

**«*LE CLÉZIO L'AFRICAIN*»? THE ROLE AND PLACE OF AFRICA AND
AFRICANS IN *DÉSERT, ONITSHA, GENS DES NUAGES* AND
*L'AFRICAIN***

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ABSTRACT

The French author Le Clézio has garnered widespread acclaim for his postcolonial literary works, which are deeply rooted in his African heritage and extensive travels. His writings serve as a medium through which he articulates his unique Africanist perspective. In addition to inquiring into his African identity, Le Clézio's oeuvre explores a myriad of themes including childhood memories, personal journeys and reflections, family histories, and the influential role of photography in shaping one's perception of reality. These thematic threads constitute essential components of our scholarly inquiry, which seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between Le Clézio's African identity and the profound influence of Africa on his literary creations. This study aims to dissect Le Clézio's intricate relationship with Africa and this continent's pivotal role in his artistic endeavours. Central to our examination is the interrogation of how the author acquired his profound knowledge of Africa, probing whether this deep understanding stems solely from his African lineage or whether external factors have also contributed to shaping his perspective. By synthesizing the insights of various scholars who have meticulously scrutinized the works of this Nobel Laureate, we are shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of Africa in Le Clézio's literary tapestry.

While existing scholarly discourse provides a substantial foundation for our investigation, a wealth of untapped fields remains waiting to be explored, particularly concerning the nuanced interplay between colonial legacies and postcolonial narratives in Le Clézio's writings. Le Clézio's literary corpus serves as a rich repository of material for our analysis, with works such as *Désert*, *Gens des Nuages*, *Onitsha*, and *L'Africain* offering poignant vignettes that encapsulate the author's profound engagement with Africa. Through a meticulous examination of these texts, our research attempts to unravel the intricate web of themes, motifs, and narratives that underscore Le Clézio's portrayal of Africa, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of this continent's profound impact on his literary imagination.

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For you Ese!
I found love
I found you
I don't want anything more.

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INTRODUCTION

«*LE CLÉZIO L'AFRICAIN*»? THE ROLE AND PLACE OF AFRICA AND AFRICANS IN *DÉSERT*, *ONITSHA*, *GENS DES NUAGES* AND *L'AFRICAIN*

J'aurais voulu que ça continue. Que ça dure. Car j'avais le sentiment d'avancer dans une sorte de libération... J'aurais voulu y rester, je pensais que je ne l'écrirais jamais... aujourd'hui, je suis soulagé, je me sens plus clair. Ce livre était en moi, je l'ai enfin : le bateau est arrivé à destination.

(Le Clézio- Entretien avec Pierre Assouline, *Lire*, Avril 1991)

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's oeuvre draws heavily on the author's personal experience, as the choice of the narrator's name in many of his novels – Jean-Marie – tends to indicate. This autobiographical element rarely becomes more prominent, and problematic at the same time, than in the case of his writings on Africa – a continent where he wished he had spent his whole life, as the opening quotation reveals. This relationship with the African continent, and Africans, has generated a complex mix of feelings evident in the writer's production, combining lifelong nostalgia, enduring fascination, and genuine affection.

Born on April 13, 1940, in Nice, France, to Simone née Le Clézio and Doctor Raoul Le Clézio (his parents were first cousins), Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio has written novels, short stories, and historical books, whilst also granting some rare interviews. His other works include several articles that have been published separately and in collected editions since 1966, in addition to seven

collections of short stories. Among the honours he has received, the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature is the most notable, making him a significant contemporary figure in French literature. He also received two awards for the book *Poisson d'or* in 1997 – Jean Giono prize and Prix Prince-de-Monaco –, a novel which is also largely influenced by his fascination with Africa.

Though it's not the focus of our research, the relationship between Le Clézio and Mauritius is of primary importance. The novel *Alma* intricately weaves together a narrative that delves into the post-paradisaal quest for a lost epoch. Positioned as the third installment in this year's summer special, the literary piece offers critical analyses of artworks by creators whose contributions are pivotal to societal progress. Notably, the creation of *Alma* bears the indelible marks of Le Clézio's personal history. The place of Mauritius is captured through a study of the book *Alma* by Dombrowski (2020):

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's latest literary work prominently features the theme of ancestral heritage, as exemplified by the character Jérémie Felsen, a French scientist, who embarks on a journey to Mauritius. Initially thought to be searching for remnants of the extinct dodo bird, Felsen's true quest unravels as a poignant exploration of his family's historical roots. The book's title, "Alma," pays homage to the land that bore witness to generations of his family's toil. Mauritius emerges as a symbolic backdrop within the narrative, mirroring the profound societal and environmental upheavals that have shaped Felsen's personal history and the island nation itself. (Dombrowski, 1-2)

With ancestral roots stemming from Mauritius, the author's dual citizenship of the island nation and France serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of

his identity, having cultivated profound connections during his formative years spent in these locales. Frequent pilgrimages to Mauritius further enrich Le Clézio's creative process, with the island serving as a poignant backdrop that sets the stage for many of his literary works. Through the thematic exploration of travel and displacement, the intrinsic beauty of nature juxtaposed with its harrowing desecration, and the interplay of diverse societal norms, the legacy of colonialism, and its enduring repercussions, "Alma" features the recurrent motifs that have underscored Le Clézio's literary oeuvre, culminating in a poignant and resonant final opus.

Another specific feature of Le Clézio's relationship with Africa is the recurring theme of cultural displacement and the search for identity. Le Clézio's representations of Africa also reveal a deep concern for the socio-political issues faced by the continent. In addition, the author explores the theme of Africa as a space of memory, and the significance of this memorialization process. In particular, the representation of Africa in his narratives as a site of collective memory, cultural heritage, and personal introspection is semiotically rich. Despite this, research into the place of Africa in Le Clézio's work remains scant; this dissertation seeks to explore the role and representation of Africa in the context of Le Clézio's wider oeuvre.

Putting *Le Clézio L'Africain* in context: short biographical elements

In an interview with Pierre Boncenne Le Clézio declared himself to be a 'citoyen français-mauricien appartenant à la culture occidentale', thus laying claim to Western cultural heritage and giving a clue to his origins — his descent from a family whose forebear had migrated from Brittany in the eighteenth century to settle in L'Ile de France, later Mauritius.
(Yillah, 173)

Although Le Clézio grew up in the South of France, his life and upbringing were influenced by his strong ties to Africa, and especially Nigeria where his father worked at that time. Aged 8, he moved with his mother to Onitsha, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, where his father had been a doctor for the British government during the Second World War. Nigeria holds a central place in Le Clézio's writing. On a month-long cruise to Nigeria, he wrote two novels titled: *Un Long Voyage* and *Oradi Noir*. Le Clézio was raised bilingually, in the context of his childhood in Africa: French and English were spoken to him as a child. Grossman (2018) comments on this relationship:

Son of a doctor, despite having a close connection to Mauritius on both sides of his family tree, Le Clézio was born in Nice in 1940 and has strong ties to Africa. French and English were Le Clézio's native languages as he grew up in France and Eastern Nigeria (Onitsha). One of his early endeavors was writing, which he started doing at the age of 8.
(Grossman 2018, p.1-2)

The family finally returned to France, settling in Nice again in 1950. After studying at the University of Bristol from 1958-1959, Le Clézio completed his

undergraduate studies in Nice in 1963. At the University of Aix-en-Provence, he earned a master's degree in 1964, and in 1983, he completed a doctoral dissertation at the University of Perpignan on the early history of Mexico. As we have seen, he began writing when he was very young, and he has authored alone more than thirty volumes. In *Le Procès-Verbal* (1963), he explains the importance of writing for him, as a source of joy and his preferred mode of communication

À mon sens, écrire et communiquer, c'est être capable de faire croire
n'importe quoi à n'importe qui [...] (Procès-Verbal, p.10)

Le Clézio's interest in Africa

As we have seen earlier, Le Clézio's interest in Africa started while he was young, and the African countries he visited and lived in played a great role in influencing his literary output. Hence, Le Clézio articulates his experience of memorable events in Africa through the narrator or himself in the selected books of study. Morocco, Nigeria, and Mauritius feature amongst the countries where Le Clézio has resided. It seems reasonable to establish a causal relation between this personal experience and the settings where he based some of his literary works.

Le Clézio's language, as it relates to his books on Africa and the African people, shows how committed he is to understanding different, indigenous cultures. In particular, his choice to foreground the name of people and places reflects his intimate connection with Africa. These are most probably demonyms

and toponyms that he has encountered, all constituting an interesting part of his memories of Africa. For example, he mentions the names of people and places like: Ogoja, Obudu, Arochukwu, Babungo, Cotonou, Biafra, Oya in *Onitsha*, and *L'Africain*. His works are a reflection of his passion for exploration and one such exploration is also seen in *Gens des Nuages* where the writer and his wife set on a journey to trace his wife's lineage in North Africa.

Furthermore, Le Clézio's works reflect curiosity in various cultures and civilizations, colonial memories, and experience with Africa and Africans. Aside from *Gens des Nuages*, these reflections are also seen in other books such as *L'Africain*, *Onitsha* and *Désert*. These four books form the corpus that will be used for this dissertation. A brief summary of these books will be given in the next sub-section.

PRESENTATION OF CORPUS

Summary of selected books

Désert is a piece of fiction set in two different eras with an attempt to trace the ancestral lineage of the Blue Men who are historically defined as Moors (les Maures, in French). It is narrated from a third-person viewpoint, with the narrator of the book existing outside the two different eras discussed and thus distancing him from the events that unfold in the story. The main characters are Lalla and Nour. Le Clézio uses the third person because he wants readers to see the unfolding of events from multiple perspectives. It also gives the author more

control of the narrative. In *Désert*, the writer compares the peace of pre-colonial African societies with the vices of modernity, and Nour and Lalla play an important role in the unfolding of this comparison where Nour partly represents the former and Lalla the latter.

Onitsha (1991) places Africa, and particularly Nigeria, center-stage. Like *Désert*, *Onitsha* is narrated from a third person standpoint. However, in the latter, the main protagonist changes at different points between Fintan (fictional character representing the writer), Maria Luisa (Maou), his mother, and Geoffrey Allen (Fintan's father). Even though the book deals with the author's past life, there are fictional elements introduced such as the name Fintan, which is not his real name – rather, it is a name that he adopts to express his part of the story. This qualifies the book to be referred to as a semi-autobiography. The book is set during the colonial era: the novel follows Fintan, an Irish boy living in Nigeria, as he experiences the clash between cultures and witnesses the struggles faced by African people. Le Clézio sheds light on the impact of colonization on African societies and the resilience of their people. He writes, "L'Afrique brûle comme un secret, comme une fièvre." (*Onitsha: Cover copy*). It is compared to a feverish dream by the narrator because it was a strange or bad experience for Africans and especially most of them would find it hard to believe that something like that would happen. A feverish dream is usually unpleasant bizarre and fearful. This could be compared to the arrival of the White conquerors in Africa. It was strange

to see other people of colour at first and then watching what started as a friendship by association turned into a friendship by oppression and assimilation was even stranger, not least because it was perhaps the first time the continent was experiencing such a cultural and political upheaval.

In *Gens des nuages*, Le Clézio's wife, Jemia, sets off on a pilgrimage in the footsteps of her ancestors, to satisfy her nostalgic feelings. The most prominent narrative devices used in the book are the third-person and first-person plural. The book could also easily be classified as a memoir, a travelogue, and an autobiography. This memoir centres round the account of Jemia who with the help of her husband and their photographer, Bruno Barbey, embark on a journey to trace her origin. She is a Saharawi and her ancestors were nomads who had lived in the desert area. The book is about exploration, an activity that plays a vital role in Leclézian literature, as Robert (2009) asserts:

The literary topography of Le Clézio is one of “New departures, poetic adventure, and sensual ecstasy”; it is also a topography of humility, pilgrimage, and vision. (Robert, p.1)

The fourth – and final – novel of our corpus is *L'Africain*, an autobiography of the author told using the first person while he was 8 years old. The biographical notice introducing the book claims that he traveled to Nigeria to visit his father, a doctor, after leaving Nice with his mother and brother. Despite being there during the war, his father was too far from his wife, whom he adored, and his two

children, none of whom he had been able to watch grow up. In this novel, Le Clézio recalls his father, who worked as a jungle doctor in Guyana, Cameroon, and Nigeria before moving on to settle in Nice.

Le Clézio's reflections on his upbringing in Africa and living in secluded areas may be found here. The character's narrative, *L'Africain*, is at once a reconstruction, a defense, and a memory of a little child who had to grow up under the tutelage of a stranger he was compelled to adore. The scenery in Africa reminds him of his past and who he was at the time of his family's reunion following their split during the war. It can appear as though the author is paying tribute to the father he never got to know during his early childhood.

The Blue Men of the Sahara

The "Blue Men of the Sahara" is a term that evokes a sense of intrigue and fascination, referring to the Tuareg, a nomadic Berber ethnic group known for their distinctive indigo-dyed clothing that often stains their skin a deep, captivating blue. (Ottoni et al., 2011), (Pereira et al., 2010). These desert dwellers inhabit the vast Saharan and Sahelian regions, including parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Algeria. (Lecocq, 2004), (Ottoni et al., 2009).

Genetic studies have revealed a complex ancestral history for the Tuareg, with their gene pool exhibiting a West Eurasian-North African composition. (Pereira et al., 2010). Their paternal lineages can be traced to the Near Eastern Neolithic

demic expansion. In contrast, their maternal genetic lineages (mtDNA) are linked to the post-Last Glacial Maximum human expansion from Iberian refugia. (Pereira et al., 2010), (Ottoni et al., 2011), (Ottoni et al., 2009).

This intriguing blend of genetic influences, combined with the Tuareg's unique cultural identity, shaped by their historical settlement in the Sahara, has contributed to their distinctive place within the broader context of North African populations. (Lecocq, 2004), (Pereira et al., 2010), (Ottoni et al., 2009). The Tuareg's cultural heritage is further highlighted by their use of Tifinagh inscriptions, a unique script that has been found in the region, as well as their traditional medicine practices derived from the rich Saharan flora. Their use of Tifinagh inscriptions further highlights the Tuareg's cultural heritage, shaped by their historical settlement in the Sahara. (Lecocq,2004), (Pereira et al., 2010), (Ottoni et al., 2009).

