

## **Mysterious Desert in Desert Literature: An Exploration Through the Eyes of Asad's *The Road To Makkah***

**Anu Antony**

Guest Lecturer

KAHM Unity Women's  
College, Manjeri, Kerala.

### **Abstract**

Desert literature is a genre of literary form which has been skillfully used by many writers to depict the devastated stage of mind and the land through the description of various cultures, dry areas, geology, weather etc. in the world and it persuaded us to explore "desert motif in literature" but the fact is that, it remains largely unexplored and undeveloped. But the present studies are the results, and it brings into its spectrum, several books and articles that talk about desert directly or indirectly, plainly as well as in the glow and colour of imagination. Desert in fact, appeared in the writings of many as background, symbol, metaphor and even a character. Even before the origin and growth of literary writings, desert played a major role in religious writings too. Christianity and Islam in their holy books desert have used desert as a metaphor and symbol. The language of desert literature is also remarkably different from other literary forms.

The present study is an attempt to explore the desert in *The Road to Makkah* and which describes the happiness and sense of reality brought to one man by the Muslim way of life. But the desert was the major part of his quest for spirituality. He speaks only about his own unique experiences upon the desert he had travelled and all that were in it, and comes out with a book of outstanding power and insight.

**Key words:** desert literature, mysticism, spiritualism, and psychoanalysis

*The Road to Makkah* is in a sense, an autobiographical novel of an Austrian Jewish journalist Leopold Weiss, who after his embrace of Islam took the name Mohammed Asad, and was known so ever since. It was considered as a spiritual journey for the study of the Muslim community. And for the elaboration of that purpose, he chose the life in the desert and was in Saudi Arabian desert for six years. In this work, he analyses the issues relating to the culture that he hails from and talks at length about his own civilizations, juxtaposing it in detail with the rest of the world or at least the eastern world. It is the story of those exciting years spent in the desert and the snow-covered peaks of the Pamus between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea. Once he

said about the text that: "It should be kept in mind, on the time level of my last desert journey from the interior of Arabia to Makkah in the last summer of 1932" (Asad 2004, 9). It was the main focus of the story. His pain is to feel something precious, now irretrievably lost, the long desert trek, roads etc. than in the depiction of the desert's solitude and integrity.

In the first chapter, like any other writers who wrote about the character of the desert, in his opinion, it was a horrible experience. The title of this chapter itself gave a clue to its content - *Thirsty*. He says that the thirst aroused in him by the intolerable heat of in the desert, was of a high degree. For example, the chapter begins with:

We Ride, Ride, two men on two dromedaries, the sun flames over our heads, everything is shimmer and glimmer and swimming light. Reddish and orange-coloured dunes, dunes, dunes behind dunes beyond dunes, loneliness and burning silence, and two men on two dromedaries in that swimming gait which makes you sleepy, so that you forget the day, the sun, the hot wind and the long way (Asad 2004,17).

It shows the sharpness in the nature of the desert. It offers an uncomfortable journey and the life in the desert. It also shows how dangerous it was. With this in mind, first he wrote about the sand which was raised so high in the strong wind like the giant snakes. It was clear that such terrible experiences changed the present condition of them like any other organisms. So, they were aware of such natural dangers which suddenly occurred in the desert. So they took all the protection to prevent them by awakening from the sleepy mood:

Sleepy have become the senses, you are rocking in the saddle, you perceive hardly anything beyond the crunching of the sand under the camels' soles and the rub of the saddle-peg against the crook of your knee. Your face is wrapped in your head-cloth for protection against sun and the wind...right across it...to the dark wells of Tayma that give water to him that is thirsty (Asad 2004, 10).

The place Tayma was very significant in the desert. Such places change the conventional concept of the entire desert. Of course, Tayma also is considered as a part of the desert. But it was different from ordinary deserts by its nature. The abundance of Tayma's water and its huge wells have no match anywhere in the Arabia. Therefore, it gained a great place in the Arabian culture. It finds a place in the Old Testament also. So he was interested to see it. A new hope for the travelers. "The inhabitants of the land of Tayma brought water to him that was thirsty" (Asad 2004, 10-11).

