Even more remarkable is his description: "Fragrant aromas drift through the small gardens of Timimoun, a blend of the scent of burnt wood, wet earth, pungent fabrics, fresh fruits such as apricots, dates, figs, and dried tomatoes, as well as cleaning agents like natron and lotions used to cleanse the channels. The owners of these wonderful gardens devote themselves to laborious tasks, never ceasing, to prevent the accumulation of sand in the channels and the growth of mud" (Boudjedra, 2002). This vivid and detailed description stimulates the reader's curiosity to visit the place and experience its beauty firsthand. The author skilfully highlights Timimoun's culinary traditions, showcasing the hospitality and generosity of its inhabitants, who invite him to partake in their meals, emphasizing this deeply ingrained custom, which remains exclusive to desert dwellers and continues to be cherished by them.

The novel offers an authentic depiction of Timimoun, an architectural heritage that stands as a testament to an ancient civilization. The narrator reveals the origins of its name, aligning this explanation with his role as a guide. He states: "Timimoun is an ancient Berber palace, its walls constructed from red and mud bricks, which is why it came to be called the Red Oasis. This palace

is perched on a rock, 20 meters above the oasis, and it houses an old and magnificent mosque with a minaret that seems to vigilantly guard the palace, ever watchful of the many invasions it faced in times past, constantly on the lookout for any intruder from the desert" (Boudjedra, 2002). The author strives to transcend his ideological awareness, acknowledging the mosque's magnificence, which he cannot avoid describing due to its aesthetic contribution to the architecture of the palace. More significantly, the mosque symbolizes the spiritual life of the desert self, challenging the mythological framework often associated with desert thinking and the distorted notions depicted in Orientalist imagery and classical literature, which the novel critiques as "cheap books." The depiction of Timimoun's significance is further underscored as the narrator introduces the reader to the innovations created by its people, which have been preserved by the desert inhabitants. He elaborates on the "fouqara" irrigation system: "... In the scenic and picturesque oasis of Timimoun, where water channels stretch over two hundred kilometers, these channels were dug by black slaves brought from Sudan centuries ago, through layers of clay and accumulated sediment, one atop the other. These layers sloped in the opposite direction, from east to west. Timimoun's channels formed patterns resembling interwoven and intersecting combs that spanned the entire oasis.

The small gardens were supplied by a highly intricate and differential system of water distribution. My friend, Kamal Raïs, will undoubtedly be astonished when he discovers it. Every process of water distribution relies on the ability to control the original groundwater levels, which then divides into fractional levels that branch into new channels, making them impossible to count due to their sheer abundance and complexity" (Boudjedra, 2002). The culture of the desert inhabitants is a product of their interaction with the environment, their ability to integrate with it, and their understanding of its essence, which has ultimately evolved into a civilizational achievement that shaped nature to serve their needs and well-being. This is the central message of the descriptive passage, which asserts that "culture has a single source: the interaction of humans with reality. It begins as an awareness of the features of things, a natural starting point, and then forms mental images created through communication and interaction, ultimately becoming a cohesive whole of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, shaped by an understanding of the world and its elements" (Boudjedra, 2002). The inclusion of Kamal Raïs, the narrator's friend, in this comprehensive and precise depiction of the system the desert inhabitants use to extract and distribute groundwater for irrigating oases in a mathematically rigorous manner that astonishes and impresses, creates a deliberate contrast. This contrast juxtaposes the culture of the desert inhabitants

and their remarkable achievements with that of the city, which relies on imitation and theory but lacks practical experience.

The narrator frequently recalls both his and his friend's brilliance in solving mathematical equations during their high school years and their pride in having memorized some of Omar Khayyam's poetry, reflecting a youthful exuberance that remains perpetually unfulfilled. This narrative approach subtly conveys a satirical tone that critiques the illusionary culture embraced by urban dwellers, signalling their cultural decline. Through an implicit comparison, the text highlights the significant disparity between the two cultures: the first is authentic, ancient, and has yielded tangible, real-world results, while the second is merely imitation, an empty slogan with no substantial outcomes. This critique implicitly addresses the marginalization of human capabilities that have demonstrated their potential to generate knowledge, construct civilization, and tame nature using simple yet effective means, leading to extraordinary practical results that exemplify taste, justice, culture, and democracy (Imad, 2006).

