Chapter Three

Forty Days and Forty Years:

Passing through the Desert

Historically, theologically, mystically, and literarily, the desert is dealt with as a sacred space of self-exploration and the concretization of the meaning of life. Down the centuries, the desert has been an attraction to geographers, historians, travelers, scientists, writers, and filmmakers. For these people, the desert has been a space of discovery of the lost heritage of the ancient past in the form of rock-paintings and carvings upon caves and mountains. Dualities of inside and outside, interior and exterior, darkness and light, subject and object, self and Other, human and ‘other-than-human’ are unified in this empty, formless desert. In the desert, emptiness is fullness and fullness is the void. The desert spiritualizes the mind and personifies the ‘other-than-human’. In a visit to the Tunisian Sahara in 1979, the American artist Bill Viola in a visit to the Tunisian Sahara in 1979 recorded a video, where he gloriously describes his journey as follows:

Standing there, a place where, after a long arduous journey, you realize you can go on further. Each time you advance towards it, it recedes further. You have reached the edge. All you can do is stand there and peer out into the void, watching. Standing there you strain to look further, to see beyond, strain to make out familiar shapes and forms. You finally realize that the void is yourself. It is like some huge mirror for your mind. Clear and uncluttered, it is the opposite of our urban spaces. Out here, the unbound mind can run free. Imagination reigns.
Space becomes a huge projection of screen. Inside becomes outside.  
(qtd. in David Jasper, “The Desert Landscape…” 250 )

The desert imposes challenges to the observer’s mind by its intriguing formlessness and vast emptiness. The Mind fails to make out any difference between the exterior and the interior of both the desert and one’s being because the desert is always in an endless movement. Apparently, the desert is seen by writers as a setting with specific geographical details such as drought and heat. However, it is shown in their works not only as a metaphor for human emotions but also of a spiritual power that raises its dwellers by inscribing their identities and traditions on its landscape, and harmonizes their nomadic perceptions of themselves and the world around them. The desert is revisited as a space which is replete with a plethora of historical, cultural, and religious details that are inherent in the evolution of human civilization.

The significance of the Sahara lies in the fact that it precedes the *anthropos* (human nature). The Great Sahara of Africa is deemed the homeland of creation and existence. Anthropology, archeology, and genealogy prove that Homo sapiens evolved in Africa. Based on these sciences, Yuval N. Harari records that “Humans first evolved in East Africa about 2.5 million years ago from an earlier genus of apes called *Australopithecus*, which means ‘Southern Ape.’ About 2 million years ago, some of these archaic men and women left their homeland to journey through and settle in vast areas of North Africa […]” (5-6). Archeologists show the evidence of a seven-million-year-old skull found in the Southern fringes of the Sahara as the oldest evidence of a link between primates and humans.
3.1 Desert: A Cosmology of Emptiness

The desert emptiness is a metaphor for self-Emptiness. The physical structure of the desert helps seekers, spiritual people, and saints in becoming one with the Divine. In the absolute emptiness of the self the Presence of God is realized through retreat in the remote wilderness—away from the evils of self—a state which the Sufis call in Arabic *khalwa*. The empty and formless desert is metaphorically synonymous with the formless God. Venturing into the desert void is the doorway to losing one’s perception of forms and objects of the distracting world. Despite all its negative characteristics, such as drought, famine, and the scorching heat, the desert is still the contemplative sanctuary. Mystics do not lose themselves in the world of objects and forms, because bewilderment in the empty desert is the prerequisite for contemplation. Jasper describes the ascetical journey to the desert as a path to the lost paradise from which God expelled Adam (Genesis 3:23):

> The early ascetics went into the desert while seeking a lost paradise. What they bequeathed to the mystical tradition in the West was a haunting by two biblical images that impelled and grounded their search. The first was that of the lost Eden (Genesis 3:23). The second was that of the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21, for they literally sought a new earth and the old had passed away. (*The Sacred Desert*… 43)

The achievement of the desert journey, as it appears in Jasper, entails self-emptying from all the worldly attachments. Self-emptying in turn entails the wanderer’s meditation, the best locus for which is the desert.
The physical emptiness of the desert is a precondition for the Emptiness of the self. The empty, formless desert is actually a metaphor for the “Emptiness” of the self, because both are basically empty of “forms.” The “Emptiness” of the self, which is the “Original”/Ultimate condition of the self, is not a “form”—not “known”: it is the “Seer”/“Witness.” Hence, the desert is the locus of the Sufi experience of Oneness of Being. Ken Wilber in his book *A Brief History of Everything* explicates the process of emptying the self from its narrow defining objects, ideas, desires, concepts, and distracting worldly images:

When, as a specific type of meditation, you pursue the observing Self, the Witness, to its very source in pure Emptiness, then no objects arise in consciousness at all. This is a discrete, identifiable state of awareness—namely, *unmanifest absorption or cessation*, variously known as nirvikalpa samadhi, jnana samadhi, ayin, vergezzen, nirodh, classical nirvana.

[...] Emptiness is often likened to the state of deep dreamless sleep, except that this state is not a mere blank but rather an utter fullness, and it is experienced as such—as infinitely drenched in the fullness of Being, so full that no manifestation can even begin to contain it. Because it can never be seen as an object, this pure Self is pure Emptiness. (220)

Living in a metropolis, a town, or a village, with one’s society contributes mainly to the formation of one’s reason and consciousness. In the desert, all objects of one’s awareness are illusory, for they do not really exist. They are not the Seer, the observing Self, or the real Self, they are the seen. Wilber’s worldview of the
experience of self-emptying can be easily accessed in the desert because one is freed from all the distracting sensations, objects and subjects. In the vastness of the formless, empty desert, one becomes a witness, but in utter release/freedom, just as one witnesses clouds come and go in the sky. The true Witness is not bound by time and place, it is timeless and placeless. Similarly, nomads do not abide by the constrictions of time and place, as they are in continuous movement. The desert is not a place for the nomads because it lacks the preconditions of place such as water, therefore, they are always moving in search of places that have water and pasture. In other words, the desert compels them to wander. They do not fear death because the desert does not offer them any temptations. They are the vast Freedom in the expanse of the desert. They do not pay heed to time, because the desert is itself futureless. The desert generates in one a consciousness of the Real Self which is the True Witness of the world of objects and nature. Put differently, the difference between Self in the Empty Space and self in the world is that the former, for Wilber, “is utterly timeless, spaceless, and objectless,” (A Brief History… 225) while the latter is caught in what he calls “mistaken identities, a list of lies, a list of precisely what you ultimately are not” (221). In this sense, the desert derives its spirituality from the fact that its physical emptiness gives way to formless mysticism.

