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The Living Desert: Eco-Aesthetics and Environmental Critique in Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's *Desert*

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Ms. Nourin Shukoor**

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's novel *Desert* presents an intricate exploration of the profound connection between humans and the natural world, with a particular focus on the Tuareg people and the desert ecosystem. This analysis investigates the manifestation of eco-aesthetics within the novel, specifically through its depiction of the desert landscape, the characters' relationships with nature, and the broader thematic elements that critique modernity and colonialism. The study examines Le Clézio's ecological vision as articulated in *Desert*, analysing how he challenges anthropocentrism, integrates philosophical and poetic elements, reflects Amerindian influences, and draws parallels between shamanic and artistic practices. Additionally, it critiques Western civilization and emphasizes ecological and ethical responsibility. The article highlights Le Clézio's message about the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and the ethical imperative to protect it.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Eco-aesthetics, Desert ecosystem, Western civilization, Ecological Responsibility

Introduction

Eco-aesthetics is an interdisciplinary field that merges ecological concerns with aesthetic theory, exploring how environmental values and issues are reflected in art, literature, and cultural practices. This concept emphasizes the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world

and the ethical implications of human interactions with the environment. Eco-aesthetics seeks to foster a deeper connection between humans and nature through artistic expression and to promote environmental awareness and stewardship. Malcolm Miles introduces Eco-aesthetics as “seeing it, or feeling it, as a mirror of the self, which is more or less an ecological position, may imply a sense of caring and of living in relation to rather than exerting power over worlds – of which there are as many as beholders, each as real to the person seeing or imagining it” (p. 49-50).

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, a Nobel laureate, is renowned for his profound and poetic explorations of human existence and its intricate relationship with the natural world. His novel *Desert* embodies the principles of eco-aesthetics by integrating a profound respect for nature, a critique of modernity and colonialism, and an emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life forms. *Desert*, published in 1980, is a compelling narrative that intertwines the lives of the Tuareg people and the desert ecosystem. In *Desert*, Le Clézio portrays the natural world as a central character, integral to the lives and identities of his characters. The characters in *Desert*, particularly Lalla and Nour, have profound connections to the natural world. These connections illustrate the concept of interdependence between humans and nature, a key aspect of eco-aesthetics. This study elucidates how the different characters map the forgotten routes to rediscover their ancestral roots and offers a feast to the eyes with the enchanting natural habitat of Moroccan deserts. It also explores the role of storytelling as a means of preserving and transmitting ecological knowledge. Le Clézio writes, “The elders told stories of the desert, tales of its power and mystery, teaching the young ones to respect and honor the land” (p. 225). This tradition of storytelling serves as a form of ecological education, passing down crucial knowledge about the environment and its preservation.

This novel consists of two narratives; first from the viewpoint of a young Arab boy named Nour. He details the struggles faced by the natives in order to win back their own land from the clutches of French colonisers. They are guided by Ma al-Ainine, the water of the

eyes, who is believed to be the last disciple of Al-Azraq, the Blue Man. Le Clézio pens their suffering as:

There was nothing else on the earth, nothing, no one. They were born of the desert; they could follow no other path. They said nothing. Wanted nothing. The wind swept over them, through them, as if there were no one on the dunes. (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 2)

Set in present time, the second narrative of the novel blooms from the eyes of a young, lovely Arab girl named Lalla whose trajectory of life suddenly changes from spending her days contently in a slum of a Moroccan coastal city to emigrating to the land of modernity as an attempt to save herself from a child marriage. The novel further accounts how Lalla fails to anchor herself in the ever-changing luxurious land and finds solace by returning back to her home land ultimately. “The relationship of the twin narrative threads of *Desert* is intratextual, that is, each provides “instructions” on how to read the other and what to read in(to) it by a process of similarity or reduplication with difference” (Smith, 1985, p. 15).

