

The Semiotic and Cultural Dimensions of the Desert Space The Novel (Timimoun) by Rashid Boudjedra as a pattern

Samiha Abbes

Faculty of Letters and Languages, Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba, Algeria.
Email: samihaabbes@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research paper aims to elucidate the semiotic and cultural dimensions of the desert space in Rashid Boudjedra's novel (Timimoun), where the space transcends its usual role to acquire new significances, becoming intertwined with the intellectual, psychological, and cultural aspects of the characters and environment. This aligns with the author's vision, turning it into an active element in the narrative adventure that unfolds new meanings with each reading, blossoming into multiple interpretations.

Keywords: *Space, Novel, Semiotic and Cultural Dimensions, Rashid Boudjedra.*

Critical studies of literary works have remained faithful to classical aesthetic forms or patterns of evaluation while also uncovering specific narrative construction features, among which the specificity of space is notable.

Modern studies, according to Henri Mitterand since Balzac, have recognized the poetics of place, turning it into a "narrative element in the literal sense of the word, as the narrative space has become an essential component in the narrative machinery" (Hassan Bahrawi, 2009, p. 27). This shift has clarified the relationship between real space or location and narrative space, transforming it from mere geographical settings or decorative frameworks to carriers of knowledge and cultural significance laden with symbolic meanings and capable of multiple readings. The space "is shaped through the narrative world, carrying all its inherent meanings typically associated with a specific culture or worldview, what Julia Kristeva calls 'the age's idiolect'" (Hamid Lahmidani, 2000, p. 54).

Space does not exist in isolation from other narrative elements; it has a close relationship with other narrative elements. Stripping it from these relationships renders it incapable of fulfilling its narrative role, as space is not merely the backdrop for the narrative adventure but also an active element within it (Bahrawi, 2009, p. 28).

According to this concept, space is comprehensive, referring to the creator's world not constrained by empirical measures such as dimensions, numbers, or geographic maps. The narrative space is an imaginary positive space acquiring symbolic dimensions that enhance the artistic value of the work due to its diverse readings and interpretations. The novelist often provides cues that stimulate the reader's imagination and trigger methodical explorations of the places depicted in the writer's literary language and fertile imagination. Space exists only through language, making it a verbal space par excellence (Bahrawi, 2009, p. 27), serving as both a literary writing strategy and interpretive reading simultaneously.

Space here becomes akin to the perspective presented by the author, where the narrative world remains tethered according to a predetermined plan. Julia Kristeva emphasizes this point by stating that space becomes a transformed unity, monitored by the author's singular

perspective dominating the discourse, with all lines converging at the depth where the author resides, and these lines are the active protagonists weaving the narrative scene (J-Kristeva, 1979, p. 186). Therefore, it's impossible to discuss place in isolation within the narrative, as the perception of a single place varies with different perspectives, making place an integral part of space. Since places are diverse and varied in narratives, their collective representation forms the narrative space. The inclusivity and indefiniteness characterizing narrative space make it open to multiple meanings and interpretations. This is unsurprising because it is "an imagined place crafted by language to serve imaginative purposes" (Jaafar Hassan, 2001, p. 28).

Despite the distinction between place and narrative space, a close relationship binds them. The presence of place in the narrative depends on the nature of the narrative content, and the diverse images of place contribute to its significance beyond its usual role. Reflecting the intellectual or emotional states of the characters in their environment makes place an actual axis in the narrative world, liberating itself from descriptive shackles because "place contributes to creating meaning within the narrative and is not always passive or negative. Sometimes the novelist can turn the place element into a tool to express the characters' stance towards the world" (Al-Hamidani, 2000, p. 70).

The desert plays a significant role in enriching the modern Arabic narrative space, transforming it into a realm of freedom, purity, and sanctity, surpassing its traditional associations with absence, loss, and isolation. Writers like Ibrahim al-Koni, who made the desert the source of his initial culture, and Abdul Rahman Munif, who delved into its elements revealing its boundless worlds, paved the way for authors like Rashid Boudjedra, the author of "Timimoun," to explore the desert theme uniquely in modern Arabic narrative discourse. Boudjedra's narrative, thus, diverges significantly, pushing the boundaries of Arabic narrative discourse uniquely.

Since our study revolves around the desert space, we have chosen the novel "Timimoun" to delve into its open spaces, shedding light on both closed and open spaces alike.