Spiritually, journeying the desert entails a shift from the finite self to the infinite Self; from spatiotemporal consciousness to the Empty Consciousness; and from the object-defined self to the Subject “I”. One wonder how this desert which has no shelter except the sky, is different from the city or town in terms of the actualization of Oneness of Being? Physically the desert is as vast and formless as the sky. Different traditions have different forms of deity, some of the examples being an idol, a tree, an animal, and hybrids of animal and the human body. But in Sufism, God
is not an object to look at or to make sense of. He is nothing and everything. He is irreducible to any form or object. The desert is analogous to God in terms of formlessness. In Wilber’s terms, it helps one grow with the process of self-liberation and through self-questioning. In *The Simple Feeling of Being: Embracing Your True Nature*, Wilber evokes the role that self-emptying plays in the possibility of achieving Oneness of Being:

> Who am I? Ask this question over and over again, deeply. Who am I? What is it in me that is conscious of everything? If you think that you know Spirit, or if you think you don’t, Spirit is actually that which is thinking both of those thoughts. So you can doubt the objects of consciousness, but you can never believably doubt the doubter, never really doubt the Witness [...]. The certainty lies in the pure self-felt Consciousness to which objects appear, not in the objects themselves. You will never, never, never see God, because God is the Seer, not any finite, mortal, bounded object that can be seen…

> (07)

We are this awareness of things but not the objects of which we are aware. We are, as Wilber suggests, not our bodies and minds. We are the Spirit which rests in a vast Freedom of thought. The desert liberates us from our sense of boundaries, forms, and objects.

Doubt is the right path to knowledge. Doubt is a metaphor of Ibn Arabi’s highest plane of self-knowledge which he calls *hayra* (bewilderment). By the self’s immortalization in God, one becomes the Seer, who is not the reflected objects in the Mirror but the Mirror itself. This meditational process requires self-liberation from all
that is empty of mental constrictions. With this, Wilber continues his ideas about self-realization in the Divine:

This pure I AM state is not hard to achieve but impossible to escape, because it is ever present and can never really be doubted. I am not objects in nature, not feelings in the body, not thoughts in the mind, for I can Witness them all. I am that Witness—a vast, spacious, empty, clear, pure, transparent Openness that impartially notices all that arises, as a mirror spontaneously reflects all its objects…. (The Simple Feeling… 07)

The Witness cannot be the witnessed, because the witnessed is an object, not the “I Am.” The Witness is the mirror, not the objects in the mirror, for objects in the mirror come and go in a moment while the mirror stays the same. When the Seer is empty from all these constrictions, witnessing becomes the defining consciousness “I Am,” which is, to Wilber, the state of self-discovery:

This is actually the profound discovery of … the pure divine Self, the formless Witness, causal nothingness, the vast Emptiness in which the entire world arises, stays a bit, and passes. And you are That. You are not the body, not the ego, not nature, not thoughts, not this, not that—you are a vast Emptiness, Freedom, Release, and Liberation.

[….] You have disidentified from any and all finite objects; you rest as infinite Consciousness. You are free, open, empty, clear, radiant, released, liberated, exalted, drenched in a blissful emptiness that exists prior to space, prior to time, prior to tears and terror, prior to pain and mortality and suffering and death. You have found the great Unborn,
the vast Abyss, the unqualifiable Ground of all that is, and all that was, and all that ever shall be. (The Simple Feeling… 08)

The mystical Self-realization happens in the desert emptiness, where nothing exists to connect one’s self with, but the emptiness—a metaphor par excellence for the Empty, Formless Divine. Self-realization through self-emptiness negates the idea of identifying ourselves with worldly forms. It affirms the priority of spiritual Emptiness over material fullness. Spiritual emptiness in all contemplative traditions is the real fullness of one’s meaning. Wilber rejects the reducibility of humans into objects, bodies, thoughts, and feelings, because mystical Consciousness embraces and Sees all That is. He suggests that all mind-made boundaries and barriers between Man and God should be eliminated for the Oneness of Being to be fully realized. In this sense, the physical structure of the desert is a metaphor for the “Emptiness” of the self.

3.2 The Desert Encounter

Jasper describes the role of the desert in filling the finitude of human self with the infinitude of God as follows:

The desert meditation is about what it means for each of us to be the unique human being that “I” am. Minimally, this meditation, which grows richer and more amazing with each step of the “wanderings,” includes reflection on human finitude: our capacities are bounded and limited by a vast, empty space that we can understand with the image of the ‘desert’ […] The experience of the desert is an experience of the overturning of human finitude, the opening of human being to the mystical basis of its identity. This place is where the divine as “God”
empties itself into finite human being and where finite human being discovers its own deep participation in transcendence. This is the place of desert encounter: the encounter of the self with itself, encounter of the self with the other self, and encounter of the self with the unknowable Transcendent Other that in the end is not other than self or other self […] where conventional distinctions are overturned so as to manifest their origin and final destination in the unspeakable, unnamable Word and Name of God. (The Sacred Desert… xii-xiii)

The desert encounter is synonymous with encountering God, for it transcends prayer, which, one feels sometimes, does not go beyond the ceiling. Thus, the point of departure for all contemplative traditions is wandering in solitude where the presence of God is experienced. In Sufism, purgation and purification are achieved only through one’s acceptance of suffering which is synonymous with the nomadic life of wandering in the desert. Once they are achieved, perfection manifests itself and materializes. Intentionality, desire, and openness combined with the desert are prerequisites for embracing God. Otherwise, one remains immersed in self-centeredness. Indigenous people are endowed with such a spiritual sense. The desert is historically the refuge for the Israelites, Muslims and the Christian fathers, because it is theologically and spiritually God’s chosen land. The desert, as a landscape metaphor, frees them from limited paradigms, be they religious sects or political ideologies, that neither promote the spiritual imagination nor encourage spiritual reflection. The keystone of the Sufi school of Oneness of Being cannot materialize unless nature and Man are considered divine theophanies.
The literal and material meaning of the desert is not as much of concern to the mystics as its latent meaning. The boundlessness and emptiness, silence and stillness of the desert are conducive to considering it a Sufi geography proper for meditation. James Wellard powerfully describes how the North African desert can be differently conceived of by different people, “If one tries to capture it by mental effort it tends to be completely elusive. All that one can intimate is an awareness of a silence such as is never heard outside the real desert, neither in the mountains or the sea; a sense of timelessness which transcends even the sense of morality; and a glimpse into the mysteries of life in its most primeval form [...]” (The Great Sahara16). The space of the desert provides writers with philosophical reflections on silence, reflections which unveil realities that mystically transcend mortality. The desert qua a spiritual metaphor in their writing is revealed through the power of mystical discourse through a penetration of metaphysical realms of thought and experience. The spiritual meaning of the desert is explored by examining the historical and religious significance of the desert to humankind—an exploration that litterateurs express through metaphors.