The way to reach it was very risky. The actual desert behavior was visible there. Especially the journeys through the reddish sand desert, the highlands of Central Arabia and the Syrian Desert. He said that there was no track and no path; instead only it was a part of a tremendous wasteland. The desert wind removed even the footprints of the humans on the sand which were helpful for the followers. The dunes changing so quickly, from one form to another, new hill dotted with dry, lifeless grass etc. give bitter experience for the travelers. They cannot trust their path, except for the natives. So, the author was glad in the guidance of Zayd, a native

boy. The description of a sandstorm is a most important thing. It gives a clear picture of the dangers of the desert. In the first part of the journey, he witnessed the powerful sandstorm when it appeared:

the summit of high sand hill in front of me catches my eyes. I see that the movement is not above, but in the dune crest itself: the crest is moving, ever so slightly, rippling and forward. A murky redness creeps up the sky from behind the dune; under this redness its contours lose their sharpness and become blurred; and reddish twilight begins to spread rapidly over the desert. A cloud of sand whirls against my face and around me, and all at once the wind begins to roar from all directions, crisscrossing the valley with powerful blasts. In a matter of minutes the sky darkens to a deep, rust-brown hue and the air is filled with the swirling sand dust which, like a reddish fog, obscured the sun and the day. This is a sandstorm (Asad 2004, 22).

Escaping from such terrible experiences was very difficult. Therefore, the animals expressed some strange signals warning against that. Here Asad's camel also was terrified and wants to rise from the ground. Therefore, Asad complained that he could work hardly to control his camel as well as himself against that sandstorm. And one thing is to be borne in mind; he was fascinated by the sandstorm in the desert. Only because of that, he was interested in the desert activities. And therefore, he decided to conduct a five or six year's journey from Makkah to Riyadh only because of the desert or some dunes, or something somewhere in the horizon, even king Ibn Saud warned him against that journey and he said that: "The beduins are backward people, and my Najd is a desert land without charms, and the camel-saddle will be hard and the food dreary on the journey- nothing but rice and dates occasionally meat" (Asad 2004, 20). However he was attracted to the wilderness of the desert. Nothing could dissuade him from the task.

Here, the author's concept about the life in the desert is very interesting and could be considered as against the one expressed in Thirst, the first chapter. He believed that in the deserts, there was life. But it was hard and difficult to stay in the deserts, even though he says that the desert always brought surprises. Sometimes it is its rigidity and emptiness, sometimes it awakens from the dream and tender, pale-green grass suddenly stands where even yesterday there was nothing but sand and splintery pebbles. And he becomes confused about the presence of the flock of small birds fluttering through the desert air. And again he says that the life in the desert was majestic:

Sometimes it is lava ground, black and jagged; sometimes dunes without end; sometimes a wadi between rocky hills, covered with thorn bushes out of which startled hare jumps across your way; sometimes a village beneath palm trees; sometimes a well in the midst of a desert valley, with Beduin herdsmen bustling around it to water their thirsty sheep and camels(Asad 2004, 13).

In this chapter, Asad is interested in describing the importance of water in the desert also, a positive thought against the thirst in the desert. For this, he noticed the changing weather in the

desert including the clouds, air, the lake, rivers, mountains, trees etc. And he says that the sudden change of them before the presence of water was very enjoyable. And he advised that it should realize whether true or not. “You suddenly recognize them for what they are: blandishment of the jinns, the mirage that has so often led travelers to false hopes and so to perdition: and your hand goes involuntarily toward the water skin at your saddle...” (Asad 2004, 14).

