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Contents

6

Representations of Desert Arabs as Colonial Subjects in the Contemporary French Novel: A Study of *Desert* by Le Clezio

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Abstract

Stereotypes of the Islamic world, which were generated by colonial French writers and denounced by their North African counterparts, usually degraded the Orient and justified colonialism. This article focused on the representations of the colonised Maghrebian Arabs in the novel of Le Clezio, a contemporary French writer. The study applied the postcolonial literary theory to explore the experiences of race, representation and difference in relation to the colonial discourse of Orientalism and Fanon's dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised with a view to establishing the colonial assumptions permeating the novel titled *Desert*. The nomadic Arabs were dehumanised, debased, gerontified and infantilised while their virtues were negated and trivialised by Europeans, who, conversely influenced by Occidentalist self-affirmation, portrayed themselves as superior and powerful people whose intervention was to take out an eccentric, criminal and outlawed Islamic leader. His descendants in the colonised 'City' were classified as oppressors of women, moribund and wretched people who saw Europe as the Eldorado. These various representations of the Tuaregs as the demonic 'Other' of the European 'Self' underpinned the writer's intention to expose the influence of colonial mentality, a result of hegemonic western discourse, on his fellow Europeans.

Key words: Desert Arabs, Colonial Subjects, contemporary French novel, Le Clézio

> "East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet" (Rudyard Kipling).

Introduction

As the 18th century of Enlightenment believed more than before in progress, reason, happiness and universal brotherhood, a literature on journeys to other continents was produced by French authors like Montesquieu, who talked about the Persians from Oriental Asia in *Lettres Persanes* (1721), and Diderot who made reference to Paraguay from Southern America in *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772). At the peak of the colonial rule, all the representations of the Orient made by the *West* formed the basis of the discourse called 'Orientalism'.

Works from French writers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Pierre Loti, which could be regarded nowadays as postcolonial, were produced in the heat of colonisation to support or counter nationalist intellectual reactions to colonialism. After colonisation, references to colonialism and the subsequent political, cultural and linguistic effects on the formerly colonised societies mostly emanated from writers in the former colonies. However, the historical experiences of colonisation that took place mainly in the twentieth century were also narrated by contemporary French writers such as Michel Tournier and Le Clézio.

Both Frantz Fanon and Edward Said explained that Western knowledge and representations of the non-Western world are neither objective nor based on "reality," but implicated in the West's will to colonise imaginations, establish a myth of White superiority and ultimately justify its imperial adventures. This study, therefore, deals with the extent to which Maghrebian Arabs were misrepresented by a 'self-serving western propensity' in what is known as western colonial and neo-colonial discourses (Lee Haring, 2010: 250).

French Exotic and Colonial Literature

Jourda (10, 17) asserted that most romantic writers first imagined the outside world before visiting it. They hardly travelled and those who made trips did not know how to observe. The French started travelling to farther places after the 1789 Revolution and the Empire (of Napoléon), from 1899. Romantic writers built an Orient of their fantasy (Jourda, 11). Travelling and discovering of territories were noticed in the 19th century, with Flaubert moving towards Egypt; Fromentin to Algeria and Loti to Constantinople and Fez. Pioneers of Romantic literature in France, namely Chateaubriand and particularly Mme de Staël, initiated the Travel Literature (as a genre) after 1800, which inspired writers like André Gide and Paul Morand. The Romantics appealed to their imagination rather than the strict observation of things and humans, the environment, habits and events. Texts about the Orient were characterised by recurrent images of the desert, the sea and the charm of Islam. For Chevrier (5), colonial literature served as a documentary on African ethnic groups and its geography with some French writers attempting to either glorify the European conquest or describe the landscape.

The legitimacy of colonialism and tactics to be used during colonial rule were discussed in the nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville did not sanction the idea of a "civilising mission." However, the justification for Empire in 19th Century French Thought was that it would bring glory to France and make its population more socially and politically active. However, Kohn (2011) was all the more surprised that colonialism could hold sway and be justified at a time when liberal thought was conflicting

with colonial practice. Walter Rodney (163) supported the Marxist view by stating that Imperialism was essentially an economic phenomenon, that is, a form of capitalism which enforced exploitation and social change.