Paul Ricoeur notes, “With metaphors, the innovation lies in the producing of new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution. The metaphor is alive as long as we can perceive, through the new semantic pertinence […]” (Time and Narrative 17). Defamiliarizing metaphors are produced by an “impertinent” or bold creative imagination. A metaphor is not merely a figure of speech constituted in replacing one word with another but an effective means of adding a real meaning that transcends the boundaries of traditional rhetoric. The Sufi discourse is metaphorical by nature. Sufis use parables in teaching their disciples. Muhsin al-Musawi notes that “Sufi literature represents the unworldly side of things; it was being collected for
posterity in order to ensure the survival in times that for the Sufis were too materialistic, worldly, and self-serving” (Arabic Literary Thresholds: Sites of Rhetorical Turn in Contemporary Scholarship 27). Metaphors are used in Sufism in order to allow permeation into a world unrecognized by the mind’s eye. Sufism establishes a connection between this world and the otherworld through its discourse. John Renard highlights the way metaphors function in Sufism, “Sufi authors often fashioned metaphors to describe subtle aspects of the divine-human relationship […] Sufi metaphors (majaz in Arabic) have often had the effect of appearing to tread on forbidden territory in attempts to say what, by definition, no human language can” (157). Sallie McFague asserts that “A good metaphor moves us to see our ordinary world in an extraordinary way” (qtd. in Peter Rhea Jones 8). The desert is utilized by her as a landscape metaphor which invites the pilgrims to examine the various aspects of their journey as they travel through both the familiar and the mysterious. Realization of the presence of God in nature is the telos of their journey. With reference to the function of metaphors, Steven Lewis observes, “Landscape metaphors are used as a means of providing a common language and familiar imagery through which the ancient spiritual journeys are articulated and critiqued” (1).

The desert is deemed as a space of testimony of one’s wrestling with one’s faith. In the hardships of the desert one can have a self-encounter so as to purify one’s skepticism about the divine presence. When one is unable to succeed in encountering problems in the desert, one realizes one’s powerlessness. When one is saved, one realizes the greatness of God. Asouf in al-Koni’s The Bleeding of the Stone realizes God’s presence in the heart when he endures the hard abyss for several hours without falling down the mountain. He sees God in the eyes of the waddan that saves him. Lewis emphasizes the role of metaphors in self-exploration vis-à-vis God: “Landscape
metaphors provide a common language and space to explore one’s journey with God. Metaphors invite, and, on a certain level, even grant us permission to struggle in spiritual deserts […] where the ordinary becomes sacred” (1). Belden C. Lane suggests the following:

The desert as metaphor is that uncharted terrain beyond the edges of the seemingly secure and structured world in which we take such confidence, a world of affluence and order we cannot imagine ever ending. Yet it does. And at the point where the world begins to crack, where brokenness and disorientation suddenly overtake us, there we step into the wide, silent plains of a desert we had never known existed. (195)

Mystically, the eternity of a moment is realized in the infinity of the Sahara. Metaphysically, the desert is bestowed with depth and emptiness where nothing is left of one’s self-centeredness and arrogance. Bewilderment and contemplation take place in the desert, it is boundless, borderless, and infinite. The feeling of one’s nothingness in front of the divine presence is generated by meditation on one’s own reality. The geography of the desert edge becomes the center of self-consciousness.

The desert is eternal. Its existence precedes Adam, so does its stillness and emptiness. It is as changeless as God. It does not change with the passage of time or by the human force, for its formlessness cannot be formed and its emptiness cannot be filled by the human mind. As for Eryk Hanut, the desert today “is what the planet was when nothing and no one walked on it […] The first Fathers of the Christian Church ran into it to be clothed in its mystery. Corruption doesn’t exist there, and what we take for solitude is perhaps another name for innocence […] It is colorless and one. It
is eternal and invisible. The winds of change never break over it” (Perfume of the Desert… XX). The travel experience in the desert is totally different from cities or populated areas like towns and villages. With reference to life in the desert as a challenging journey of struggle against death, Hanut writes, “No one can be prepared for the desert. Like a serious illness, it attacks you by surprise, rubbing to nothing all your physical and moral resistance. If I attempted a definition of desert—idiotic thought—it would consist only of innumerable repetitions of one word: ‘Light’” (XIX). In this way, Hanut’s reflections on the desert and life in it make it different from other places, because it entails purification (safa) through patience (sabr) which is not only the nomadic but also the Sufi maxim of life. In the desert of al-Koni, patience is understood by the Tuareg life in terms of the maxim “pain lessens pain.” Hanut describes the way the desert influences the Sufis over the centuries as follows:

The Sufis, I am certain, polished their philosophy in the wind of the desert. The plants that grow there are fragrant, for the most part. Pines and aloes survive there. The odor of their leaves, rubbed between two fingers—the perfume of the desert—is concentrated, distilled to a quintessence, sublimed perhaps by the absence of water. This is how Sufis speak […] In a fierce way, too noble for consolation. (XX-XXI)

Travel in the desert is synonymous with the soul’s journey and its awakening to divine nature. The sacred desert contains oases of gnosis and disclosure. The desert is trackless and nameless. Therefore, wanderers encounter the experience similar to ‘mise en abyme’, which literally means “placed into abyss.” The reality of the desert is as distorted as its mirage. Scorching heat, stormy wind, and the sand dunes make the desert groundless. The desert physically contains sharp edges of mountains and
blurred rocks. As the earthly objects float and the thin air becomes like the ripples of the sea, the exterior and the interior of the desert no longer remain discontinuous. As a result, a wanderer in the desert loses the consciousness of the boundary between one’s interior and exterior. One’s consciousness in the desert becomes the void, or perhaps what the mystics call the Truth because it is formless. The desert turns out to be an interiorized experience of its people. Every desert phenomenon is ephemeral except its emptiness and formlessness. Drought sometimes continues for years, but rain falls and sweeps everything in its way. Nothing stands between a desert nomad and heaven but the horizon.

The desert has contributed to shaping different cultures, civilizations, and religions over the millennia. Its influence on them is generally presented by the One World Magazine as follows:

One could safely say that the deserts have both troubled and influenced entire cultures and individuals alike […] A target for exploration and conquest, the arid areas in our world have stood taller than the tallest mountain range in the eyes of its explorers and have presented indifferent, inscrutable barriers to many civilizations. Three of our most widespread religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism experienced their beginnings in or at on the very borders of arid and sometimes very hospitable environments. (N.P.)