Critique of Anthropocentrism and Depiction of the Desert Ecosystem

Le Clézio’s *Desert* is a powerful critique of anthropocentrism, the belief that human beings are the central or most significant species on the planet. Throughout the novel, he dismantles the hierarchical separation between humans and nature, advocating for an “écologie des relations,” which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms. “I shall show that, in a prolonged attack on anthropocentrism, on the separation between nature and culture that continues to underpin Western societies, Le Clézio argues for what the anthropologist Philippe Descola has termed ‘une écologie des relations’” (Martin, 2013, p. 506). In *Desert*, the desert is not merely a setting but a living, breathing entity that interacts with the characters (especially with Lalla, Nour and Hartani). Le Clézio’s descriptions of the desert are infused with a sense of reverence and awe, capturing its vastness, its harshness, and its profound beauty. The opening scene of the novel vividly portrays the arrival of a caravan in the desert: “They appeared as if in a dream at the top of the dune, half-hidden in the cloud of sand rising from their steps” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 1). This

imagery sets the tone for the novel, emphasizing the desert's ethereal and almost mystical quality.

Le Clézio masterfully integrates philosophical reflections with poetic descriptions, creating an immersive and contemplative narrative. His philosophical stance is evident in the way he portrays the desert not just as a physical space, but as a realm of existential and spiritual significance. The desert in *Desert* is depicted as a place of both beauty and hardship, a duality that invites philosophical contemplation. Le Clézio describes the landscape with a poetic sensibility: “The desert was like a sea of light, with waves of heat and flashes of sunlight dancing on the sand” (p. 112). This poetic imagery conveys the desert's sublime beauty while also reflecting on its relentless and indifferent nature, prompting readers to reflect on the human condition within the broader context of the natural world. Le Clézio's philosophical musings often touch on the themes of existence and meaning. He writes, “In the desert, there is neither past nor future, only the eternity of the present” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 139). This reflection emphasizes the timeless nature of the desert and the way it forces individuals to confront their own existence, stripped of the distractions and constructs of modern life.

Le Clézio's depiction of the desert underscores its dual nature—both a place of death and a place of life. He writes, “The sand swirled about them, between the legs of the camels, lashing the faces of the women, who pulled the blue veils down over their eyes” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 1). The desert is harsh and unforgiving, yet it is also home to a diverse array of life forms, each adapted to its extreme conditions. This duality reflects the broader theme of the interconnectedness of life and death, a central motif in Le Clézio's ecological vision.

The desert's vast expanse serves as a stark reminder of the limitations of human power and control. Le Clézio captures this sentiment when he writes, “There was no end to freedom, it was as vast as the wide world, beautiful and cruel as the light, gentle as the eyes of water” (p. 3). The boundless nature of the desert highlights the insignificance of humans in the face of such an immense and indifferent environment. Moreover, the novel portrays the desert as a

powerful and autonomous entity, capable of evoking awe and reverence. Le Clézio writes, “The desert was a sea of light, with waves of heat and flashes of sunlight dancing on the sand” (p. 112). This depiction underscores the desert’s majesty and resilience, challenging the notion that humans have dominion over nature. For each character in *Desert*, “the desert is both home and site of travel, of an endless voyage that is both physical and spiritual; their lives are comprised of constant voyage, their lives are nothing but voyage, with no apparent destination or aim” (Thompson, 1997, p. 711). The novel’s narrative structure itself reflects this philosophical approach, intertwining the stories of Lalla and Nour across different timelines. This structure underscores the cyclical nature of life and history, reinforcing the idea that human experiences are deeply intertwined with the natural world. Le Clézio writes, “The stories of Lalla and Nour are like the wind and the sand, constantly shifting and reshaping, yet always connected” (p. 211). This metaphor highlights the interconnectedness of human and natural histories.