Orientalism, Colonial and postcolonial discourses

As a critical approach, postcolonialism is a subversive discourse against Western cultural imperialism over peoples who had come under its dominance through colonialism. Colonialism is a term that refers to the political ideologies which justified colonisation, that is, the modern invasion, occupation and exploitation of inhabited lands by foreign military powers. In other words, postcolonialism holds a set of theories that are reactions to the cultural legacy of colonialism with reference to how it "continues to shape the relationship between the West and the non-West after former colonies have won their independence" (Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon, 115). Harrison referred to 'discourse' in postcolonial studies as representations and practices that impose a certain view of the world and direct the others accordingly, while rejecting any other views (19).

Homi Bhabha (1994) showed that colonial discourse debases the colonised population in order to justify Imperialism. As for Said, colonial discourse generated the creation of binary oppositions which shape the way we view others. For instance, the Oriental and the Westerner were distinguished as different from each other (i.e. the emotional, decadent Orient vs. the principled, progressive Occident). This opposition justified what was termed as the "white man's burden" or the coloniser's self-perceived "destiny to rule" subordinate peoples.

The analysis of cultural representations of the non-Western 'Other' formed the core of Orientalism, a term owed to *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said's pioneering book on postcolonial theory. The book presented Orientalism as a colonial discourse on the ways the Western colonial powers represented the Oriental territories and people (in North Africa and the Middle East) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It revealed the Eurocentric universalism which attributed superiority to what was European and inferiority to what was not. Said explained how a societal fantasy of European racial superiority was influenced by French writers Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire and Lautreamont. He elaborated on the frequent *negative* terms used against the Orient, which was seen as timeless, strange, feminine, and degenerate while its inhabitants were victims of gender and race assumptions, "eccentric, backward, silently indifferent, (and) penetrable like a female, malleable" (Said, 4). John McLeod (41) noted that, 'The Orient is frequently described in a series of *negative* terms that serve to buttress a sense of West's superiority and strength."

Dibyesh Anand (2007) corroborated Said's argument that these attempts at showing images of the Orient's separateness had been part of Western discursive practices for a long time in order to justify imperialism as a civilizing mission and also to justify the massacre of some resistant natives. Anand claimed that these stereotypes demarcated the West from the Orient as they marked a difference between norm and deviancy, the West being seen as 'Us' and the Orient as 'Them'. Finally, the representation of the Other as irrational, immoral, inefficient, and duplicitous affirmed *self-representation* of Europeans as rational, moral, efficient, and honest.

Classification, gerontification and infantilisation of the resistant desert tribes

Désert (1980) presents two interwoven stories: the crushing of the Tuaregs at the beginning of the 20th century by the French colonisers and the story of Lalla, a young nomad woman, descendant of the desert tribe who, despite becoming a famous photo model in France, returns to the desert to give birth to her child. Reading *Desert* through Orientalism consists in examining all the representations of the Orient made by the *West* taking into consideration that the novel is set in the Orient. It consists in finding binary divisions between the West and the Orient from the perspective of a writer who belongs to the Western world, more precisely finding degenerate images of the oriental culture and people.

Images of the scorching sun and the unbearable heat, which generated sweat and made body to smell nastily, demonstrated that the North African desert tribes lived in an unfriendly environment (*Desert*, 8, 49). The dry weather and the harsh blowing wind were harbingers of sickness and death (D, 196). This unfriendly weather had been a major source of concern for Europeans not only in Africa, but other colonised territories as far as Asia. The French novelist, Marguerite Duras, confirmed the negative effects of the weather and the unbearable heat on Europeans in colonial Vietnam (*L'Amant*, 11, 90, 125).

The narrator of *Desert* gave credit to the observations of the character called Nour for the story of the desert tribes under his father's leadership. They opted to be fugitives against the French troops that were all out to capture Al Azraq, their religious leader. Their continuous flight translates the weakness, inefficiency and incapacity of the Arabs to face the superior fire power of the Western army. As a result, they were condemned to a very precarious living, full of suffering for the remainder of their lives on the road, where deaths, births and even weddings occurred (D, 11). However, the Arabs's only reaction to their fate was mere silence, a worrisome acceptance of defeat spread and shared by everyone, including Nour's parents (D, 237-8). Trekking barefooted or with rudimentary footwears like goat leather wears, which tore easily and exposed their feet to tears, defined the Arabs as

primitive (D, 233-4) [transl. 186]. The suffering, poor and underdeveloped desert men, armed with a ridiculous arsenal made of duggards and a few long guns, could not battle the invaders (D, 17).

