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Beyond Geography: The Desert as a Transformative Space in Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist

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Abstract: The paper examines the desert in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988) as more than a geographical setting. It argues that the desert functions as a transformative space where Santiago experiences personal, spiritual, and psychological growth. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of liminality, Mircea Eliade's theory of sacred space, and Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place. The paper explores how the desert separates Santiago from his former identity and prepares him for a new understanding of himself and the world. The paper concludes that the significance of the desert lies not in its physical geography but in its ability to transform Santiago's perception. The desert becomes a central space of self-discovery, where Santiago learns to understand nature, trust his intuition, and recognise his connection with the larger world.

Keywords: Desert, Transformation, Liminality, Sacred Space.



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Introduction

Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988) follows Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd who leaves his flock after experiencing a recurring dream about a treasure near the Egyptian pyramids. His journey takes him from Spain to Tangier, across the desert, and finally towards the pyramids. The novel is often read as a story about dreams, destiny, and the search for one's personal legend. However, the desert deserves particular attention because it is the main space in which Santiago changes. It is not simply a geographical area that he must cross to reach Egypt. It becomes a space of learning, fear, spiritual discovery, and self-understanding.

The desert separates Santiago from his earlier life. It removes him from familiar surroundings and places him in an environment where he is dependent on observation, courage, and intuition. He gradually learns that the desert has its own language and that natural events can function as signs. His relationship with the desert therefore changes from fear to understanding. By the end of his journey, the desert has become closely connected with his understanding of the “Soul of the World.”

The paper argues that Coelho presents the desert as a transformative space rather than merely a geographical setting. It functions as a liminal space, where Santiago moves between two stages of his life; as a sacred space, where he encounters signs and spiritual knowledge; and as a meaningful place, which he develops through lived experience.

Theoretical Framework

Victor Turner developed the concept of liminality in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969). Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, Turner describes liminality as the middle stage of a process in which an individual leaves one social position but has not yet entered another. He describes liminal persons as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony” (Turner 94). This idea is useful for understanding Santiago's position in the desert. He has left his earlier identity as a shepherd but has not yet reached the person he will become. He is therefore between two stages of life. The desert provides the physical setting for this transition.

Turner also discusses 'communitas', a temporary form of social equality that may develop among people who share a liminal experience. Santiago's caravan can be understood in this way. People from different backgrounds travel together because they face the same dangers. The desert temporarily reduces the importance of their social differences.

Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) provides another useful perspective. Eliade argues that sacred space is different from ordinary space because it becomes a place of revelation and meaning. He writes that sacred experience involves "a break effected in space" (Eliade 20). This break separates sacred space from ordinary, homogeneous space. It creates a point where the individual can experience a different order of reality. The concept is relevant because the desert gradually changes from an unfamiliar physical landscape into a space filled with signs and spiritual meaning. Santiago learns to understand omens and eventually experiences a connection with the Soul of the World. Eliade's theory therefore helps explain why the desert becomes more than an empty landscape.

Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) focuses on how human experience gives meaning to geographical space. Tuan writes, "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 6). The distinction is important in *The Alchemist*. At first, the desert is an unknown and threatening space for Santiago. As he travels through it, however, he learns its signs, understands its dangers, and develops a relationship with it. His experience gives the desert personal meaning.

Tuan's theory therefore helps explain the gradual movement from unfamiliar space to meaningful place. The desert becomes important not simply because of what it is physically, but because of what Santiago experiences there.

The Desert as an In-Between Zone

By the time Santiago enters the desert, he has already left his old life behind. He has separated himself from his sheep, his father's expectations, and the familiar surroundings of his homeland. The desert thus becomes an in-between stage in his journey. Santiago exists, in Victor Turner's terms, "betwixt and between," occupying a transitional position between his old identity and the new identity that is gradually taking shape. This transformation begins even before he crosses the Sahara. After losing his money in Tangier, Santiago initially sees himself as a victim of circumstances. However, as his journey progresses, he gradually begins to view his situation from a different perspective.

He begins to see himself as “an adventurer, looking for treasure” (Coelho 57). This change is important because Santiago begins to construct his identity through experience and action rather than through the roles that defined his earlier life. The desert becomes the space in which this emerging identity develops.

The caravan further reflects this condition of transition. People from different countries and social backgrounds travel together because they share the risks and uncertainties of crossing the desert. During the journey, their common experience becomes more important than their ordinary social differences. This situation recalls Turner’s concept of *communitas*, in which individuals undergoing a similar transitional experience develop a temporary sense of equality and connection. The caravan therefore creates a temporary social space in which established differences become less significant.

The desert also changes Santiago’s understanding of signs and omens. The alchemist explains that Santiago will become better at understanding omens because “the desert is the best teacher there is” (Coelho 131). This statement gives the desert an active role in Santiago’s transformation. It does not merely test him physically; it teaches him to observe his surroundings, interpret signs, and make decisions independently. His experiences in the desert gradually strengthen his ability to trust his own understanding. The desert therefore functions as a liminal space between Santiago’s earlier life and his emerging identity. By removing him from familiar social structures and placing him in an unfamiliar environment, it forces him to develop greater independence, awareness, and self-reliance.