The protagonist, Lalla, embodies a profound connection with the desert. Her reverence for the land and its creatures is evident in her interactions with the environment. Le Clézio writes, “Lalla loves running in the desert. She listens to the voice of the wind, the murmur of stones and dunes” (p. 47). This deep appreciation for the desert’s sounds and sights highlights a non-anthropocentric worldview, where nature is not merely a backdrop for human activities but a living entity with its own intrinsic value. Le Clézio further illustrates this connection when he describes Lalla’s intimate understanding of her environment: “She knew the places, the stones, the plants, and the animals of the desert as one knows old friends” (p. 53). This familiarity and respect for the desert’s components reflect an egalitarian view of nature, emphasizing the inherent value of all living and non-living elements of the ecosystem. Even when blindfolded she can find the paths and dips in the dunes just by feeling the ground with her feet, that’s how attached she is with her favourite place in the whole wide world. She spends hours leisurely by just being close to the nature, observing and analysing everything that amuses her:

There are always ants, wherever you stop. They seem to come out from between the stones and scurry over the gray sand burning with light, as if they were spies. But Lalla is quite fond of them anyway. She also likes the slow centipedes, the golden-brown June bugs, the dung beetles, stag beetles, potato beetles, ladybugs, the crickets - like bits of burnt wood...Mostly there are flies. Lalla likes them too, despite their noise and their bites. She doesn't really know why she likes them, but she just does. Maybe it's because of their delicate legs, their transparent wings, or maybe because they know how to fly fast, forwards, backwards, in zigzags, and Lalla thinks it must be great to know how to fly like that. (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 53)

Lalla's relationship with the desert is also deeply spiritual. She perceives the desert as a sacred space that is alive with its own spirit. This spirituality is evident in her reflections and the way she interacts with the environment. For instance, Le Clézio writes, "She knows that the desert is alive, that it has a soul. Every stone, every plant, every animal is part of this great whole" (p. 136). This quote encapsulates Lalla's belief in the interconnectedness of all life within the desert, highlighting her reverence for nature.

The desert serves as a backdrop for Lalla's spiritual growth and self-discovery. It is in the desert that she feels closest to her ancestors and her cultural heritage. Le Clézio illustrates this connection through Lalla's thoughts: "She felt the presence of her ancestors in the desert, their spirits guiding her steps" (p. 172). This spiritual bond reinforces her sense of identity and purpose. Lalla's connection to nature is also deeply tied to her identity and cultural heritage. The desert is not just a place for her; it is an integral part of who she is and where she comes from. This relationship with nature shapes her understanding of herself and her place in the world.

The desert is a link to Lalla's ancestors and their way of life. It embodies the history and traditions of her people, the Tuareg. Le Clézio writes, "Lalla carried the words of Blue Man in her heart, a compass guiding her through the challenges of life" (p. 216). Blue Man, a significant figure in Tuareg culture, represents the wisdom and resilience of her ancestors, and his teachings help Lalla navigate

her own path. This connection to her heritage is further emphasized through her reflections on the desert. Lalla feels a deep sense of continuity and belonging in the desert, a place where the past and present merge. Le Clézio captures this sentiment: “In the desert, Lalla felt the presence of all those who had walked its sands before her, their spirits living on in the wind and the stones” (p. 145). This quote highlights how the desert serves as a living testament to her people’s history and legacy.

For Lalla, the desert is also a symbol of freedom and resistance against the constraints of modern society and colonial oppression. The vast, open spaces of the desert represent a form of liberation that she cannot find in the city. Le Clézio writes, “There was no end to freedom, it was as vast as the wide world, beautiful and cruel as the light, gentle as the eyes of water” (p. 3). This quote underscores the paradoxical nature of the desert—it is both beautiful and harsh, yet it embodies the essence of freedom for Lalla. Her relationship with the desert reflects her resistance to conforming to societal norms and expectations. Lalla’s time in the desert allows her to reconnect with her roots and embrace her identity fully. This sense of freedom and resistance is crucial to her character development and the choices she makes throughout the novel.