The Arabs' incapacity to conquer nature is an indication of underdevelopment and backwardness. Consequently, perceived as an inferior race, they were even downgraded to an animal level. A shepherd, for instance, was reported to be spitting and grunting like camels (D, 10). The colony of fleeing Arabs were dehumanised and presented as a herd who end up feeding on the same grass and leaves with the animals (D, 233).

Moreover, the desert Arabs were presented as violent, war-mongers. Despite their weakness and inability to confront the French army, a group among the fleeing Arabs was planning to attack a town (D, 360). Cruelty and wickedness transpired in their practice of slave trade. Even in migration, the Arabs remained slave merchants (D, 17). To sum up the narrator's view, the desert tribes's condition of living consisted of precarious child birth, dangerous daily life at the mercy of the harsh weather, rodents and dangerous reptiles, the lack of direction and purpose of life. In short, the tribes were classified by backwardness, indifference to progress, passivity in life, primitiveness and the acceptance of the desert as the centre of their life (25):

Confronted with hunger and sickness, the Arabs demonstrated naïve religiosity in the blind trust in their religious leader to give them strength and remedy through mere prayers (D, 244). They believed that their war was waged for the kingdom of God (D, 248). However, this religiosity proved to be irrational, childish and ineffective because, in the heat of the suffering and at the brink of exhaustion, the wandering Arabs could no longer offer prayers or praises to their Lord (D, 360). More importantly, the essence of the desert Arabs' lives was tied to the whims and caprices of their leader, also called Ma el Ainine.

The ineptitude of the kings or political leaders in the colonised territories explained their lack of development, by extension, their inability to match the superiority of the conquering West. The narrative derided all the tales about the desert warriors' power and invincibility. The stories about Al Azraq's powers were perceived as mere legend devoid of credibility (121):

> "No one from back in those days is still alive," says Aamma.
> "Everything that is said about him comes from tales, his legend, what can be remembered. But now there are people who don't want to believe that anymore, who say it's all lies." [Transl. 90]

Through colonial discursive techniques such as 'classification', 'debasement' and 'gerontification', Al Azraq and his subjects were classified as barbaric, debased as ignoble savage and gerontified as excessively

religious. General Moinier, the leader of the French troops chasing Al Azraq and his tribes, *interpellated* the desert leader as a fanatic and a murderer. Louis Althusser's Marxist notion of *Interpellation*, as examined by Mc Leod (2000: 38), explained the Western conqueror's identification of Al Azraq as the 'Other', that is, the opposite of what the 'civilised, rational, intelligent and, thus superior' French coloniser was (D, 374). Moinier called Al Azraq a sorcerer, who was able to bewitch only the wretched and the black people. Behind his fanaticism, the Arab spiritualist was treated as a wild, violent, blood-thirsty and warlike leader (375):

> "A fanatic,", said the officers, "a savage, who thinks only of plundering and killing, of putting the southern provinces to fire and sword, as he had in 1904, when Coppolani was assassinated in Tagant, as he had in 1905 when Mauchamp was assassinated in Oujda. [Transl. 303-4]

Al Azraq was underrated initially until he masterminded the shocking assassination of highly ranked colonial administrators (D, 382). Despite the feat that was quickly negated and dismissed, he was considered as a tricky old fox who would soon be outsmarted by the self-proclaimed 'intelligent' French General (376).

The Arabs' resistance to colonial conquest (D, 399) was trivialised. The medieval weapons paraded by the Arabs could not withstand the fire power of the French troops, who were also tagged as the Christian forces, which turned the fight into a holy war for the Arabs Muslims. The resistance of some Arab troops was easily crushed by the French troop, who took over the palace of the fugitive Arab leader (D, 397). As soon as the remaining Arabs realised that the Promised Land was a delusion, they abandoned their stubborn spiritual dreamer and moved forth to some other lands. Although their love for their leader and their belief in his religious ideals were unflinching, the Arab troops finally admitted that any resistance to the Western power was irrational, suicidal. At the demise of Ma el Aïnine, who did not confront the French troops at all (D, 406), but who refused to subject his people to colonial rule, he was buried in conditions too precarious for a leader, highlighting poverty rather than modesty (D, 430). The leader left behind a population of Blue Men, a set of modest and wretched people on earth whose property was only the arid desert land (D, 438). That was the fate of people who lack what it takes to survive as a race.