The narrator states: *"The water is distributed across each of the small gardens, most of which are modest in size. The distribution of this water is conducted with remarkable precision, despite the inherent challenges in assessment. This distribution is organized based on countless variables, complex in nature and difficult to comprehend, such as the size of the garden, the social class system, and customary practices, along with the lineage of the trees and other influencing factors. The individual responsible for overseeing this distribution is the water keeper, a wise and knowledgeable man, elected by the farming community every three years. The water keeper fulfils this role by applying his knowledge of mathematics and his artistic ingenuity"* (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 78).

The novel articulates the conditions necessary for a renaissance, which is rooted in both knowledge and natural wealth, the very foundations of civilization and its continued support. A critical component that enhances these elements is democracy, a system in which the desert self-excels in practice through the principle of sharing. This represents a civilization that does not perish with the death of its people. After his term concludes, the water keeper is replaced, not for his dishonesty, but for his honesty, yet what endures is his knowledge, expertise, and influence on future generations, ensuring the continuation of knowledge-sharing without the risk of monopolistic tendencies or the thirst for control. In this sense, the novel incorporates a political discourse that uncovers the causes of the current crisis while proposing an ideal alternative grounded in freedoms, sharing, and democracy. The equitable democratic system in the distribution

of water to the gardens emerges as a metaphor for the ideal governance structure, as it is based on fairness (equal distribution) and the free election of the water keeper. Undoubtedly, this system is inspired by Islamic law, and the presence of the beautiful mosque at the center of Timimoun's palace serves as a symbol of the centrality of religious principles in shaping culture and guiding the actions of the enlightened desert inhabitants. The desert people's interpretation of religion, considered more profound in their context, has yielded positive and constructive results. It is improbable that the novelist here intends to advocate for the Islamic model, considering his Marxist inclinations. However, this system has unconsciously imposed itself upon the text, exerting its authority due to its efficacy and deep entrenchment within desert culture. As a result, Timimoun evolves into a central figure, not only geographically and culturally, but also politically, while the influence of the city diminishes, both in imagination and amidst social and political turmoil. The city has become a place characterized by violence, loss, sorrow, and absurdity.

4. The desert as an icon of untouched natural wealth

The novel emphasizes the untouched natural wealth of this region, which remains unaccompanied by any modernizing renaissance. Through this, it implicitly critiques the failure of the authorities to effectively harness this wealth for the progress of the national economy. The political crisis depicted in the novel can be seen as an extension of the long-standing economic crises and social inequalities that have accumulated over time. In a visionary sense, the novel perhaps proposes a solution in the form of a shift toward the desert as both a cultural and human heritage, awaiting a modernizing effort that would complement the natural richness bestowed upon it by divine providence.

The writer masterfully combines contradictions within a single narrative passage, creating a tension between the opening and the closing of the scene. This contrast opens up worlds of wonder and surprise that evoke feelings of joy and delight, while simultaneously concluding with a sense of sorrow and sadness due to the dangers posed to this natural wealth, resulting from the actions of civilized humans (symbolized by the cars). These humans, as the narrative suggests, fail to recognize the value of the desert's natural reserves, putting the vulnerable camel caravans at risk of harm and destruction. This passage subtly raises the question of whether urbanites, should they move to this pristine region and modernize it, would succeed in preserving its heritage, or if they would inadvertently destroy the most magnificent and creative aspects of the Earth.

