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Writing “Desert”

The *desert* is the void. It is eternal space and time. In the Arabic dictionary, you can find more than 20 synonyms for the word “desert.” Some of them mean “wildness,” “dust,” “wild,” “emptiness,” and “nothingness.” And most others denote “loneliness,” “death,” and “ruin.”

The first place created is the desert where all the prophets lived. Adam descended from heaven to the desert. Abraham and his children, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed—all lived in the desert. Moses spoke with God in the desert and Mohammed carried his message deep into the Arabic desert.

Arabic literature started with poetry, which was the basis of the first stages of Arabic writing—the pre-Islamic era. The poets in that era described the emptiness of the desert, its animals, people, their relationships, nomadism, plants, fluctuations in the weather, winds, and harsh climate. Year after year the desert penetrated the heart of what was written—in poetry and prose.

Charles Grivel says that space is the “novelist who writes the story, even before the author's hand writes it, as space is a product of the narration and in-turn contributes to the creation of the narration.” Mikhail Bakhtin also confirmed that the chronotope (where space and time come together), is represented in language and discourse and holds the spirit of the text.

In Arabic writing, the desert is the source of sounds, words, and ideas. Writing novels or poetry is *writing desert*. Directly or indirectly. No matter what you write. *Desert* can be hidden within the lines, and its soul takes over the text. Writing desert brings forth its mythologies, mystical radiances, and its presence within Bedouin values and the individual's relations with the tribe.

Based on that, desert can be written in two ways: directly, through a specific experience, called the “novel of the desert” in the Arabic world, as mentioned by Alkaouni, Mounif, Miral Tehauoi, Rajaa Allem, and others in their writing. Their works give a glimpse of the sand, the dunes, the camels, of Bedouin values, and the desert's authentic climate. In addition to the influential tribal factors in the narration, this direct experience gives shape to the fantastic stories of the Bedouin and the desert's mystical features. The events become the place, as Abderrahman Mounif put it in the introduction of one of his novels *Ardo Alssawad*.

The second, or “non-desert” way of writing is when the writer writes about another subject or space, such as the city or the sea. But the writing still appears to be filled with desert. The desert appears to be deeply ingrained in the language of this writing through emotions and the things unsaid.

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The desert in Arabic writing is the chronotope. In the Sahara, I lived with *silence*. I gradually learned that silence had a certain sound. And I got connected with that sound. I started getting used to hearing desert sounds that became an inner image. This image, when nourished by imagination and then put on paper, became writing.

The silence in my childhood was huge, and the images were small because creatures in this vast environment are small. Different images come to my mind, especially when the place I visit is different from my native one. That's why I dig deep into the details. I delve into every small difference between the creatures of the desert and focus on each word uttered by a Bedouin. To me their words seem loaded with the depth imposed by the purity and richness of the desert.

I have lived where two worlds converge. On the one hand, the world of the Oasis—where the relationships between farmers, the land, and water are organized, and on the other hand, the wide world of the Desert—where many nomads live by moving and making adventures. Between the worlds of the Oasis and the Desert, and between their inhabitants, a relationship has lasted for centuries. The inhabitants of the oases tied their lives to agriculture and land, and they built up their mythology, dreams and weddings, and ceremonies accordingly. When the desert became arid, the nomads attacked the oases, took their wealth, and kidnapped their women. That is how legends are born.

In my novel, *Bedouins on the Edge*, I tried to reflect the ambiguous relationship between desert and oasis inhabitants, through stories about the struggle for life.

The desert inhabits me then, as it inhabited many writers, and I believe that it will reveal its secrets to me one day. Because I am the desert, with all its vigor, strength, impulse, and caution.