The Desert as Sacred Space

If Turner explains why the desert feels strange and in-between, Eliade helps explain why it also becomes meaningful. Santiago gradually enters a world in which natural events function as signs. Hawks, snakes, wind, and the movement of the desert all become part of a larger system of meaning. Coelho calls this system as the “Language of the World”. Santiago's understanding of this language develops gradually. At the oasis, while watching the hawks, he says, “I am learning the Language of the World, and everything in the world is beginning to make sense to me . . . even the flight of the hawks” (Coelho 103). This moment is important for the idea of sacred space. The desert is no longer simply a physical landscape. Santiago has begun to see relationships between different elements of nature. The ordinary act of watching birds becomes a means of accessing a larger reality. The desert becomes different from ordinary space because it allows Santiago to experience meaning through natural signs. It is a space in which the visible world appears connected to something beyond itself.

This becomes particularly clear when Santiago sees a vision of an approaching army in the flight of two hawks. His interpretation of the hawks becomes important to the people at the oasis. The desert thus functions as a place of revelation. Santiago does not receive knowledge through books or formal instruction. He receives it by observing the landscape and learning its language.

The alchemist later tests Santiago's courage and tells him, "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" (Coelho 137). The desert is therefore both dangerous and meaningful. It demands attention and courage from those who enter it.

The desert's sacred character is also connected with the idea of the Soul of the World. Fatima explains that those who disappear into the desert become, "a part of everything . . . they become the Soul of the World" (Coelho 102). The statement gives the landscape a spiritual dimension. The desert becomes a space where individual life is connected with a larger order of existence.

From Empty Space to Meaningful Place

Tuan's distinction between space and place is particularly useful for understanding Santiago's changing relationship with the desert. At first, the desert is an unfamiliar space. It is vast, dangerous, and difficult to understand. Gradually, however, Santiago develops a relationship with it through experience.

The alchemist's statement that "the desert is the best teacher there is" shows that the landscape has become part of Santiago's education (Coelho 131). He learns to observe the sand, the wind, the animals, and the movement of the sky. These experiences give the desert personal meaning.

Santiago's relationship with the desert also changes because he begins to understand that nature communicates. His observation of the hawks is not simply an act of looking. It becomes a form of interpretation. He learns that the natural world can provide knowledge when he pays close attention to it. His statement that "everything in the world is beginning to make sense to me" shows the extent of this change (Coelho 103). The desert also becomes connected with Santiago's understanding of love. Fatima describes herself as "a desert woman, and I'm proud of that" (Coelho 102). Her identity is closely connected with the landscape. She understands that men may have to leave the desert and that they may or may not return. She explains that those who do not return "become a part of everything . . . they become the Soul of the World" (Coelho 102).

This statement gives the desert a cultural and spiritual meaning. It is not simply a place that people cross. It is part of their understanding of life, love, separation, and death.

Santiago's relationship with the desert therefore becomes increasingly personal. He begins by seeing it as a difficult landscape and gradually learns to see it as a place filled with knowledge and meaning. This movement corresponds to Tuan's idea that space becomes place through experience and value.

The Desert, Alchemy, and the Soul of the World

The connection between the desert and transformation becomes strongest through the novel's central symbol of alchemy. Alchemy involves the transformation of ordinary matter into gold. In the novel, this process also represents Santiago's own transformation. The desert functions as the space in which this transformation takes place. Santiago enters it with fear and uncertainty. He gradually learns to interpret signs, trust his intuition, and understand the relationship between the individual and the larger world.

The idea of the Soul of the World brings these experiences together. Fatima explains that people who disappear into the desert become “a part of the clouds, a part of the animals that hide in the ravines and of the water that comes from the earth. They become a part of everything . . . they become the Soul of the World” (Coelho 102). The statement is significant because it presents the desert as a space of connection. Human beings, animals, water, clouds, and the landscape are not completely separate. They form part of a larger whole.

Santiago eventually reaches a similar understanding. He learns that the language of the world is not based only on words. It can be found in nature and in human experience. The desert becomes the place where he learns this language most clearly. His transformation into the wind represents the climax of this process. He does not overcome the desert by controlling it. Instead, he learns to communicate with its elements. His transformation is therefore based on connection rather than domination.

The alchemist also teaches Santiago that he does not need to understand everything intellectually. He tells him, “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” (Coelho 131). The statement summarizes the desert's role in the novel. It teaches Santiago to recognize the larger world through small and apparently ordinary things.

Conclusion

Viewed through Turner, Eliade, and Tuan, desert becomes a space with several layers of meaning. It is an in-between zone that removes Santiago from his old identity. It is a sacred space where deeper meaning emerges through natural signs. It is also a once-unfamiliar landscape that becomes meaningful through lived experience. The novel itself presents the desert as an active force in Santiago's development. The alchemist calls it "the best teacher there is" (Coelho 131), while Santiago learns to read "the Language of the World" through the landscape (103). The desert therefore does not simply provide the background for Santiago's transformation. It participates in that transformation.

The fact that Santiago ultimately finds the treasure in Spain further demonstrates that the significance of the desert is not merely geographical. Although the desert is an important physical setting in his journey, its deeper function is transformative. The most important journey takes place within Santiago himself. His experiences in the desert change the way he understands the world, interprets signs, and responds to uncertainty. Through this transformation, he becomes capable of recognizing the value of the treasure he has been seeking. The desert therefore serves as a space of learning and self-discovery rather than simply a place through which Santiago must travel. In *The Alchemist*, it moves beyond its geographical function and becomes a symbolic space of identity formation, knowledge, spiritual awareness, and inner transformation.

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