

Desert Symbolism in World Literature- The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho as a model

Dr. Moussa Bensmaine

Department of Philosophy, University of Batna 1, Laboratory for the Dialogue of Civilizations and Globalization (Algeria)

Email: moussa.bensmaine@univ-batna.dz

Received: 03/01/2025 Accepted: 22/06/2025 Published: 11/10/2025

Abstract :

This research demonstrates how, in classical literature, the desert was a symbol of drought, aridity, and poverty. Life was absent, and what was found was characterized by roughness and squalor. In contemporary world literature, it has become a symbol of generosity, fertility, and inspiration. The desert has two faces: a violent, rough exterior, and a hidden, gentle, loving interior, brimming with gentleness, love, and connection.

This is what we discover in Paulo Coelho's novel *The Alchemist*. Translated into most languages, this novel conveys a beautiful image of the desert and reveals its authentic face. It continues to inspire the hero, guiding him to paths of wisdom and mysticism. By merging with its world and listening to its delicate spirit, it becomes the place where Sufi vision is revealed, penetrating the soul of the world and understanding its signals. This allows him to realize his self, his dreams, and, in the language of the novel, his personal legend.

Keywords : Identity, Heritage, Literature, Desert.

Introduction:

It is remarkable that the concept of the desert is often associated with nomadism, which is seen as the opposite of civilization, even though ancient civilizations arose on desert lands — their monuments still stand: the Pyramids of Egypt, and the ruins of Babylon, Assyria, Persia, and others. It is true that this was made possible by the rivers that cut through the deserts — a fact we do not dispute — yet our point is that while the desert embodies nomadism, it also gives birth to civilization. Even more astonishing is that the desert has come to symbolize barrenness and hostility to life. Its very vocabulary evokes desolation — *the wasteland*, *the scorching heat*, *the barren plain*, *the vast emptiness*. It is depicted as a lonely, abandoned place, to the extent that dictionaries define it as “a vast land without plants or water.”¹ It was the desert that comforted humankind and enriched its culture with distinctive features — in poetry and prose, in customs and traditions, in norms and social structures. It is as if the desert carries within it a host of contradictions, and its people have long mastered the art of expressing their world since ancient times. The desert continues to captivate the interest of those who inhabit it, who throughout history have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation. Whatever the desert's presence in the literature of its inhabitants — whether in praise or criticism, recognition or denial — it fills their lives with its geography and history. Yet, when

¹ Nouredine, Issam Nouredine, *Al-Mu'jam Al-Waseet* (The Intermediate Dictionary), Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, Lebanon, 2005, p. 255.

the desert appears in the literature of those unfamiliar with it, this becomes particularly striking. By “those unfamiliar with it,” we mean people whose environments are entirely different from the desert — the inhabitants of northern Europe or the Americas — especially when their interest is directed toward what we commonly refer to as the Great Desert (the Sahara).

It may be reasonable to associate the Western interest in the desert with the era of colonial expansion, during which the desert was viewed as a source of natural wealth and a route of passage into Africa. To that end, expeditions were sent, and missionary activity was often used as a means of gathering information in preparation for conquest. An example of this can be found in the work of General Eugène Daumas (1803–1871), a Swiss officer who was enlisted in Algeria in 1835 during the French occupation. He served as consul to Emir Abdelkader and produced several writings that documented the Sahara Desert. In his works, he traced caravan routes, identified oases and water sources, and even ventured deep enough to study the customs and traditions of the local people. Daumas authored books that effectively served as reports facilitating the French army’s penetration of the desert. His interest, justified by immediate colonial objectives, enabled him to provide precise information on “caravan routes, wadi pathways, and local settlements.”¹

However, there were also forms of Western interest inspired by the *charm* of the desert itself — those who were captivated by it and fell in love with it. An example of this is Nasreddine Dinét (1861–1929), whose original name was Alphonse-Étienne Dinét, a French artist who was utterly fascinated by the desert and immortalized it in his works. He settled in Bousaada, where he lived, died, and was buried. He “stood in awe before the magic of the desert — its vast expanse and its oases...”², This means that he became deeply immersed in the world of the desert — its nature and its people — dedicating his spirit, effort, and time to it, which was ultimately reflected in his profound and enduring artistic creativity.