The place of memory in Leclézian literature

One theme that connects the four books is memory. Leclézian memories evoke a recalling or a remembrance of past experiences and events and relate how these events affect the writer's present style, language, and life.

The presentation of memory in Le Clézio's work is unique compared to other types of memories due to some distinctive features that characterize it. One such feature is the use of multi-layered narration: Le Clézio often weaves multiple

layers of memory into his narratives, creating a complex and rich tapestry of personal, cultural, and historical recollections. He also uses intertwined identities by exploring how memory shapes identity, blurring the lines between personal and collective memories, and how they influence an individual's sense of self. The global perspective of his work is not left out as Le Clézio's memories often transcend national and cultural boundaries, reflecting his experiences living in various countries and his deep understanding of global issues. Marina Salles (1999) references the author's knowledge and experience of the world and global issues in her book titled *Etude Sur Le Clézio- Désert* saying that he:

se nourrit de ses expériences et son œuvre orchestre diversement le thème majeur des rapports de l'homme avec le monde. (Salles, p.11)

A further look at memory in the writer's works, reveals ethereal and dreamlike elements, thereby making memories appear fluid and elusive, highlighting their subjective nature. Nature and landscape are examples of these features as Le Clézio often uses descriptions of nature and landscapes to evoke memories, connecting them to the environment and the human experience. This can be seen in *Gens des Nuages* (pp. 12, 18, 54, 118) and *L'Africain* (pp. 25, 42, 55, 74, 75, 80). Lastly, his works emphasize the interconnectedness of all living things and how memory can bridge gaps between the African people and their diverse cultures.

Furthermore, memories for Le Clézio also include his general knowledge about historical events, which he connects to people, places and continents as related in his books. When Le Clézio recounts the history of a place or a people like the Blue Men of the Sahara in *Désert* with significant imagery, we are drawn closer to his memories about Africa. One of the issues that Hodgkin & Radstone (2005) evokes in *Cultures of Memory/Memories of culture* is the place of mediation in personal/individual memory in postcolonial literature. Radstone (2005) argues that the term ‘memory’ is greater than just a remembrance of the past – rather, it blends into the future and the present too. She writes:

To say that the past is mediated by memory may be taken to mean simply that memory’s ‘account’ of the past is partial or subjective and that its representations of the past are coloured by the views of the rememberer.
(Hodgkin & Radstone, p.68)

The striking points of analysis would be the major themes that surround these books which include: the quest for emancipation of Africa and the African people; the need to trace and understand one’s origin which in this case is one’s connection to Africa; the cultural richness and diversity of Africa as well as the place of childhood memories drawn from the writer’s encounter with some parts of the African continent like the Sahara Desert in Morocco and Nigeria (Onitsha). The latter will play a very important role in this research work as the author demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the African terrain owing to the fact that

he lived there as a child, and these childhood memories have greatly influenced his literature on Africa.

Also, within the context of this thesis, we shall focus on personal memory, rather than on collective memory. This type of personal memory according to Hodgkin & Radstone (2005:69) “may be silently experienced, or it may be articulated through speech as well as through any number of written forms.”

Africa as a structuring element of the author’s memoir

Onitsha is the perfect novel to draw us closer to the reality of the events that characterised the narrator’s childhood. By contrast, the plot of *L’Africain* further revisits and demonstrates this childhood from another perspective – that of knowing the Father better than when he wrote the first of these two novels which is *Onitsha*. In the former, he visits Nigeria for the first time and tries to build a relationship with his father while having some challenges with him. However, in the latter, he spoke personally as one who finally understood the father’s actions and found a reason to defend him. Across the two novels, we are drawn to the author’s nostalgic feelings about the continent. This nostalgia is seen in the writing of these two novels, where he conveys a deep connection to the landscapes, cultures, and people of Africa, reflecting a sense of longing and appreciation for the region where he spent a significant part of his life.

David R. Godine analysed *L’Africain* (2013) primarily through the prism of the memory of the writer’s childhood about his father’s life in Africa. The point here

is that Godine directs the readers to the fact that the author, who hides behind the shadow of his father as the narrator or fictitious main character (Fintan) happened to have been influenced by these events following his first arrival in the African continent (specifically, Nigeria) :

While primarily a memoir of the author's boyhood, *The African* is also Le Clézio's attempt to pay a belated homage to the man he met for the first time in Africa at age eight and was never quite able to love or accept. His reflections on the nature of his relationship with his father become a chapeau bas to the adventurous military doctor who devoted his entire life to others. (Godine, p.1)

A literary work's depth and relatability can be improved by adding the unique authenticity and emotional resonance that childhood memories frequently possess. This means that *L'Africain* might just be one of the author's most important books because of its link to the author's childhood memories. Grossman (2008) anticipated Godine's analysis by suggesting that *Désert* is the writer's most important literary piece, as the Nobel Prize Academy argued too:

His most important novel is generally considered to be *Désert*, published in 1980 and largely set in the Moroccan Sahara. A lyrical, occasionally hallucinatory work, it deals with the marginalized but still fundamentally vital lives of African nomads, as contrasted with the bleakness of modern urban European life. (Grossman, p.2)

From the above, we could suggest that Le Clézio has decided to make the African continent and its inhabitants the central focus of his literary endeavour. We could say that Le Clézio demonstrates a wish to engage constructively with African culture, its history and its cultural legacy by positively highlighting the elements that assert its singularity. However, he has decided to embark on a

literary project where his mind would have to travel to the very places he has links with or where he has stayed before. Going further, we could suggest that most of the works that Le Clézio has written about Africa form parts of his experience about the continent and his people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Le Clézio's literary trajectory was celebrated on a global stage when he was awarded the Nobel Prize, attracting a large number of critical studies of his works. For the purpose of the present project, and for reasons of space, we will be limiting our engagement with the critical literature that deals with Le Clézio's engagement with Africa. The four books we will be looking at over the course of this study (*Désert*, *Onitsha*, *Gens des Nuages* and *L'Africain*), form part of his notable works that draw upon a strong connection to the author's memoir of Africa. This literature review critically examines the arguments made in some selected essays and specific literary works as it relates to the writer's portrayal of the African people, the continent's landscapes, cultures and the profound human connection that underpins his narratives. The review therefore aims to analyse how the writer's works are related to the African continent.

Le Clézio's writing: Going beyond the surface

Le Clézio's portrayal of Africa explores the complexities of the continent and its people. He avoids exoticism and highlights the diversity of African cultures, traditions, and histories. Le Clézio's approach seeks to break stereotypes

and to present a nuanced understanding of Africa. While Le Clézio's engagement with Africa may not be as extensive as that of African-born writers, his works contribute to the broader literary discourse on the continent. Through his evocative descriptions and insightful narratives, Le Clézio invites readers to contemplate the significance of Africa and its people, emphasizing their humanity, struggles, and cultural richness and embedding them into the global literary canon.

Furthermore, Le Clézio's representations of Africa and the African people help us to understand the way in which his works challenge conventional European narratives relating to Africa and its inhabitants. He does this by offering alternative narratives that question stereotypes and explores the diverse experiences of the continent and its inhabitants. Le Clézio's portrayal of Africa therefore reflects his interest in the continent's cultural and historical diversity, emphasizing his contribution to expanding the boundaries of African literature. Ketu Katrak (1995:603-606) as part of a review of Julien Eileen's *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (1992:192), examines Le Clézio's engagement with Africa, particularly in the context of his novel *Désert*. Katrak (1995) argues that Le Clézio's depiction of the Sahara Desert and its inhabitants goes beyond exoticism, focusing on the profound human relationship with the natural world and the complexities of cross-cultural encounters. Stylistically, he is known for his profound and introspective writing style. His works explain the complex

themes and offer readers a deeper understanding of human experiences and emotions at the same time.

Spiritual preoccupations of Le Clézien writing.

Beyond the geographical realities that emerge in LeClézian writings, spiritual preoccupations appear to shape his relationship with the African continent and its inhabitants. Nature and the sacred form part of this spiritual preoccupation as the author often explores the spiritual connection between humans and the natural world, portraying nature as a source of spiritual insight and renewal. Le Clézio's characters also grapple with questions of cultural identity and the spiritual significance of their roots, often in the context of a rapidly changing world. Furthermore, many of his protagonists embark on quests, either physical or metaphorical, to find meaning and purpose in their lives, often leading to spiritual revelations. Mysticism is also part of the writer's spiritual quest as his writings sometimes incorporate mystical elements and experiences, blurring the line between the material and spiritual worlds. One such example has been analysed by Marine Salles (2006) when she engaged with *La question de Dieu* according to Le Clézio. The philosophical point of view is on whether He exists and if so, how does He express/enter into dialogue with mankind – in other words, what is the relationship between His spirituality and the physical?

Entre fascination et rejet, cette dualité s'applique également aux rapports que les premiers protagonistes entretiennent avec la divinité. Contrairement à Meursault qu'elle laissait indifférent, la question de Dieu préoccupe les personnages

lecléziens, du *Procès-verbal* à *Terra Amata* : Existe-t-il ? Qui est-il ? Comment l'homme peut-il entrer en contact avec lui ? (Salles, p. 194)

Furthermore, in the book *Le Clézio's Spiritual Quest* by Thomas N. Trzyna (2012:4-10), the author explores the spiritual dimension of Le Clézio's engagement with Africa. Trzyna (2012) argues that Le Clézio's works reveal his profound spiritual connection to Africa, emphasizing his exploration of existential questions, spirituality, history and the survival of African cultures.

African cultures in the LeClézian canon

Le Clezio is keen to present African cultures as ones that have survived through history. Isabelle Roussel-Gillet (2011) in her book *J.M.G Le Clézio, écrivain de l'incertitude* seeks to unveil what has allowed him to «construire cependant une œuvre de liaison qui tisse ensemble regards critiques sur l'Histoire, histoires singulières, mythes, quête identitaire et questionnements.» Roussel-Gillet (2011) believes that Le Clézio's novels invite readers to understand and be open to other cultures besides their own. In the book, the writer also analyses the literary and social history of these different countries by engaging into questioning the hierarchies between small stories and History, between the West and ancient civilizations and what makes literature a "place of uncertainty", while adhering to humanist values. In that regard, Le Clézio's *L'Africain* and *Onitsha* are good examples of memorable stories of recalled past experiences (memories). To this effect, Roussel-Gillet (2011) argues that:

L'Africain, dans la lignée de quelques passages d'*Onitsha*, est une évocation de l'enfance au Nigeria passée au filtre du souvenir, du document d'archive photographique et du désir. L'écriture, toujours différée, est un voyage à rebours vers une scène primitive, un voyage de reconstruction de son autobiographie. (Roussel-Gillet, p.71)

Firstly, some important issues characterize the author's memories of, and reminiscences on, Africa as they are portrayed in those aforementioned books. These include the portrait of a father he dreamed of and what reality brought into play. The father is usually presented as a distant and enigmatic figure in his works and the complex relationship between him and his father is seen in *Désert*. Secondly, is his anti-colonial drive. He often critiques the impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures and landscapes. In novels like *Onitsha* and *Terra Amata*, Le Clézio addresses the consequences of colonialism, questioning power dynamics, cultural clashes and the loss of traditional ways of life. Lastly, we see a clear picture of his imagination about being an African or referring to himself as an African by symbolism. Le Clézio's connection to Africa has a significant influence on his literary themes, emphasizing a broader, more inclusive perspective on identity and cultural heritage which he started learning about as a result of meeting his father. As regards the reality of Le Clézio meeting with his father, Roussel-Gillet (2011) observes that:

Le portrait du père est d'autant plus succinct quant au physique, qu'il est avant tout moral: l'édification d'un homme ruiné puis amoureux, la grandeur humaine avérée du métier de médecin de brousse... (Roussel-Gillet, p.71)

A critical analysis of Roussel-Gillet's (2011) argument can be likened to the plot that is unveiled in *Onitsha* while looking at the relationship between Fintan and the father at the beginning, which was complex and later became one of understanding. Furthermore, Roussel-Gillet (2011) argues that Le Clézio, as against the way he referred to his father in *Onitsha*, took a turn to apologize for the way he treated him. Using *L'Africain* as a case study, Roussel-Gillet (2011) further supports this claim by adding that:

Devenu adulte, le fils rend hommage au père: "Je devais ce livre à cet homme que j'ai si mal traité." Le texte se fait récit de réparation, pose la question de savoir comment le fils a manqué (au sens éthique) au père qu'il veut rendre "complice" par la présence de quatorze photographies, prises par le père.
(Roussel-Gillet, p.71)

Roussel-Gillet (2011) in this second citation makes a convincing argument regarding the difference in the date of publication of both novels, with the time allowing the writer to revisit what he previously justified to be unfair. Written in 1991, *Onitsha* was followed by *L'Africain* thirteen years later, in 2004. In *Onitsha*, Fintan, through the eyes of the writer, came face-to-face with some of the reasons that had guided his father's decisions. *L'Africain* revealed the impact that maturity has had on Le Clézio, opening his eyes to a fuller understanding of how the world worked when his father had to make life-changing decisions. In thirteen years, and benefitting from the early introspective experience of *Onitsha*, Le Clézio succeeded in explaining some of the motives that drove his father's choices, and the broader context in which his life was operating.

Le Clezio's understanding of the African environment is a result of first-hand experience or evidence. *L'Africain* and *Onitsha* could also be partly likened to the author having a direct experience of the local geography hence the mastery of some names. On the topic of "Getting to know Le Clézio," Woodward (2008) in the *Wall Street Journal* of October 2008 supports this claim by referring to *Onitsha* as a slice of the author's boyhood. He writes thus:

His 1992 novel, "Onitsha," offers us a child's perception of what seems to be a slice of Mr. Le Clézio's own boyhood. (Woodward, p.2)

Roussel-Gillet (2011) shares Woodward's analysis (2008): both of them agree with the fact that the author is relating to the readers a possible childhood experience. This is what Roussel-Gillet (2011) refers to as a memory (*souvenir*). This memory that we refer to has been influenced by the author's childhood experiences which is one of the major points of discussion in the books we will be studying, as they all relate to Africa and Africans. The writer cites:

L'Africain, dans la lignée de quelques passages d'*Onitsha*, est une évocation de l'enfance au Nigeria passé au filtre du souvenir... Roussel-Gillet (2011: 71)

Both writer and critic share a similar view on the basis that an autobiographical look at the author proves to us that the author actually has a connection with Nigeria and most specifically, Onitsha. Besides the history that the author has about Nigeria, he also has something to say about the Western Sahara in his books titled *Gens des Nuages and Désert*. Le Clézio shows an

interest in the Saharan region and his people in these two books, depicting the harshness of the desert environment, the nomadic lifestyle of the inhabitants and their cultural significance. His approach to depicting the desert is characterized by a blend of sensory details, philosophical musings, and a sense of awe for the vastness and harshness of the environment.

