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Deadly Desolation: The Desert in *The Rain God*

In Arturo Islas' novel *The Rain God*, there are two seasons of desert weather, according to Mama Chona: very hot and very cold (171). In Islas' *The Rain God*, the desert comes into play often. It's the setting the characters are part of in a small town on the Texas-Mexico border. It's a sensation, and it even can be a symbol of impending trauma or death. The Rain God exists in "vast realms" and is where the dead "return to their joyful beginnings" (Islas 162). At the surface level, the Rain God can be read as a saving force that ends desert climates, but Islas sets the Rain God at a different position in the novel. In Arturo Islas' novel *The Rain God*, the desert and the Rain God are the same force, uniting through trauma, sickness and death.

The desert is the setting of the novel, but *The Rain God* also includes numerous references to the desert and its climate. In Texas, main character Miguel Chico's family seeks to escape the desert climate. The sand creeps up on the characters through cracks in housing foundations, sandstorms, and comes forward at times of trauma. One of the earliest mentions of the desert is the "poor people's cemetery," where no grass grows, and the desert wind-blown trees don't give much shade (Islas 9). Miguel Chico directly addresses the desert — and its lack of rain — when he asks whether the trees in the cemetery are ever watered. The desert climate is almost inescapable to characters, even in death, since they are buried in the sand. When Miguel Chico was in the hospital fighting for his life, the desert payed him a visit, evidenced by the phrase, "Those chips of ice fed to him by his brother Raphael were grains of sand scratching down his throat" (Islas 6). The desert merges with Miguel Chico as he's nearing death, and when he recovers, he moves away from the desert into a new life. The desert is also a source of

desolation for the family. The family's goals are to leave the desert, which is what Miguel Chico did once he grew up. Leaving the desert meant escaping its isolated surroundings.

Desert analogies are more frequent when characters are suffering or near death. In cases of death, such as the death of Felix, the desert — its sand, its rocks — are sensations felt and sometimes tasted by characters of the novel. Felix's "mouth was full of the desert" at his death (Islas 137). Like Miguel Chico, Felix felt the sense of impending death, conveyed to him by desert sand. Sensations are also connected to the desert. Leaving the desert is the goal of many members of Mama Chona's family — escaping the sand that's creeping up on the family members. JoEl, who is a seer, felt the west wind "lifting the desert to their doorstep" the night that Felix died (Islas 152). The desert approaches Felix's doorstep as he's nearing his death. The desert is also equated with death at the scene in the cemetery. With the cemetery being reduced to sand and headstones, when members of the poor El Paso community die, they are united with the desert through burial in the sand at the cemetery. Adults told Miguel Chico that "people who loved him were there" (Islas 9), *there* directly meaning the cemetery, but indirectly also meaning the desert. Miguel Chico's loved ones are made part of the desert after death, it and its sands finally catching up to them. Implying that Miguel's many late family members are part of the desert complicates the later image of Felix as the Rain God.

The desert is an avenue for the fantastic elements of the novel to present themselves. The desert and the rain work perpendicularly in a definition-based sense, with the rain signifying the end of the desert and the desert the end of the rain. However, the Rain God, according to the poem, lives in the realm of the infinite, and when considering that, his presence could be understood as meaning the end of the desert. Mama Chona almost alludes to the Rain God when she's tending to the flowers and says, "Without me, everything would die" (Islas 171). Without

the Rain God, there would be no rain and the climate would become desolate — like the desert. This also could have been meaning that without Mama Chona, the matriarch of the family, none of the others would exist. In Islas' work, however, the Rain God accompanies the desert as a symbol of death, though rain is often associated with relief outside of the novel.

Netzahualcoyotl's poem about the Rain God written out by the first Miguel Chico describes the earth as a grave, where people are buried and turn to dust, while their spiritual selves move to the realm of the Rain God (Islas 162). The poem is the image that directly ties the Rain God to death. He appears and is seen by Miguel Chico when Mama Chona dies to take her into his "vast realm" (Islas 179-180). Miguel Chico feels the Rain God come into the room, and Mama Chona sees her son Felix.

The rain plays an important role in heightening the Rain God's association with death. In the desert, Islas mentions rain at moments of approaching death. Miguel Chico's cousin Antony dies by drowning — sinking into water instead of the desert sand or being buried in the cemetery (Islas 47). When Nina heard that Antony was dead, she was looking out her window at "the desert that came right to their back door," and later, the desert is in Ernesto's eyes when talking about his son (Islas 44; 48). The metaphor of the desert pushing itself into the house is reversed with Antony's death via drowning. He, unlike the others, does not die with a desert; he faces its desolation in life with his strict parents, but he dies without reference to the desert sands. Mama Chona takes a drink of water right before the end of her life, and then when she sees the Rain God in death, her desolation is over. She has entered the "vast realms of the Rain God," her body remaining to be buried and merge with the desert. The introduction of rain/water allows the desert to merge with the Rain God as an ending destination. At the end of Islas' novel, Felix "smelled like the desert after a rainstorm" (180), the moment where the desert and the rain are

finally equal. The Rain God is “the desert after a rainstorm,” where the rain neutralizes the desert and merges with it to be one climate.

Felix had connection to the desert, which is hinted at in his fear of sandstorms. His fear matches the dislike for the desert felt by his family. When Felix was dying from injuries after being beaten, water (rain) is made parallel to the desert. Felix hears walking on stones while he says he is surrounded by water, and “the desert exhaled as he sank into the water” (Islas 137). Felix seems to be lying on the desert floor (*seems* because his body was found in the truck), which turns into water. When Felix sinks into the water, the desert exhales. He’s joined the dead as part of the desert, and Felix’s death merges the desert with the Rain God realm. He hears walking on stones — stones in the desert potentially like those in the cemetery. He joins the land of the infinite and returns to the living world as the Rain God when Mama Chona dies. At the end of the novel, Miguel Chico is the only one to feel the Rain God come into the room, which could to him being the one to see morbidity in his loved ones buried in the sand and part of the desert (Islas 178-179). As the Rain God, Felix is able to finally merge the desert with the rain as symbols of death.

The Rain God and the desert could be thought to be conflicting forces, but in Arturo Islas’ novel *The Rain God*, the desert and the Rain God symbolize sickness and death. When characters are close to death, the desert is nearby. When Mama Chona is close to death, Felix appears as the Rain God. The desert encroaches on the family in times of struggle, and sensations of sand are felt when characters are close to death. Deserts can be symbols of desolation, where mortality is reinforced with its death-ushering sands. The Rain God realm is associated with the desert when Antony drowns and then merges with the desert at Felix’s death. The Rain God

becomes a symbol for death, where his “infinite realm” exists after life. Their souls go to the realm of the Rain God, and their bodies become the desert.

Work Cited

Islas, Arturo. *The Rain God*. Avon Books, 1984.