The desert was with too many dangers. Because, once Asad tried to reach to Zayd and his night camp, it was not easy. And he realized that about three hours before there was their night camp but the strange thing is that after three years he reached the same place, there was no sign of a camp or of Zayd. It was difficult to find out Zayd now. And when he lost his water skin, he realized that it was difficult to survive from the horrible thirst in the desert without water. He says:

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth and feels like old, cracked leather; the throat is sore and the eyes are inflamed. My throat is swollen, constricted, and every breath moves a thousand torturing needles at the base of my tongue—that big, big tongue which should not move but cannot stop moving in one unceasing grip of agony. (Asad 2004, 27, 28).

Thirst is again discussed in this chapter in detail in its horrible experience. Thirst for spiritual knowledge through the direction of natural truths. He says that the tongue becomes like a stick by the insufficient water or moisture in the mouth. In his experience, when the nights come in the desert, their thirst grows into a torment. The endless dunes in the hot sun made another difficulty in his life. Endless modernity conquering our wishes in the form of dangers. Even though Asad was interested to add certain positive experiences that happened in the desert, he was struggling hard with thirst now. Therefore, he gave a place for the Beduin people who considered the outsiders as their guests and gave them bowls full of milk. And he considered that it was the beginning of spring time especially for the travelers who were struggling for drinking water in the hot desert. and it virtually broke their long silence in the desert. In another context, when Asad was struggling for drinking water, the Beduins again helped him by providing water. But he couldn't drink it properly only because of the molten water and his teeth together to prevent the water from burning his throat and the whole body. However their support for Asad was remarkable. And secondly he considered it as the continuation of the spring time after the strong rain fall. It turned the steppes and the dunes to a green garden. A new hope arises for their smooth journey. Thirdly, the cold climate in the winter nights was another positive sign for the objection one finds to continue to be thirsty. When the rain sets in, they believed that it was the mercy of god towards them. Even the hooves of their horse splashed through the water, a happy moment. And they believed that it was the end of those terrible experiences when they started their journey in the last summer season of 1932- the endless hours in the burning days. So he felt that everything was hot and dark; but out of the hot darkness there was a cooling breath of wind and here it rustles softly. Because Asad was interested in depicting the desert as a place for the lives too. Therefore he never missed no chance to prove it. For example: “Look at there, a Hare!. I turn my eyes to the bundle of grey fur that has leaped out of a clump of bushes...” (Asad 2004, 21).

Metaphorically Asad's thirst in the desert symbolizes his ultimate thirst for Arabia to become his homeland. And an adventurous thirst from a longing to find his own soul a restful place in the world. This thirst was for the fulfillment of his desire. Like searching for water, he was interested in the discovery of an entirely different world, both in its perceptions and its outer forms, from all to which his European birth made him heir to. In a context, he referred that the storm made him thirstier. And when he decided to go back to the camp, he couldn't reach it easily. Anyhow it clearly shows that it is difficult to discover anything familiar in them even when there had been no storm. No job could be easily done.

In the beginning of chapter two, 'Beginning of the Road' was the beginning of a spring time. Because this chapter began with the presence of an oasis. It gave an interval to the animals as well as human beings from the hot sun. They got abundance of water there for their needs. And the desert witnessed a new beginning in his past during the journey- especially from his childhood days, death of his wife, parents, his studies and religious views and so on. His memories were far from his past, friends and made them all burden to him. Now he believed that these are now past and now it's the time for enjoyment. Because Arabia was his real home land and finally reached there. "My coming to this land: was it not, in truth, a home-coming? Home-coming of the heart that has espied its old home backward over a curve of thousands of years and now recognizes this sky, ty sky, with painful rejoicing?" (Asad 2004, 49).

The chapter 'Winds' gives us a new experience on Sinai desert. It was memorable. During the journey, he noticed the silent emptiness of the desert, the dunes covered with thorn bushes and the smell of resting animal bodies mingled with the dry desert sand. However, the journey was very tiring and the temper of the sand was declining, giving way to the harmonious rhythm of the wind in all nights. The wind has a special place in this chapter. He was interested in portray it giving it a place of importance. His journey to Makkah was for him a journey with winds too. "This area is a kind of wind hole: every day from dawn to sunset the wind beats here with strong wings, settling down during the night only to rise again the next morning with renewed force" (Asad 2004, 85).