The Desert Space:

The "desert" in the novel "Timimoun" forms the central pivot around which the novel revolves, and the destination that alters its course. It is the open space chosen by the author to escape from the bloody reality, alienation, and loss that gnaw at his being, threatening him with death at every moment. It's as if the author believes "that only the desert cleanses the soul, purifies, empties, and releases, making it easy to launch into eternal emptiness" (Ibrahim Al-Koni, 1990, p. 127). However, he later found that the desert also became a symbol of death and oppression, as he says, "Fear still overwhelms me, rushes upon me, and tears apart my entrails, gnawing at them because it is terrible, it never leaves me" (Rashid Boudjedra, *Timimoun*, 2007, p. 10). It is also a symbol of death and suicide, as reflected in his statement, "I never revealed my feelings of death and suicide in the depths of the desert to any client" (Boudjedra, *Timimoun*, 2007, p. 47). Visitors sought it for rest and happiness as he says, "Initially, I refused to sell the magnificent desert to foreign tourists or not, because I know for sure that they come here seeking happiness" (Boudjedra, *Timimoun*, 2007, p. 46).

The happiness for which the author left his city, friends, and entire life behind, intending to go to any desert in the world, but he was surprised to find that death inhabits it, suicide is its address, and grief and pain are among its essential components. This is evident in his statement, "People do not know the meaning of grief until they see, from the top of the Assekrem Mountains, this cosmic disorder and this geological chaos that make up the Hoggar region,

where sands, dunes, and mountains accumulate in a frightening and eerie way, causing a person to inevitably think of suicide due to overwhelming awe and supplication” (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 47). The semiotic space of the desert is the relationship between metaphorical literary language and the meanings of reality; it is the space of metaphorical images through stylistic formation and linguistic narration. It is a space connected to the semantic extension of literary language, and since “Timimoun” in Rashid Boudjedra’s novel carries meanings of annihilation, estrangement, loss, and death, this overwhelming force will inevitably affect the protagonist, whether he takes action or refrains, because “the desert is a geographical and geological upheaval at the same time” (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 47).

In his novel "Timimoun," the author discusses the desert as a metaphor for human existence because the poetry of things is related to their comprehensive structure. The desert is not poetic as a geographical area covering its surface with sand and where the causes of life wither away; rather, it is from its infinite aspect and its influential legacy in collective consciousness as a place of loss and isolation. Perhaps this is what the author conveys in saying, "The desert - at night - is a terrifying shadow, a kind of waking dream. In the desert, one loses the sense of reality. In the desert also, people see splendid gray camels ... strutting over sandy plateaus, and green palm trees sprouting seemingly out of nothing ... but this splendor is imaginary, the desert is fierce, harsh, unattainable ... because for me, it represents the ideal place for longing, feeling suffering, resentment, and misery, and in the desert, I learned about longing and pain" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.33).

This description contains deep psychological implications, revealing the novelist’s existential and spiritual anxiety. Through it, he illustrates the existential and spiritual anguish he suffers, as the desert symbolizes death, misery, and suicide for him. The symbolic meanings discovered by the reader through reading the novel “Timimoun” take on a primarily existential character. They are a result of the political reality experienced by the protagonist, and this existentialism in its expressive form expresses a rejection of reality in all its social and political manifestations. It provides a glimpse of the complexity of the society that has resorted to escape and suicide. The narrator says, “I decided that the desert would be a way of death and suicide ... The desert that gnaws at my body, wounds my skin, burns my eyelids, and inflames my chest due to the dryness of the air” (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 42). The protagonist in the novel “Timimoun” escapes from the death and destruction imposed by terrorist groups and drug gangs to slow suicide and death in the desert.

The space of the desert has engraved its winding and rugged paths into the essence of the writer, intertwined with the connotations of oppression, defeat, and the omnipresent death that has accompanied him everywhere and at all times. Thus, he came to live the memory of death and the death of memory. Upon examining the objective reasons that formed the writer’s preoccupation with death, we find it manifested: Firstly, in the social situation he lives in, as he did not experience his childhood or youth like any ordinary person. His father deprived him of inheritance and considered him a communist, in addition to his unstable childhood, primarily characterized by his hatred towards women, which is similar to his hatred towards death. The symbiotic relationship between them is blood, as he says ‘I used to avoid them and avoid any intimacy with them ... I felt towards them a mysterious feeling, a mixture of fear, reproach, and disability’ (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.23). Then he continues, saying ‘That day, I understood the meaning of menstruation! I vomited for hours and nausea overwhelmed me, so I lived through the first shock in my life, leaving nightmares, complexes, and pathological behaviors, fleeing from women and sex following this incident’ (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007,

p.67).” The narrator’s aversion to women is reflected in his rejection of the harsh political reality that embodies violence and death. The protagonist begins to exhibit feelings that reflect his troubled childhood and difficult political reality, which are translated into fear and alienation. This fear stems from the dismal security situation and the news reports constantly playing on the themes of death and assassinations across all sectors of society. For instance, the narrator states, Professor Ibn Saeed was assassinated this morning at eight o’clock in his home by a terrorist group of Islamists, in front of his twenty-year-old daughter” (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.20).

