

**Resistance in the Desert: A Postcolonial Reading of the Novel
Desert by Le Clézio**

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Abstract

Literature about the images of the Maghrebians Arabs was usually investigated in postcolonial criticism as either withholding the cultural assumptions produced by Orientalism or proposing an anti-western critique of the hegemonic West. This paper focused on the subversion of the stereotypes of the colonised Maghrebians Arabs in the novel of a contemporary French writer. The study applied postcolonial literary criticism to explore the experiences of representation and difference in relation to the colonial discourse of Orientalism and Fanon's principles of violence and resistance with a view to establishing the anti-colonial reactions permeating the novel titled Desert. The nomadic Arabs were portrayed as freedom lovers who had to resist the internationally sponsored French army, presented as powerful, barbaric, repressive and oppressive intruders. Europe was demystified, as a hostile land, full of disillusion, brutality and deception. The heroin Lalla epitomised resistance as evidenced in the condemnation of oppression, forced marriage and exile to Europe. The existence of discursive resistance in the novel and the will to give a voice to the marginalized therefore establishes Desert as a postcolonial work, and more particularly a critique of the West from within.

Keywords: Resistance, Desert Arabs, postcolonial, contemporary French novel, Le Clézio

Introduction

Desert (1980), a novel by Frenchman Le Clézio, revisits the stereotypes of the Orient, initially designed by the colonial discourse of Orientalism to praise the West and debase the Orient. Interestingly, literature produced by French writers is investigated in postcolonial criticism for either as example of cultural assumptions against the Orient as “eccentric, backward, silently indifferent, (and) penetrable like a female, malleable” (Said, *Orientalism*: 4), or as a form of anti-western critique offered from within the hegemonic West, which is perceived as a coldly rational agent of imperialism, with its sinful urban life, corruption, materialism, and other evil practices that create tensions within and across religions and cultures (Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, 2004).

At the primary stage of anti-colonial, whereby “indigenous states and peoples fought Europeans’ first attempts to control them” (Cell, 2009), some fought and got crushed by the Europeans’ gun power, while others resigned to making treaties with the invaders. *Desert* relates the crushing of the Tuaregs by the French colonial army at the beginning of the 20th century, along with the story of one of their descendants, a young nomad girl who abandons her career as photo model in Paris and returns to give birth and enjoy the freedom of nature, in the Sahara desert. Our study shall focus on the subtext that reveals cases and strategies of resistance against colonialist ideology, as evidenced in the condemnation of the French colonial army for its brutality and the modern City as a strange, hostile and anonymous world where people lose their senses when they are cut off from the fundamental elements of their existence.

Resistance and Literature about the Maghreb

Resistance in postcolonial criticism is analysed at primary and secondary levels (Norman, 2012). Primary resistance is associated with the concepts of violence, independence and liberation as propounded by Fanon. The second type of resistance is counter-discourse, a postcolonial activity which requires an intellectual independence or a ‘decolonised’ mind. For Helen Tiffin, decolonisation of the mind is a continuous process: “It invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between Europe or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling.” (95). Since subversion is the ingredient of postcolonial texts, our study shall dwell on passages where the normative codes of European biases and canonical traditions are subverted and their ideology eroded.

Early anticolonial manifestos emanated from Bartolomé de Las Casas (*Mémoires*, 1542) and Franciscus de Victoria, who were identified as two of the most influential critics of Spanish colonial practice in the 16th century (Ferro, 1997 and Kohn, 2011). De Las Casas claimed that “The Defense of the Indians lies in showing that they are human beings, without any difference from those who were colonising them” (Ferro, 168), while Victoria argued that neither the Pope nor the Spaniards had the right to colonise the Indians under the pretext that they violated natural

laws by being fornicators or adulterers. The 16th century French writer Montaigne's *Les Essais*, was equally another accusation of the West on its role in colonialism (Jouanny, 5).

