



## THE DESERT ODYSSEY: A STUDY OF LANDSCAPES IN PAULO COELHO'S "THE ALCHEMIST" AND BENYAMIN'S "GOAT DAYS"

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### ABSTRACT

Desert has always been a mysterious place difficult to survive as well as comprehend for man. Much literature has their plots unfurling in the sand dunes. Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and Benyamin's *Goat Days* follow the story of two young men undertaking an arduous journey through the desert to fulfil their objectives. Desert occupies a space more than merely setting the backdrop to these novels. Life in the desert affects, unites and revamps the life of the individuals. Travel is also an important motif in the novels. The paper attempts a comparative study of the two novels with special focus on the landscape and the life in desert. It analyses the meaning of the journey and its significance, its goal, dreams and omens, the effect of the landscape in shaping the individual, varied perceptions of the desert and finally the existentialist attitude of the protagonists towards their fulfilment.

**Keywords:** Desert, landscape, comparative study, Alchemist, *Aadujeevitham*, travel

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Wikipedia defines 'desert' as a barren area of land where little precipitation occurs and consequently living conditions are hostile for plant and animal life. Still, man has managed to settle in deserts near to oases and pursue life there. People cross vast expanses of this arid region to reach others places which are more wet and fertile. Travel through a desert is in itself a variant experience similar to a sea voyage or warfare. Because one requires contesting and thriving in unfavourable conditions all the while the landscape affecting the mind and living conditions of the individual.

There have always been stories developing around deserts in different countries in different languages. From the stories of Jesus and Prophet Muhammad to fables of Arabian Nights and tales of exile and very recently *The English Patient* by

Michael Ondaatje and *Desert* by J.M.G Le Clezio figure desert as an omnipresent backdrop. However there are still very few works in which desert appears as a character. Two such novels are *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and *Aadujeevitham* by Benyamin (Trans. Joseph Koyippally). In this paper I intend to attempt a comparative study of the two novels with special focus on the phenomena of desert and travel through desert.

*The Alchemist* (1988) is the story of an Andalusian shepherd named Santiago travelling to Egypt after inspired on the journey by a recurring dream of finding a treasure there. It is an allegorical story which talks about the importance of pursuing one's dreams. The book originally written in Portuguese by the Brazilian writer was a best seller with over 65 million copies sold and translated into

72 languages. *Aadujivitham* written in 2008 was translated from Malayalam to English by Dr. Joseph Koyipally into *Goat Days*. It tells the story of sufferings and survival of Najeeb in the deserts of Gulf countries. While Benyamin is often criticised for trying to consciously incorporate spiritual elements into the plot, Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is a novel on spirituality (Moolasheril).

*The Alchemist* presents 'the boy' in search of a treasure which stands for his Personal Legend. Najeeb in *Goat days* on the other hand is in the pursuit for a much greater emergency – his freedom. Both the protagonists begin their quest from a place where their ultimate goal resides. It is to the same place that they both reach in the end – 'the boy' to the ruined church in Spain and Najeeb to his homeland in Kerala. Najeeb started for Gulf in pursuit of livelihood in midst of abject poverty. The desert of Gulf holds many promises for ordinary men in Kerala. On reaching Riyadh Najeeb exclaims "City of my dreams, I have arrived. Kindly receive me" (Benyamin 43). But by a turn of events, Najeeb and his companion Hakeem reach wrong place due to some mix up. He is forced to become a caretaker for goats and sheep in a Masara under an Arabian Arabab. The novel proceeds through Najeeb's heartrending turmoil and sufferings in the Masara. Santiago in *The Alchemist* is addressed throughout as 'the boy' effacing his particular identity. The boy initially was studying in a seminary but his passion to travel and explore new places drove him to become a shepherd. The freedom of a shepherd's life lured him and helped him pursue his Personal Legend. His recurring dream of finding a treasure inspires him to cross the desert to reach the Pyramids. He is guided in his journey by omens, interpreter of dreams, King and the Alchemist. Thus unlike Najeeb the boy starts on the voyage out of his own interest.

Dreams, desires and omens are part of voyages through desert. Dreams are what lead the boy towards his goal. But they are also sources of suffering in life. The heart of the boy talks to him once, "People are afraid to pursue their most important dreams, because they feel that they don't deserve them, or that they'll be unable to achieve them... Because, when these things happen, we suffer terribly" (Coelho 124). Whereas Najeeb finds

out that: "When I finally got the chance to live the life of a shepherd, I realised how painfully distant it was from my dreams. We shouldn't dream about the unfamiliar and about what only looks good from afar. When such dreams become reality, they are often impossible to come to terms with" (Benyamin 124). Here desert makes the boy go in pursuit of his dream while for Najeeb the painful reality in the desert dissuades him from engaging in frivolous imaginations and come into terms with it.

Desire changes its dimensions in a desert. It is not ordinary desires but passionate ones that haunt you in a desert. Desert changes the value and need of ordinary things. Najeeb says, "What do you think I wanted most during my first summer in the desert? ... My fervent desire was to sit in a bit of shade for some time... It was in the desert I experienced its reality." (Coelho 151)

Omens too play an important role in the life of the boy. He is rescued out of uncertainties by Urim and Thumim, and he observes the omens to prophesy life and war. Omens are abstract signs which give one understanding of more concrete realities. In desert, they are especially meaningful in solving the mysteries that lay beyond what we experience in there. Najeeb experiences the birth of his first baby through the birth of a goat kid – Nabeel.

The desert invariably hides unforeseen dangers within its womb. Venomous snakes, tribal wars, adverse conditions for survival etc. The boy comes across a cobra while with the Alchemist. Najeeb is troubled by more intense situations of survival like lack of water and food.