Lalla’s bond with nature is also depicted as a refuge from the harsh realities of modernity. The desert provides her with an escape from the alienation and fragmentation of urban life. This refuge is not merely physical but also emotional and psychological. In the city, Lalla experiences a sense of dislocation and alienation that contrasts sharply with the peace she finds in the desert. The noise, pollution, and social constraints of urban life weigh heavily on her. Le Clézio contrasts these experiences through vivid imagery: “The city was a place where nature was forgotten, where people lived surrounded by concrete and noise” (p. 245). This quote highlights the stark difference between the natural world and the constructed environment of the city. Lalla’s return to the desert symbolizes a return to a simpler, more authentic way of living. “Europe was nothing essential to offer her. Africa is her source of identity, freedom and happiness.” (Souleymane, 2015, p. 577). It is in the desert that she finds clarity and renewal, away

from the distractions and pressures of modern life. Le Clézio writes, “Each evening, their bleeding lips sought the cool wells, the brackish mud of alkaline rivers” (p. 3), illustrating the harsh yet rejuvenating experience of living in the desert.

Desert also provides Lalla with psychological and emotional renewal. The vast, open spaces of the desert allow her to reflect and find inner peace. This renewal is essential for her personal growth and resilience. Le Clézio captures this aspect of her relationship with nature: “In the desert, Lalla found a sense of peace and strength that she could not find elsewhere” (p. 172). This quote emphasizes how the natural environment plays a crucial role in her emotional well-being. The desert’s ability to offer solace and renewal is further highlighted by Lalla’s reflections on her experiences. “Lalla’s personal development occurs gradually and consists of benevolent acts towards herself, other colonized people, and toward the colonizers themselves. She refuses, for example, to be married off to a city man who wears a fancy gray-green suit. Fleeing instead to the desert to develop a mysterious intimate relationship with a muted Berber shepherd, she learns to see the sea and the sky” (LaLonde, p. 96). She finds solace in the simplicity and beauty of the natural world, which contrasts sharply with the complexity and chaos of urban life. Le Clézio writes, “The desert was her sanctuary, a place where she could escape and find herself” (p. 147). This sanctuary is vital for Lalla’s ability to cope with the challenges she faces.

The novel’s narrative structure itself reflects a philosophical approach, intertwining the stories of Lalla and Nour across different timelines. This structure underscores the cyclical nature of life and history, reinforcing the idea that human experiences are deeply intertwined with the natural world. Le Clézio writes, “The stories of Lalla and Nour are like the wind and the sand, constantly shifting and reshaping, yet always connected” (p. 211). This metaphor highlights the interconnectedness of human and natural histories.

Amerindian Influence

Le Clézio’s encounter with Amerindian cultures significantly shapes his ecological vision. This influence is evident in his portrayal of the Tuareg people and their harmonious relationship with the desert.

Just as Amerindian cultures often emphasize the interconnectedness of all life, the Tuareg in *Desert* are depicted as living in harmony with their environment. In *Desert*, “Blue Man” is a significant figure who symbolizes resilience, wisdom, and the connection to traditional Tuareg culture. He is also known as “Ma al-Aïnine,” which translates to “Water of the Eyes.” Blue Man is a leader and a spiritual guide for his people, the Tuareg, who are depicted as a proud and free nomadic tribe living in the Sahara Desert. Le Clézio’s portrayal of the Tuareg’s spiritual practices further reflects Amerindian influences. For instance, he describes a Tuareg ritual: “They gathered around the fire, chanting and swaying, calling upon the spirits of the desert for guidance and protection” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 198). This ritual echoes the shamanic traditions of many Amerindian cultures, where spiritual practices are deeply connected to the natural environment. In the novel, Naman embodies the core values of the Tuareg people—courage, loyalty, and a deep connection to the land. His character serves as a reminder of the importance of these values in the face of adversity. “To speak of Naman was to speak of the desert, of the unyielding spirit of a people who would never surrender” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 130). Like other characters in the novel, Al-ser’s connection to the desert is also important. Al-ser understands the desert’s rhythms and respects its power, using this knowledge to guide his people. Le Clézio describes Al-ser’s relationship with the desert: “Al-ser knew the desert like the lines on his hands, every rock, every grain of sand held a story he could tell” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 70). This intimate knowledge reflects his deep bond with the land and his role as a guardian of Tuareg traditions. Al-ser is also a protector of Tuareg culture and heritage. He strives to preserve the customs and values of his people in the face of external threats and changing times. “Al-ser believed in the strength of their traditions, the stories and songs that had been passed down through generations. He knew that these were the things that kept them strong” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 72).