But what about a creator who did not live in the desert — who may have only passed through it as a traveler or merely read about it? An example of this is the Brazilian novelist **Paulo Coelho** (1947–), a writer from Latin America — “those lands lying south of the Rio Grande or the Rio Bravo,” the river that marks the border between the two Americas and imparts a distinctive cultural, political, social, and linguistic character to the region.

This novelist is one whose life deserves closer attention, for it was a life full of upheaval. He rebelled against Catholic traditions at an early age and was committed to a psychiatric hospital, from which he later escaped. He then plunged into a life of pleasure and excess, traveling across South America, Europe, and North Africa. During a long journey he undertook on foot, a profound spiritual awakening stirred within him, rekindling his interest in Catholicism — a transformation that would later shape his works. All of this may seem fitting for a creator of Coelho’s stature, yet what truly invites reflection is that the *desert* itself became the subject of one of his creative works.

How could this author make the *desert* the setting for his world-renowned novel *The Alchemist*, which was first published in 1988 in Portuguese under the title *O Alquimista*? The book has been translated into nearly eighty languages and has sold over 100 million copies — an achievement unprecedented in the life of any writer — earning it a place in the *Guinness World Records*.

How could this author make the *desert* the setting for his world-famous novel *The Alchemist*, published in 1988 in Portuguese under the title *O Alquimista*? The novel has

1 Mustafa, Ben Ouaz, *The French Perspective on the Algerian Desert*, *Al-Ibar Journal of Historical and Archaeological Studies*, Issue 1, Vol. 3, January 2020, p. 254.

2 Abdelkrim, Ahmed, *The World-Famous Painter Étienne Dinét: Bousaada, the Lost Paradise*, Touf for Tourism, Environment, and Health, [touw/info.ar](http://touw.info.ar).

been translated into nearly eighty languages and has sold over 100 million copies — something that had never before happened in the lifetime of any author — earning it a place in the *Guinness World Records*. Moreover, his experience in writing the novel came about quite suddenly.

This leads us to raise the following questions:

What is the content of this novel that took the desert as the stage for its events? Did it draw only on the desert's outward nature, or did it penetrate its deeper essence? How did the novel portray the desert — was it a harsh obstacle, or an active force shaping the events?

1. The story and its essence:

The hero of the story is Santiago, a shepherd who is haunted by a recurring dream that there is a hidden treasure buried near the Pyramids of Egypt. He consults an old gypsy woman, who tells him: "Listen to the interpretation. You must go to the Pyramids of Egypt — I've never heard anyone speak to me about them, but if it was a child who showed them to you, then they truly exist. There you will find the treasure that will make you rich."¹

Then he meets the Arab elder, who urges him to fulfill his Personal Legend: "How can you achieve your Personal Legend, which is what shapes your work and your will?"², Fulfilling one's Personal Legend is the only duty imposed on all human beings.

In pursuit of his Personal Legend, Santiago sells his flock of sheep and crosses the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco. In Tangier, however, just as he stands at the gateway to the desert, he faces his first trial — his money, which he had earned from selling his sheep, is stolen. It was his only provision for crossing the desert: "The entire Sahara Desert must be crossed, and such a journey requires money."³.

This forced him to remain in that city, working in a crystal shop. After saving a considerable amount of money, he became convinced that he should return to his homeland and buy another flock of sheep, for he now had enough to purchase twice as many as before. Yet the calling returned to him:

"I understand very well my desire to go back to my sheep. I've known them before — they don't require much effort, and I can love them. But could I ever love the desert? I don't know... yet it is the desert that hides my treasure"⁴, And from that moment on, he decided to live out his Personal Legend.

