

# Conceptualizing Desert as a Metaphor in Paulo Coelho's the Alchemist

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## ABSTRACT

Literature is one of the finest mediums of artistic endeavour for expressing one's perception of the physical and metaphysical world. Literary artists use a variety of literary devices to enrich and make their work more meaningful. The exquisite quality of literature lies in the beauty of expression, an expression that is both appropriate as well as compelling. Therefore, whatever observations, experiences, fancies, or imaginations literary artists communicate in literature, they express it in a deeper and enriched way to emphasize its profound impact. Furthermore, life is not as simple as we imagine but rather riddled with complexities. Thus, the expression and description of it also appears a little complex to apprehend, as pragmatic behaviour of life cannot be portrayed in linear expression and humble style of writing. The language of literature must have indirect conjectures in order to oblige readers to visualize life from a higher perspective by being visionary about it. Hence, the language of metaphors, allegories, and other literary devices should be incorporated to make language more vivid and meaningful to have a greater influence on the readers' minds. Metaphor is capable of expressing and conveying the more complex and subtle aspects of life in a very impressive manner. It leaves an indelible mark in the mind of the reader with its exquisite inscription of the implicit essence of life. As in the words of George Lakoff and Mark Jonson, "Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff and Jonson 3) Thus, Lakoff and Johnson have eloquently and vehemently mirrored the inevitability of the use of metaphors in everyday life. Paul Coelho is one of the luminaries of the literary world who has shown a profound proficiency in employing this literary device in the majority of his illustrious literary inscriptions. The Alchemist is one of his excellent and treasured literary inventions in which he amply applies various literary devices. In this research paper, the metaphor device has been chosen to explore the literary expression of the pragmatic aspects of life. Though Paulo Coelho has used various metaphors to enrich his work, the metaphor of the desert has been explored from different perspectives in the study to realise the multidimensional meaning it delivers about the pragmatic life of human beings.

**Keywords:** Metaphor, Desert, Quest for Self-Realization, Obstacle, Personal Legend

## INTRODUCTION

Metaphors are used to intertwine apparently unrelated concepts with a novel perspective. It transforms and mirrors the hidden meaning of the alien aspects of universalities. The literary meaning of metaphor in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase, literally denoting one kind of object or idea, is used in place of another to indirectly insinuate the meaning of the subject in a hilarious style of writing to woo the writer towards the inscription." Thus, it is an effective literary device that infuses distinct vitality to the bare and arid expressions. Thus, by using various metaphors, Paulo Coelho instills richness and gravity to his depiction of Santiago's existential journey in his most popular inscription, The Alchemist, which creates an invincible record of readers as it was bought by millions of people across the world. Paulo Coelho's protagonist, Santiago, is a shepherd who follows his dreams in the search of his Personal Legend. He starts his voyage for the said purpose from the pastures of Andalusia in Spain, and after crossing through the Sahara desert, he reaches the Egyptian pyramids, where he eventually discovers his Personal Legend.

The profound impact of this text lies not only in its story but also in its language, which is immensely rich in literary devices. Paulo Coelho used numerous metaphors in The Alchemist to candidly bring the idea home to his readers. Metaphors are the essential components of literary expression that provide the transparent image of the disguising complexities of the thoughts in an effective and cherished manner. The focal point of this paper is to explore and analyze the metaphor of desert, which makes this text an interesting description. Landscape of the Desert as a metaphor has been used in literature for centuries. The glaring and mysterious beauty of the sprawling desert with sandy mounds becomes the alluring theme for the literary artists. After having captured the intrigue, complex but rather rich natural tapestry on the desert landscape, Swami Vivekananda said, "The desert is no longer a landscape; it is a pure form produced by the abstraction of all others...apparently the desert is very simple, but it's full of life; it's of hidden places."

(Vivekananda 173) Thus, desert captivates the attention of literary artists to mirror the pragmatic aspects of the universalities over a long span of time. The desert in the alchemist has served as a powerful metaphor to symbolise the various aspects of human life. Paulo Coelho's use of the metaphor of desert not only deepens the thematic aspect of the novel but also serves as a tool to assist Santiago in his existential quest for self-realisation. The metaphor of the desert depicts the psychological growth and general understanding of Santiago in his journey to accomplish his Personal Legend by passing through numerous catastrophic situations in the barren and arid basin of the universe. The metaphor of desert not only elevates the persona of Santiago but also reflects the deeper personality traits of other characters of the novel. Desert, as a metaphor, insinuates different connotations in different internal and external contexts of life. Sometimes it serves as an obstacle in the journey of the protagonist, and sometimes it beckons of hope that educates and supports him by carving out the right path to smoothen the journey of the directionless protagonist to realise the veracity of life and accomplish his legend. Paulo Coelho enriches the text of the Alchemist by mirroring his fancy and visualization of the polygonal and hidden aspects of desert.