Besides, Césaire – with his works *Cahier D'un Retour Au Pays Natal* (1939) and *Discours Sur Le Colonialisme* (1950) – alongside Frantz Fanon saw colonialism as a source of violence and dehumanisation. In *Les damnés de la terre* (1961, translated as *The Wretched of the Earth*), Fanon analysed the role of class, race, and violence in the Algerian struggle for national liberation. Since the coloniser's presence was based on strength, resistance to this force should likewise be violent. The differential factor of class was no more owning factories, but belonging to a particular race, like the dirty native zone of Arabs characterised by depravation (30). Colonial stereotypes made Algerians to be identified with the images that the European made about them: savage and unreasonable killers (Harrison, 68) or the violent, passionate, brutal, jealous, proud, arrogant Algerian who stakes his life on a word or on some detail (Harrison, 70). Fanon's major preoccupations were first, the existence of cultural alienation and the necessity to fight the colonial domination that generated it (Giraud, 74). Subversion becomes, therefore, the ingredient of postcolonial texts: "If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued" (Barry, 192).

Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which revealed the Eurocentric universalism that attributes superiority to what is European and inferiority to what is not, successfully sensitised critics to the operations of colonial discourses, which launched postcolonialism as a literary theory (McLeod, 23-24). As a result, many writers have striven to demonstrate how colonialism was perpetuated by the process called 'colonising the mind' that consisted in justifying colonisation as a Civilising Mission and making the colonised subjects to accept their lower ranking. Following Said and Fanon, pioneers of a counter-discourse about the stereotypes of the Orientals, the new generation of critics in the 1980s – when *Desert* was published – who would believe that resistance to colonialism should challenge the way of thinking about identity.

While the early African Negritude poets shared their frustration in Europe and their desire to fraternise with the races of the world in works that expressed their nostalgia about Africa, the Algerian Tahar Ben Jelloul elicited the contradictions inherent in exile – whether physical, cultural or psychological – by describing Europe as a place of misfortune and hell, in contrast to the illusion of hope and paradise: "L'Occident que décrit Ben Jelloun n'est pas un paradis terrestre; mais un espace ambigu qui donne et prend la vie, qui rend heureux et malheureux, et qui se manifeste à la fois comme enfer et paradis" (Ajah, 49). Albert Memmi's *La Statue de sel* (1953) treated the identity quest of a young Tunisian hailing from the minority Jewish community, living in an Arab Muslims' dominated country under French colonial rule. Benillouche's quest for a new identity was marked by the rejection of imposed societal norms and embracing external cultural models (Marzouki, 68). Assia Djebar was a female Algerian writer who gave a central role to women, either as oppressed or emancipated individuals, in the

narratives intertwining between History and her personal life in works such as *La Soif* (1957) and *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985).

Mehdi Charef's *Le Harki de Meriem* (1989) and Yamina Benguigui's *Histoires d'immigrés* (1997), as examples of diaspora literature, examined the reconstruction of identity by ostracised French Algerians who suffered a double rejection, that is, considered as traitors back in Algeria and as strangers by their host communities in France (Rachedi, 83). The diaspora writer, Nina Bouraoui, with an Algeria father and a French mother, and the author of *Garçon manqué* (2000) examined the relationships between men and women in Algeria, the quest for identity between one's Algerian origins and the diaspora in France (Blondeau, et. al. 146). Kangni Alem Alemdjrodo, in a mytho-critical comparative study of African and Maghrebian literatures, stated that North African writers such as Mohammed Dib, Driss Chraïbi, and Albert Memmi treated the delusion of colonial France, questioned the myths of the founding founders, oscillating between greatness and their decline, and the coldness and immorality of France epitomised by Paris: "La France c'est le bordel du monde et le cabinet de ce bordel est Paris" (Dris Chraïbi, 271). Contemporary French writer Le Clézio, whose spouse is a Maghrebian, made his contribution on the images of the desert Arabs, notably in the novel *Desert* through his treatment of colonial agents as villains and Arabs subjects as victims of colonialism.