Lalla’s connection to the desert also mirrors the spiritual and cultural values found in Amerindian traditions. Le Clézio writes, “She knows that the desert is alive, that it has a soul. Every stone, every plant, every animal is part of this great whole” (p. 136). This

perspective aligns with Amerindian beliefs in the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness of all beings, reinforcing Le Clézio's ecological message. This influence is also evident in Nour's reflections on his journey through the desert: "He saw the desert as a living being, with its own laws and its own spirit" (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 175). This view emphasizes the need to respect and understand the natural world on its own terms, rather than imposing human-centric values and judgments.

Shamanic and Artistic Practices

In *Desert*, Le Clézio parallels shamanic practices with artistic expression, suggesting that both are means of connecting with and healing the natural world. The character of Nour, who embarks on a spiritual journey through the desert, exemplifies this connection. Le Clézio's portrayal of Nour's journey is imbued with shamanic elements. As Nour traverses the desert, he experiences visions and a heightened sense of awareness, akin to a shamanic journey. Nour's reflections on his heritage further illustrate this connection. He feels a strong sense of pride and belonging in the desert, which is a testament to his ancestors' resilience and wisdom. "The desert was the land of his ancestors, a place where their spirits still roamed and guided him" (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 89). Le Clézio describes a pivotal moment: "Nour felt the spirits of the desert around him, in the wind and the stars. He knew that the desert was guiding him, that it was a part of him" (p. 178). This passage underscores the idea that spiritual and artistic practices can foster a deep connection with the natural world, offering insights and healing. He perceives the desert as a sacred space that is alive with its own spirit. The desert serves as a source of guidance and strength for Nour. It is in the desert that he finds clarity and inspiration, helping him navigate the challenges he faces. Le Clézio writes, "In the silence of the desert, Nour found answers to questions he did not know he had, a sense of peace that eluded him elsewhere" (p. 110). Nour learns to navigate the desert's harsh environment, developing skills and knowledge that are essential for survival. These lessons are not just practical but also philosophical, teaching him about the balance and harmony of nature. Le Clézio writes, "The desert demanded respect and humility, it taught Nour to move with the wind,

to read the signs in the sand” (p. 117). The challenges of the desert also strengthen Nour’s character and resolve. He learns to endure and adapt, finding strength in his connection to the land. “Nour felt the heat of the sun, the sting of the sand, but he also felt the power of the desert within him, a force that could not be broken” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 125). Le Clézio also uses artistic imagery to convey this connection. He writes, “The desert was a great canvas on which the wind and the sun painted new masterpieces every day” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 190). This metaphor highlights the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the desert, akin to an artist’s canvas, and underscores the idea that nature itself is a work of art, constantly evolving and creating new forms of beauty.

Critique of Western Civilization

Le Clézio’s *Desert* offers a poignant critique of Western civilization, particularly its colonial and capitalist practices that have led to the destruction of natural landscapes and indigenous cultures. The novel juxtaposes the harmonious existence of the Tuareg with the disruptive forces of modernity and colonization. “Le Clézio is clearly attacking the widespread belief in the West in the intrinsic superiority of the human, in the right to dominate and control other life forms, a belief that is fostered both by Cartesian rationalism and by biblical discourse” (Martin, 2013, p. 518).

The impact of colonialism is starkly portrayed in the narrative of the Tuareg’s displacement. Le Clézio writes, “The white men took their lands, destroyed their villages. They brought with them war and misery” (p. 214). This critique extends to the broader consequences of Western industrialization and consumerism, which are depicted as antithetical to the sustainable and respectful relationship the Tuareg have with their environment.

Le Clézio’s narrative often contrasts the purity of the desert with the corruption of urban spaces. He describes the city as “a place where nature is forgotten, where people live surrounded by concrete and noise” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 245). This stark contrast serves to emphasize the alienation from nature experienced in modern urban life, highlighting the environmental and spiritual degradation that accompanies industrialization.