He joined a caravan that was to cross the Sahara Desert toward the Pyramids. Along the way, he met an Englishman who was deeply engaged in the study of alchemy. This man was traveling in search of an alchemist who possessed the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life — he, too, was pursuing his own Personal Legend: the quest for the Philosopher's Stone, Santiago thus became part of a caravan teeming with people, each with their own purpose, united by a single journey yet made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Together, they embarked on a perilous voyage through the desert. The leader of the caravan declared, "I am the chief of this caravan, and the lives and deaths of all those I lead are in my hands, for the desert is a capricious woman who sometimes drives men to madness"⁵ This is the very essence

¹Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, Publishing and Distribution Company, 2008, 4th edition, p. 30.

²Ibid., p. 37.

³ Ibid., p.51

⁴ Ibid., p.81

⁵ Ibid., p.89

of adventure — how we embark on a journey without knowing whether reaching the intended destination is assured or not. In fact, it is far more likely that it will not end well.

During this journey, he came to know the desert — its vastness, its nature, its people. He learned from the Alchemist that the world has a soul, through which one can understand the language of things. He also learned that the alchemists had lived out their Personal Legends, just as he, too, was striving to live his own.

In the oasis, the boy Santiago meets Fatima — the embodiment of the woman shaped by the desert. Through her, he comes to understand the true meaning of love: “When he looked into her dark eyes and at her lips, trembling between a smile and silence, he understood the essential part — the most expressive element — of the language spoken by the world, a language that every being on earth can understand in its depths: it is called love”¹, Fatima, the daughter of the oasis in the desert, became part of his Personal Legend. She was the one who inspired him to continue his journey toward his goal “I want you to go on following the path toward what you came here to find”², Fatima is a woman unlike any other — molded by the desert itself. She is outwardly strong, yet inwardly filled with love and tenderness, just like the desert: harsh in appearance, but gentle at its core to those who understand its true nature and respect its boundaries.

As the horseman also told him: “You must not let your determination weaken, even if you have already covered a great distance on your journey. You must love the desert, but never trust it blindly, for it is the test of men — it judges each person by the sound of his footsteps and kills those who surrender to negligence.”³, Yes, that is the desert — and few truly grasp its secret. It is the same truth the Alchemist, who accompanied him for days across the desert on the way to the Pyramids, kept emphasizing. The boy asked him, “Do our hearts always help us?” The Alchemist replied, “They only help those who are living their Personal Legend — those who can feel their own aspirations and strive to realize themselves.” For there is no place for those who have no purpose and do not live out their Personal Legend, as Paulo Coelho puts it.

He finally reaches the Pyramids and begins to dig for his treasure — but finds nothing. Once again, he is attacked by thieves who beat him severely. Then he hears the leader of the thieves say with a mocking smile, “Even I once dreamed that a treasure was buried in an abandoned church.” These were the signs he should have understood long ago.

He returns to his hometown, where he once tended his sheep, and there he finds his treasure, repeating to himself: “Life is truly generous to those who live their Personal Legend.”⁴, This is the story — simple in appearance, yet carrying a profound moral and spiritual vision that made it one of the most successful novels in the world.

2. The Desert in Confrontation with the Personal Legend:

In a special preface to a new edition of **The Alchemist**, Coelho wrote: “The desert wind has brushed against my skin, and at night the scent of the oasis has accompanied me. What a long road I have traveled since that time! Words, thoughts, memories, stories, stones, the path itself... And as I sit before this printed page, I can still see that stretch of the road which I so often walk in my imagination”⁵.

1 Ibid., p111

2 Ibid., p116

3 Ibid., p129

4 Ibid., p186

5 Ibid., p4

This vision inspired him to believe that every person has a dream — what he called a *Personal Legend* — and that each of us must strive to make that dream a living reality, no matter the obstacles, even if they are as vast and perilous as the desert itself. The desert, a place of deadly danger — where if one does not die of thirst, one may fall victim to violence and perish — symbolizes the ultimate test. For, as he wrote, “Fulfilling one’s Personal Legend is the only duty imposed upon human beings”¹, The Personal Legend is what we truly wish to become, and when we deeply desire something, the entire universe conspires to help us achieve it. The hero’s legend is his quest to fulfill his dream — to reach the treasure hidden near the Pyramids. To do so, he must cross the vast Sahara Desert, “He would lose nothing by going to the caravan outpost to find out whether the Pyramids were really that far away”².