The emptiness and hardships of the desert qualifies it as a sanctuary for humankind to be mature in terms of understanding God. The desert preexisted Man in the planet Earth, it is with us from the first days of creation. The Genesis refers to the world, namely the pre-creation scene when the world was “a formless void and a wilderness”
Moreover, the desert stands for suffering and toil in the Genesis (3:17). For Prophet Moses and his people, the Israelites, Sinai Desert was the spiritual sanctuary for purification for forty years. The desert is where God speaks to Moses, yet, remains hidden or unseen. Moses remains in a state of unconsciousness “while my [divine] glory passes by” (Exodus 33:22). The desert represents testing, encounter, and renewal for Jesus, the Christ, who was tested by the devil’s temptations in the wilderness of desert and fasted for forty days and nights after which the angels brought nourishment to him (Luke 4:2). Prophet Muhammad was brought up by his bedouin foster mother, Halima, in the desert for two years. It took him forty years of solitude in the desert of today’s Saudi Arabia to receive the divine revelation and to be declared the seal of prophets by God. Muhammad used to leave the distracting life in Mecca city to the cave of Hira in a mountain called the Mountain of Light (Jebel al-Nour), where he received enlightenment and the divine revelation. Renard in *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* shows the significance of the number forty in Sufism, “God kneaded the clay of Adam for 40 days, leading Persian Sufis to identify the discipline of the spiritual retreat simply as “the 40” (chilla) days, the time the seeker needs to be fashioned into a spiritually mature being. It was at the age of 40 that the Prophet is traditionally believed to have received his inaugural revelations” (90). For Muhammad, it is the age of revelation, “At length, when he reaches the age of full strength and attains forty years, he says, “O my Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for Thy favour which Thou has bestowed upon me, and upon both my parents, and that I may work righteousness such as Thou mayest approve; and be gracious to me in my issue. Truly have I turned to Thee and truly do I bow (to Thee) in Islam” (Koran 46:15).28

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28 The number forty symbolizes one’s spiritual elevation in several religions. In Noah’s story, “it rained
Theologically, the existence of number forty (40) in the three largest religions of the world is not a matter of coincidence. No wonder, the forty days of Christ’s fasting, Moses’ forty years of trial and chastisement, and Muhammad’s forty years to gain full strength and patience (sabr) take place in the desert. The number forty has a deep symbolic meaning in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It denotes a spell put by God for his messengers and their followers as a period of probation, purgation, trial, and chastisement. Thus, “forty” stands for perfection of the human soul through retreat and asceticism during which one loses one’s self (nafs) and obtains witnessing of God. The desert is also the place to which mystics, hermits, ascetics, and solitaires retreated. As Annemarie Schimmel indicates, “Forty” signals preparation and completion in of one’s life-cycle: “A proverb among Bedouins claims that someone who deals with the tribe’s enemies for 40 days becomes one of them. If someone performs the morning prayer for 40 consecutive days under the lamp of the main mosque, he or she will be blessed by the vision of Khidr, the guardian saint of seekers after mystical enlightenment” (The Mystery of Numbers 240). Following the forty-day spiritual experience of the Christ, the Christian hermits led an ascetical life in Sinai desert by the year 400 CE. According to Christine Valters Paintner, “[…] these spiritual seekers, known as the desert fathers and mothers, withdrew from a society where the misuse of human relationships, power, and material possessions ran counter to their sense of the sacredness of life” (ix). For them, the desert is the locus of God’s presence.

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for forty days (Genesis 7:4). According to Catherine G. Lucas, “Buddha was beset under the bodhi tree meditating for forty days to attain enlightenment” (97). Koran refers to Moses story, “And when We did appoint for Moses forty nights (of solitude), and then ye chose the calf, when he had gone from you, and were wrong-doers” (2:51). The desert is depicted as an abyss (teeh) and punishment to wander in for the Israelites because they refused God’s command to join Musa, “Allah said: “Therefore will the land be out of their reach for forty years: In distraction will they wander through the land: But sorrow thou not over these rebellious people” (5.26). The desert, for them, was a land of purification.
Ibn Khaldun illustrates the influence of the desert on the nomadic consciousness and the way it is formed so as to embrace and accept all things:

The Bedouins restrict themselves to the bare necessities in their way of life and are unable to go beyond them, while sedentary people concern themselves with conveniences and luxuries in their conditions and customs […] Bedouins, thus, are the basis of, and prior to, cities and sedentary people.

[…] Bedouins are closer to being good than sedentary people. The reason for this is that the soul in its first natural state of creation is ready to accept whatever good or evil may arrive and leave an imprint upon it […] they are closer to the first natural state and more remote from the evil habits that have been impressed upon the souls (of sedentary people) through numerous and ugly, blameworthy customs. (Muqaddimah 93-94)

Life in the desert contributes to the priority of nomadic consciousness over the urban consciousness. The controllable desert lacks the preconditions for life that meet human expectations. The duality of good and evil are integral parts of human nature, and it is in the hand of the human agent whether to get either of them enlivened or contested. Yet, the desert, owing to its poverty with regard to lack of resources and unavailability of a high-styled life, helps its people overcome self-inclinations (desires). With the only exception to this argument, the Arabian Desert is pervaded by tribalism which led to conflicts and war. Nomads of Arabia constructed groups that Ibn Khaldun in the Muqaddimah calls asabiyya (tribal solidarity), which can be either
integrative or divisive. Ibn Khaldun radically shows how tribalism in Arabia dominates the urban regions through *asabiyyah* which was associated with nomadic Arabs for about 120 years. Kevin Burns cites Ibn Khaldun’s theory of *Umran* (Urbanity), “The nomads are hardy, courageous and have strong *asabiyya*. The townspeople are cultured and wealthy, but weak individually and as a group” (117).

Ibn Khaldun’s view of the purity of the nomadic self as a trait maintained by the desert nature finds resonance in T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* where he depicts the desert as a rinsing and purifying force of human soul through its barrenness that is compensated by the glory and vastness of its land, “The abstraction of the desert landscape cleansed me, and rendered my mind vacant with its superfluous greatness: a greatness achieved not by the addition of thought to its emptiness, but by its subtraction. In the weakness of earth’s life was mirrored the strength of heaven, so vast, so beautiful, so strong” (506). The world of letters has a number of works that are mainly associated with travels in the desert as a means of the mystical self-exploration. In these works, reflections on travels in the desert entail a journey through different spiritual stages that are actualized by physical wandering. This wandering involves crossing empty deserts and encountering different hardships on the way to annihilation that has asceticism as an inevitable prerequisite for it to be achieved. Mahin Tajadod describes the way seven spiritual valleys enumerated in Sufism are actualized in Persian literature as follows:

The Persian mystic tradition compares the spiritual quest to the crossing of desert valleys. Sufism enumerates seven of these valleys:

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29 Elbaki Hermassi notes that “Alasabiyyah is both cohesive and divisive. Although Ibn Khaldun uses this notion when he speaks of the difficulties of establishing dynasties in heterogeneous societies, he is not referring to social cohesion” (*Leadership and National Development in North Africa: A Comparative Study* (15-16)).
quest, love, knowledge, detachment, unity, amazement and annihilation. The path is perilous. Asceticism to purify the soul; the disavowal of carnal passions; the renunciation of earthly desires—all these thorns wait on the mystic’s path. Gold, the possession of goods that flatter the eye and the heart and stir envy and desire—all the world’s vanities—appear as mirages in the path of the thirsty voyager.