Alienation is manifested in his sense of disconnection between his inner life and the space around him, which he perceives as filled with loss, oppression, and the loneliness that drives him towards suicide, yet he fails each time. "Since forever, I have been struggling with the urge to commit suicide, always carrying five capsules of cyanide for this purpose, fully prepared to rid myself of this dreadful life. It's fortunate that I am very fond of drinking vodka... Without all these things, I would have committed the worst form of suicide. But in reality, I know I am a coward, afraid of death, and perhaps the issue of the capsules... only signifies a kind of theatrics and pretense to myself (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.32).

Here we find that the novelist Rachid Boudjedra shows a great interest in the metaphysical dimension of the issue of death and the sense of self-fragmentation. He leverages existential philosophy's statements, which was not previously known in the ideological novel dedicated to serving authority. In addition, he relies on Freudian psychoanalytic theories when discussing libido concepts and psychological complexes such as repression and regression, and suicide (death) because the fear of death - as Philippe Zanic says - has only a psychological anxiety felt by the individual will seeking uniqueness and separation. The risk of losing individuality is death itself.

The desert space created by Rachid Boudjedra in “Timimoun” serves as a central locational value and an enticing axis for anthropological reading. It leads us to several icons that the author employs to explore the utmost boundaries, standing at the intersection between survival and annihilation, between death and life. Among these icons, the desert and woman are considered the most significant, as the desert only burdens life in imagery that resonates with extreme possibilities and boldly confronts death. As Ibrahim Al-Koni suggests, the desert is inherently harsh because freedom is harsh, it is nothingness because death is nothingness.

The woman is considered the most important symbol used by the writer after the desert - because the woman also contributed to expanding his fear of death. For him, the desert and the woman are two sides of the same coin, which is death, and the complementary relationship between them is blood. In his opinion, the woman risks her heart for what is worldly, so he does not want the death of his symbolic values in exchange for material values. Therefore, he must confront death to preserve his symbolic values. That’s why the hero cuts short his journey at the end of the novel and returns to the city after revisiting his origins and correcting his vision of himself and the world, saying, “I returned to my origin and my temperament ... But what matters is that I lost that hybrid way of looking at the world! I regained my spontaneity” (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 106).

Constantine Space:

Constantine is depicted in Rachid Boudjedra’s novel “Timimoun” as an open space that reflects its identity, origins, and cultural heritage. This vast and magnificent city is where the protagonist was born, educated, and developed a strong attachment to the rocky terrain and

traditional way of life. Boudjedra describes Constantine as a city always filled with the scent of incense, fine fabrics, and the aroma of grilled sheep's heads over charcoal, in a traditional manner (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 57). There is no wonder in that, for humans are born with an innate connection to their homeland, enamored with the place that embraced their first moments of birth. Emotions are carved in both the soul and memory, which is why Siza Qasim says, 'Yet, our relationship with a place encompasses many complex aspects, making our experience of it a process that surpasses our conscious abilities to delve into our subconscious. There are places that help us find stability and others that repel us.' (Saleh Wala, 2001, p.48)."

Despite the writer's attachment to his city of Constantine, he fled from it due to feelings of isolation and despair, as expressed in his words, "Matters became complicated from the very beginning for me, and they became so entangled to the extent that since my early adolescence, I felt lost and doomed through this family and this city with its mazes, twists, and alleys" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.20). He also states, "The feeling of isolation returned to me as it was when I was a teenager. As soon as my friends leave me, fear and constriction take hold of me. I enter the city and think it will crush me under its buildings, institutions, and homes... Constantine, where I acquired this pale face and this pale charge since adolescence. Constantine, where the allure of suicide dominates its inhabitants more than any other city" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.77).