And when he decided to join the caravan that would cross the desert, the caravan leader addressed them, saying: “The lives and deaths of those I lead are in my hands, for the desert is a capricious woman who sometimes drives men mad”³, The capricious woman — one who is difficult to tame — symbolizes impulsiveness and recklessness. The desert is much the same: harsh and unpredictable in its ways. It dominates those who traverse its vast expanses, capable of destroying them in an instant. It drains a person’s strength and leaves them at the mercy of death.

The caravan challenged the desert on its journey toward its goal, much like the hero himself, who faced hardships in pursuit of his Personal Legend.

The difficulties faced by the caravan have no importance “as long as it moves toward the same goal”⁴, All dangers are nothing, because “whoever commits to crossing the desert cannot turn back; and since we will not go back, we must concern ourselves only with the best way to move forward”⁵.

The desert was no longer that desolate world filled with dangers — sand, wind, scorching heat by day, and freezing cold by night. It was not something evil once one realized that the desert was inhabited by the “Soul of the World” and spoke its language.

The Soul of the World is a principle in traditional alchemy, which holds that chemical elements possess a spirit that determines their interactions. Their spirit comes from the Soul of the World, and we are part of this world and part of that spirit.

As the caravan makes its legendary crossing of the desert, it speaks the desert’s language, harmonizes with it, and adapts to its conditions. In the desert, if this harmony is not achieved and its language is not understood, the inevitable result is death. This means that to stay alive in the desert is to understand its language and merge with its spirit — and that is precisely what must happen in one’s journey through life while fulfilling one’s Personal Legend.

The difference between Santiago, the boy in the novel, and his English companion on the journey is that Santiago tries to grasp the spirit of the desert, which is part of the Soul of the World. He perceives its signs with his heart, understands its language, and acts accordingly as he moves toward his goal, fulfilling his dream and realizing his Personal Legend. The Englishman, on the other hand, places his faith in science. He reads extensively, and his camel is burdened with a great number of books as he crosses the desert with the caravan. Yet he is so absorbed in his reading that he fails to listen to the voice of the desert. Consequently, his path toward his goal is doomed to failure. The Englishman seeks the Alchemist, who is said to

1 Ibid., p37

2 Ibid., p61

3 Ibid., p89

4 Ibid., p92

5 Ibid., p 95

possess the Philosopher's Stone, and has long prepared himself to meet him and learn from his wisdom. Santiago, by contrast, is a simple shepherd whose main concern is to listen to the voice of nature as he too crosses the desert in pursuit of his dream — to reach the treasure.

Both of them face hardships, both of them rise to the challenge, and both pursue a goal. However, the achievement of each one's goal depends on merging with the Soul of the World, understanding its language, and interpreting its signs. One relies on science, reason, and logic, while the other embraces mysticism and follows the guidance of the heart. So, which of them will ultimately reach his goal?

2.1. The Spirit of the Desert as Part of the Soul of the World:

In **The Alchemist**, the desert is no longer that harsh natural world; it becomes a vast and open realm that tells the legend of the world, speaks its language, and expresses its soul. It is the school that enriches you more than a thousand books: "I can learn from the desert, for it seems to me older and wiser"¹.

Here, Coelho takes us in his novel from a physical desert — harsh, dangerous, and deadly, a place of tribal conflicts and destructive wars that never truly cease — to a spiritual desert, gentle and filled with pure, beautiful love embodied by Fatima, and with wisdom represented by the elders.

It is the desert that molds souls, distilling them into aspiring spirits, overflowing love, and timeless wisdom.

Fatima, from whose lips—hesitating between a smile and silence—he understood "the most essential and expressive part of the language spoken by the world, a language that all creatures of the earth can understand deep within themselves, and that is called love"², And because he listened with his soul to the desert and its creatures, he became able to understand its language. This was revealed through his intuition of the danger threatening the oasis: "An army is approaching; the vision has appeared." He thus saved the oasis from destruction.