(N.P.)

The number seven (7) is religiously associated with spiritual perfection. In the Bible, it refers to the completeness, stability, and durability of the house of Wisdom: “Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars” (Proverb 9:1).

Muhammad in his night of ascension (Mi’raj) from the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra) in Jerusalem has to cross the Seven Heavens until he met Allah. The hell in Islam has seven gates and seven layers for the sinners to be purified. The desert is an analogy of hell in terms of its scorching heat through which the mystical purification takes place. Although not all Muslims celebrate Aqīqa, a custom in welcoming a newborn, the aqīqa is celebrated when the newborn is seven day old through slaughtering a goat or sheep some of whose meat is distributed among the needy. Notably, the meaning achieved in encountering the desert, not only in literature but also in mystical accounts, is considered synonymous with fundamental changes in one’s character at the physical and spiritual levels.

Jasper considers T. E. Lawrence’s The Seven Pillars of Wisdom and Thomas Merton’s The Seven Storey Mountain as two works that have similar titles but are not set in the desert by accident. He argues, “[…] it is perhaps not finally an accident, that two literary monuments to the ‘desert’ experience in the twentieth century—by men
different in almost every respect imaginable—bear closely similar titles” (*The Sacred Desert* 10). “The Seven Pillars of Wisdom” is the name Lawrence gave the impressive mountainous pillars and hissing sand dunes in Wadi Rum (Rum Valley)—a magical area where he had made his home in the Jordanian desert. In this autobiographical work, Lawrence depicts how silence and emptiness exist in the magnificent scenery of the desert. In fact, the outset of many literary monuments is significant as doorways to their contents. As we note, the title of this work is derived from the Bible (Proverb 9:1). In the first chapter of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence spiritually and physically describes his tale in the naked desert as follows:

Some of the evil of my tale may have been inherent in our circumstances. For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven. By day the hot sun fermented us; and we were dizzied by the beating wind. At night we were stained by dew, and shamed into pettiness by the innumerable silences of stars. We were a self-centered army without parade or gesture, devoted to freedom, the second of man’s creeds, a purpose so ravenous that it devoured all our strength, a hope so transcendent that our earlier ambitions faded in its glare. (11)

Lawrence is an English desert war strategist who joins the Arabs in their victory against the Ottomans. However, the desert seems to be indifferent to any wanderer in it regardless of one’s title, sex, or designation. The passage displays the centrality of romance and enigma in the protagonist’s life in the desert.

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30 The book was also adopted into an internationally popular film by David Lean as “Lawrence of Arabia” (1962) and is considered one of the greatest achievements in the history of cinema. It also won the Academy Award for Best Picture.
Meditation is the medium of self-emptiness. It requires silence and serenity, which are two features of the desert. Although the desert is portrayed as a world where the real meets the fictional, both non-dually dissolve. We come across a place which is no-place [changeability and groundlessness], a utopia, either the lost paradise (al-Koni’s Waw), the heart of darkness, or the point of no return. Western writers have been inspired by the mystically-natured perennial philosophy. As wanderers of the Libyan Desert, protagonists of al-Koni’s novels are directed to a vanishing point or a point of no return. The worlds of mysticism and literature draw similar portrayals of the experience of the desert’s visionary silence. The desert is envisioned in both worlds as a place that offers scarce solace and deep delight, for it is the shelter of the soul. Silence is a “rose amidst flames” of worldly desires which are reduced into nothingness in the desert. Silence is mystically via negativa of religious preaching as it is superior to speech, because speech is inadequate to express God as Non-Being. This priority of silence is deeply expressed in Sufism. Rumi makes the point that God speaks to those who are silent, “Be silent that the Lord who gave thee language may speak” (qtd. in Frederick Hadland Davis, The Persian Mystics… 58). Similarly, Bistami highlights the same point by saying, “The furthest from God among the devotees are those who speak the most of him” (qtd. in Whitall N Perry, A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom 70). Desert silence is mystically represented, illustrated, and visualized in different literary works of literature. Jean Baudrillard in his book America visualizes the desert silence as a phenomenon peculiar only to the desert:

The grandeur of deserts derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth’s surface and of our civilized humors. They are places where humors and fluids become rarefied, where the air is so
pure that the influence of the stars descends direct from the constellations.

The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too—a product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since there contours roar. And for there to be silence, time itself has to attain a sort of horizontality; there has to be no echo of time in the future, but simply a sliding of geological strata one upon the other giving out nothing more than a fossil murmur. (6)

The desert journey is entirely interiorized just like the Fathers who ventured deeper into the Egyptian desert. The desert is a space of horizontality where travelers wander in a silence that exists nowhere else. Silence in the desert is so eternal that it precedes the creation of Adam. Spiritual awakening materializes through silence in the desert. Silence is not merely the disappearance of sounds or language, rather, it is a visionary experience where the Spirit is awakened to its original state. Even if little voices exist in the desert, they do not disturb the mystical experience of silence as it appears from Baudrillard’s description. Such little voices add to the experience of one’s meditation. Unlike the city, the desert has everything horizontal, without beginning or end. In this sense, the immense emptiness of the desert quietens everyone. The desert has no beginning or end because the dual vision related to time and space is non-existent. In other words, the desert is not deemed as a spatiotemporal landscape.
3.3 Representation of the Desert in Literature

[...] the notion of turning the waste into words is as absurd as any other volunteer activity, the question remains, how to make it happen? Clearly one cannot write about absence directly: one would trail into mystic blather, finally to repeat the same lame syllable. The only recourse is to write about absence indirectly, by invoking its exceptions. Like the hiker, the writer will gravitate to the oasis. He will wind up describing old lakebeds, cactus, the pronghorn, the owl. He will people the waste with fellow travelers, human or otherwise.

And being a social animal, he will record man’s endless conversation with the desert in his arts, his fabrications, in the distortion of memory. He will observe desert companions divorced from the contexts that make sense of their follies. Because those follies endure, even in the desert, man and his civilization will gain a certain wry perspective.

One of the desert’s finer by-products is its dry wit. (Bruce Berger, The Telling Distance: Conversations with the American Desert)

For writers, the desert is an ocean without shore or a sea of sand. This passage reveals Berger’s view of the desert setting as a challenge for writers’ talent, because they have the task of inhabiting the uninhabited desert with wanderers, animals, plants that are interwoven in stories with nomadic myths and beliefs and the mystical fables, meditations, and wisdom about its formlessness and emptiness. Setting their work in the desert entails imaginary, mystical inventions. The desert is inhabited, as we shall see in al-Koni’s world, not only by humans but also animals and plants that are
socially personified. Desert and its literature are deeply connected with spiritual quests and self-exploration.