Desert requires one to understand it by itself. It is not like any other place and demands specific skills for survival. For a traveller, someone new to the sand dunes a guide is an inevitable person - someone who knows about the treacherous land geography, dangers and life skills particular to desert. Santiago and Najeeb acquire such proficient counsellors to help them in their voyage. The former is assisted by many different people in his quest including the gypsy woman who was the interpreter of dreams, the king of Salem Melchizedek and finally the Alchemist. Najeeb had to learn the ways of his new life but through the

hard path – through experience. He was severely punished for using water to clean his backside after defecating. He learnt not to let loose the goats after being clobbered in the chest by a male goat. Still, when he fled from the masara he was aided by Ibrahim Khadiri. Najeeb believes him to be God sent since nothing was known of him after the man reached Najeeb safely to the escape route.

There are also situations which make the protagonists learn to adapt to their hostile circumstances and surroundings. The arbab forces Najeeb to kill a snake and locks him inside the masara.

At home I wouldn't even go in the direction where a mud snake or a water snake had been sighted, for three days at least. Even the mention of a snake terrified me. Seeing me so frightened, the arbab came out angrily and pushed me back inside and locked the masara from outside. Now I had only two options. Either kill the snake or die of snake bite. Necessity bestows a man with courage he did not know he possessed. I had many unfulfilled aspirations throbbing inside me, so I had to be bold. To live was my necessity. (Benyamin 157)

Najeeb and Santiago then undergoes a transformation at the end. Najeeb metaphorically turns into a goat – he leads the life of a goat and loses his manhood like the many goats castrated in the masara. Santiago on the other hand transforms himself into a strong wind by his will. This instance in the novel is an example of magical realism. In both the cases their circumstances and need for survival changes them into what they become.

"I didn't understand why he was doing that, nor did I ask. After all, goats do not talk to men" (Benyamin 156).

"I ate the wheat with the salt. It was on that day that I realised uncooked wheat could be tasty! I guzzled water again from the container. My belly full, I was finally at ease. I slept in the masara with the goats. By then I had indeed become a goat." (150)

"I remained a goat in the masara of goats. I began to hate myself even more" (176).

"My fate is to live and die here. My days went back to how they had been. With nothing to hope for. Nothing to dream about. A goat's life" (180).

"I could not help thinking how the sight was so similar to herding a flock of goats back into a masara! I was one of the goats. Mine was a goat's life" (253).

And the boy pleads to the Alchemist:

"I'm not afraid of failing. It's just that I don't know how to turn myself into the wind."

"Well, you'll have to learn; your life depends on it."

"But what if I can't?"

"Then you'll die in the midst of trying to realise your destiny." (135)

Throughout the novel, Paulo Coelho presents a romanticised understanding of the desert. It is more than a landscape; it becomes a character towards the end.

"How do I immerse myself in the desert?"

"Listen to your heart. It knows all things, because it came from the Soul of the World, and it will one day return there." (122)

Even then, it's impossible to make sense of the desert in its entirety.

"The boy looked out at the horizon. There were mountains in the distance. And there were dunes, rocks, and plants that insisted on living where survival seemed impossible. There was the desert that he had wandered for so many months; despite all that time, he knew only a small part of it" (Coelho 137)

Desert appears differently to different people. For Fatima, it holds her hopes for Santiago's return. The Alchemist has a much objective, detached impression of the desert.

He had already seen many people come and go, and the desert remained as it was. He had seen kings and beggars walking the desert sands. The dunes were changed constantly by the wind, yet these were the same sands he had known since he was a child. He always enjoyed seeing the happiness that the travellers experienced when, after weeks of yellow sand and blue

sky, they first saw the green of the date palms. Maybe God created the desert so that man could appreciate the date trees, he thought. (Coelho 82-83)

The Englishman thinks that the caravans and the desert speak the same language and this allows their smooth crossing. The magnificence of the desert inspires awe in the beholders. The camel driver says, "But the desert is so huge, and the horizon so distant, that they make a person feel small, and as if he should remain silent" (70). In the end, at the time of crisis, the boy turns to the desert for help. Desert appears before him to ask questions on love and guide him towards help.

For Najeeb on the contrary, the desert was a rooster cage from which he wanted to escape (Benyamin 210). Though an adopted son, he had to wrestle with the desert to preserve his life (144). Najeeb sees the many faces of desert in his run. Desert overflowing with life, endless stretch of sand, God's frying pan etc. But he is always inevitably frightened by its immensity (208). It is because his freedom lies beyond the desert.

Finally, both the novels end with a twist in the tale. Just as the boy's treasure was hidden right under the Sycamore tree from where he started the journey, Najeeb was mistakenly taken in on someone else's visa. Najeeb was hence ultimately living and suffering some other person's fate. Thus in both the novels the significance of the journey and suffering themselves are questioned. Even then the novelists seem to advocate an existential understanding of life. A meaning to their journey is endowed by the protagonists themselves. More than attaining the treasure, the journey towards finding it had prepared Santiago to understand and seek out his Personal Legend. Through the travel he learnt to read the omens, speak the language of the heart and become an alchemist of his own. Najeeb on the other hand, feels grateful to God that the ominous fate that awaited another person was somehow endured by him. One person was saved of the brutality of his desert experiences.

Nevertheless, the journey itself creates a new awareness of the desert in the two men. As the Alchemist shares with the boy, "the desert will give you an understanding of the world; in fact, anything

on the face of the earth will do that. You don't even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation" (122).

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