The French colonial army as agent of repression and oppression

The narrative tone of the novel incriminates the colonial army for its brutality towards the desert warriors who resisted violently even if their weapons were no match for the Europeans'. No form of resistance was tolerated; otherwise, it was repelled with killings (D, 40). As repression and oppression characterised the colonial situation, the invaders launched attacks against the native nomads, which caused a destruction of lives, livestock and properties (39). The merciless army grounded the local economy by attacking their caravans, burning down villages and abducting the local children (D. 230-1). The imperial army would only tolerate the local leaders who accept their supremacy. When some leaders contested their imperial authority, they were forcefully removed and replaced by African collaborators, sometimes from the very family of the deposed leader, thereby foregrounding Fanon's warning against the presence of African sell-outs who served as links between the European capitalists and their Africa:

Ils marchent vers le Nord, vers la ville sainte de Fez, pour renverser le sultan, et faire nommer à sa place Moulay Hiba, celui qu'on appelle Sebaa, le Lion, le fils aîné de Ma el Aïnine. (D. 382)

(They are marching northward toward the holy city of Fez, to overthrow the sultan and have Moulay Hiba appointed in his place, he who is called Sebaa, the Lion, the eldest son of Ma el Aïnine. transl. 309)

The might of the colonial army notwithstanding, some oppressed Arabs who rejected the submission of their territories recorded some victories, as exemplified by the assassinations of

colonial administrators such as governor Coppolani and Mauchamp (375). Although General Moinier saw the French army's attacks as a revenge mission against the Arab leader Al Azraq, the narrator - who doubled as the Arab leader's son - presented the mission as foregrounding the imperialist economic system of the West. In this case, the rebellion was an organised action spearheaded by an Islamic scholar. The Arabs might have been defeated militarily, but they were not conquered. They might have lost their lands later to the Imperial administration, but they never submitted themselves to humiliation. They fought and died gallantly. The novel highlights Fanon's principle on the necessity to fight colonial domination and the liberation of people by themselves.

Writing about resistance: the reconstruction of stereotypes

Fanon expected the postcolonial writer to react against all the negative stereotypes generated by colonial discourse against the colonised. Degenerate images of Arabs permeated the novel *Desert* as some Europeans' representations of the oriental 'Other', yet characters that seemed to carry the voice of the writer did not endorse them. There was a discrepancy between the ways the religious leaders were perceived in their own community and how the French considered them. Al Azraq and his subjects were othered as barbaric, debased as ignoble savage and gerontified as excessively religious, while their descendants were denigrated as lazy, redundant and wretched by colonial agents.

A subversion of the traditions and images of the Orient showed that the arid desert land could be seen as beautiful, fascinating, and free, without clusters of objects and buildings, inspiring freedom, which the Blue men enjoyed and refused to relinquish (23). Positive images of characters were used to counter the negative images of the Arabs. In *Desert*, the French General's interpellations of the Muslim leader as fanatic, wicked, crazy and murderer turned out to be baseless. The observer engaged with the French army, who was the only person to have come across the sheikh, had positive memories about the fugitive, which portrayed him as merciful to his prisoners, including French administrators (D, 375): "Douls was a prisoner of the Moors; his clothing was in shreds, his face ravaged from fatigue and from the sun, but Ma al-Ainine had looked at him without hatred, without contempt..." (transl. 303). Moreover, the narrator respected the sheikh's refusal to confront the colonial army. He was not a coward, but a wise man. He understood that his forces were no match to the colonial expedition, which in reality, was sponsored by a global capitalist adventure put in place by many Western countries and companies who joined forces and organised the conquest of territories for economic gains.

Lalla as the epitome of resistance

Several instances of resistance and subversion were revealed through the study of the heroin's anti-conformist personality. First, the young Lalla's love for the sun and the sky subverted the image of Africa as a hellish land with a scorching sun and a harsh weather (D. 91). Moreover, unlike the typical submissive African girl child, she refused to carry out duties such as fetching firewood and grinding wheat (D. 85). With her rejection of the suitor imposed on her, and her choice for an outcast, a strange and black shepherd living among goats in the hills, Lalla showed that she was not ready to succumb to intimidation. Taken to a carpet seller in a case of child labour, for the sustenance of her family, Lalla fought the owner of the shop against her abuse, exploitation and battering of underage employees (188). Her revolt cost her the job, but earned her respect and sweet freedom « La liberté est belle. » (189). When she declared, at home, that she would no longer go to work at Zora's, she successfully made a statement:

C'est à partir de ce jour-là que les choses ont changé réellement pour Lalla, ici, à la Cité. C'est comme si elle était devenue grande tout d'un coup, et que les gens avaient commencé à la voir. Même les fils d'Aamma ne sont plus comme avant, durs et méprisants. (189, 90)

(Since that day, things here in the Project have really changed for Lalla. It's as if she'd grown up all of the sudden, and people have started noticing her. Even Aamma's sons aren't like they used to be, cold and scornful.) (transl. 151)

Lalla posted a Fanonian attitude, which stated that freedom begets respect, and that a nation would be respected only when it acceded to independence and secured a total freedom from the colonial mentality and dominance.