The text presents a linguistic pattern in which the narrator skilfully describes the desert creatures that inspired his ancestors, who immortalized the monuments and composed poetry. The narrator gives way to his poetic talent to convey what prose could not capture, with poetry replacing narrative to describe a scene that prose language cannot fully encompass. He writes:

*“My horse crosses the desert, proud and slow,
The desert is saffron-colored, the horse walks languidly, as if blind,
Its movement imprints the space with stunning beauty,
Appearing as a slow-moving blue stain,
Crossing our pure white shore,
The horse’s hooves lift mounds of pale sand,
And clouds of green salt...”* (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 52).

This blending of poetic language and prose reflects the nature of the narrative structure, which requires distinctive and significant dimensions to capture the essence of the novel's action. What matters here is that through this technique, the author *"transfers reality in a way that aligns with the narrative structure's framework and meaning, corresponding to the realistic challenges that reveal convictions and ideologies, fostering a wide exchange between narrative styles, which incorporate the ideas of thought and dimensions of self-pride in the homeland, language, and nation."* (Boudjedra, 2002, p. 53).

However, the narrator later contrasts this beauty with the harshness of the desert's nature, embedding a discourse of human impotence, critiquing the inability of the city dweller to comprehend and tame it. The narrator says: *"...The desert is bitterly cold in winter, where the space appears whitened despite the saffron-colored sand dunes, and the red and yellow hues. At that moment, I feel that the desert is difficult to access, its features elusive, its views hostile, and its winds mesmerizing..."* (Akkar, 2000, p. 69).

This passage carries implicit meanings, illustrating human impotence and authority in the face of this paradise that remains hidden due to the lack of modernization, which has been limited to the city. There is no interaction between the authority and this place. The description of the desert's beauty continues, portraying it as a paradise, vibrant, full of life, purity, simplicity, and clarity, with its lush green trees, climbing roses that shelter migrating birds seeking warmth and safety: *"The desert night grew deeper and firmer, the moon ascended into the sky, and twilight approached."*

The crystalline, round, and gleaming moon almost touched a massive climbing rose bush, which had climbed up all the surrounding walls... The birds, hidden inside the blooming rose, could be heard, their voices rising softly, fearful, trembling, restless, anxious... These traces reached us before the birds entered between the branches of the rose trees and the towering palm trees winding around the hotel windows, influenced by the abundance and fertility, or by some invisible force.” (Boudjedra, 2002). The author continues to dismantle the preconceived stereotype of the desert in the minds of readers, transforming it into a lively paradise full of flowers and dense trees. This establishes the centrality of the marginalized and overlooked, not only within the realm of imagination but extending into reality. As the narrator is a tour guide, he convinces the reader of his role and encourages them to align themselves with him, preparing them for a journey through the pages of the novel.

Conclusion

Contemporary novels transcend aesthetic approaches to establish a cultural and cognitive foundation. This novel offers a radically different perspective from the traditional Orientalist and classical writings about the desert, where the desert has been celebrated and placed at the center of geographical, social, and cultural significance due to its natural and civilizational attributes. In this regard, the desert’s influence over the text becomes undeniable, with Timimoun emerging as an earthly paradise, while the city diminishes, overwhelmed by waves of violence and destruction. The novel systematically dismantles all the beauty previously associated with the city, unseating what traditional narratives had established. The city is depicted as a corrupt, decayed place, its streets imbued with the stench of blood, where death lies in wait to strike both intellectuals and ordinary people alike. Timimoun, as a distinctive narrative discourse, seeks to challenge and alter our perception of ourselves and our civilizational achievements. It affirms that the self-possesses its own system of thought, creativity, and innovation, ensuring both its survival and superiority. The novel represents a vision that endeavors to re-establish the centrality of the East and the desert, while signalling the decline of the city and the modern Western world. Its aim is to create a shift in the social, political, and cultural landscape. This begins by altering the way the audience perceives reality, thus shifting the entire system of thought within it. It contests the belief in the inherent superiority of the West, advocating instead for a recognition of its own extraordinary capabilities, particularly in terms of its natural wealth, human creativity, and religion.

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