Consequently, he noticed that the wind affects each and every element in the desert. The palm trees were eternally pressed down by its blows, and they cannot grow to their full height but remain stunted, close to the ground, always in danger from the encroaching dunes. The wind made their life hard; it destroyed their plantations, and they always struggled to keep them from being covered by sand. They were worried about their village and it was big and rich, but now it had grown small. The sands were close to their life day by day.

Voices had an unimaginable place in the deserts. It was the main focus in chapter four. It reduced the long silence and loneliness of the people in one way. "The verses of Zayd's song penetrate in a blurred way into my sleepiness, but precisely in the measure that the words escape me they seem to gain a wider, deeper significance quite unrelated to their outward meaning" (Asad 2004, 102).

Songs were very common in the desert. But it doesn't mean that their songs had proper meanings. Each and every caravan used to sing its songs. And it was common that the camel-

riders could hear songs in every part of Arabia. Their animals were trained to keep their songs regular, for they do not feel sleepy themselves- chants of deserts men were accustomed to, spaces that knew neither limits nor echoes but always keep them in one tone. They were loose and somewhat husky, coming high up in the throat, tenderly fading in the dry air. No one who travelled through the desert ever forgets those voices. They were able to control the earth, therefore the natives used this tool for their comfort. "Zayd sings, as his father must have sung before him, and all the other men of his tribe and of many other tribes over thousands of years were needed to mould the intensive, monotonous melodies and to bring them to their final form" (Asad 2004, 102). Their songs were unlike western music, which almost always tends to express individual feeling as well as their spiritual experiences along with their emotional knowledge shared by many people. It carries a sense of poverty of imagination; however it owes a lot to the Arabian culture for its strength and also its faults.

The physical health required for the journey was the main focus of chapter five. Here he is conscious of his health and that of his camels, mainly about the abundance of water required. From this, it was clear that, he enjoyed the desert journey even the dangerous situations in which he passed on weeks. After that again he decided to continue the journey:

Our dromedaries are in excellent shape- they have been recently watered, and the last two days have provided them with abundant pasture. There are still fourteen days between here and Mecca and even more if as is probable. I am strong, young, healthy. I can ride for many hours at a stretch without being unduly tired. I can travel- and have been doing so for years- like a Beduin, without a tent and without the small comforts. (Asad 2004, 132-133).

But after the two days of the journey, he and his camel were became very tired. The long silence and the long distance of the desert were the reasons for it. When they stopped; the dromedaries stretched their necks on the sand. Yet, he was wonderstruck by the beauty of the desert. He believed that there were many more beautiful places in the world, but none carries away man's spirit in such a sovereign way. As we tried to understand the hardness and sparseness, the desert becomes comprehensible to us. It creates a beautiful nature in the human mind. In the desert, he tried to project his own imagination pertaining to it: "The desert is bare and clean and knows no compromise" (Asad 2004, 145)

It sweeps out of the heart of the man all the lovely fantasies that could be used as masquerade for wistful thinking and made them surrender into the absolute that had no image. And he believed that, when men began to think, the desert becomes the cradle of their belief. They tried to believe in omens that were provided by the desert. A kind of spiritual entity- gave life and certain knowledge. Desert embraced both flesh and spirit of the people. And it gained a proper place on Holy Book: "It was from till burn bush in the desert of Midian that the voice of God rang out to the Moses; it was in the wilderness of the Judean desert that Jesus received the message of the kingdom of God; it was in the cave of Hira, in the desert hills near Mecca....." (Asad 2004, 145).Fulfillment of dreams is one of the major themes in desert novels. Here too, Asad wished to visit Mecca by travelling through the desert.