In Paris, Lalla displayed kindness by caring for other people's needs, even with the little money she made from menial jobs (D. 333). In spite of this financial handicap, she would not tolerate either oppression or intimidation, as she took Radicz the beggar to an exquisite and luxurious restaurant in defiance to the condescending looks of the European customers (D. 336). Moreover, she depicted Oriental beauty as she became a source of enrichment to a French photographer, who made her a model (D. 338). Lalla belittled the glamour of her celebrity as she mocked the vanity and absurdity of the photographic artistry (D. 345). Contrary to most Africans in exile, she made it clear to the photographer that she was not interested in pecuniary gains:

Elle ne veut pas d'argent, cela ne l'intéresse pas. Chaque fois que le photographe lui donne de l'argent – le prix des heures de pose – Hawa prend les billets de banque, en choisit un ou deux, elle lui rend le reste. Quelquefois, même, c'est elle qui lui donne de l'argent, des poignées de billets et de pièces qu'elle sort de la poche de sa salopette, comme si elle ne voulait rien garder pour elle.» (D. 351, 2)

(She doesn't want money, it doesn't interest her. Every time the photographer gives her some money – wages for the hours of posing – Hawa takes the bills, picks out one or two, and hands him back the rest. Sometimes, she's even the one who gives him money,

handfuls of bills and coins that she takes out of the pocket in her overall, as if she didn't want to keep any of it for herself. transl. 285-6)

She thought that not only her pictures displayed in magazines did not portray her real identity, the comments and messages sent to her were all misplaced, inadequate, and untrue. She bemoaned the reactions of her fans, which were based on the artificialities worked out by the photographer. Although she looked like a star, she believed that they would be stunned if they realised that she was an unlettered desert girl: « Lalla se met à rire: « Quels menteurs! » (...) « Parce qu'elle pense que ça ne lui ressemble pas.» (D. 347). Her relationship with the French photographer, despite sharing the same apartment, was devoid of the promiscuity and cupidity, thereby betraying the stereotypes of the native Oriental woman.

Lalla, the freedom lover, eventually put an end to her adventure in France, going back home, without any additional material possession, exactly the way she was before departing (D. 411). Back to her City, in spite of the new buildings, simple, natural, faithful to the Hartani – who had vanished –, Lalla gave birth to their child, at the root of a fig tree (D. 422). Unfazed by the absence of money and medical attention, Lalla was merely happy to realise her life ambition. Like her ancestors, the key enjoyment of life was freedom: « Il n'y avait pas de fin à la liberté, elle était vaste comme l'étendue de la terre, belle et cruelle comme la lumière, douce comme les yeux de l'eau. » (D. 439). In spite of the displacement, Lalla did not suffer any alienation. Europe was nothing essential to offer her. Africa is her source of identity, freedom and happiness.

Writing 'Postcolonially': Forced Marriage and Exile

Problems related to marriage as a result of the conflict between African culture and the newly introduced Western way of life, of misunderstanding between the old generation of African traditionalists and the new generation of educated intellectuals, of a choice between love and money, formed the plots of African post-independent fiction. Likewise, Le Clézio's *Desert* announced Lalla as a teenager when her adoptive family decided to give her out to a better suitor, with wealth as the criterion of choice (192). It was all the more important because of her amorous relationship with a shepherd, the desert orphan boy. Since the family's choice was made against her will, Lalla fled the 'City' with the Hartani, for whom she became pregnant. Although the conflict emanating from the choice of a suitor for Lalla was similar to the stories in some African literature works such as like Guillaume Oyono Mbia's *Trois prétendants, un mari* and Seydou Badian's *Sous l'orage*, the apotheosis was slightly different in Le Clézio's *Desert*. Lalla and her lover were both illiterate. The victory of her love was not a triumph of the intellectual youth over the illiterate older generation, but a victory of pure love over cupidity, of individual search for identity and self-fulfillment over the slavery of cultural prejudices and practices installed as the result of what Jung terms as 'collective unconscious' and myths.