Emancipation through harmony with nature and the desert

According to Nicole M. Thorborn (2012:12), Le Clézio believes that because contemporary society has altered how human beings once lived in harmony with nature, modern human beings now feel alone. With his peers, he genuinely struggles to communicate. Also, in today's culture, man is still treated like a true prisoner. As a result of technology's enslavement to the consumerist world, enforcing life rules can prove challenging (Thorborn 2012:12)

The writer therefore suggests specifically that it would be easier for Africans to find emancipation and hope by returning to their roots as the African continent remains a fertile ground for riches and peace. The writer understands this because of the cultural immersion he had in African society. This immersion is what facilitates this intimacy with Africa. The writer therefore draws the attention of the audience by using characters that seek this emancipation, a process that cannot be found elsewhere except in their place of origin or natural habitat which in this case is Africa. The quest for freedom as a way out of

captivity is described by Amar (2014) to be one of the important features of the Leclézian literature about Africa:

Therefore, the materialistic culture of contemporary society will master the modern man, and because the Leclézian characters are seeking freedom and never stand in captivity, they are marginalized and at variance with the civilized modern existence. The Leclézian hero experiences a rupture from his initial independence when he lives in society, particularly the decadent metropolitan setting. (Amar, p.5-6)

Initial independence as used in the quotation has a lot to do with people's initial environment where freedom was enjoyed. The necessity to return to such a time or place is emphasized in the selected books and in line with this necessity, François (2000) anticipated Amar's view (2014) by drawing our attention to the fact that the writer seeks ways to make the audience understand the need to move from the city (a more crowded place) towards the desert (a less crowded and more peaceful place). This is true in the sense that the writer considers Africa as a place of tranquility and liberty, a place where nature is still as beautiful as ever. In reality, after leaving the fabled city of Smara, the tribes from the first story where Nour belongs wander the desert in search of land and water, stopping occasionally on the edges of towns that terrify and fascinate them. The same fate is shared by Lalla who quits the city for the desert. Faroughi & Hormozi (213) concludes that the view outside the desert was never comfortable for the nomads, it did not fit into the kind of freedom they sought in nature:

Défendues par des remparts et des murs, les villes du désert sont inhospitalières pour les nomades, et leurs habitants leur sont hostiles.
(François, 68)

Hence, the kind of freedom sought after by the author is the one that resonates from the desert, the type that unites the people, the type that brings a sense of oneness and love for one's culture. Le Clézio's work about the desert is based on this kind of oneness within the spatial design of this terrain. This forms part of Khaled Elmahjoub's (2013) argument when comparing three desert books including that of Le Clézio. Elmahjoub (2013) claims that Le Clézio's primary idea fits deeply into the desert, reflects his vision, as well as offers a space that eliminates all boundaries and encloses the entire planet. In a nutshell, Le Clézio's vision is seeing Africa and Africans become one with their natural environment, the desert space being an example of such oneness or harmony. This approach, Elmahjoub argues, is shared by Le Clézio with Libyan and Algerian writers Ibrahim Al Koni and Rachid Boudjedra:

Through *Desert*, *Little Waw*, and *Timimoun*, Le Clézio, Ibrahim Al Koni, and Rachid Boudjedra met in an inventive manner that is related to the desert's spatial design, which is based on the notion of oneness. Such terrain, which starts with the desert rather than clarity and suggests the possibility of going back to a mythical centre before creation, is present across various publications. (Elmahjoub, p.10-12)

The characters' rapport with the desert space is what brings about this harmony. Catherine Domecq (1993), while comparing the space of the desert in

three desert books including that of Le Clézio, argues that the foundational elements of the desert's formation—stones, sky, and water—make it a place imbued with the memory of creation in Le Clézio's *Désert*. According to Domecq (1993), the desert is the ideal setting for the revelation of a joyful worldview and a vital source of information for the discovery of poetic writing that travels via visions of routes. He goes on to explain that the desert is the site of the transfiguring journey and that it manifests as a joyful vastness by allowing the dream to crystallize and leading mankind to discover a basic accord of union with the world via the pathways of sensuous and spiritual pleasure in it:

...le désert est le lieu de l'expérience transfiguratrice et se révèle une immensité heureuse. Il autorise la cristallisation du rêve où l'homme retrouve un accord fondamental de fusion avec le monde par les voies de l'extase sensuelle et mystique. (Domecq, 1993-*Résumé*)

Maintaining balance: Le Clezio's ecological principles

Le Clézio's books about the African continent offer several ecological lessons that can inspire readers to reflect on their relationship with the environment. Interconnectedness is one of such lessons. Jun Yu (2019:25-31) in *A Study of Periods and Themes of Le Clezio's Literary Creation* introduces this as one of the focal points of discussion in the author's literature relating to Africa. According to Yu (2019:25), Le Clézio often emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. His writings highlight the intricate web of life and the importance of recognizing our place within it. This understanding

encourages a sense of responsibility towards the preservation and protection of ecosystems. Nature as a source of wisdom also plays an important role in the writer's ecological view of Africa. Le Clézio's works underscore the wisdom and knowledge that can be gained from observing and engaging with nature. He portrays the deep understanding that indigenous cultures often have of their environments, emphasizing the importance of learning from traditional ecological knowledge.

Human impact on the environment cannot be left out. Le Clézio explores the destructive consequences of human activities on the environment. Through his narratives, he draws attention to issues such as deforestation, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity. His works serve as a reminder of the urgent need to address these environmental challenges which of course is one of the ecological lessons from the writer's works. Yu (2019) is of the opinion that ecological lessons from Le Clézio's books can encourage readers to reflect on our role as stewards of the Earth and inspire us to take action toward a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the environment. Concerning one such lesson, Yu (2019:30-31) argues that:

It seems that we can learn ecological lessons of man's balance with nature, with himself, the balance between the magical and the real, between life and death, between individual and society, a whole series of equilibrium. (Yu, p.26)

Yu (2019) mentioned only a few select examples in their work yet they also state that there are competing dynamics that are vying to structure the ecological lessons conveyed by Le Clézio's writings. Xu Jun (2016) in "The Poetic Adventure of Le Clézio" and Yu (2019) share similar views regarding Le Clézio's literature as being always concerned with maintaining equilibrium between humans and the natural world. Xu (2016:12-15) emphasizes the need for a balanced relationship where humans respect and coexist harmoniously with nature. Both views are in line with the writer's thoughts in the sense that Le Clézio's works often explore the consequences of human actions that disrupt this equilibrium and highlight the importance of preserving the integrity of ecosystems. Even more so, literature calls for a more sustainable and respectful approach to the environment, promoting a sense of stewardship and emphasizing the value of preserving the delicate balance between humanity and nature.

Furthermore, Xu (2016:13-14) believes that in order to maintain a healthy balance with the natural environment, we have to get back the lost equilibrium. Xu goes on to argue that we can discover ideals of harmony and balance, as well as a friendly interaction between humans and the environment and society, from these pure and nearly vanished civilizations. Africa still has a rich culture and civilization and for the writer, the Western world needs to understand how Africans engage with the world and at the same time seek to embrace the message of peace, emancipation and hope that his works are trying to pass while taking a

journey either towards the historical facts and childhood memories of his, that draw Africa into the point of discussion. (Xu 2016:14)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From the last paragraph, we can identify some important features of Le Clézio's engagement with Africa and Africans such as culture, emancipation, memories, ecological principles, and maintaining harmony and balance with nature in Africa. These features will serve as background for the four research questions that will be engaged with:

What role do Africa and the African people play in Le Clézio's work?

Le Clézio has shown a strong and long-term interest in Africa and Africans in his work. Africa often serves as a significant backdrop in his narratives, and African characters are frequently portrayed with depth and complexity. Therefore, to what extent does Le Clézio's engagement with Africa reflect his fascination with the continent's rich cultural heritage, history, and its people's struggles? How does he explore themes such as colonization, identity, and the impact of Western influence on African societies? Through his writing, does Le Clézio aim to bridge cultural gaps and promote a deeper understanding of Africa's diverse landscapes and its people's experiences in the selected books?

To what extent have Le Clézio's childhood memories about Africa influenced the storyline and analysis of the selected texts?

Our hypothesis is that Le Clézio's childhood memories of Africa have had a profound influence on the storyline and themes in his books. His experiences growing up in Nigeria and Mauritius fostered a deep connection to the continent, its landscapes, and its people. These memories often find their way into his works, shaping the settings and characters he portrays. However, to what extent have these memories been reflected in his works? Furthermore, has Le Clézio's childhood encounters with different cultures, languages, and social dynamics in Africa informed his exploration of themes such as identity, migration, and survival? His first-hand observations of the beauty, challenges, and injustices of African societies have inspired his literary endeavours. Furthermore, Le Clézio's childhood experiences in Africa have contributed to his empathetic portrayal of African characters. However, we also seek to understand how the struggles, aspirations, and cultural nuances of the various African communities he has lived in allow him to create multidimensional and authentic representations in these books.

How does the desert play an emancipative role in Le Clézio's works?

In Le Clezio's writing, desert spaces located in Africa serve as a multifaceted geographical feature that embodies the physical and metaphorical aspects of the continent, contributing significantly to the thematic depth and cultural richness of his narratives. How does the writer portray the desert in order to achieve these geographical features? Does he portray the desert as a space of

liberation, introspection, and spiritual awakening? Does it serve as a transformative backdrop where characters can break free from societal constraints and discover their true selves? In the process, would the desert likely become a symbol of freedom, a place where individuals can escape the confines of their past or present circumstances and find solace or enlightenment? Additionally, we seek to explore the spiritual significance of the desert in Le Clézio's works while trying to understand how it can become a sacred realm where characters can experience a sense of transcendence, encounter mysticism, or connect with ancestral roots. Furthermore, does the desert in the selected books invite characters to explore the depths of their existence and seek a more profound understanding of themselves and the world around them?

How does Le Clézio express the need for freedom and the ecological importance of nature in the selected books?

Le Clézio's writings convey a vital need for freedom and underline the ecological importance of nature in Africa. How does he explore this theme? Does he do it by portraying characters who seek liberation in natural settings or by celebrating indigenous cultures in harmony with the environment in Africa? Do his works encourage readers to consider the vital connection between human freedom and the preservation of the natural world in the African continent? Does he do it via the exploration of nature, escaping societal norms, inner liberation, embracing cultural diversity, and/ or the quest for authenticity? Do his works

depict freedom as a multifaceted and transformative journey that enables characters to break free from limitations and discover their true essence? Le Clézio also highlights the ecological importance of nature, urging readers to recognize their responsibility as stewards of the Earth. Do the selected books emphasize the need for such sustainable practices, respect for biodiversity, and a rekindling of our connection with the natural world to ensure a harmonious coexistence with the planet in Africa?

METHODOLOGY

The field of postcolonial literary theory recognises and critically analyses the literary works that bear witness to the political, economic, social, and historical consequences of European imperialism. How people of colour and the Global South are portrayed in European literature, and how that portrayal affects public opinion, became of special importance to this school of thought. Re-examining colonial and postcolonial literature, with a focus on the connection between the colonized and the colonizer, is the goal of postcolonial literary theorists such as Edward Said, Chinua Achebe, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

The 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, which was created during the colonial era, is critically analysed by Achebe(2016:14-27) in his article "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" as "the other world" and "a foil to Europe." Achebe (2016:20) claimed that Conrad portrayed Africa with bias based on his dehumanising treatment of the African characters in the

novel which had no language or "human expression". However, Le Clézio's characters in our case studies triumph amidst the challenges posed by Colonialism and have unique means of communication ranging from indigenous to a melange of the English language. In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak (2010) provided a commentary on how the practice of Sati (or Suttee) is often not documented in literature. This essay took an intersectional approach, considering postcolonial and feminist theories by examining the presentation and representation of women in previously colonized countries. (Spivak: 290-305) This representation enjoys a positive sight of the African continent in our case studies as the author critically acknowledges and praises the role of African women as a source of hope, liberation, and nostalgia for the continent.

The development of theoretical frameworks that challenge the prevailing Western perspectives has occupied a significant portion of the postcolonial cultural analysis that has been produced as a result of this undertaking. Postcolonial theory, however, is not a theory in the scientific sense, that is a coherently elaborated set of principles that can predict the outcome of a given set of phenomena. Nor is it even a theory as understood by the social sciences, which is a methodology to be utilized for the analysis of empirical data. According to Robert Young (2016):

Postcolonial theory involves a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledge, as well as needs, developed outside the West. (Young, 24)

In addition to this, Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism* (1978:209) stated already that it is more than just a political ideology or field that culture reflects passively. He sees it as a concept with different interests. Said (1978:209-212) further insists that post-colonial criticism is the dissemination of geopolitical consciousness across literary works in the fields of philology, sociology, economics, and aesthetics; it is the development of a wide range of "interests and perspectives" in addition to a fundamental geographical differentiation.

Based on these different interests and perspectives, we will be undertaking a conceptual and contextual analysis of the four selected books mentioned above. In order to achieve this goal, we will be using a postcolonial approach as well as an ecocritical one. These two approaches will be backed up by the concept of Diaspora in postcolonial literature which will be identified lastly under this subheading. Lastly, the post-colonial and ecocritical approaches are motivated by distinct features. Nonetheless, the idea of ‘diaspora’ is the one feature that permeates the whole framework of this research study. This is a reference to the way individuals have migrated from their own countries to other parts of the globe. These peoples, although living in different parts of the world, are united by a shared memory of their ancestral home, which influences a portion of their individual identities. This ancestral house, nevertheless, is not a real location that may be visited. Physically and mentally, Le Clezio’s ancestral house in our case

studies is Africa and the African people, a place that largely influenced his childhood memories. Also, the author's identity was influenced by the memories he shared with the African continent hence he has much interest in writing about the continent and sharing his experience about the continent. This attempt is driven by the fact that the author wants to correct wrong impressions about the African culture, traditions and environment.