#### **Desert As A Metaphor Of Obstacle, Emptiness And Solitude:**

In the world of literature, the metaphorical depiction of the desert is characterised by hardships, despair, isolation, emptiness, and desolation. In *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho uses the metaphor of desert to reflect the similar aspects of universalities. The protagonist, Santiago, in his journey of searching for his destiny, joins the caravan of people to the Sahara desert, where he meets an Englishman. Eventually this Englishman serves as a guide and friend and teaches him meaningful life's lessons that help Santiago to enhance his perspective towards comprehending things profoundly. Santiago and Englishman, in the course of their voyage across the desert, meet a camel driver who says, "Once you get into the desert, there's no going back." (Coelho 74) Here Coelho portrays the desert as a metaphor representing obstacles. All obstacles take his ordeal tests and challenge his perseverance; eventually, he is made rather more robust, which helps him to elevate from an ordinary human being to a real struggler in the pragmatic world ridden with infinite complications and glitches. Thus, Santiago's journey was indeed a challenging and herculean mission that had no scope for him to recede.

In spite of being a challenging, baffling, and confusing journey through the desert, it made Santiago the protagonist, as all catastrophes made him more encouraged and enlightened with the righteousness and reality of life. Santiago himself shares his experience during his journey across the desert in his own words: "There is life in the desert, but not knowing where to look." (Coelho112) Thus, Coelho underscores the idea that desert is not entirely an arid land. It has a life but is not easy to get through as it is riddled with infinite difficulties that need courage and patience to wade through them. No one can evade testing and challenges; one who wishes to wade through it will have to keep patience and courage to pass through it successfully. This testing journey is very transformative, as it's a journey of learning. In the journey of self-realisation, when everything seems stagnant, it actually provides an opportunity for self-realisation and introspection. Santiago, when struck in the midst of the desert, contemplates and connects himself with the deserted surroundings that empower him to have a better observation and understanding of the situation. Thus, the introspection helps him to accomplish his destiny.

In fact, desert symbolises solitude here, which is the prenominal condition for mental growth and evolution. This idea is put forth by Coelho when he writes, "The boy went back to contemplating the silence of the desert." (Coelho80) The writer affirms the importance of interaction with oneself, and it becomes possible only when one suffers alone and wades through this difficult patch of life successfully by using his inner intellect and power. The protagonist, Santiago, tries to connect with the spirit of the desert by perceiving its silence. Coelho asserts the significance of the moments of reflection here. He also observes about human beings that what he conjectures with his person experiences about the pragmatic world. The sprawling and silent desert gives opportunity to a man to reflect on his own actions and make speculation about life by being a visionary. Santiago understands that it is an individual journey where everyone speculates in their own unique way. Since everyone's journey is inspired by different motives, their outlooks for it are also different. Therefore, he acknowledges the different outlooks of himself and that of the Englishman. This understanding evolves his mental perspective that teaches him to not only understand one's own Personal Legend but also respect the path of others to fulfill one's own legend. Hence, the silence of the desert blessed Santiago with the wisdom to understand this world comprehensively and assimilate yourself with the spirit of the universe.

#### **Desert As The Spirit Of The Universe:**

Santiago believes in the spirit of the universe. He also believes that the spirit that delves into everything of nature guides only those who listen to it. There is a strong and hidden connection between human beings and the spirit of the universe. As in *The Alchemist*, when the camel driver says, "The caravan and the desert speak the same language, and it's for that reason that the desert allows the crossing." (Coelho75) Coelho wants to assert the idea that nature always communicates, but only with those who try to listen and understand it. In the narrative, the caravan presents the group of people travelling together, whereas the desert is the symbol of those obstacles or challenges that they encounter in their journey. On the one hand, desert, which is very unforgiving, cruel, testing, and posing hardships on every step, acts like a guide. It shows direction to those who understand its ways and then helps them in their transformative quest

to fulfill their personal legends. Santiago believes that the spirit of the universe tries to give him conjectures in different ways. The signs of nature, which he calls good and bad omens, the voice of the desert in the form of storms, dunes, sand, and its stillness itself, all seem to communicate with him. That's why the camel driver claims that only those who can well interpret the conjectures, be in harmony with the desert, and learn its ways may traverse the desert.