Coelho imparted a mystical, mythical dimension to the desert, transforming it into a marvelous place for contemplation where visions are revealed: "The mysticism of the desert in Coelho's work intertwines with a set of identities that form a fractured space nourished by wars — a transition from the postmodern technological/civilized space to what could be called post-mysticism, that is, the shift of mysticism from its Eastern spirituality to postmodern materiality"³.

In fact, Coelho imparts a mystical dimension to the desert — or rather, it becomes the most marvelous place where the Sufi vision is revealed, penetrating the Soul of the World and understanding its signs. This represents a transition from the mechanized, technological space of modernity to the realm of mysticism — from the confined material world of civilization to the boundless world of the spirit.

Thus, the desert takes on a dual presence in the novel. On one hand, it serves as a test for the self that longs to fulfill its dreams — what Coelho calls the **Personal Legend**. It is a trial marked by the hardships inherent to its harsh nature and the ferocity of its people — bandits, robbers, and aggressors. The question remains: can the self withstand such violence? On the other hand, the desert is an immense, boundless space in which the self can only merge and

¹ Ibid., p91

² Ibid., p111

³ Mohamed Lamine Laâlouna, **The Desert Paradigm Between Sufism and Postmodernism: The Alchemist and Alice Murgh as a Model**, ***Al-Khitab Journal***, Vol. 15, June 2020, p. 129.

realize its true identity. It is a fertile realm of the *Soul of the World*, speaking its language and revealing its signs — a symbol, in human terms, of elevation, nobility, and love.

The widespread success of the novel and its global acclaim can be attributed to this mystical inclination, which has become a refuge for global culture — a form of escape from the ailments of Western civilization, its falseness and hypocrisy. It proclaims lofty human values while practicing their opposites in its politics, economy, and culture.

The invocation of the desert in the novel represents a shift of the center of gravity toward the South — toward the desert, which had long been described as barren and sterile, only to become a source of inspiration.

3. The Limits of the Novel:

Despite the great success of the novel, which turned its author into one of the most famous figures of contemporary culture, Paulo Coelho was appointed in 2007 as a **United Nations Messenger of Peace** and as a **UNESCO advisor for intercultural and spiritual dialogue**. Coelho's admirers see his works as **inspirational and life-changing**, serving as a **critique of material civilization** and a **call to return to the spirit and the purity of emotions**, drawing heavily on **spiritual and Sufi values**. Coelho himself wrote on this matter: > “Western culture stood by my side for most of my life, revealing to me things that the world I lived in could not comprehend”¹, The culture that Coelho refers to is **Sufism**, and this may be linked to a **spiritual transformation** that marked his life in the early 1980s. Biographers of Coelho mention that in his youth he led a **dissolute life** — filled with alcohol, drugs, and sexual excess. It so happened that he undertook a **500-mile pilgrimage on foot from the Netherlands to Spain**, along a route famous as a **Catholic pilgrimage path**. During this journey, **deep religious feelings were rekindled in his soul**, inspiring him to write *The Pilgrimage*, followed by *The Alchemist*, in which we clearly see a **spiritual tendency** that offered readers a sense of comfort and inner peace.

Nevertheless, many critics have harshly criticized the novel, arguing that it does not reach the artistic level of a true literary work, stating that “it should be classified among self-help books to be placed where it truly belongs.” They see its success merely as an expression of the **state of confusion and loss experienced by modern humanity** as a result of the **overwhelming dominance of materialism** — making the novel a kind of **refuge in which readers found their comfort and solace**.

Moreover, some critics go even further, arguing that the entire novel is nothing more than a **retelling of a tale from *One Thousand and One Nights***. In that story, a man from **Cairo** dreams of a voice telling him to go to **Isfahan in Persia**, where a treasure awaits him. He travels all the way to Isfahan, exhausted, and lies down to rest in the courtyard of a mosque. Without realizing it, he finds himself among a group of thieves who are arrested. During his trial, he tells the judge about his situation and his dream. The judge laughs at his foolishness, saying that he too once dreamed of a house in Cairo with a garden behind it, a fountain, and a fig tree — and beneath the fountain lay a treasure. The judge adds that he never paid any attention to the dream. Then he gives the man some coins and tells him to go home. When the man returns to Cairo, he recognizes the house described in the judge's dream, digs beneath the fountain, and **finds the treasure there**.