The middle of the desert was very interesting. During the odd journeys, when they met the camel-riders between the cars, gave him more happiness. It causes a short interval in the lonely and the endless desert. But the strange thing is that the animals disappeared in the desert quickly as the Euphrates had disappeared beyond the horizon. Secondly, in the idleness of the desert, he witnessed the hot sand by the wind, wide patches of gravel and there were few tufts of grass or a thorn bush in the dessert. The view of the sand hills was naked and fissured, crumbling under the hot sun; even though they grew up suddenly and concealed the endlessness of the desert.

Here, Asad tries to describe- the difficulties of the travelers in the desert. And once he met a caravan group; unfortunately he had forgotten to take some water from them for his engine. The area was the middle of the desert; therefore there was no possibility for well, river or anything else in the desert. The water sources were very far, and the miles around, there was only dry sand. There was only hot wind playing over the dry sand, “Coming from nowhere and going into nowhere, without beginning and without end, a muffled but out of eternity himself” (Asad 2004, 202). Water was very rare in the midway to the desert. So, they got mostly camel’s milk for drinking. If they were stuck in the desert, then they will continue to live there without food and water until a car was passing, “perhaps tomorrow or the day after tomorrow- or perhaps next month” (Asad 2004, 202). Water in the desert was very precious. When Zayd brought good news about the presence of water to him, their happiness was unimaginable. “Water! We ran to him and there it was: in a hollow, protected from the sun by over changing rocks glittered a little pool of water, remnant of the last winter rains, yellow-brown, muddy, but nevertheless water” (Asad 2004, 204).

Jinns and Godly presence appear in the eighth chapter. In the beginning, it was in the form of a snake, and were believed to be the representation of Satan. When Asad and Mansur were moving through the desert, they saw a big and black snake suddenly on the path. The native man Mansur convinced Asad that it was very dangerous, and the snake jerks, writhes and is deadly to the humans; because, the desert people believed that: “Thou shouldst not have killed it...anyhow, not at the time of sunset: for this is the time when the Jinns come out from the underground and often assume the shape of a snake” (Asad 2004, 208).

But in the same chapter, when Asad stopped his journey to water their camels, saw two large wells and full of sweet water. They were in the centre of the valley, and the tribes cooperated quite sincerely for giving water to the animals in large buckets. These are, of course, placed so conveniently by the hands of the Almighty god. Otherwise, it was impossible to drink water to reduce their thirst itself. In another context, they made a camp at the Wadi ar-Rumma; there they saw an ancient dry river, there thickly overhung with *arfai* bushes- God’s creation of greenery in the desert. Another strange thing they saw there, a group of *Ikwan*, they could only be hostile *Ikwan* in those places. These men believed that their faith obviously meant more than anything else in the life. So, they thought that their fighting was only for its purity and for the greater glory of God. Even though others believed that: “They are like jinns who know neither joy of life nor fear of death...They are brave and strong in faith, no one can deny that- but all they dream about is blood and death and Paradise...” (Asad 2004, 237)

The strong belief of the desert people in God was clearly visible in the beginning of chapter nine. When they reached Madina; the weather was quite changed. The sky became filled with the heavy clouds, a high wind plays around the soft clouds, a roar of wind comes suddenly from out of the desert and sweeps them apart, and the faces of the people who have been waiting for rain turn away in silent resignation and they muttered that: "There is no power and strength except in God- while the sky glares anew in a light-blue clearness without mercy" (Asad 2004, 250).

Sometimes, an image of Baluchi desert comes to us as a dangerous one. For example; a native man told to Asad: "Even if you had come without introduction, I would have accompanied you myself on your journey through the Dasht- i- Lut. You are my guest. I would never let you ride alone the Baluchi desert" (Asad 2004, 254). Because there was the silence of death. There were only endless sand dunes deeper and deeper into plain and empty place. Nothing could be found there on which to rest, no ridge on the ground, no stone, no bush, not even a blade of grass. No animal sound, no chirping of birds or humming of a beetle through the vast silence. A particular part of the desert was named 'Desert of Ahamad's Bells.' It was another ghostly place. Because there was a dangerous story that happened there. Many years ago, a caravan led by a man named Ahamad lost its way there and all of them, men and animals, perished from thirst; and the bells which Ahamad's camels wore around their neck and some travelers heard the ghostly, mournful sound of those bells from their path and that led them into death in the desert. A ghostly desert with a ghostly appearance it was.