The Sahara [of North Africa] is, in fact, the largest desert in the world. The Sahara is the master that surpasses human mastery. The shifting sands and the golden vistas are two beautiful, sublime scenes of the desert in Van Dyke’s *The Desert*, where the sublimity of the Saharan scenery—“from the rising up of the sun to the going down of the moon”—distinguishes it from other sceneries by painting the following surpassing image in words:

…the waste places of the earth, the barren deserts, the tracts forsaken of men and given over to loneliness, have a peculiar attraction of their own. The weird solitude, the great silence, the grim desolation, are the very things with which every desert wanderer eventually falls in love.

You think that very strange perhaps? Well, the beauty of the ugly was sometime a paradox, but do-day people admit its truth; and the grandeur of the desolate is just as paradoxical, yet the desert gives it proof. (19)

[...] In sublimity—the superlative degree of beauty—what land can equal with its wide plains, its grim mountains, and its expanding canopy of sky! You shall never see elsewhere as here the dome, the pinnacle, the minaret fretted with golden fire at sunrise and sunset; you shall never see elsewhere as here the sunset valleys swimming in a pink and lilac haze, the great mesas and plateaus fading into blue distance, the gorges and canyons banked full of purple shadow. Never again shall you see such light and air and color; never such opaline
mirage, such rosy dawn, such fiery twilight, and wherever you go, by land or by sea, you shall not forget that which you saw not but rather felt—the desolation and the silence of the desert. (232)

Dyke’s love of the beauty and sublimity of the desolate expanse and its natural hues is obvious. The remote regions of the desert occupy a unique place in travel writing. Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) in *Critique of Judgment* shows the difference between the Beautiful and the Sublime by noting that beauty is connected with “the form of the object,” having boundaries, while the sublime “is to be found in a formless object,” represented by “boundlessness” (98). The emptiness of the desert completes the imperfection of its beauty, which according to Kant and the Romantics, generates “[…] loftiness and immensity in the beholder” (Syrine C. Hout 116). The desert landscape excites ideas of pain and danger through one’s conversation with terrible objects and phenomena. Hout argues, “[…] the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful underpins the difference between loving and liking the desert, for whereas the former is absolute, abstract, and certain, the latter is relative, concrete, and contingent” (116). In a similar fashion, Edmund Burke (d. 1797) puts forward the idea of the sublime and the way it is generated in his *A Philosophical Enquiry*, “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling […]” (36). Noteworthy, the desert generates a feeling of the sublime through its characteristics when it becomes “[…] more terrifying than the darkest forest at dead of night” (Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* 36) when one’s eyes may not “after a while endure” the severe reflection of “particles of sand” (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom* 68).
Actually, different writers have shown their fascination for the spiritual meanings generated by wandering in the North African desert. Mainly, works set in the North African desert share the common theme of the desert as a space of spirituality and freedom. Gustave Flaubert’s book *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1933) represents the author’s wanderings in North Africa when his contemporaries were interested in and inspired by connecting the experience of the religious figures of *The Old Testament* and the Christian Fathers with their own travels. Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* is a splendid story of an enchanting, mystical adventure of self-exploration. It is a story of a pilot stranded in the Sahara where he meets a little prince coming from another universe in search of understanding the true meaning of life. The pilot attains the mystical wisdom by sleeping for one night in the desert which is, to him, vaster than an ocean, “The first night, then, I went to sleep on the sand, a thousand miles from any human habitation. I was more isolated than a shipwrecked sailor on a raft in the middle of the ocean. Thus you can imagine my amazement, at sunrise, when I was awakened by an odd little voice” (6). Silence is the precondition of meditation in Sufism and the Sahara is the place where the Little Prince internalizes his experience of meditation and self-exploration. Saint Exupéry reveals the profound exploration of one’s self in the Saharan silence through the Little Prince who ponders his love of the desert, “I have always loved the desert. One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams […]” (13). This statement shows the feasibility of the presence of the Little Prince’s inner silence which mystically engulfs his body and consumes the entirety of his I-ness. The sacredness of the Saharan silence lies in its role in creating an atmosphere for the Sufi practices of *tarkeez* (concentration) and *ta’mmul* (meditation). Hence, the consideration of this story as a Sufi-natured fable
lies in the fact that it is set in the Sahara in whose silence lies the catalysis of meditation and understanding of both one’s self and the meaning of life. Through the Sahara, the trajectory of the story changes from a physical journey to an interior itinerary for the Little Prince. The Sufi/mystical nature of Saint Exupéry’s story derives its significance from its setting in the Sahara. The story is mystically multilayered in the desert space as there is a sense of multivocality of the Sufi experience of its protagonist.

Like mystics who learn by direct practice (mumarasah), the Little Prince’s detachment from his rose, which he once left for its over-demanding nature, engenders the human journey back home irrespective of the span of life in this world. Presence of people around one is not necessarily a precondition for what he learns from his wanderings for he learns some morals from animals too. The fox gives him his final words of wisdom: “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye” (48). Had the story ended in a way that makes the Little Prince find his rose in his return or not, it would have been odd. Because the reward of return is perhaps beyond his knowledge—it is left by the author as a ‘hidden treasure’ (kanz makhfi) to contemplate for both the protagonist and readers. The fox plays the role of a dervish by emphasizing the role of the heart as the medium of true perception—the heart is described by the fox as the medium of perceiving the transcendent, the metaphysical, or what Kant in his *Groundwork* calls the *Noumen*. The Rose, like the desert, remains a mystery for one and all. The sense of ‘longing’ surpasses that of belonging, for longing spiritually engenders perpetual love whereas belonging entails another meeting with the rose. If such a meeting takes place again the story of separation of the Little Prince from the Rose will happen again. Longing is folly when
the longed for is unattainable, but, Ibn Arabi notes, “[…] longing is a necessary attribute of love, and accordingly I cease not from longing” (qtd. in Rom Landu 97).

Paul Bowles (d. 1999) is an American expatriate writer who migrated in 1948 to Morocco and was attracted to the Sahara to the extent that most of his works are solely on the nomadic life and the nature of the Saharan landscape. He describes his experience in the Sahara and its influence on him as follows:

It is a unique sensation, and it has nothing to do with loneliness, for loneliness presupposes memory. Here, in this wholly mineral landscape lighted by stars like flares, even memory disappears; nothing is left but your own breathing and the sound of your heart beating. A strange, and by no means pleasant, process of reintegration begins inside you, and [sic] have the choice of fighting against it, and insisting on remaining the person you have always been, or letting it take its course. For no one who has stayed in the Sahara for a while is quite the same as when he came. Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue 129)

The desert encounter is depicted in a number of novels of Bowles. The Sheltering Sky, the first novel Bowles wrote, is a story of three American travelers: Port and Kit Moresby (the couple) along with their friend George Tunner. It was introduced by the Time magazine among its TIME 100 Best English Language Novels from 1923 to 2005. It has been adapted into film in 1990 with the same title by Bernardo Bertolucci. Characters of the desert novel may be fictional or real, but the desert is the real protagonist. In The Sheltering Sky, the desert mainly contributes to the reshaping

31 Paul Bowles is an American novelist, poet, music composer, translator, short story writer, and a film scorer. He “married Jane Auer (a novelist) in 1938” (Birch and Hooper 82).
of spiritual, psychological, and existential aspects of characters. Their ignorance of the desert and its culture has put them in hard times.