The denigration of the colonised was highlighted by Fanon in *Les Damnés de la terre* (190), translated as *The Wretched of the Earth*), where he bemoaned that the Arabs were not considered as human beings, whereas the French were still considered as human beings under the German occupation and vice versa:

> Il faut se souvenir en tout cas qu'un peuple colonisé n'est pas seulement un peuple dominé. Sous l'Occupation allemande, les Français étaient demeurés des hommes. Sous l'occupation française, les Allemands sont demeurés des hommes ... Tandis que les Algériens, les femmes en 'haïk', les palmeraies et les chameaux formaient le panorama, la toile de fond naturelle de la présence française.
> We should always remember that a colonised people are more than just a dominated people. Under the German Occupation, the French remained human beings. Under the French Occupation, the German remained human beings... Meanwhile, Algerians, women in 'haik', the palm trees and the camels serves a panorama, the natural backdrop of the French presence. [Our translation]

Debasement of the colonialised Arabs

The failure of the first generation of Arabs to stop the conquest of their territory led to the colonisation of their descendants. The narrator presented the inhabitants of the unnamed North-African city as passive and inept people who merely submitted themselves to the whims and caprices of time, events and weather. They could not, on their own, undertake, let alone achieve any form of development. This attitude of ineptitude from the colonised was denounced by Fanon in what is termed as *esprit de Kokangnè* spirit in Guadeloupe, a French Oversea Territory in West Indies:

> Cette tendance à la facilité, à la paresse et aussi à la lâcheté qui conduit à tout attendre des autres et en tirer profit sans aucun effort ; sans aucun esprit de sacrifice. Cet esprit de Kokangnè qui nous conduit à attendre notre libération de l'Autre ou à vouloir faire la révolution par personne interposée. » (Roland Thesauros, 42)
> That tendency toward ease, laziness and also cowardice, that makes one to depend on others and profit from them, with no spirit of sacrifice. That Kokangne spirit that makes us to expect liberation from the 'Other' or to want a revolution through a third party... [Our translation]

More stereotypes of the Arabs were revealed through the study of characters' identities. Lalla was presented as a primitive who goes around barefooted (D, 79). She was seen as exotic and sexually promiscuous. Twice, she allowed a shepherd to have carnal knowledge of her body. The double *jouissance* (Dobie, 72) in the cave led to her later pregnancy (D, 140). Her unreserved love for the strange Hartani was debased by the presentation of Hartani teaching her an animalistic way of life (D, 152).

Usually, the slaughtering of rams comes at the end of the Muslim's pilgrimage to Mecca, not after the Ramadan fast. However, the presence of

the ram in the novel, for a festival it was not meant for, brought to the fore the image of barbarism, through a pejorative reference to the spilling of blood (D, 172). The narrator's disapproval of cruelty seen in the spilling of animal blood for the sake of human celebration was translated in Lalla's attitude. She was unhappy about the festival, especially about the treatment melted out on rams (172). Lalla's disposition showed that neither the oriental society nor her guardian could provide the social amenities to cater for the needs of the orphans and the emotions of a mentally strained girl. The precarious conditions of living, of windowless cabin where her aunt's sons lived, deprived Lalla of a 'standard' upbringing (D, 87).

Lalla's mother, also called Lalla Hawa, a descendant of the desert tribes of Ma el Aïnine, was reported by Aamma, to a victim of gender-based cruelty and oppression (178), who died because of the lack of medical infrastructures in the village (179). Owing to her mother's demise, Lalla's search for love and affection compelled her to turn to a weird and strange figure, the Hartani, who was portrayed as a savage shepherd. He was 'othered' by the remaining population of the City as evil, ostracised and avoided like a plague (D, 131). Lalla's guardian, Aamma, hated the Hartani too, whom she blacklisted as abnormal and strange and unfit for Lalla (D, 112). The whole City believed that the Hartani was possessed by evil spirits. Beyond these scare tactics, the tag of a thief was placed on Lalla's ultimate friend (135). The Hartani was the prototype of the primitive, wretched and inferior black shepherds in the lands of the Arabs. He only came to limelight because of his privileged relationship with the Arab heroin of the novel (D, 191).