Meanwhile, as colonial discourse attempted to show Africa as the land of poverty and underdevelopment, it painted Europe as the land of development, happiness and material fulfilment. Europe was presented as the land of education and wealth. In *Desert*, the metropolis was not the bed of roses that the African immigrants had hitherto dreamt of. In a postcolonial style, hunger, poverty and the desire to become rich were presented as the primary causes of migration. However, the initial excitement of greener pastures ended up in bitterness, disillusion, exclusion, cultural shock and loneliness. Unlike Amma and her children who had financial motives, Lalla went as a refugee fleeing forced marriage, with the 'privilege' to be taken to Europe without the required immigration papers. This accidental immigrant's experiences in France confirmed an earlier warning against the difficulties of life in Europe, which consisted of violence, police harassment, and other dangers that faced illegal immigrants (104, 5).

Aamma's ordeals in her early days in the French city of Marseille included being lodged in an overpopulated room and losing her luggage, when she was running away from the police that came to tame a scuffle in the street where knives were used (265). In general, migrants, mostly Arabs and Gypsies, could not enjoy their stay in Europe as the police were always out to harass them (284). The challenges of immigration led to Aamma's premature ageing. Besides, jobs are scarce. Another hazard of life in Europe was sexual abuse, which Lalla quickly realised and successfully resisted (267).

However, she soon realised that there was a considerable number of wretched people in France too (269, 70). Lalla noticed that migrants, fleeing poverty in their countries, were from all over the world: North and sub-Saharan Africans as well as Europeans from Spain, Turkey and Greece. Therefore, poverty and underdevelopment were not restricted only to the colonised world (D. 272, 3). Lalla was all the more stunned by the presence of beggars in France. Her friend, Radicz, an Eastern European, was sold because his family was crippled by poverty (278). The migrants' shabby milieu was characterised by poverty, sickness and death (290). They experienced hatred, despair, violence and insatiate desires (314). The deplorable conditions of living dehumanised them. Drunkenness, violence, obscenity and promiscuity were among issues they grappled with (320).

Besides the problem of adaptation, the elements of Western civilisation were actually negative inventions. Lalla saw the plane as a noisy machine, polluting the environment (271). Thus, life in Europe was hellish, with anxious and stressed people (271). Europeans were accused of cold feelings, indifference to their neighbour's needs. When Lalla fell down, unconscious, passers-by paid no attention to her, nearly trampling on her (280). Sometimes, winter bit hard, and Lalla wished she were in the 'City', in the dark night with the sky full of stars (289). Europe as the Eldorado was therefore a fallacy. After her *rite de passage*, Lalla went back to Africa, without any riches. Yet, she realised that, even in poverty and hunger, staying at home was better than life in exile, with its inherent alienation and identity crisis. Le Clézio's novel successfully presented a sordid image of life in exile.

Conclusion

In spite of the ‘debasement’ and ‘gerontification’ used to vilify the Islamic cleric, his followers and descendants as barbaric, ignoble savage, excessively religious and wretched people, the novel *Desert* equally showed that the desert Arabs were rather nice, religious and compassionate fellows, who simply wanted to protect their heritage and cherish their freedom. The ambivalent stance of the novel in the treatment of its characters vis-à-vis colonial invasion and its aftermath underpinned its postcoloniality, as demonstrated by the subversion of the stereotypes of the desert Arabs and the condemnation of colonialism, and the treatment of forced marriage and exile. Migration was proved to be universal, not restricted to the movement from the former colonies to the Europe. After Lalla’s *rite de passage* in Paris, foregrounded by her process of discovery, discursive resistance in *Desert* was demonstrated in the dismantling of eurocentrism from within the Western world. Thus, Le Clézio is a French postcolonial writer, who, like Homi Bhabha, thinks that the subaltern can speak. Lalla has spoken: Paris is just another place, not better than the North-African ‘City’; and, Europeans are human beings, just like others.

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