According to Tennessee William, “The Sheltering Sky is an allegory of the spiritual adventure of the fully conscious person into modern experience […] it contains a mirror of what is most terrifying and cryptic within the Sahara of moral nihilism, into which the race of man now seems to be wandering blindly” (199-200). The novel is written from Bowles’ experience as he kept shuttling back and forth to Africa since 1930. Upon their arrival in the Sahara, narrator proclaims the travelers’ view of it, “[…] for the first time without any visible sign of European influence, so that the scene had a purity which had been lacking in the other towns, an unexpected quality of being complete which dissipated the feeling of chaos” (195-6). Bowles, as it appears from his interviews and works, holds a Sufi-like attitude to life and meaning answering a question about this novel, “My intention in the novel was to show what the desert can do to us, to reveal the inner desert of the spirit” (Their Heads… 128).

The desert represents a land of freedom for Port, whose passport is lost, “I’m not going to carry a passport to existence around with me, to prove I have the right to be here!” (88-9). Port’s statement is a denial of the passport as a symbol of legitimacy in the Sahara. Further, the couple’s venturing into the Sahara indicates that metaphysics of the Saharan life transcends the restrictions of city life and offers a new way of living. Port represents a dervish-like character wandering in search of his self which is socially-conditioned and alienated. Bowles at the novel’s outset draws a line between travel and tourism, where the former is intrinsically mystical and the latter is worldly, “He [Port] did not think of himself as a tourist; he was a traveler. The
difference is partly one of time, he would explain. Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over a period of years, from one part of the earth to another” (6). Port is traveler who throws himself into a situation that is not bound by time. Throughout the storyline, he escapes the view that reason can solve the riddle of existence, therefore, he tries to create meaning. Like the desert uncertainty and groundlessness, Port lives inevitably in profound uncertainty in a world with no point of return. Bowles ascertains to Halpern the secret of the Sahara’s influence on his characters by saying, “I think it has something to do with the Romantic fantasy of reaching a region of self-negation and thereby regaining a state of innocence” (Conversations with Paul Bowles 169).

Although Kit is cynical about the desert’s monotonous landscape, she gradually changes her mind towards the end of the novel under the influence of the desert’s darkness, light, and infinity:

The chaos of cubical buildings with their flat roofs seemed to go on to infinity, and with the dust and heat-daze it was hard to tell just where the sky began. In spite of the glare landscape was gray—blinding in its brilliancy, but gray in color. In the early morning for a short while the steel-yellow sun glittered distantly in the sky, fixing her like a serpent’s eye as she sat propped up against the cushions staring out at the rectangle of the impossible light. (276)

The immensity of the desert oases, colors, and the horizon stands as a source of bewilderment for Kit. Port finds in the immensity and darkness of the desert a doorway to liberation of the self from the constrictions of everything familiar.
Venturing deeper into the Sahara represents a way-out, for Port, from all physical and psychological fetters, an escape to the real desert from the desert within, “If he had not been journeying into regions he did not know, he would have found it insufferable. The idea that at each successive moment he was deeper into the Sahara than he had been the moment before, that he was leaving behind all familiar things, this constant consideration kept him in a state of pleasurable agitation” (108).

Although the desert is a point of liberation from the menacing obsessions and it grants him excitement of a moment, it also functions as a relentless force that unveils his inner desert. While preparing himself to move from Bou Noura to el-Ga’a, Port suddenly becomes oppressed for he knows how the landscape around entails exertion of energy, which he lacks, in the process of meaning acquisition:

> It takes energy to invest life with meaning, and at present this energy was lacking. He knew how things could stand bare, their essence having retreated on all sides to beyond the horizon, as if impelled by a sinister centrifugal force. He didn’t want to face the intense sky, too blue to be real…or the dark spot of the oasis below. They were there, and they should have pleased the eye, but he didn’t have the strength to relate them… he could not bring them into focus beyond the visual. So he would not look at them. (165-66)

Port’s consciousness of his inner desert that hurdles him from contemplating meaning in the external desert is relentless. The passage shows his fluctuation between love of the desert and anxiety that puts off that love. Unlike urban places, the desert appears to Port as a space without beginning or end. Images of the desert such as the blue sky and the dark night, the empty space and the horizon are not points where he can begin
his journey or end it. He turns out to be aimless as far as physical travel is concerned. The borderless character of the desert makes him in a daze. The desert symbolizes an examination of human values for Port and Kit in the civilized world. The divide between life and death is meaningless for Port as he walks in the desert, “It was an existence of exile from the world. He never saw a human face or figure, nor even an animal; there were no familiar objects along the way, there was no ground below, nor sky above, yet the space was full of things” (178). Port imagines the desert as nothing and everything. Although he sees nothing, he knows by heart that the space of the desert is full of things, which is a mystical metaphor for the fullness of emptiness. Further, he does not find any difference between the sky and the desert in terms of oneness of nature:

“You know,” said Port, […] “the sky here’s very strange. I often have the sensation when I look at it that it’s a solid thing up there, protecting us from what’s behind.”

Kit shuddered slightly as she said: “From what’s behind?”

“Yes.”

“But what is behind?” Her voice was very small.

“Nothing, I suppose. Just darkness. Absolute night.” (101)

This conversation is an existential contemplation of the mystical values of darkness and nothingness that are generated by the sky and the desert in his imagination. It indicates his sense of all creatures including the sky and the desert as still shadows signifying nothing, which is the Nothingness of God through which all purposes of
worldly existence become non-existent. The desert is an environment within which Port loses himself through death at the end.