Analysing the selected books through a post-colonial approach involves examining the ways in which colonialism and its aftermath have influenced the literary works of African writers as well as those who have written about Africa such as Le Clézio/ Postcolonialism seeks to deconstruct and challenge the power dynamics, cultural imbalances, and colonial legacies present in texts.

Compared to other works in this multi-faceted postcolonial theory, Barbara Bush's *Imperialism and Postcolonialism* (2006) is distinctive. In addition to the more recent subgenres of colonial and postcolonial studies, it brings together a critical examination of a variety of works and ideas in "traditional" imperial history which Young (2016:24-25) refers to as different perspectives. Bush (2006) adds colour to the study of postcolonial literature and how to use it effectively for literary criticism. She does this by revisiting previous works and ideas about the postcolonial theme. Of course, there is a very good reason for the choice of focus, but it does tend to either ignore or minimize some previous currents and possibly overemphasize the freshness of some topics in modern work

By applying a post-colonial view, one can explore some of these themes such as identity, representation, resistance, migration, survival, the quest for freedom and memory within the writer's work. This approach acknowledges the historical context of colonization and the subsequent struggles for independence, while also considering the ongoing impacts of colonialism on social, political, and cultural spheres. Furthermore, this post-colonial perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances within these texts. It enables readers to examine how Le Clézio responds to and navigates colonial influences, reclaiming and asserting cultural identities in Africa and narratives in the process.

Furthermore, to complement postcolonial critique, ecocriticism will also be used in our analysis as it focuses on the relationships between humans and the environment, ecological concerns, and the portrayal of nature in literary texts. Applying ecocriticism to these books provides insights into how Le Clézio explores ecological themes, engages with environmental challenges, and depicts the complex interactions between Africans and their natural surroundings. Through an ecocritical view, one can examine how Le Clézio addresses issues surrounding the relationship between traditional ecological knowledge and modernity. It allows for an exploration of the cultural, social, and political dimensions of environmental issues in Africa.

In addition, this ecocritical approach is designed to shed light on the diverse ways Le Clézio depicts nature, ecological disruptions, and the impact of environmental changes on communities. According to Malcolm Ferdinand (2021:4), it is crucial to comprehend colonialism through a lens that transcends dualism and does not arbitrarily distinguish between ecological and socio-political concerns. In the opinion of Ferdinand (2021:4), colonialism and transatlantic servitude entailed the exploiting of ecosystems to the detriment of indigenous peoples and their subjection, sometimes even leading to their extinction. In addition, through an ecocritical approach, we seek to highlight the interconnectedness between human and non-human entities, emphasizing the importance of sustainable relationships with the environment. This relationship is very significant in the sense that everything that characterised Le Clezio's autobiographical narrative in *Onitsha* and *L'Africain* resulted from him being influenced by the African environment.

Hardwick (2013) confirms such environmental influence, while engaging with childhood, environment, and diaspora, using Daniel Maximin's *Tu, c'est l'enfance* and Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* as case studies:

While Maximin recalls his childhood in Guadeloupe, Pineau describes a childhood largely spent in metropolitan France. Nonetheless, for both authors, the child's bond with the environment articulates a politics of landscape, through which history, memory, exile, and diaspora come to the fore.
(Hardwick:132)

History, memory, exile, and the idea of diaspora as mentioned by Hardwick, form part of what characterizes Leclézian literature about Africa. These points of view summarize a great deal of what will be mentioned and analyzed in our chapter breakdown.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Le Clézio, through these selected books, attempts to relate and redefine some historically unique narratives and perspectives about Africa by exposition, exploration, and knowledge through personal and childhood experiences. In order to explore the research topic, we will be dividing the research work into two parts, each part having two chapters – with four chapters in total.

Each chapter is dedicated to a critical study of one of the selected books. The first part of the research is entitled *Individual Quests: The Sahara*. Understanding how and why the main characters in the books embark on personal journeys, seeking identity, meaning, or connection with the world around them is important. We also intend to explore in this first part how Le Clézio's narratives delve into the complexities of self-discovery and the search for purpose often set against diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. The first part will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will deal with *The Liberating African Desert: The Sahara and Individual Emancipation in Désert*. In this first chapter, the Sahara will be discussed as a place where freedom can be achieved, as a place of peace and tranquillity. In addition, freedom in this context is often depicted as

a connection to the land, a spiritual bond with nature, and a sense of autonomy within the nomadic lifestyle. The vast expanse of the Sahara serves as a backdrop for the characters' quest for identity and their pursuit of a life that aligns with the rhythms of the natural world.

The second chapter - *Wanderings in the Wilderness: Genealogy, Reverie, and Personal Journeys in Gens des Nuages* will establish how the characters Jean-Marie and Jemia, have been influenced by their personal experiences of the Sahara. In the writer's narratives, the wilderness can take various forms, ranging from natural landscapes like deserts or forests to urban environments that are unexplored or unfamiliar to the characters. These wanderings often lead to moments of introspection, encounters with diverse cultures, and a deeper understanding of the self and its trajectories in the world.

The second part of this research covers chapters three and four respectively and will explore *Childhood Africa: Nigeria*. Le Clézio's childhood in Africa is reflected in themes of cultural diversity, the impact of European colonization, and the juxtaposition of traditional ways of life with the modern world. The two novels selected in this part often explore the intersections of different cultures and the challenges faced by individuals navigating these diverse environments. The chapter three of this research which is *Beloved Africa: Childhood Memories and Personal Introspection in Onitsha*, will explore how the childhood memories of the writer about his stay in Africa (most specifically

Nigeria) greatly influenced his life and literature. In the novel *Onitsha*, Le Clézio engages with autobiographical elements in his literary output in the novel. Not only are we going to explore how this has affected him, but we will also be looking at the influence it has had on his life till now.

Photography And The Long Shadow Of The Father in L'Africain will be studied in chapter four. I will be taking a close look at how the writer has been able to use pictures to visualize his perspectives about Africa. The writer integrates visual elements to complement the narrative, blurring the lines between written and visual storytelling. It also serves to capture moments, landscapes, and the essence of the places he writes about.

PART ONE
INDIVIDUAL QUESTS: THE SAHARA
CHAPTER 1
THE LIBERATING AFRICAN DESERT: THE SAHARA AND
INDIVIDUAL EMANCIPATION IN *DÉSERT*

The Sahara, a journey from captivity and prohibition to freedom: Personal experiences of Nour and Lalla

The desert is a recurring theme in literature and criticism relating to the African continent. It is a place that is explored and conceptualized from varied perspectives. Aubuchon Jeffery Williams (2017:3) sees the desert as a place of images or mirages. Drawing upon some of the analogies in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Ibrahim Al-Koni (2015:4) presents the desert as a wasteland and a place of human wander. To Paul Bowles (1949:19-25), the desert is a space of wilderness and a location where people roam.

The varied representations of the desert are a characteristic phenomenon of Le Clézio's writing. Even though the desert as referred to by Le Clézio comes with its challenges, the writer engages the readers to see beyond the deceptively monotonous surface of the desert rather than see the light that it has brought to Africa both metaphorically and literally. He often portrays the desert not just as a barren wasteland, but as a place of profound beauty, spiritual significance, and resilience. Through his lyrical descriptions and evocative imagery, Le Clézio

captures the mesmerizing allure of the desert landscape, with its vast expanses of sand, shifting dunes, and endless horizons. Moreover, Le Clézio highlights the cultural richness and diversity of desert-dwelling communities, such as the Tuareg people, whose way of life is intimately connected to the rhythms of the desert.

Also, the author explores the profound spiritual connection that many desert-dwellers feel with their environment, seeing the desert not as a harsh wilderness to be conquered, but as a source of wisdom, inspiration, and renewal. In challenging readers to see the light that the desert has brought to Africa, Le Clézio invites them to reconsider their preconceived notions about the continent and its people. He celebrates the resilience, resourcefulness, and creativity of African cultures, offering a more nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of the desert and its inhabitants. Through his writing, Le Clézio encourages readers to embrace the beauty and complexity of the desert landscape, and to recognize the ways in which it has shaped African identity and culture. Sylvie Vartian (2000) sees the desert of Le Clézio from a positive point of view, in a context where the writer cannot be separated from contrasting perceptions prevailing in the Western literary canon:

Cruel et magnifique, le désert incarne l'espace du malaise et du vertige horizontal pour certains, celui de la splendeur et de l'unité pour d'autres. Le Clézio a célébré le désert doré comme un corps immense. (Vartian, p.27)

The plot of the novel *Désert* gives a compelling account of several important aspects that the desert stands for in Le Clézio's literature. Within the context of the Leclézian narrative, the desert represents stillness, liberation, survival, courage, love of nature, self-compassion, and respect for others. The narrative of the writer has been influenced by his discovery and relationship with other cultures and civilizations. Bruno Doucey (1994) confirms this when he states that:

Avec le temps et la découverte d'autres civilisations, Le Clézio s'est apaisé: il est devenu un écrivain de la quiétude, du bonheur et de la liberté. (Doucey, p.11)

Doucey's comment reflects what the desert symbolises through the eyes of the author. These include: civilizations, quietness, happiness and liberty. To further support our analysis of Le Clézio's narrative, Roux (1986) argues that Le Clézio's discourse is characteristically light, and geared towards personal liberation:

Le fond du ciel, la lumière, le silence, le désert s'associent en une vision unique récurrente dans le discours descriptif, celle de l'origine. Elle traduit l'itinéraire d'un impérieux désir : « seulement l'espace ouvert, libre, immédiat, seulement l'espace et la lumière. » (Roux, p.24)

The Sahara serves as the foundation for the light and liberation that Roux (1986) refers to, and this can be seen in the life of Lalla, who notwithstanding the disappointments she faced abroad, was able to feel such internal peace of mind

after having passed the night in the desert. (*Désert*, 316) This theme of hope and freedom, closely linked to the desert, is also evident in other works by Le Clézio, including *La Quarantaine* and *L'Africain*. In *L'Africain*, for example, the writer describes the freedom he felt as soon as he landed on the shores of Africa as “une liberté si intense”. (*L'Africain*, p.103) The Sahara also offers a unique backdrop to the analysis and articulation of hope and freedom as portrayed by Le Clézio in books such as *La Quarantaine*, *Désert*, and *Gens des Nuages*. So, as we can see, this significant subject of freedom, as interpreted through the trope of the desert, permeates Le Clézio's literary works. One of the two protagonists in *Désert*, Lalla, whom we discussed in the introduction, offers an important representation of how the desert becomes a site of liberation and renewal in the novel.

In *Désert* (p.219), Lalla rebels against a forced union and escapes with her true love, the Hartani. In the end, she leaves Marseille and returns to her native country- Morocco (in the Sahara Desert). Elham Sajadi et al (2010 :27) in the article «Retour au désert ou refus de la modernité dans *Désert* de Le Clézio » supports this by stating that “ le besoin de trouver le bonheur et la liberté est une raison qui nourrit le désir de fuite de Lalla.” Here, the goal of the getaway is not only to avoid the dramatic and challenging circumstances of socio-cultural oppression but also, to recover lost property and rebuild a destroyed environment. She leaves in order to experience happiness and to learn about a new life. The return to the desert marks a turning point in Lalla's life, through which she finds

love, symbolizing the start of a new life, in harmony with her African roots and with nature, as symbolized by the birth of Hawa (*Désert*, p. 400-418).

We could also argue here that the moments spent in the desert represent freedom and emancipation because the experience of Lalla in it presupposes an intense wish to breathe, see, and hear; an increasing appetite to live and enjoy life, which she never felt outside of the desert:

Mais Lalla aime être dehors ces jours-là, peut-être justement parce qu'il n'y a plus personne; c'est comme s'il n'y avait plus rien sur la terre, plus rien qui appartienne aux hommes. (*Désert* :109)

Additionally, there might be possibilities of going back to the beginning of Le Clezio's works. To depart therefore might be to come back. So, escape for Le Clézio does not imply living somewhere with no intention of returning; on the contrary, it implies a constant intention of doing so. Nour and Lalla play out the intentions of Le Clézio who in *Désert* finds a way to remind Africans of the nostalgic feelings of peace back in Africa, using the Sahara Desert as the plot. This also means that the constant intention to revisit or return to his past life is a way for the writer to relive the freedom and peace he felt in Africa. Nour set the road for the generation of Lalla who will later escape the West to return to her mother's land. (*Désert*, p.200)

Furthermore, the intention to return is purposeful as the main characters Nour and Lalla seek to find the right location to embrace peaceful emancipation.

Lalla and Nour had the intention of returning to their place of origin and this is why the writer would always draw a connection between the sea and the desert which serve as important routes to freedom in some of his works. Both journeys to freedom are connected by the apparent emptiness of the desert and the sea. This is reflected in *Onitsha* (pp. 1-2) and *L'Africain* (pp. 7-10) where we see the main character Fintan traveling on *Le Surabaya* (the ship) to travel to Africa to reunite with his parents. In *Gens des Nuages*, Jemia and Jean-Marie as a couple accompanied by their photographer will need to go through the desert in order to trace Jemia's origin and lineage. The trajectory of this journey is made for the purpose of reconciling with one's lineage and culture which could be likened to the trajectory of traveling back to find peace in the Sahara in the case of Lalla. Yu (2019), mentions a citation from Gao and Fan (2013) which helps to describe this trajectory:

The characters in Le Clézio's works almost always have a special connection with the sea, which has become a destination for freedom, a destination for escape (Gao & Fan, 2013 cited in Yu 2019)

Le Clézio's style is marked by a deep attachment to the principles of reality, thus applies to Lalla when she crosses through the sea to go abroad, she encounters life challenges in the process which have more to do with the treatment of migrants. We can therefore suggest that the description of the Sahara desert goes beyond traditional imagery in LeClézian literature. The description of the physical environment in the novel makes the story realistic so much more than

the audience is thrown into the Sahara environment and it became even more realistic to the couple and their photographer, who traveled to these places. The three have in mind, as a goal, to embrace the beauty of the Saharan landscape. Salles (1999) having made a geographic observation of the terrain further describes this reality citing that:

Le désert présenté dans le roman de Le Clézio n'est pas un lieu théorique et abstrait. Il s'agit du Sahara marocain que la documentation précise de l'auteur permet au lecteur de découvrir. (Salles, p.26)

Furthermore, the discovery and exploration of the Sahara is a step towards gaining liberty for the protagonists and their people because both characters seek to find freedom for themselves and their communities. Hence, the emancipation of the Blue Men (the Moors of the Western Sahara) who reside in the valley of Saguiet el Hamra and are close friends of Lalla (especially the Hartani) becomes very important:

Il fallait [aller ?] encore plus loin, pencher un peu en avant, dans la direction qu'avaient donnée les étoiles... Maintenant, ils étaient apparus au-dessus de la vallée de la Saguiet el Hamra, ils descendaient lentement les pentes de sable. (*Désert*, p.13)

Invariably, the quest for individual emancipation in this novel by the two main characters will in due course influence the quest for collective triumph and victory. Therefore, the value placed on individual emancipation cannot be overemphasised in the two stories presented in the book; both individual and

collective freedom collide for good. However, the story behind it all is that of individual courage for leadership (Nour) and a strong quest for individual emancipation of the mind, soul and body (Lalla), right there in the Sahara desert.