Although Constantine's space was woven with threads of death, oppression, and loss, akin to the space of the desert, we find the protagonist nostalgic for this city from time to time, especially when he talks about his memories there, especially with "Kamel Raïs" and "John Cohen" in their adolescence and school days, and the exciting events they witnessed. We can sense this in his words, "Constantine, that city built on a huge rock surface. It appears as if tilted. Constantine, precious with its raised bridges in the sky, its terrifying cliffs, and its ancient citadel perched on the edge of the clay mountain and the crumbling rock" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.57). He also described it as having a kind of development starting from the year 1958, when signs of civilization and progress began to appear in Constantine. This is evident in his saying, "Constantine was manifesting in this year, in the year 1958, with its artificial workshops acting as if eager to employ thousands of unemployed. People noticed the presence of some cranes here and there, and the emergence of some buildings from the ground while still under construction." (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 57). Despite the openness and expansiveness of Constantine and the desert spaces, they are reduced to a closed, crowded place embodying all meanings of loss, death, oppression, and suicide.

Regarding closed spaces, we will try to focus on a group of them that contributed to shaping the spaces and landmarks of the narrative fabric. Among these enclosed spaces in the novel "Timimoun," we mention:

The Bus:

It is one of the prominently present closed spaces in the novel, accompanying the protagonist on his journey to and from the city of Algiers. It is a large, ugly-looking bus that he called "Shattat" "because it looked strange and was extremely fast at the same time" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 34). The bus served as a home for the protagonist, where he experienced all aspects of biological life. He said, "I drive 'Shattat' and live inside it, eating, sleeping, drinking, and getting drunk, and the bus has become a home" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.46). Although the bus is a confined and small space compared to the city and the desert, enclosed spaces usually make us feel suffocated and unfamiliar. However, the protagonist

found all the safety and reassurance he was searching for. As Gaston Bachelard said, “He - the infinitely small - is vast in his own way” (Gaston Bachelard, p.194). The hero’s strong attachment to this bus stems from his desire for stability and breaking free from the cycle of loss and turmoil imposed by social circumstances, such as his father’s abandonment, deprivation of inheritance, and the political turmoil of that period marked by assassination campaigns and physical purges carried out by terrorist groups and criminal gangs across various segments of society, especially the educated class. This is evident in the hero’s statement, “My stumbling life became unbearable, so I reject all this terrifying violence and savage terrorism, as well as the suffocation from political maneuvers, financial thefts, and ‘mafia-like’ dealings, while the criminal gangs impose their presence through violence, indiscriminately targeting innocent intellectuals and ordinary citizens.” (Boudjadra, Timimoun 2007, p. 70).

Therefore, this bus can be considered the safe haven the hero is seeking, rushing to reach it, as he is in a race against time on this bus that is exaggeratedly described for its speed. This is evident in his statement: “Because the desert is harsh, especially when one crosses it aboard an old, terrifyingly fast bus: one hundred kilometers per hour as it climbs the high dunes and descends from them in a hellish manner. He raced towards her at full throttle, with Rolls Royce extinguishing systems! Here, the hero aimed to reach a safe place devoid of contradictions and the bloody terror that threatened to cast him into the abyss of loss and death. He said, ‘Today I am threatened by people who are experts in murder and crime, having appointed themselves as guardians of religious ethics’ (Boudjadra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 34). The closed bus space has occupied a significant area in the novel discourse, where it served as the engine of events and a link between the past and the bright future envisioned by the poet, a safe homeland far from the circle of loss, suicide, and death.

Al Hanat (The Bar):

Is a place that symbolizes the protagonist's state of loss and homelessness, where he frequented alone or with friends to drink alcohol and consume hashish, in order to escape from the harsh reality, disappointment, and feeling of being lost. He says, "On one of the nights, Kamal Raïs and Henri Cohen went to a Hanat, where the dream is easy. In this place, the faces of hashish smokers take on the color of absence that is left behind by supplication among people" (Boudjadra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 55). The protagonist has always frequented such places, as he mentions, "Where I spent a whole night drinking beer until I got drunk. I had become accustomed to such behaviors" (Boudjadra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 18). Despite contradicting his symbolic, ethical, and even religious values, he did not hesitate for a moment to go to her because she made him forget his bitter reality. The hero’s journey was not limited to adolescence but extended beyond to the age of forty, and even when he met Sarra, he did not hesitate to ask her to accompany him. He says, ‘After a quarter century has passed since that period, I try to seduce Sarra and take her with me to a secret tavern in Timimoun’ (Boujedra, Timimoun, 2007, p. 59).))