The last novel I am discussing is *Désert* (1980) by the French Nobel Prize Laureate (2008) J. M. G. Le Clézio. It was translated into English by C. Dickson in 2009. It represents the Westerners’ fascination with the desert and shows Le Clézio’s concern about the disappearance of the desert civilization. The novel opens with a caravan:

They’d been walking like that for months, years maybe. They'd followed the routes of the sky between the waves of sands, the routes coming from the Drâa, from Tamgrout, from the Erg Iguidi, or farther north—the route of the Aďt Atta, of the Gheris, coming from Tafilelt, that joins the great *ksours* in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, or else the endless route that penetrates into the heart of the desert, beyond Hank, in the direction of the great city of Timbuktu. Some died along the way, others were born, were married. Animals died too, throats slit open to fertilize the entrails of the earth, or else stricken with the plague and left to rot on the hard ground […] The desert cleansed everything in its wind, wiped everything away. The men had the freedom of the open spaces in their eyes, their skin was like metal. Sunlight blazed everywhere […] The men knew perfectly well that the desert wanted nothing to do with them: so they walked on without stopping, following the paths that other feet had already traveled in search of something else. (3)
Desert is a story of the nomadic journey through the desert, although devastating, the nomads embrace. Right from the outset, Le Clézio depicts the desert as a Sufi space that swallows the ego and strips the physical traits and energy away from its wanderers. Although they have lethal diseases, the desert shows them its mystical freedom that cleanses and empties everything in their eyes. They know that the desert does not have evil intentions towards them, so, they continue their journey in search of undeniable union with the divine beauty that emanates from its clean places. The passage shows Man’s unusual relationship with the desert. The desert shapes the nomadic life in silence that was pleasing to the ancient spiritual Fathers and conducive to their meditation and prayer. The Tuareg bear the unbearable desert life, because it gives them tranquility and mystical freedom from the urban civilization which they know through violent encroachments which put their survival in peril. Their relationship with the desert is based on the Tuareg’s civilization where their travel guides are stars and dunes. Thus, in the harsh and contrasting environment of the desert, men were able to create an original civilization that modernity threatens on all sides, so much so that one can wonder about its chances of survival. Today, the Tuareg, the sons of the sand dunes and the wind, are reduced to myths, stories and folklores. Hence, the moral function of the desert novel is to represent nomads as irreducible communities and emphasize equal footing between them and the urban communities.

Two stories are interconnected but different in time and setting. The desert is mystically depicted as “[…] a timeless land, removed from human history perhaps, a land where nothing else could come to be or die, as if it were already beyond other lands, at the pinnacle of earthly existence” (4). The first story is about Nour, a bedouin lad wandering with his tribe under the chieftaincy of the Sufi Shaykh Ma’
Ainine, whose **zawiya**\(^{32}\) is still visited today by many people seeking his blessings. The story covers the Western Sahara (Morocco) indigenous people’s resistance to the French colonizer among other dilemmas between the years 1909 and 1912. The resistance leader was the most well-known Sufi saint Ma Al-Ainine. In his characterization, Le Clézio accentuates the significance of Ma Al-Ainine as a spiritual healer as well as a raider against the French colonization in the Western Sahara. Even wandering nomads, like the boy Nour, are part of the nomadic agglomerations around him for the sake of security that they do not psychologically enjoy in other regions. Ma Al-Ainine defends the Sahara’s civilization against the threats of modernity, but he is killed by the French. Ma Al-Ainine, the son of the founder of the Qadiriya Brotherhood, is politically known not only for leading resistance against the French colonizer but also for deposing the Sultan Abdelhafid. Between Nour’s fleeing from the French and Lalla’s running to France, the Sahara remains their unifying power in terms of the oneness of their ancestry and culture. The Sahara is the common, omnipresent protagonist throughout the novel. Characters are considered the “men of the soil.” Lalla’s pleasure lies in her being a reclusive character in some areas of a shantytown named the Project. She finds consolation only in remote areas inhabited only by birds, flies and wasps. Solitude and loneliness are key motifs in the novel where the nomads and the way they live are celebrated. Aunt Aamma describes the desert land and life to Lalla:

> It was there in the desert that Lalla was born, at the foot of a tree, as Aamma tells it. There in the open desert, the sky is immense; the horizon has no end because there is nothing for the eye to catch upon.

\(^{32}\) **Zawiya** (pl. **zawaya**) is an Arabic term that refers to a Sufi lodge whose main function is providing religious teachings and learning run by its Sufi masters and their **murids** (disciples). In other words, it is a religious/Sufi school, **khanaqah** circle, or **ribat** where disciples gather around their teacher for spiritual initiation and character reformation.
The desert is like the sea, with the waves of wind over the hard sand, with the froth of rolling bramble bushes, with the flat stones, patches of lichen and plaques of salt, and the black shadows that dig out holes when the sun draws near to the earth […] Out there, in the open desert, men can walk for days without passing a single house, seeing a well, for the desert is so vast that no one can know it all. Men go out into the desert, and they are like ships at sea; no one knows when they will return. (142)

The fate of the Saharans is destined by the desert. Like wells, they disappear. Drought in the desert is a threat no less than the colonial encroachment resisted by Ma Al-Ainine. It is another disaster that jeopardizes the nomadic life. The vastness of the Sahara is analogous to the sea, because it is a point of no return. The desert of Desert represents a fugitive’s isolation as Lalla flees to the Sahara when she is proposed to marry a much older man. Then she flees to Marseille. But she comes back to the Sahara at the end.

The Saharan setting shows Le Clézio’s experience as a construct of the vintage of spirituality through Lalla:

She sees the immense expanse of gold-and sulfur-colored sand, as vast as the sea, with huge still waves. There is no one in the stretch of sand, not a tree, not a wisp of grass, nothing but the shadow of the dunes growing long, touching one another, creating lakes of twilight. Here everything looks the same, and it’s as if she were here and at the same time a little farther away, over where her eyes happen to fall, then still elsewhere, right out between the edge and the sky. The sort of life
people have in the desert is simple and ascetic one; purely Sufi way of 
life. (69-70)

Le Clézio displays the desert as a civilization of the spirit. This passage shows the 
actualization of characters’ self-emptiness through their bewilderment in the 
emptiness of the desert. They are ascetics in the Sufi sense. It reveals Lalla’s intimacy 
with the beauty and the sublime in nature is obviously depicted. Everything is moving 
and alive including the grains of sand. Le Clézio combines the Sufi concept of living 
and the mystical manifestation of the desert. In sum, the novel is a fictional realm of 
divine majesty that lies in the desert’s secrets.

In brief, the desert intensifies the writers’ talent to a better advantage than 
other landscapes, since its serenity and stillness, solitude and struggle, emptiness and 
infinities are facets of special setting for reflection and inspiration. Writers often, as 
we have seen, express silence that defies language in the desert through narrative 
descriptions of the desert secrets. The desert is displayed by both mystics and writers 
as an environment where silence speaks and stillness moves the heart towards union 
with its own Reality. Journeying in the desert symbolizes lives of the Little Prince, 
Lalla, and the Moresbys among many others as a journey of self-exploration. The 
desert journey spells the change of characters’ consciousness and echoes their 
freedom from all worldly confinements. Although the desert makes some characters 
pessimistic and distrustful, it is for others optimistic, constructive and healing. It 
fortifies the belief in Oneness of Being and defies the desert of the heart for many. 
The desert is depicted as a mirror for the True Self to see itself and God. Although the 
desert is physically a point of no return, it is spiritually the locus of redemption of lost 
meaning and the achievement of union with Being.