The conversation that develops between these two stories demonstrates an interaction that involves two contemporary eras with unique language structures, with Nour and Lalla embodying/standing as emblems of these two unique language structures in two separate eras. In the narrative of Lalla, contemporary French is used, compared to that of Nour which has an older structure. This is because the events took place in different eras. The dialogue established between these two stories of Nour and Lalla is described in the novel and summarised in this light according to Boulos (1999):

Le dialogue qui s'instaure entre ces deux textes reflète un dialogue entre deux époques et deux vécus intimement liés, mais il propose aussi une conciliation entre deux genres de structures hétérogènes : entre le récit épique narrant le vécu collectif des hommes bleus et le récit personnel d'un destin individuel. (Boulos, p.45).

To this effect, instead of assigning situations an individualizing significance, analogies are made between the sensation felt in a specific circumstance, communal and universal emotions using antiquated pictures and mythological allusions such as in *Gens des Nuages* (pp. 51,66,68) or *L'Africain*, (pp. 18, 75). With the aid of such literary and cultural contact, the interaction between the personal and collective experience is underlined as one which focuses on the Sahara desert. The personal and collective experience related in

the two stories from two different eras are founded on the writer's perception of Africa and the world in general. Simply put, Le Clézio uses the desert to engage with the subject of harmony and conflict in Africa.

Mobarak (2013), in a comparative study of *Désert* by Le Clézio and *Les baliseurs du désert* by Nacer Khémir, articulates the use of the desert as a way for the writer to relate with the world. He further argues that *Désert* and *Gens des Nuages* are a fundamental framework of the desert's representation because, in these two books, the desert is depicted as an area that functions as a practical means of transportation and a motif that expresses a relationship between human beings and the world.

Dans les deux œuvres, le désert se présente comme un espace d'errance, traversé par une marche qui n'est pas un simple déplacement fonctionnel, mais un motif articulant un rapport de l'être au monde, ainsi qu'une unité fondamentale de la structure narrative de la représentation du désert.

(Mobarak, p.180)

One salient aspect of Le Clézio's relationship with Africa is his love for the natural environment which he describes, using terms like sea, desert, and mountains. Le Clézio's profound connection with nature is therefore reflected in his choice of words, evoking the vastness of the Mediterranean Sea, the solitude of the desert, and the grandeur of mountains. His language captures the essence of these landscapes, emphasizing their significance in literary works.

In addition, aside from evolving into a destination for freedom and liberty, the Sahara was also an escape route for the protagonists (Nour and Lalla) in *Désert*, and they virtually always have a particular bond with it. This bond is also a reflection of the characteristics of the desert as described in the novel. The narrator goes further to describe the nature of the night before the advent of the Colonial Masters. Again, it is referred to as being calm and free of noise. In summary, the beauty of the desert can be described from the novel thus:

Mais c'était leur vrai monde. Ce sable, ces pierres, ce ciel, ce soleil, ce silence, cette douleur, et non pas les villes de métal et de ciment où l'on entendait le bruit des fontaines et des voix humaines. (*Désert*, p. 22).

Here, the author refers to the Western world of metal and cement judging from the fact that he thinks that the beauty of nature has been covered over / replaced by most of these modern interventions. The desert to him is a place of peace and tranquillity, a place where stones and sand remain in their original form. Bonding with such an environment is a direct result of the peace felt in the desert because in finding solitude within the desert, characters may experience a sense of tranquillity, which contributes to a thematic exploration of harmony between individuals and the natural environment in Le Clézio's work. Through the help of the narrator, we see a further description of the peace found in the desert which becomes a haven of peace in the night:

Quand la nuit venait ici, sur l'eau des puits, c'était à nouveau le règne du ciel constellé du désert sur la vallée de la Saguiet el Hamra, les nuits étaient plus douces... (*Désert*, p. 18)

The people depicted in the novel cherished the freedom offered by the desert settlements of the Sahara. Furthermore, the narrator says that Lalla loves looking at the heavens in this calm desert that was without birds and planes. Planes here, refer to Western influences that impede the freedom of the settlers and colonialism is one of such example. The narrator cites that :

Lalla aime beaucoup regarder le ciel. Elle va souvent du côté des dunes, là où le chemin de sable part droit devant lui, et elle se laisse tomber sur le dos, en plein dans le sable et les chardons, les bras en croix. Alors, le ciel s'ouvre sur son visage lisse, il luit comme un miroir, calme, si calme, sans nuages, sans oiseaux, sans avions. (*Désert*, p. 85)

Alongside the term colonialism, the definition of the term “desert”, has a significant role to play in explaining the role of the Sahara Desert in Le Clézio’s work. The desert as a space and as a metaphor therefore plays an important role in the development of the novel, not just as a title – *Désert* – but also as the environment where the freedom will be found. The Latin word- *desertum*, which means "to forsake" and "to abandon," could be expanded to mean: emptiness, lifelessness, and harsh circumstances. These phrases could serve as subtitles for Le Clézio's *Désert*. The term “emptiness” could convey a sense of barrenness in the desert and vast solitude of the few persons living within it, capturing the thematic essence of the novel. Lifelessness on the other hand emphasizes the desolate nature of the landscape depicted in the novel.

Emptiness and lifelessness point towards solitude. Lalla, the main character in *Désert*, grows up lonely. It is associated with a process of

modernization that is particularly evident in metropolitan areas. Modern man flees into solitary, severing his ties to the natural world. In contrast, the character in LeClézian novels enjoys solitude and does not want to eliminate it; in fact, loneliness for Lalla frequently serves as an inspiration for the quest for freedom. Sajadi et al (2010) argue in support of the place of solitude in the novel:

Dans *Désert*, le personnage central, Lalla se construit en solitude... le personnage des récits lecléziens au contraire, ne cherche pas à se débarrasser de la solitude, il s'y complaît et cette exclusion a en effet bien souvent le rôle de stimulus de la mise en route vers la liberté.
(Sajadi et al, pp.21-22)

Surviving in the desert alone or as a group comes with a cost — that of a struggle for dependence and survival. Le Clézio, having studied the terrain in person, must have over the years learned how to live within such environment. In a poetical perspective, it would be safe to imagine that the Moors became a part of the desert because the spirit of the desert was already living in them. Hence, Le Clézio's conception of the desert in this case will be that of a quest for independence. In *Désert*, Nour and Lalla must contend with limitations and obstacles such as hunger, fear, and tiredness. Forging a bond with the desert as a part of nature is what both characters must do to survive. This hunger, according to Nour and the Moors, "digs out a dizzy pit in the ground" and includes not just a want for food but also "hope and independence".

Comme Nour, tous les hommes regardaient vers lui, avec leurs yeux brûlants de fatigue et de fièvre, leur esprit tendu par la souffrance. Tous sentaient leur peau durcie par la brûlure du soleil, et leurs lèvres étaient desséchées par le vent du désert. (*Désert*, p.38)

Furthermore, the journeys of Nour and Lalla play such important roles in the novel as they both stand out, not just as observers but also as witnesses to the challenges of pursuit, chase, violence and prohibition in the Sahara Desert. One of the painful events of violence in Nour's life was seeing the blind warrior, Sidi Mohammed die in his hands. Sidi was wounded by the French and then healed by Ma el Aïnine. Ma el Aïnine (also spelled Ma al Aynin), plays an important role in Le Clézio's narrative and this narrative talks about the place of this historical figure. In the writer's narrative, he is a Moor leader in the Sahara Desert, and the novel explores the complex interactions between various cultures and characters in a vast and challenging environment. Ma el Aïnine is very crucial in the story so much more that Magri-Mourgues (2015:473) affirms that "Les personnages se fondent au désert autour de Ma el Aïnine." This is also evident in the narrator's words:

Le bruit du déchirement des souffles était si grand, si puissant que c'était comme si tous étaient déjà partis très loin de Smara, à travers le ciel, dans le vent, mêlés à la lumière de la lune et à la fine poussière du désert.
(*Désert*, p. 71)

Furthermore, the translation of Ma el Aïnine's in French is "the water of the eyes." Mohammed el Mustafa ben Cheikh Mohammed el Fadel ben Mamine was his complete name (Chabihna, 1998, p.144). Born in 1830 in the northern part of Mauritania, he died in 1910 in Tiznit, Morocco. What the writer simply did was to apply some fictional characters and events in order to tell a true and

legendary historical story of the Moors of Morocco linked to the man of the desert- Ma el Aïnine. Magri-Mourgues (2015) comments on the authenticity of this history adding that:

Le point de départ de *Désert* est un épisode authentique de l'Histoire : la montée vers le Nord des Maures dirigés par Ma el Aïnine, lorsque les Français entrent au Maroc. Leur histoire s'étend de 1909 jusqu'en 1912, date de l'établissement du protectorat français sur le Maroc. (Magri-Mourgues, p.469)

This man of the desert is a legendary figure from the 19th and 20th century Saharan literature. He built from nothing, the spiritual city of Smara in 1898. The term “Smara” means remembrance or memory. It is a place that reminds the Moors of their struggle and by extension the Moroccans during the colonial rule. Smara is in Morocco and the biggest city in her province. In the centre of the city, there is a stone fortress of Zawiy Malainin and this used to be a capital city during the Spanish domination. He was a leader of the resistance and the spiritual community. (Boulakhsoumi, p.2) Ma el Aïnine was regarded by the colonists as "a great master of rebellion" (Ferré, 2000, p.14). JMG Le Clézio honours this historical figure by taking a different viewpoint from the imperialist worldview and highlighting his multiple identities as a charming personality and a valiant military leader who organizes the resistance of the Saharan tribesmen. Nour is a descendant of Al Azraq and himself a master of Ma el Aïnine (*Désert*, p.16-17).

Nour is one of the few survivors of the holy war, and although we do not know what will become of him in the future, he is still a spectator and a witness

to the violent history of the so-called colonial pacification which pushed them far into the Sahara Desert, a place where they witnessed violence and later peace. He may also be a probable propagator of this history. Talking about violence as narrated through the eyes of the main characters, Foden (2010), referring to the Moors as Tuaregs, has this comment to give:

The majority of the French soldiers that fight the Tuaregs are Senegalese, which highlights one of the novel's major themes—the problematic interaction between traditional communities and the brutal powers of mechanised imperialism—which leads to the eventual killing of the Sheikh's warriors. (Foden, p.1)

In the citation above, we see that the Tuaregs are being classified as Moors. They might share similar culture, however, they are not the same. The Moors are nomadic Berber tribes from Morocco while the Tuaregs are semi-nomadic herders and traders living in Northern Mali. Moors and Tuaregs share the same race but this does not make them the same. Most of the people we call “the Tuareg” are Black. (Whitehouse, p.2) Lalla being a Moor is also a witness to these occurrences, but in contrast to Nour, Lalla did not have to physically depart from her family because her father passed away in an accident before she was even born. Lalla was taken in by Aamma, her father's sister who resides in the city with her husband Selim (Soussi), and their two boys Ali and Bareki. Lalla and Nour are victims of this violent history of pacification, fear, battle, and pursuit from their homeland into the Sahara Desert as they share the same lineage. The Sahara is therefore the meeting point of struggle and pursuit of liberty that connects both

protagonists. In the case of Nour, we see the struggle of the people in Smara and Lalla:

Il y avait tant de jours, durs et aigus comme le silex, tant d'heures qu'ils attendaient de voir cela. Il y avait tant de souffrance dans leurs corps meurtris, dans leurs lèvres saignantes, dans leur regard brûlé. (*Désert*, p.16)

In addition, we could also notice how fearful she was when a man came for her hand in marriage:

Quand elle a appris, un peu plus tard, que l'homme était venu pour la demander en mariage, Lalla a eu très peur. Cela a fait comme un étourdissement dans sa tête, et son cœur s'est mis à battre très fort. (*Désert*, p.180)

Consequently, the Blue Men, Nour, and Lalla follow the same geographical and spiritual path that their masters Ma el Aïnine or Es Ser initiated them to, returning them from an imaginary flight to the North in the middle of the desert. Behind them, the eponymous silhouette of Al Azraq looms. The narrator abandons them as they approach maturity; one is a hopeful character who is undoubtedly headed for renown and the other, after becoming a mother, has discovered "bliss". The latter is a young woman who has found happiness.

The closest Lalla gets to happiness and emancipation in the desert is through her association with a young man she calls the Hartani (a derogatory Arabic term for black oasis residents), who was also abandoned at a nearby well by one of the blue men and is now a shepherd: "Le Hartani n'a pas vraiment de famille, comme Lalla, il ne sait lire, ni écrire" (*Désert*, p.105). She enjoys keeping

up with the Hartani. Walking along the path he has opened, she follows him. (*Désert*, page 121). One of the most heart-warming aspects of this motivational but uneven tale is the growing relationship between Lalla and the Hartani who will in turn follow Lalla on her quest for liberty:

Le Hartani prend la main de Lalla dans sa longue main brune aux doigts effilés. Il la serre si fort qu'elle en a presque mal. Lalla sent dans la paume de sa main passer le courant de chaleur comme une drôle de vibration ténue. (*Désert*, p.106)

Still on the issue of the relationships maintained by the protagonist, one could argue that the writer was very much interested in how the Blue Men or Lalla would enjoy their spiritual freedom. Bettina L. Knapp (1997) supports this argument by stating how the writer planned out the ending of one of the spiritual engagements of the Berbers:

Le Clézio returns the desert space to the Berber wanderers so that they can worship freely and experience Divinity as a permanent state of creation. (Knapp, p. 704)

In addition to the spiritual engagement of the desert in the writer's work, the Sahara Desert for Le Clézio also acts as a spiritual path and guide and this is seen in the character of Es Ser. There is much unsaid about the parents of Es Ser as a supernatural person who is unseen and enigmatic, as suggested by his name, which is Arabic for "the secret." He has a significant influence on the young Lalla's growth. Es Ser is a secret entity that only she is aware of. Frequently, she encounters him "on the stone plateau, where the desert begins" (p. 124). However,

he "cannot make his name heard, nor give the warmth of his gaze, when Lalla is in the City of planks and tar paper" (p.92).