It was a rainy weather in Madina when Asad was there. That's why during their departure, there was still rain. The morning was grey and cloudy. In the forenoon it begins to rain. In the night, the only canopy of the tent; and it smells of wool. The rain was hammering holes into the sand- myriads of tiny holes which suddenly appeared and suddenly disappeared to make room for new holes. The problem is that in such times, there was nobody in sight. There was long silence. The tents were near the acacia tree down below the valley in the rainy afternoon. The night became soft in the darkness and the coolness. In such climates, people enjoyed well by preparing meals:

Before most of the tents glow fires; the clatter ring of cooking pots and pans and the laughter of the 'women' mingle with the occasional calls of the men and the fragments of their talk which the wind carries to me. The sheep and goats that have come after the camels continue to beat for a while and sometimes a dog barks" (Asad 2004, 345).

The way from the desert to Mecca was very hot. It represents the struggle to reach God after passing the gigantic desert including all its dangerous situations. So the pilgrims believed that the desert posed big tests in the life of believers and only true followers passed such situations unflinchingly.

The wars in the desert were another evil thing that happened there and disturbed its tranquility. When they were in Saudi Arabia in 1927, King Ibn Saud's struggle for power at Najd and Hijaz against the Sharifian dynasty was the major war at that time. And we can see that



it was significant in many times. Anyhow, it was clear that he survived the dangers of the desert and fulfilled his dreams and finally he realized the meaning of the love and care of the desert.

*The Road to Makkah* is generally considered as a totally different work focused on a spiritual journey to the holy place Makkah. When majority of the people try to read it in that angle, the attempt here was to explore the significance of the desert in that novel-like autobiography. It was only because it was understood by the present writer that without the desert, the pilgrimage of Asad would have been far from being complete. The desert journey, one understands, can be too long and difficult. If anyone of the desert travelers did not accept the nature and behavior of the desert, he cannot survive in it successfully. Of course, there are too many difficulties one has to face there, hunger, thirst, heat, wind, long distance and so on. This is so, even though the desert is friendly and allowed one to follow his motives successfully.

In a world become a desert we thirst for comradeship. It is the savor of bread broken with comrades that makes us the values of war. But there are other ways than war to bring us the warmth of the race, shoulder to shoulder towards the ideal goal. Visibly our new home was a desert, walled in by barren, snow-clad mountains. There was not a tree in a sight. There was no vegetation but the endless sagebrush and greasewood. All nature was grey with it. the desert is related to purification or a therapeutic experience and can be found to have represented so in the Bible. Prophets of the Bible, in order to counter the Agrarian religions based on fertility rites, never ceased to describe their religion as the purest of the religions of the Israelites when they were in the wilderness. However, when it referred to a literal place, the desert is depicted forthrightly as a harsh, unrelenting presence that is nonetheless sacred because it is part of God's creation.

Over the past two hundred years, western poets, artists, novelists, musicians and even pilots have journeyed to the deserts of the world. Many of these visitors have found it not always lovely, but they use such opportunities for self-discovery, and have found strange places that are troves of wonder also. With these large features of landscape common to all countries and for the whole face of a land is changed by the rains. But the desert has none of these charms. Nor is it a livable place. There is not a thing about it that is "Pretty" and not a spot upon it that is "picturesque". The feeling of fierceness grows upon you come to know the desert better. The sun shafts are falling in a burning shower upon rock and dune, the winds blowing with the breath of far-off fires are overwhelm the mountains, the cloud- bursts are rushing down the mountain's side. The life too on the desert is peculiarly savage.

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