Aamma, as a typical traditional Arab woman, fueled the oppression of women by sustaining patriarchal attitudes. For instance, at meal times, she served the male members of the family first, who, after their dishes, would leave the dining spot without helping out on the household chores (D, 101). In addition, Amma's narration of the life of Lalla's mother was an accusation of underdevelopment whereby African oral traditions lacked credible archival methods. Passed on orally, without any written backup documents, some stories were bound to be thwarted and vary according to the memories and moods of the chronicler (D, 88-9). Likewise, the fisherman in Naman's stories, which were not rigorously documented events, were qualified as untrue (D, 190).

Orientalism defined the Arab males as effeminate and irresponsible (D, 169). Aamma's husband was reported to be incapable of getting a good ram, prompting his wife to go alone to buy one towards the end of the fasting period. His wife, singlehandedly ran the household (D, 186). The financial burden made the financially challenged lady, along with her sons, to rely on Europe to take them out of financial quagmire, or finally to send Lalla to carpet to make ends meet. Zora, as the prototype of Arabs as

oppressors, was a wicked woman, who engaged little girls between eight and fourteen years and treated them as slaves: (D, 187).

Occidentalist views about the West

Although Occidentalism includes both positive and negative representations of the West, the focus of this study is on the stereotypes that sustain the Eurocentric hegemonic western mentality that justify colonialism. The speech made in Dakar in 2007 by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, was an attempt to establish that colonialism was positive for African history (Hauser, 65-78). Such an idea was an occurrence of colonial discourse which interpreted the colonial adventure as a meeting between fearless and courageous French with strange and uncivilised indigenous people. That colonial myth was sustained by the story of the French troop fighting the desert tribes. Besides, Le Clézio promoted the colonial mentality of current French politicians like Sarkozy whose speech accused Africans of having sold their fellows to the slave merchants (D, 39).

> They spoke of caravans that were cut short when the soldiers of the Christians liberated the slaves and sent them back to the south, and how the Tuareg warriors received money from the Christians for each slave they had stolen from the convoys. [transl. 24]

In *Desert*, the narrator presented the collaboration of Africans with the French army as some of Africans served as guide to the French army (39). The French might have armed and led the army; they were not directly responsible for the killings of the natives. In the troops under the command of General Moinier, there were only two French officers. The remaining troops were made of Africans consisting of an observer, a guide and thousands of soldiers (*Desert*, 373). Another regimen consisted of hundreds of African soldiers, all combat ready to attack the 'rebels' of Ma el Aïnine (D, 378). The perceived atrocities attributed to the French army were actually committed by the African troops in the French army. The narrator asserted thereby that barbarism could only be attributed to the Africans, not the civilised French (384).

However, Fanon rightly debunked this complicity of Africans as a well planned scheme by the French to free their conscious of the guilt inherent in the brutality and murder of native populations:

> Unable to stand up to all demands, the white man sloughs off his responsibilities. I have a name for this procedure: the racial distribution of guilt. I have remarked that certain things surprised me. Whenever there has been any attempt at insurrection, the military authorities have ordered only coloured soldiers into action (BSWM, 103).

With the role of Africans in the French army, as found in the novel Desert, Le Clézio sustained the opinion of French politicians that colonialism was meant for the civilisation and development of other lands, but the natives who collaborated with the French in the 'Civilising Mission' turned it to an aggressive and brutal mission. While the merits of colonialism should be attributed to the colonisers, the negative brutality and murder aspects should be put at the door steps of the indigenous collaborators. Thus, the West had always remained generous and good, while the Other has been brutal and bad.

Conclusion

With the discredit of the Muslim leader's qualities and strength as mere tales, and the 'classification', 'debasement' and 'gerontification' of his followers and descendants as barbaric, excessively and naively religious, colonial discourse interpellated Ma el Aïnine as a fanatic, a murderer, a sorcerer, who could only be influential to the morally and intellectually inferior Maghrebian Arabs. In the novel studied, the stereotypes of the Orient were those spread by hegemonic western discourse to support the pretentious Civilising Mission and justify the domination of other races and territories.

The occurrences of negative images of North Africa vis-à-vis the positive representations of the West are premised on the French author's personal experience of North Africa, maybe through his Maghrebian wife as well as an attempt to give a realistic picture of colonial North Africa and the way representations operate as a result of the interactions between the French and the Maghrebian Muslims who have been affected by colonialism. Although we might question the writer's authenticity, typicality, and ability to be a voice for the Maghrebian Arabs, we should acknowledge his eligibility to expose colonial assumptions as a step toward the postcolonial project of decolonising the minds of both the coloniser and the colonised.

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