Es Ser cannot exist without the desert, and the only place where its entire presence can be recorded is in the orderly emptiness of the desert's vast expanses. Es Ser is not shown as a mythical creature. Lalla gets to know him better over time. The little girl can draw connections between Es Ser and The Blue Man, the fabled character of her origins, according to Aamma's legendary tales. The Secret and Al Azraq are unmistakably linked near the conclusion of the section called "Le Bonheur" when Lalla is surrounded by, protected by, and guided by a tangible force – Es Ser. (*Désert*, p.355, 124, 92, 205)

Le Clézio often uses the lexical fields of warmth and clarity to suggest his presence. Lalla is drawn to Es Ser's stare, which also ignites a fire within her. The Secret has full access to all information and resides around and within her. Er Ser and Ma el Aïnine are two powerful characters that step in for parental guidance and these two characters are spiritually inclined towards the Sahara Desert, like a leading voice for the protagonists regarding what to do in the desert. We could say then that Es Ser and Ma el Aïnine are the spirits of the Sahara Desert tasked with the responsibility of leading the settlers to a destination of peace and tranquillity. The desert for example uses one of these spiritual guides to help Lalla see the light:

Lalla voit surtout...un tombeau blanc...posé sur la terre rouge. C'est de là que semble venir la lumière du regard, et Lalla comprend que c'est la demeure de l'Homme Bleu. (*Désert*, p. 205)

Es Ser which is a mystique force in Lalla's journey acts as a crucial influence in the decisions the young girl makes while having no real existence. He is always there when Lalla needs advice:

l'homme qui apparaît quelquefois sur le plateau de pierres. Es Ser, le Secret, parce que nul ne doit savoir son nom. (*Désert*, p.96)

Salles (1999) defined the function of Es Ser as a guide to Lalla during challenging times in the desert. With this, it can be said that Es Ser is also what links Lalla to the desert throughout the novel:

À Marseille, alors même qu'Es Ser semble l'avoir abandonnée, il intervient brutalement sur la piste de danse pour arracher la jeune femme, devenue cover-girl, aux dangers de la vie factice et de la célébrité. Bien qu'immatériel, Es Ser est l'ultime agent de la révélation. Il est la représentation des forces spirituelles qui animent l'héroïne de *Désert* et l'orientent. (Salles, p.41)

Initiated by masters, Ma al Aïnine or Es Ser, behind whom looms the tutelary silhouette of Al Azraq and the Blue Men, Nour and Lalla accomplish the same geographical, spiritual and liberating itinerary in the desert. This brings them back from an illusory flight towards the North in the centre of the desert. Away from the spiritual inclinations of the desert, we would also add another important part that characterises Le Clézio's *Désert* which is a representation of the natural environment. The lengthy part titled "Le Bonheur," where Lalla's tale is located, is filled with happy imagery. Here, the natural environment is highlighted. cites "...Lalla sera bien plus seule qu'elle ne l'était dans le désert..."

(Onimus, p.104). There, she was intimate with the beauty of nature. We could therefore argue that Lalla was more comfortable with the natural atmosphere in the desert where she could walk freely even with her eyes closed compared to the hostility she encountered abroad:

...elle essaie de comprendre ce qu'elles chantonent en faisant vrombir leurs ailes. (*Désert*, p.9)

Unlike Marseilles, Lalla knows the different routes in the Sahara Desert like Nour and his people did too as a result of wandering there for a long time:

Lalla connaît tous les chemins, tous les creux de dunes. Elle pourrait aller partout les yeux fermés, et elle saurait tout de suite où elle est, rien qu'en touchant la terre avec ses pieds nus. (*Désert*, p.72)

The second part of Lalla's story which is in contrast to this first section is titled "La vie chez les esclaves". Lalla's challenges and predicaments are explained in this chapter. She battles through the humiliations that the circumstances around her had brought into her life. Lalla is cut off from the outside world and tries to make it in Marseille in this section. She has a friend who is no poorer than she was in her shantytown, but she isn't exposed to the transcendent light that was a symbol of Africa and the freedom in the desert. The history, the myths, and the values and beliefs of the people who inhabit the Sahara Desert are all present there.

Lalla does not cherish the wealth that comes with her fame as a model. One morning before heading back to the desert, she gives the photographer a piece of

soap that has the symbol of her tribe carved on it (where “le bonheur” could be seen again). This part of the story makes us to know the trajectory of the happiness she seeks after and the fact that the symbol of her tribe which of the same lineage with Nour is carved in it takes us back to how important the location of this tribe is- the Sahara Desert. In the sands of her youth, beneath the fig tree where Haman, the fisherman, used to tell her tales, she conceives Hartani's child and gives birth. Lalla mimics the gestures done by her mother and all the other women in her tribe before her while she hangs from the tree. "Over the full expanse of the sea, the whole expanse of the sand, all the way out to the pale sky," she says of her suffering. "Hawa, daughter of Hawa's" birth is portrayed as a celestial occurrence. However, all these suffering was to pave way for freedom:

Lentement, avec des peines infinies, Lalla traîne son corps, sur les avant-bras, le long de la dune. Devant elle, à quelques brasses, la silhouette de l'arbre se dresse sur le tas de pierres, très noire contre le ciel blanc. Jamais le figuier ne lui avait paru si grand, si fort. Son tronc large est tordu vers l'arrière, ses grosses branches rejetées, et les belles feuilles dentelées bougent un peu dans le vent frais, en brillant à la lumière du jour. (*Désert*, p.392)

The same desert that represented their suffering and invasion by Foreigners will also serve as a symbol of their freedom and tranquillity. The victory of the desert and its ideals is therefore illustrated by Lalla's return which we could also argue to be a triumph for their lineage knowing that their daughter has retraced her roots to their ancestral home (the desert). The desert would in turn be a place where Lalla just like Nour would be able to surmount her pains, especially from the unusual circumstances. One of the ways she surmounts her pain is to build a

more romantic relationship with Hartani. It will also be where she will finally give birth. (*Désert*, p.420-423). Edouard (2019) in summary, describes this situation thus:

Lalla plans to return to the Desert with the money she makes, since she dearly misses it, especially in light of Radicz's tragic death. Lalla will give birth under a fig tree in her mother's traditional ways when she is back in her home country of Morocco, close to her ghetto. Lalla holding the kid in her arms is shown on the final page of the book. (Edouard, p. 2)

Roussel-Gillet (2011), further describes the emancipation that the birth of this child in brought to the development of the storyline while comparing it to *Gens des Nuages*:

Les échos opérés par le Clézio entre ses livres contribuent à cette impression d'éternel retour, de temps cyclique. A la fin de *Désert*, Lalla retrouve les gestes primordiaux pour accoucher. La thématique de la naissance est aussi au cœur de *Gens des Nuages*, son second écrit sur le Maroc. (Roussel-Gillet, p.76)

A new life is created, and the girl born at the base of the ancient tree ensures a future for the Agadir massacre survivors, the freemen of the desert. The city could be regarded therefore as not being the right environment for Lalla and Nour to find joy, including the Hartani. The desert once again becomes very important as it is therefore the right environment. In affirmation of this statement, Halm (2003) argues that:

Lalla ne sait pas pourquoi ça s'appelle la Cité, parce qu'au début, il n'y avait qu'une dizaine de cabanes de planches et de papier goudronné. Peut-être qu'on a donné ce nom pour faire oublier aux gens qu'ils vivaient avec des chiens et des rats, au milieu de la poussière. Comme tout le monde est

pauvre, la population ne peut pas dépenser de l'argent pour des bâtiments en briques. (Halm, p.2)

Désert therefore broadens our horizons about the role that the Sahara Desert has played as we pursue freedom while provoking us to consider sustainability-related concerns by introducing us to other ecoregions and civilizations. The difficulties that the main characters (Nour and Lalla) must overcome, however, will highlight enduring problems like climatic adaptability, biodiversity, food, deprivation, inequality, and imperiled cultural traditions. Through his narrative, Le Clézio prompts readers to contemplate the consequences of human actions on the delicate ecosystems of the desert and the broader implications for the planet's ecological well-being. François (2000) describes this journey to freedom and tranquillity by these two main characters as significant:

La fin des deux récits est à cet égard significative : alors que Nour « disparaît », comme dans un rêve » (p.439), Lalla « attend, sans impatience, que quelqu'un vienne », car « il finit toujours par venir quelqu'un, et l'ombre du figuier est bien douce et fraîche » (p.423).
(François, p.53)

Indeed, Nour and Lalla are two autonomous, powerful, and dazzling lone creatures. Ideally, the small boy and girl embody sympathy, oppression, and imprisonment of the vulnerable. Amidst the challenges that the main characters face in the novel, finding happiness in nature is the main focus. Nour, Lalla and Hartani all have the same goal which is to free their family from oppression and

find a place of peace. Nour goes to physical battle and change of location for the sake of peace while Lalla simply came back home with her lover, Hartani. Sampon-Nicolas (2015) speaks on how the issue of finding happiness in nature affects Lalla and Hartani. The comment is summarised thus:

It's vital to note the close relationship between Lalla and the Hartani, a group of people that reside on the edge of the desert. The Hartani won't step foot in a city and instead chooses to spend his evenings in the desert, while Lalla stays in a shanty with no windows, power, or running water. It is far from a paradise because of the terrible climate, hunger, and poverty that surround them. These youthful characters do, however, manage to find a certain level of contentment in nature and their interactions with the multi-species environment. (Sampon-Nicolas: 5)

Nour, who is familiar with the names of the stars owing to the teachings of his father is aware of how crucial they are for crossing the symbolic desert. Also, he is just as sensitive to the physical and spiritual environment that the desert is made of as he is to other people's pain. He shows compassion by helping the injured children and ladies he offers to carry their bags for them throughout their interminable trip; he also shares his meal with the blind warrior and acts as his guide. François (2000) cites an example of Nour's compassion:

Nour regarde ainsi « avec compassion» (p.227) la troupe de « ceux qui n'en pouvaient plus, les vieillards, les enfants, les blessés, les jeunes femmes, dont tous les hommes étaient morts, et qui n'avaient plus personne pour les aider à trouver la nourriture et l'eau » (p.226) et il offre aide et protection au guerrier aveugle. (François: 54)

In this section, we established that the desert serves as a background for peace and guidance to the people of Africa as well as has a great influence on her

civilization. We have also learned that by exposing us to other ecoregions and cultures, desert therefore broadens our perspectives as regards the desire for freedom.

Section 2: Uncovering the route to emancipation in *Désert* through Symbolic interpretation of names: The case of Nour, Lalla, and the Hartini

As stated earlier, Le Clézio's perceives Africa in a unique way and in order to share with the audience how he perceives this nation, he turns to visual images, imagery and symbols. This is typical in the different ways he uses people, events, and places to describe the challenges and the beauty of the Sahara Desert. In the abstract of his article which examines the ecological vision of Le Clézio as it emerges in his poetic essay- Haï, Martin (2018) agrees with the writer's alternative perception of the world and further strengthens his argument by stating how the author engages with images and symbols:

Le Clézio is presenting us with an alternative mode of perception and of being in the world; it is one which collapses the oppositions between mind and matter, language and life... At the same time, Le Clézio's philosophical position is strengthened through the use of iconography in the text, in the contrast between, for example, photographs of Indian basketwork and reproductions of Western advertisements for perfumes or cigarettes. (Martin, p.699)

The trajectory towards liberation by the choice of names offered by Le Clézio in *Désert* conveys an important message with heavy symbols. The analysis of these symbols draws our attention to two meaningful perspectives such as

darkness (which represents captivity, oppression, prohibition, suffering) and light (which represents freedom, liberty, happiness, hope). Names are symbolic in nature. In the case of *Désert*, we find out that there are three names whose historical meanings convey the importance of individual and collective liberty which the Sahara Desert stands for in the novel: they are Nour, Lalla, and Hartani.

One of the protagonists in the narrative is Nour, whose name in Arabic means 'light'. Light brings illumination and with light, one can see the way. Consequently, Nour can be seen as the one that prepared the way for the future generation. This preparation of this way came with some difficulties but despite the position he has in *Désert*, this young boy is one of the focus of a thorough exposition of the challenges in the desert. He is a nomad among other nomads and a child among other children. Yet as the story progresses, this figure takes on new characteristics and stops seeming like a regular little child to the reader. The "man with the rifle," in charge of leading the caravan to the sacred city of Smara, is the father of Nour. His mother is a "Cheriffa," meaning that she is an ancestor of Al Azraq, the Blue Man (a woman who descends from the Prophet Muhammad or a holy man). So, from this lineage, we understand that the young boy comes from a noble family. His gradual sense of accountability for a specific adult mission is brought on by this. Nour must work hard to lead his people in the expectation of victory so that they may see the light. Doucey (1994) describes the obligations of Nour in the novel in this light:

...Nour devra, comme son père, guider son peuple à travers le désert. Tel Al Azraq, son ancêtre, il devra tendre à la sainteté pour transmettre aux siens la lumière d'une espérance. (Doucey, p. 46)

When that happens, he serves as the community's beacon of hope. People would seek to reclaim their freedom from their pursuers and oppressors through this journey of faith and hope led by Nour in the desert which would become their place of victory. Nour shows courage and strength through this journey of emancipation in the desert. The dimension of his courage is expressed in his name and temperament. On a particular occasion, it occurs during the arduous journey that the nomads take to reach the north. Unprompted, Nour offers to help a blind warrior. He stays with this adult who has been wounded in battle day and night. The symbol that Nour's name carries is directly synonymous with the leadership qualities that he portrayed in this journey to freedom. He was born a light, started showing the characteristics of light at a young age, and continued on the same path till adulthood. It could be argued that the desert became a breeding place for the light that Nour carried inside of him hence the desert turning into the same light of hope for the generations to come. Doucey (1994) summarises this journey with a symbolic reference to the meaning of Nour's name:

Dès l'enfance, Nour, «la lumière» est le guide qui conduit l'homme plongé dans les ténèbres vers la clarté d'une espérance libératrice.
(Doucey, p.47)

On the other hand, Lalla in Arabic means “Woman”. Here, it describes the power of Arab women who are simple, and fierce and fight to gain liberty and preserve their identity in times of menace. Like Nour, her ancestor, she was born in the desert near the tree and the spring. However, Nour experienced some of the terrors that colonialism brought to Africa; he and his people were chased from the desert. As a descendant of this generation, this was a story that Lalla came to know about later in life. Lalla had to be taught where she was from, her identity, and the survival of her generation. Both characters have a similar experience of surviving exile either with their people (Nour) or with their loved ones (Lalla). Nassari (2007) describes the reality of surviving in exile:

No one can directly experience the life of the previous generation, and for the children of the survivors of exile, the home of the family’s past is so often erased, and with it, identity itself is expunged. (Nassari, p.168).