The Hotel:

It was a space that did not play a major role in driving the events of the novel; it was where the protagonist and tourists stayed to rest before resuming their journey. However, it was also a place laden with feelings of loss and displacement because the protagonist was never without his bottle of alcohol even while at the hotel. He said, "I returned alone to the hotel, went up to my room, took a bottle of vodka, sat down on the floor in front of a blank room, and

started getting drunk provocatively" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.63). Thus, loss and death haunted the protagonist even in the hotel, which is supposed to be a place of rest.

Talking about the novelistic space leads us to discuss the spatial convergences that are considered effective and efficient techniques for forming this narrative component. In our study, we will try to highlight their importance in the novel "Timimoun."

The Duality of Past and Present:

This duality has been a central theme in Rachid Boudjedra's novel, reflecting the intertwined relationship between two intersecting spaces: the bus space as a closed space representing the protagonist's past, which he evokes through recalling a tape of his personal memories and the memory of his wounded homeland. "Thus, as I drive the massive 'Shatat' bus with its splendid engine that I was proud of, and I am annoyed by its old, ugly exterior appearance, memories from my childhood and adolescence flood me. How many days and nights did Kamal Raïs, Henri Cohen, and I spend talking about women, sex issues, love, and romance" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.29). He then resumes his speech, saying, "I still retain in my memory the traces of that chaos, noise, and thunderous echo, laden with sighs, groans, chants, and screams, throughout the entire mourning period." (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.39). As for the present space he seeks to live in with tranquility, freedom, and peace, it is the open desert space that the protagonist imagines as his escape from fear, loss, and destruction, where he says, "Fear still besieges me... it never leaves me. I try to resist it with cups of vodka and my journeys across the largest and most remote desert in the world." (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.10). The vast open desert space empowers the protagonist, as manifested in his words, "I notice some overlapping sand traces extending in beautiful circles, from top to bottom on the surface of the windows, creating reflections of sand dunes and saffron."

"The color... thanks to the white bus lights' radiation" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.11). The author has turned the closed space of the bus, or rather its dilapidated frame, and the headquarters of memory into a space of disability, non-being, and loss, where the protagonist felt pain and isolation. "I wandered through the entire desert for years in complete isolation. Alone. I drove 'Shattat,' and his character was tired, lost, bound by the shackles of a sad past. I feel like I carry a mixture of human fates on board the bus that arouses pity in me" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.11). However, the closed space of the bus opens up to the desert space where the protagonist seeks a path of salvation and safety, only to be surprised that the desert has also become a place not for freedom but for slow death and certain suicide, as evidenced by his statement, "I think the desert is the central place of suffering, pain, and grief" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.47). Therefore, the protagonist decides to cut short his journey to the desert and return to his homeland, from which he fled seeking refuge. After reconciling with himself and changing his outlook on the world as a whole, he says, "But the useful thing is that I lost that hybrid way of looking at the world! I regained my spontaneity" (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.106).

Duality of Discontinuity and Communication:

This duality reflects the contradiction between the open space of memory (the homeland) which represents one aspect of communication and the closed space of the bus, which constitutes the space of the dream of a safe homeland and is a form of discontinuity.

The harsh reality experienced by the city of Algiers due to bloody terrorism forced the protagonist (in the novel "Timimoun") to leave his homeland and head towards the desert by

bus in search of peace and tranquility. However, the protagonist carried this wounded homeland with him in his memory, which kept him in constant connection with it. For example, simply reading the headlines of daily newspapers full of brutal terrorist attacks would take him back to the sad past of his homeland and his troubled childhood. He says, “Despite all my attempts, I fail miserably to erase these memories. The past and my shattered childhood haunt me, causing me to struggle incessantly, my hands dripping with sweat, grappling with my thoughts, feelings, and obsessions” (Boudjedra, Timimoun, 2007, p.106).

Despite the painful memories of his homeland (Algeria) and childhood that the protagonist recalls, they ultimately establish a connection. The theme of detachment in the novel (Timimoun) is embodied in the bus space that the protagonist chooses to escape from his wounded homeland and turn it into a home and a safe haven, allowing him to sever ties with fear, loss, and suicide. However, this enclosed space (the bus) opens onto the desert space, which also symbolizes estrangement, death, and destruction, thus transforming the desert into a point of connection with the sorrowful past. This affirms to the protagonist that there is no refuge for him except in his homeland, Algeria, and that he has no mother but Algeria. He realizes this truth at the end of his journey, so he cuts short his trip to the desert and returns to his city, Algiers, after reconciling with himself and the world.

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