However, the same observation applies to the Argentine novelist **Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986)**, who in his 1934 short story ***“The Dreamers”*** (*Los dos que soñaron*) **rewrote the very same tale**.

1 Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, p11,

Conclusion:

The desert will continue to inspire many intellectuals, regardless of whether the resulting vision is realistic or mythical. It is essential for our intellectuals to change their perception of the desert — from a condescending view that sees it only as barren and impoverished — to a positive one that elevates the value of this part of the earth. For despite its apparent harshness, the desert remains a source of all goodness.

This vast Sahara, which stretches over more than nine million square kilometers—with Algeria's share exceeding two million—has proven to be a land of great abundance. Beneath its surface lie immense reserves of gas, oil, and billions of cubic meters of water, making it a vital engine for economic growth and a source of food security for Algeria, freeing the nation from all forms of economic dependency.

Moreover, it is rich in a unique cultural heritage reflected in the lifestyle of the desert dweller—expressed through his arts, language, rituals, and architecture—which reveals a refined human relationship that gave rise to successive civilizations in this vast desert. The Saharan heritage requires care and attention to uncover its depths and fully grasp its distinctive characteristics.

It is indeed astonishing to witness such an unjustified paradox: while the desert grants us its blessings and resources, shaping for us an authentic cultural heritage that defines our identity, it simultaneously suffers from neglect and lacks the attention commensurate with its generosity. Anyone traveling through its vast expanses can clearly see the extent of deprivation endured by its inhabitants—the deeper one ventures into the desert, the more evident the weakness of development becomes.

Among the signs of this underdevelopment are the fragile and inadequate infrastructure, deteriorating or even non-existent roads in some areas, which have affected transportation and imposed a stifling isolation. Added to this are the insufficient healthcare coverage and the weakness of administrative and educational facilities, among others.

Nevertheless, hope remains alive for renewed and greater attention to the region—much of which now depends on its own people, who have become increasingly aware of the desert's importance, its distinct characteristics, and its vital role. This growing awareness will undoubtedly accelerate the emergence of the desert's true potential and the activation of its capacities.

List of Sources and References:

- ✓ **Israa Abu Ranna.** (n.d.). *A Brief Biography of Paulo Coelho.* Retrieved from Sotor: <http://sotor.com>
- ✓ **Al-Din, A. N.** (2005). *Al-Noor Al-Deen Intermediate Dictionary* (1st ed.). Lebanon: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyya.
- ✓ **Al-Karim, A. A.** (n.d.). *The World-Famous Painter Étienne Dinet: Boussaada, the Lost Paradise.* Retrieved from Towf for Tourism, Environment, and Health: Towf/info.ar
- ✓ **Hammoud, M.** (2008). *Latin American Literature* (1st ed.). Lebanon: University Foundation for Studies.
- ✓ **Coelho, P.** (2008). *The Alchemist* (4th ed.). (Translated by J. Sayedawi). Publishing and Distribution Company.
- ✓ **Lamine, L. M.** (June 2020). *The Desert Paradigm Between Sufism and Postmodernism: The Alchemist and Ellisbourg as Models.* *Al-Khitab Journal,* Issue 2.
- ✓ **Mohammed bin Zayed.** (n.d.). *The Great Secret of The Alchemist Novel.* Retrieved from Al Jazeera Net: <http://www.aljazeera.net>

- ✓ **Mustafa, B. W.** (2020). *The French Perspective on the Algerian Desert: Eugène Dumas as a Model.* *Al-Ibar Journal for Historical and Archaeological Studies,* Issue 3.
- ✓ **Nouwarkto.** (n.d.). *From a Mental Hospital to the Life of the Hippies.* Retrieved from [http://arabicpost.net](<http://arabicpost.net>)