The novel also critiques the exploitative nature of Western capitalism. “The men in suits saw the desert as nothing more than a resource to be exploited, a commodity to be sold” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 267). This perspective underscores the destructive impact of viewing nature purely through an economic lens, ignoring its intrinsic value and the deep cultural and spiritual connections that indigenous peoples have with their land. “In place of the occidental intellectual model that valorizes absolute truths, Le Clézio offers a far less comforting worldview in which ambivalence reigns supreme and a complete understanding of the universe appears to be unattainable.” (Moser, 2011, p. 724)

In *Desert*, Naman and Al-ser represent the resilience of the Tuareg people. Naman symbolizes the Tuareg’s resistance against colonial oppression. His actions and determination reflect the collective spirit of the Tuareg people as they fight to protect their land and heritage. Le Clézio describes Naman’s resolve: “Naman’s eyes burned with the fire of resistance, a determination to fight for every grain of sand in the desert” (p. 110). His loyalty and bravery are crucial in the Tuareg’s struggle to maintain their freedom and way of life. “Naman was always by Nour’s side, his loyalty unwavering, his courage unmatched” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 102). Al-ser embodies the rich cultural heritage of the Tuareg, representing their history, values, and resilience. His character is a reminder of the importance of preserving and honoring one’s cultural roots. “To speak of Al-ser was to speak of the desert itself, of the unbroken spirit of a people who had thrived in its vastness for generations” (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 90). Al-ser’s leadership and resilience inspire Nour and others to resist the encroachment of colonial forces. He is a symbol of strength and defiance, embodying the spirit of the Tuareg’s resistance. Le Clézio describes Al-ser’s impact: “In the presence of Al-ser, the men felt a renewed sense of purpose. His courage was infectious, fueling their desire to protect their land and way of life” (p. 80).

Le Clezio offers an alternative for Western Civilization in the portrayal of Hartani (the strange, nameless, illiterate shepherd boy with social anxiety who chose to stay mute or simply he doesn’t understand human language because he’s from a land where there

are no human beings, only the sand dunes and the sky) who symbolizes the intimate and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. Hartani's way of life exemplifies living in harmony with nature. He respects the desert's rhythms and understands the importance of maintaining a balance between human activities and the natural world. Le Clézio illustrates this harmony through Hartani's actions and thoughts: "Hartani moved through the desert with a quiet grace, his steps in tune with the heartbeat of the land" (p. 75). Hartani's character is marked by his profound respect for the natural elements of the desert. He treats the land, the plants, and the animals with reverence, understanding their significance in the broader ecosystem. "Hartani spoke to the desert as if it were a living being, acknowledging its power and its fragility" (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 80). He represents the embodiment of traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through generations. This knowledge includes not only survival skills but also a deep understanding of the ecological balance necessary to sustain life in the harsh desert environment. "He knew the secrets of the desert, the hidden wells, the paths of the wind. This knowledge was a gift from his ancestors, a treasure he guarded with his life" (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 85). Hartani represents a life that is pure and uncorrupted by modern civilization. His existence is simple, yet profoundly connected to the essential elements of life. This purity and simplicity attract Lalla, who feels alienated by the complexities and materialism of urban life. "In Hartani's presence, Lalla felt the burdens of the city fall away, replaced by a sense of peace and belonging" (Le Clézio, 2011, p. 95). This passage illustrates how Hartani's way of life offers an alternative to the alienation and fragmentation experienced in Western society. Through Hartani, Le Clézio emphasizes the need to preserve traditional knowledge and live sustainably, offering a poignant commentary on the relationship between humans and nature.

Conclusion

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's *Desert* serves as a seminal work in exploring the nuanced relationship between humans and the natural world. Through its dual narratives and richly textured prose, the novel offers profound ecological insights that challenge anthropocentric worldviews and advocate for a more harmonious

existence with nature. By examining the intricate connections between characters and their environment, Le Clézio presents a compelling vision of ecological interdependence, cultural heritage, and the enduring impact of colonialism on both human and natural lands.

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