#### **Desert As A Metaphor Of Illusion:**

Desert as a metaphor of illusion has long been used in literature to express the feeling of deceptiveness and emptiness. The violent expansion of the desert, where only sand dunes and mounds are seen as far as one can see in all directions, can sink anyone into bafflement, hopelessness, and delusion. In "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho, the quote "The desert fills men's hearts with visions," (Coelho96) suggests that the landscape of the desert doesn't only posit difficulties and hardships in front of its passersby but also creates illusions and distorted perceptions to misguide them in order to have a litmus test of their patience, resilience, and perseverance. Though these tests turn into transformative experiences for the voyager, they must face them judiciously as they test the endurance and spirit of the voyager's struggle. The desert is portrayed as a place of introspection and self-discovery. The desert projects the aspirations and cravings of the travellers to ascertain whether they are worthy enough to peek inside their inner selves to assess their courage to confront challenges or not. The illusions created by deserts test their discretion and imagination. Thus, desert is portrayed as a place of illusion where individuals endeavour to get themselves connected with the surroundings and with themselves. This connection with the self lends them insight to see through the internal as well as external nature of one being in the eddy of the universe. Santiago's belief that desert instills visions in the heart. It, obviously, reflects that desert has the potential to generate imagination in him and a vision to see and understand beyond his own present scope of thinking. In order to be on the right path of self-authenticity, one must also experience disillusionment. Experience disillusionment is a process of learning and essential when one undergoes a transformative journey.

Coelho further emphasizes the cruel nature of the desert by quoting, "You must love the desert but never trust it completely because the desert tests all men; it challenges every step and kills those who become distracted." (Coelho106) The expression indicates that desert serves a variety of purposes according to the perception of the individuals. Desert deceives by creating deceptive illusions and tests the mental strength of the individuals. In fact, the desert is traitorous in nature here. It plays with the minds of the individuals; it kills them who are vulnerable and go astray and uplifts them who wisely understand its ways and go through it. It makes Santiago never trust the superfluous nature of the desert but tries to connect with the spirit of the desert. He peeps into the hidden meaning in the various conjectures of the desert. Consequently, he comprehends the spirit of the desert well. Desert demands complete attention, and those who fail to understand it become harsh and unforgiving. The desert is metaphorically a testing field that makes them powerful, who learn the movements and behaviour of the surroundings and adapt themselves to them. However, it destroys those who lack resilience and vigilance and act against their surroundings.

#### **Desert As A Metaphor Of Introspection:**

Desert has been beautifully and insightfully used as a metaphor for introspection in "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho. Having alluded to this theme, the old man from the oasis says, "But the tradition also says that we should believe the messages of the desert. Everything we know was taught to us by the desert." (Coelho102) The hardships and challenging conditions of the desert offer an opportunity for introspection. Humans have a natural propensity to reevaluate their actions through introspection in hostile conditions. This introspection provides wisdom and understanding of their conditions and also an insight to traverse the difficult and challenging times with encouragement and patience. In the instance, the desert is portrayed as an opportunity for introspection. Metaphorically, Desert is more than an obstacle. In fact, it delivers a lesson that wisdom is disguised in a challenge, and people who understand this reality are blessed with wisdom. The wisdom attained by self-introspection gives mental growth and helps in discovering their real selves. Therefore, the quote is intended to suggest that one should open one's mind to the surroundings, no matter how difficult they are. It actually conveys a philosophical message that if human beings get themselves connected with the harmony of nature, they are blessed with the hidden message of nature. Thus, the understanding of the movements of the desert helps to comprehend its essence more profoundly.

#### **Desert As A Metaphor Of Hope And Sturdiness**

The camel driver in "The Alchemist" says to the protagonist, Santiago, "You will see that there is life in the desert." (Coelho81) It describes the desert as a metaphor of hope, life, and sturdiness. Though the desert brings hardships and deceives individuals, it also reflects an optimistic and beautiful life that is full of ambition and aspiration. Despite the barrenness and arid stretch of sand, the desert gives valuable lessons that help the individuals to fulfill the legend of their lives. In this instance, the desert represents a metaphorical quest that fulfills Santiago's Personal Legend and becomes possible only through transforming himself. Thus, the desert motivates individuals and makes them hopeful by altering their characters altogether. This quote encourages individuals to look beyond the surface and embrace the challenges and lessons of life and also recognises that there is always something to be learnt and appreciated.

Further in "The Alchemist," the alchemist says, "The dunes were changed constantly by the wind, yet these were the same sands he had known since he was a child." (Coelho83) It highlights the desert's unchanging nature despite the continuous change in its dunes' shapes due to stormy winds. The metaphor of the desert shows strength, persistence, and endurance. The quote asserts that though the dunes change their shape due to wind, the desert remains the same. Even though desert changes its shape due to storm, it never changes its core essence. It symbolises that circumstances may change in due course of time to attain a meaningful life. However, we should not give up the essence of life and our prenominal nature during any kind of situation. They must change their ways and remain constant and sturdy in front of the hostile circumstances. Paulo Coelho suggests that external changes cannot be controlled, but the inner nature to be in one's true self to face every situation by being stable. Following the essence of this affirmation, the protagonist Santiago never leaves to pursue his dreams. He is always inspired by his dreams to remain sturdy under difficult and directionless situations during his journey to fulfill his Personal Legend. In fact, this implies a broader philosophical message about the enduring aspects of life and existence. It also mirrors the unchanging truths and values that guide one's own quest to attain the real purpose of life.

#### **Desert As A Metaphor Of Teacher:**

Exploring desert as a teacher in "The Alchemist," the alchemist suggests Santiago that "the desert is the best teacher." (Coelho114) Thus, Coelho portrays desert in all its dimensions, including its favourable and unfavourable conditions. The desert is projected as a mentor as it teaches its best lesson of life in the adverse circumstances. Santiago, whenever he feels isolated and dejected, listens to the voice of the desert that helps him to look into himself. Thus, the desert is portrayed as a place where Santiago gets wisdom, which eventually leads to his transformation. Like a teacher, it poses challenges to those who come to its vicinity but does not render them fail; rather, it polishes their true and hidden characters. It compels them to face their deepest fears and vulnerabilities, and these testing situations teach them valuable understanding not only about themselves but also those who are around them. They understand the nature of people and the environment around them. The desert teaches them everything that helps to sustain their existence. The desert gives knowledge, valuable lessons, and insight to illuminate the path of those who embark in the quest of self-discovery and personal growth. Santiago, like an ardent and dedicated student, learns the best lessons of the desert, and eventually the wisdom that he acquires during his stay in the desert helps him to fulfill his Personal Legend. Thus, desert metaphorically as a teacher puts the individual into compelling and harsh conditions and brings out the best qualities that help them to realise their true selves and thereby attain their destiny.

#### **Desert As A Metaphor Of Freedom:**

In "The Alchemist," Fatima, the wife of Santiago, shows the strength of character and her strong faith in desert life, which teaches her the value of freedom when she says, "I'm a desert woman, and I'm proud of that. I want my husband to wander as free as the wind that shapes the dunes." (Coelho94) This statement of Fatima shows her understanding and desire for freedom and self-discovery. As time changes, everything evolves with the passing time. The protagonist, Santiago, also recognises the significance of his quest to fulfill his Personal Legend. He values his freedom and gets ready to initiate his further journey of his destiny. The dunes in the desert change their shapes with the passage of time. However, they never lose their real essence. Similarly, Santiago changes the course of his life by making choices that lead him to his destiny. The protagonist, Santiago, when embarking on a journey of self-discovery and fulfillment, his loving wife reflects a strong sense of understanding. She presents herself as a tough woman of the desert who knows how to live independently. Simultaneously, she also encourages her husband to live with his own choices. She knows the value of a dignified life that comes from freedom and independence. Thus, this idea celebrates the privilege of freedom, which is very crucial for everyone to follow one's own unique and individual journey of life. Freedom is a major factor that helps individuals to explore their lives and shape their destinies. Thus, Fatima encourages and supports her husband to pursue his journey through life.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study reaffirms that the metaphor of the desert is used to enrich the meaning of the narrative. In "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho, the metaphor of desert effectively fulfills its purpose. The landscape of the desert serves not only the physical framework to the narrative but also represents the trials and tribulations that one must go through in the process of transformation. The journey of Santiago is not merely the journey of finding treasure but a metaphorical journey of self-discovery and self-realisation. The desert projected in the Alchemist is not merely a landscape used as a backdrop; however, it is a metaphor of obstacles, isolation, challenges, hope, realisation, and finally transformation. The desert, in all its austerity and beauty, teaches that the treasures Santiago searches for are actually buried within the trials and endurances that guide him to fulfill his Personal Legend.

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