Orphaned from her earliest childhood, Lalla was raised by Aamma, her paternal aunt, and lives happily in a "City of planks and tar paper". Throughout her childhood, Lalla led, in a word, the simple and quiet life of nomadic women, but the death of old Naman and the growing threat of a forced marriage upset the balance of this existence. Worried and bruised, Lalla is forced to flee and the reason for fleeing is commented on by Thibault (2000)

...elle veut fuir un mariage arrangé contre son gré, échapper à la demi-servitude des femmes du bidonville et mener une vie meilleure en France.
(Thibault, p.361)

After experiencing happiness in Africa, the young girl would sound more natural in France . Hence, in *Désert*, «Le Clézio avait tenté de réexaminer le cadre urbain à plusieurs reprises, mais la ville française prend une allure plutôt négative... » (Dutton, p.259). Assaulted by the urban universe, marked by work and fear, haunted by the memory of her distant happiness, Lalla goes through a challenging night:

Eloignée du Désert, privée du sable, du ciel et du vent, Lalla vit coupée de l'essentiel. Elle n'est qu'une ombre en fuite, une étoile errante.
(Doucey, p.47)

The space of the desert in this case, is much different from the city. We could also refer to the desert in this situation as a peaceful village where one could go to stay far from the pains of life. Lalla finds herself in a similar situation where the ambiance she finds in the desert is different from what she observes in the city where work always calls, people are usually in a hurry to get to work so they can provide for themselves; most things are done with such a rush and precision. However, in the desert, there is time to think clearly. This sets a clear dichotomy between what Lalla experienced in France which she thought was paradise and the calm in the desert where the spirit of her ancestor's light (Nour) lives. It is also for this reason that Lalla creates a positive image of the desert against the negativity of what she saw abroad regarding the oppressive and unlawful

treatment of migrants. The reality of this negativity is supported by Thibault (2000)

Loin de nous éblouir par des images de l'Eldorado français, Le Clézio décrit dans *Désert* les conditions de vie très dures qui attendent les travailleurs immigrés à leur arrivée en France. (Thibault, 361)

The novel's conclusion solidifies the meaning of her name, which is recounted from the character's return to the desert (pages 408–423), then portrays this as a rebirth. Lalla, who is pregnant, rediscovers the peaceful and limpid night of her native land after being lost in the gloomy world of artificial cities. She rediscovers the ancient motions that provide life while she lies on the sand, clinging to the old fig tree that is shielding her. She closely synchronizes her pregnancy with the environment. Little Hawa, who is born at the end, serves as evidence that the young woman's return to this place of peace (desert) helped her re-establish her connection to joy:

Elle sent contre elle le petit être chaud qui se presse contre sa poitrine, qui veut vivre, qui suce goulument son lait. « Hawa, fille de Hawa », pense Lalla, une seule fois... (*Désert* :395)

Le Clézio did not choose the girl's first name at random. In reality, we are aware that Lalla in Arabic is also equivalent to "Lady" Lalla is the icon of Arab women, magnificent and proud, who battle to acquire their independence and retain an identity that is occasionally endangered. We can argue that Le Clézio

gives her character this name in order to make her a typical figure of the challenges that women encounter. Similarly, we could also say that Le Clézio presumably picked this name because it is likened to Laila, an Arabic first name that signifies "the night." If the male character in the book is metaphorically connected with day (Nour means "light"), the woman's image is, on the other hand, symbolically associated with darkness (life's challenges). This would leave us with a likely perception that the writer must have used a variant orthography of the name Laila or Lalla. Also, we could say that the Sahara Desert is symbolic of the trying times, represented by the night and moments of emancipation, represented by the light, within two stories.

Three observations could result from this linguistic choice. First, Nour and Lalla in *Désert* oppose and complement one another as the daytime and night-time worlds, or like light and darkness. Secondly, by connecting the image of the night to that of the woman, Le Clézio reminds us that the forces necessary to give life and bring about the dawn are growing deep within our bodies. On a third note, at the beginning of the 20th century, the existence of the nomads - that the novelist perhaps idealizes - was still placed under the sign of light: Nour and his people were "free men". The night symbolized by Lalla is, for Le Clézio, the one experienced by subsequent generations. She feels a whole sense of liberty in the desert, hence, she is referred to metaphorically as drunk on liberty:

Alors, maintenant, Lalla est ivre de liberté. Elle regarde tout autour d'elle, les murs, les fenêtres, les autos, les gens, comme s'ils étaient des formes

seulement, des images, des fantômes, que le vent et la lumière allaient balayer. (*Désert*, p. 311)

Aside from Lalla and Nour, Hartani is another name with powerful symbolic attention to the desert in the novel. Throughout the book, Hartani serves a crucial purpose to illustrate the journey to freedom in the Sahara Desert. Lalla grew up with a young Chleuh shepherd that she befriended (as the Berbers in the South are called). The "stone plateau," which is at the entrance to the desert, is where she usually runs into him. As a result of his ancestors being slaves, the youngster is referred to as "the Hartani," which is Arabic for "black half-breed." The little girl visits Lalla so frequently in the hills, which annoys Lalla's aunt Aamma:

Elle lui dit que c'est un enfant trouvé, un étranger, qu'il n'est pas un garçon pour elle... (*Désert*, p.112)

His muteness and use of hands and eyes to communicate are what most people find frightening; they call him "mejnoun." Lalla declares her intention to stand in solidarity with the poor, the weak, and the excluded by aligning her destiny with that of Hartani. The proof that it is possible to abolish the unjust law of segregation for two is the love that unites them at the end of a protracted errand. The love that Lalla has for Hartani could be likened to the love that Nour had for his people even in the trying times. Le Clézio therefore uncovers a story that can be likened to that of the legendary pair of Layla et Medjnoun-when he talks about

Lalla and Hartani. This couple was immortalised in Arabic by the poet of Turkish descent Fouzouli in 1535.

Furthermore, the Hartani's character is a proof that the desert in Le Clézio's work assures the restoration of hope and direction for the main characters just like the functions played by Er Ser and Ma el Aïnine. This is reflected in Hartani's relationship with "un être de lumière" Lalla, whose name also means light, can only make out this figure of light, with its blue veil covering its face and its dazzling coat, amid the stark scenery of the Hamada of white stone. The fact that "he does not enjoy noises and scents" illustrates his completely spiritual nature (p.92). He derives his flaming stare, like the captivating characters, from a mysterious fire that is "full of strength" (p. 96), and from his silence since he only speaks the endless language of the desert: "the words of light," "the words of sand," and "the words of the pebbles" (p.96). Lalla who is portrayed as a light of hope in this novel would need the help of this guide who thrives in light and hope:

Sa première fonction est d'introduire et de guider Lalla dans l'espace du désert dont il est en quelque sorte le symbole. Ainsi, lorsqu'elle sent sa présence, la jeune fille « peut marcher au milieu de l'étendue des pierres brisées, sans perdre garde où elle va, sans chercher » (p.95)

Lalla would become a woman according to the meaning of her name. which in turn is the future. Lalla identifies with the Hartani as a sign that she stands against segregation and exclusion. It is just another way of saying that the Hartani further symbolizes the place of light (exposure to truth and knowledge)

in the novel and giving birth in the Sahara makes the desert even more symbolic as it represents yet again the symbol of hope, truth, knowledge, and peace for this lineage. Nour, on the other hand, would triumph courageously with his people, making him the one who led them to freedom.

To conclude this part, we can argue that Le Clézio, within the years. has made attempts through his book *Désert* to reconstruct a broken world. Influenced by his personal experiences in *Onitsha* and *L'Africain*, Le Clézio also uses important locations to drive his message to the audience and one such message is portrayed in *Désert* which invites us to consider the role that the Sahara plays as a place of challenges and battles as well as freedom and emancipation. Nour and Lalla were broken at a point in time. Realizing this, they have to seek after freedom at any challenging and courageous cost necessary. This freedom they are working towards will not only affect them as individuals but rather will affect those that are close to or form part of their clan. Holzberg (1981) further describes the writer's intention to make us understand much about the destruction and reconstruction of a broken world:

La lecture de l'œuvre de Le Clézio offre une invitation au voyage à travers un monde éternellement détruit et reconstruit. Il est surprenant de remarquer, cependant, qu'une fois qu'on pénètre à l'intérieur des textes touffus, on y trouve une lutte continue contre les mots, système inefficace de communication. (Holzberg, p.7)

In this chapter, we explored the emancipative roles that the desert plays in the writer's works using *Désert* as our major case study. We have also learned that aside from this major case study, the writer also gives such harmonious importance to the desert in *Gens des nuages* which was written seventeen years after *Désert*. The desert reflects the past and present of Africans, hence it is very important to Le Clézio.

CHAPTER TWO

WANDERINGS IN THE WILDERNESS: GENEALOGY, REVERIE, AND PERSONAL JOURNEYS IN *GENS DES NUAGES*

J. M. G. Le Clézio and his wife Jemia wrote *Gens des nuages* and in it are images captured by Bruno Barbey on the occasion of a journey to the Western Sahara that the three of them undertook as part of this book project. The text explores the authors' journey to the Saguia el Hamra, which means Red River in Hassaniya, in a contested territory that was the original home of Jemia's ancestors, the Aroussiyine tribe, established in the fifteenth century by Sidi Ahmed el Aroussi. Zeidan introduces us to this contested territory thus:

The Northern Western Sahara area, in Africa's northwest, is known as Saguia el-Hamra. The territory was taken over by Morocco since Spain left its borders in the year 1976. The main city is Laayoune, and Smara is another notable town. The local populace, which is primarily Muslim and mostly nomadic in nature migrated to one of the Polisario Front's (Popular Front for the Emancipation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro) refugee camps in late 1975 or early 1976.(Zeidan 2024:1)

Consequently, Morocco, backed up by the United States of America against the Polisario, which was mainly supported by Algeria, has been wrestling for control of the territory since then. To resolve this dispute, the United Nations Western Sahara force was established in 1991. Holding a referendum on whether the region should remain an autonomous region of Morocco or become

independent as its nation, was intended to be an immediate mission. However, the situation has remained unresolved so far. Some European countries have offered diplomatic help to Morocco for it to retain supremacy in this region and exploit the mining of natural resources (especially phosphates) and halieutic stocks in the region. Lopez supports this fact:

The United States, France, and Spain offered assistance to Morocco as it retained supremacy over the area and enjoyed the advantages of its minerals and permits to fish. (Lopez 2020:3)

The foundation of the story in *Gens des Nuages* is deeply rooted in this area. The six chapters relate the journey of the explorers as they leave behind civilization, travel down the Draa River, which flows from the fabled Atlas Mountains' snows, and then go south over 300 kilometers of arid terrain in the direction of Abattekh and Smara. Furthermore, the reading of *Gens des Nuages* opens up an opportunity to reconnect with the writing of the author's novel titled *Désert* and reestablish the role of the Aroussiyyine, whose territory she returns after two generations away. Thematic links exist between *Gens des nuages* and *Désert* including existential concerns, identity exploration, a nomadic existence, and a connection to nature. Both novels maintain a strong bond between the protagonists and their natural environment even as they search for the characters' true identities. Whether it is the Tuareg people of the Sahara, or the other communities encountered in the process, both books give insights into the

civilizations they portray, citing, for example, the great insurrection. A reference to this reconnection is made in the prologue of the novel:

C'est dans ce désert qu'était née la première grande insurrection quand les marabouts lançaient leurs appels à la guerre sainte et que le cheikh Ma el Aïnine... (*Gens des Nuages*: prologue, 25)

The purpose of this personal quest located at the heart of the desert is to embrace the reality and historical facts that surround the ancestral lineage of Jemia. As they wander through the desert, the couple takes note whilst Barbey captures images depicting monuments, historical places, and artifacts in Western Saharan, precisely of Smara and Saguia el Hamra. There is just one access path there, the same as it has always been. Writing about the desert was a dream come true for the couple who defines the moment as an emotional one:

Il n'y a pas de plus grande émotion que d'entrer dans le désert. (*Gens des Nuages*: 37)

One notable point about wandering in the desert as presented by the couple is the tendency towards reverie which could be likened to the concept of Baudelaire's (1964) 'flâneur', as explained by Taylor (2023), describing a person who takes a walk or a stroll while taking in the sights and sounds of the city or their immediate environs. *Flâner* may also be a style of thinking philosophically or a manner of experiencing the world. Strolling for strolling, rather than in a rush to go from one location to a different one, is a great method to enjoy and marvel

at the metropolitan environment, as well as experiencing the surroundings while also being noticed. Taylor (2023) supports this statement by further defining what the flaneur does:

The flâneur is simultaneously separated from society and has the leisure and means to traverse it. His primary goal is to wander society, thus he comes out as aimless. (Taylor: 4)

The couple has the leisure and means to travel into the Western Sahara to understand Jemia's ancestry. The journey started with one of their reveries. Entitled *Passage du Draa* (reference below), it is embodied through an archway over the road in Tan-Tan

C'est ici la porte du désert. Bizarre porte : un portique plutôt, de ciment armé, figurant un couple de dromadaires se baisant sur la bouche au travers de la route... (*Gens des Nuages*: 27)

Journeying through the Sahara Desert is intended to help Jemia reconnect with, search, and reach out to places she has not visited for long. It puts the couple in a position where they would be able to embrace their histories and cultures (especially that of the wife). In the process, the couple develops a strong imaginative bond of intimacy with the environment. In this far and uneasy journey, the need to reconnect with their past and embrace their future with hope was the main goal:

Il n'est pas facile de retourner vers un lieu d'origine, particulièrement quand ce lieu est un territoire lointain, entouré par le désert, isolé par des années des guerres, et qu'on ne sait rien sur le sort de ceux qui y sont restés. (*Gens des Nuages* : 15)

However challenging the wanderings around the desert might have been to the couple, it comes to an end at "Tbeïla," a sizable vessel-shaped rock overlooking the desert where, according to mythology, the saint is said to have descended from the sky five centuries before and afterward preached to the desert inhabitants:

C'est Tbeïla, le Rocher, cet endroit mystérieux dont parlaient les voyageurs, autrefois, comme d'un secret. (*Gens des Nuages*: 115)

Furthermore, this travel journey could be likened to a pilgrimage to one's roots to uncover an unknown image of oneself. The couple follows in the footsteps of Jemia's grandparents, who had to leave Smara for economic reasons bordered around survival. The significant meeting with Jemia's distant past, which J.M.G. refers to as her genetic memory, is where such a legendary adventure finds its true culmination in a planned pilgrimage:

Ce petit livre écrit conjointement par les époux Le Clézio retrace un pèlerinage, un de ces retours aux sources, une de ces quêtes des origines qui constituent, chez JMG Le Clézio, le prétexte de la plupart de ses romans. (Tristou: 2)

The extratextual occurrence of *Désert* in *Gens des nuages* highlights Le Clézio's mythological portrayal of the desert as the ideal setting for a defenseless individual shielded from the assaults of the crowd and the modern world, whose acceptance of her/his cultural inclinations would become the crucial element to peace. Looking at *Gens des Nuages*, one could say that it might have become one of the writer's fantasies – especially after writing about the Sahara Desert in *Désert*. Therefore, *Désert* sets the road for another journey in the desert but this time, with his wife, Jemia. Allet (1998) describes this possibility:

Le Clézio had already fancied this journey when he wrote *Désert* seventeen years before. In that novel, Lalla, a young Bedouin girl who dreamt of traveling north, went to Marseille only to share the "life of the slaves" in the most decadent and corrupt of all worlds and eventually returned to her native desert, where she courageously delivered her child by herself. (Allet: 800-801)

Le Clézio, who set out to retrace his wife's lost ancestry, wrote *Gens des nuages* (1997), as a *compte rendu d'un retour aux origines*. The images and the text show the simplicity and traditions of Western Saharan life (fishermen repairing their nets, men praying, ladies during festivals or at the souk). Images reflect the reality of people's thoughts and imaginations. The writers understand this fact, thus allowing the captured images to play their role effectively. In *Gens des Nuages*, we see the power of images resulting from passionate and professional photography. Canton (2015) comments on the place of photography in the travelogue:

Le récit *Gens des Nuages* est accompagné des photographies de Bruno Barbey invitant le lecteur à partager les émotions et le rêve du voyage de J.M.G. et Jemia Le Clézio. (Canton: 2)

Meanwhile, this is not the first time Le Clézio will be introducing this photographic style. The power of photography is put into play in some other books written by the author, as in the essay *Haiï*, and the biographical *L'Africain* (all of which may be considered examples of "life writing"). *Révolutions*, *Étoile errante*, *Ritournelle de la faim*, *Le temps ne passe pas*, *Vent du Sud*, and *Le Trésor* are among the books and short tales in which photographs are used too, but to varied degrees of significance.

Photography tends to back up, support, or even confirm assertions of factual truth. Various narrative decisions would frequently undermine a photograph's probative usefulness, making readers reflect on the purpose of photographic texts. In the case of *Gens des Nuages*, we will adopt a perspective on the images' inclusion, thereby agreeing that their purpose is to demonstrate how little this region of predominantly desert landscape has been altered through time:

Nous sommes ici avec lui, nous voyons ce qu'il voyait. Alors la vallée ne devait pas être différente de ce qu'elle est aujourd'hui : immense, vide, un réceptacle pour la pensée (*Gens des nuages* 124).

The fact that the terrain has not changed attests to the desert's might, which can indeed withstand, and erase any and every sign of mankind's presence:

Aujourd'hui, il ne reste rien, que ces marques sur le toit du Rocher, le cercle de pierres qui entoure la stèle, et les noms gravés sur la paroi noire. Toutes les autres traces de présence humaine ont été effacées (*Gens des nuages*: 125).

The images in the book are contemporaneous with the Le Clézios' journey and might provide a more accurate description of the physicality of the setting for these wanderings in the desert. Both writers and the photographer travel around many landscapes in the area, and the photography displayed effectively illustrates the various times, locations, people, and of course the sandy and arid atmosphere.

«*Le désert des origines*» : Genealogy and Cross-Cultural Trajectories in Le Clézio's Sahara

C'est bien de ce pays que rêvait Jemia. Ce pays qu'elle porte sans doute dans sa mémoire génétique, et qu'elle a cru reconnaître... Maintenant elle le retrouve, elle le prend en elle, elle l'interroge. (*Gens des Nuages*: 40)

At the heart of *Gens des Nuages* is a journey with Le Clézio's wife exploring her family history. This travelogue offers an account of a return to personal roots. The voyage of the pair is a form of travel back in time, first to the time of Jemia's tribe, and then to the beginnings of civilization in this Desert space, where water and wind have created a mash-up of human interactions. The

book *Désert* and the chosen barren location (the Sahara) therefore play an important role in *Gens des Nuages* as it carries in it answers to the questions and imaginative thoughts of the couple. For Le Clézio, we should see the desert beyond just a geographical location. Rather, it is a symbolic place of history and remembrance. This stand point is explained by Bruno Doucey:

Pour le Clézio, le désert n'est pas seulement un espace géographique. Par son aridité et son dépouillement, par la mise à l'épreuve qu'il impose aux hommes, il acquiert, dans le roman, une dimension véritablement symbolique. (Doucey 1994: 74)

To further explain this role, Doucey's view can be complemented by François' analysis:

L'œuvre de le Clézio est très unie et cohérente : il n'est donc pas étonnant de retrouver dans d'autres romans, d'autres récits, des pages qui font écho à *Désert*. (François 2000: 99)

Jemia, who hails from the Aroussiine tribe, understood how to develop advancements that may benefit them without allowing themselves to become the desert's slaves. To adapt to a natural environment that they have intimately grown familiar with, free nomads who coexist peacefully may find their riches lie in the understanding of their boundaries. Here, it is mostly Jemia who understands her boundaries and with her husband, she sets out to discover her forefathers and tribal groups. All these lead towards the discovery of Jemia's cousin, Sid Brahim Salem, encountering the mausoleum of Saint Sidi Ahmed El Aroussi as well as ascending the Rock – the Tbeïla –, in the arid Saguia El Hamra.

Jemia has a unique family background. Her grandparent's genealogy can be traced to a Saharan ethnic group that experienced migration and endured months of traveling in the process to settle in a peaceful location. The trajectory of their migration is related in the book:

(...) vers les plaines fertiles du nord, vers Taroudant, Marrakech, puis vers les grandes villes où ils trouvaient de l'eau, du travail, des magasins.
(*Gens des Nuages*: 76)

Uncovering Jemia's genealogy was not an easy task for the couple due to the ancient nature of her family tree. In an interview with Gérard de Cortanze regarding the journey documented in *Gens des nuages*, Le Clézio, cited in Thorburn (2012) discusses the challenges he and his wife Jemia faced concerning uncovering their family history:

Il y a une grande différence entre Jemia et moi. Elle est issue d'une famille extrêmement ancienne. Au contraire, Jemia peut remonter très loin puisqu'elle descend de la fille aînée du prophète et peut ainsi, de génération en génération, remonter jusqu'en l'an 620. Mais ceci relève du monde des idées. Dans celui des faits concrets, par les aléas de la vie, par le simple fait que sa mère ait émigré, et ait quitté le territoire natal, il y a une rupture totale, et elle ne sait plus rien. Sa connaissance de ce qui s'est passé était totalement abstraite. Aller à la Saguia el Hamra, c'était permettre la réunion entre deux histoires: la légendaire et la physique.
(cited in Thorburn, p.183-184)

The stories Jemia's mother told her, serve as an inspiration for *Gens des Nuages* (GN:21,88), an anonymous storyteller, who is only mentioned about the relationship that connects her to the narrator, is the sole access to this genealogy which tends to unravel the past:

Nous voulions entendre résonner les noms que la mère de Jemia lui avait appris, comme une légende ancienne, et qui prenaient maintenant un sens différent, un sens vivant : les femmes bleues ; l'assemblée du vendredi, qui avait donné son nom à Jemia ; les tribus chrofa (descendantes du Prophète) ; les Ahel Jmal, le Peuple du chameau ; les Ahel Mouzna, les Gens des nuages, à la poursuite de la pluie. (*Gens des Nuages*: 21)

The citation above enumerates the names of the allied tribes, each one with a translation or tale to go with it. Sid Brahim Salem, Jemia's cousin and guardian of Sidi Ahmed el Aroussi's tomb, the revered founder of the Aroussiyine tribe, conjures up a naming act that recalls the incantatory and poetic dimension of the litany recited to her hosts by Jemia's mother, who later took the form of Oum Bouiba (GN, 107), to revive the past (GN, 90-91). It is through Le Clézio's wife that the mother's voice may be heard when she converses in her ancestors' native Hassaniya language (85), the voice of a lady from the desert who sings love songs, epic tales, and poems, as well as the voice of the mother.

They travel back in time in tandem with their trek southward, paying close attention to the remnants and sometimes minute traces that the illustrious figures from Sahrawi heritage have left behind in these sand and rock landscapes. As a result, they frequently sense the influence of Sidi Ahmed El Aroussi, the founder of the Aroussiyine tribal group, who was able to unite people without the use of structures, persuade without the use of force, convert without the use of a place of worship, and defend the notion that closeness to God is fostered by poverty and quietness.

Jemia's mission is to discover not just her relatives' migration paths but also their experiences of exile. Thus, like Lalla Hawa, the protagonist of *Désert*, Jemia's forefathers travelled through pain and exile (GN, 36), to the North and eventually to the major towns. *Gens des Nuages* relates this passage to the publication of their journey across the Western Sahara:

Mais revenir sur ses pas, comprendre ce qui vous a manqué, ce à quoi vous avez manqué. Retrouver la face ancienne, le regard profond et doux qui attache l'enfant à sa mère, à un pays, à une vallée... loin du souffle de la religion, loin de la voix qui appelle à la prière chaque soir, loin du regard du saint qui avait choisi pour les siens cette vallée. Vivre, se battre et mourir en terre étrangère. C'est cela qui est difficile, et digne d'admiration. (*Gens des Nuages*: 37)

The purpose of the journey is reflected in the citation above as the need to 'Retrouver la face ancienne', and to do this, the couple had to go far from the Western world to the place of calm (Western Sahara). This suggests a nostalgia for one's origin as well as echoes the concept of diaspora in postcolonial literature.

Dreaming the Desert: Rêverie as a literary device to engage with the Sahara

The finest writing consistently transforms experience and environment into fresh imagery and linguistic mashups that transport us. When our own work soars and strikes a chord with our audience, we play a part in lulling others into a state of enchantment. (Fortune: 4)

As Fortune has argued, writing becomes an invitation to incredible travels when it is done through the form of reverie. Amongst the traveling fantasies of Le Clézio, there is no doubt that the Sahara Desert functions as the representation of nature and the environment in Africa. The dreams and deep thoughts of the couple come true, and *Gens des Nuages* is indeed a journey journal. The expectations of the couple form the title of each of the chapters in the novel starting with: *Passage du Draa*, followed by *-Le Désert*, *Saguia el Hamra*, *Le Tombeau*, *Tbeila le Rocher*, and *Tariqa la voie*. At the *Passage du Draa*, the couple anticipated the reality of their imaginations about the Sahara Desert:

Ce que nous attendions. C'était le Draa. Sur les cartes, nous avions regardé cet estuaire, remonté par la pensée la vallée du plus long fleuve marocain, comme un chaos magnifique, dans notre imagination pareil à celui des grandes vallées de la mer Morte, du Jourdain, de l'oued Sar.
(*Gens des Nuages*: 28)

The couple's imagination as stated in the quote came through as part of their conversation, hence it seemed often like a dialogue between them. The reader is able to understand the expectations of the couple following their conversations. conversations between Jemia and JMG Le Clézio and these Saguia El Hamra residents—ancestors—were profound, deep, and full of compassion. This novel is not fiction, and these conversations are factual. It depicts going back to the sources that have been long desired, prayed for and ultimately realized like in a dream. Good writing would consistently recreate nature and experience using

fresh imagery and linguistic elements that transport us. The writer contributes to lulling people into a state of reverie when his work soars and strikes a chord with the readers. Much attention as regards this is drawn from the fact that the couple, most especially the wife, had imagined, dreamed, and planned for the journey. This however does not imply that Le Clézio has not had the same thoughts of visiting these places right from his childhood:

Comme Jemia (mais pour d'autres raisons), il y a très longtemps que JMG attend de pouvoir venir dans cette vallée. Il lui semble en avoir toujours rêvé. (*Gens des Nuages*: 57)

Furthermore, it should be noted that of Jemia's dream that is brought into reality in the novel and that the husband is in a supporting role by contributing to the development of this dream. In their second journey into *Le désert*, we are drawn to one of the dreams of the wife that comes into reality:

...de ce paysage que rêvait Jemia... t qu'elle a cru reconnaître la première fois qu'elle est allée au Nouveau-Mexique...
(*Gens des Nuages*: 40)

The reality of these dreams turned into a successful journey is also described also by Nina (2009):

Pour ce couple, tout a commencé par un rêve devenu obsédant. Ensuite JMG Le Clézio a écrit son roman *Désert* pour donner une plus grande réalité à ce rêve, et un jour il est devenu réalité. (Nina: 1)

To bring this reverie to life, images are used. Language and images have a powerful charm. Therefore, the writings about the deep thoughts of the couple have become an invitation to remarkable excursions influenced by candid imaginations. The couple are flexible and open in their writing. They move with certainty and full confidence while travelling in a state of danger across the Sahara Desert. Yet, the spirit of reverie in *Gens des Nuages* is far more than a dream. It became a strong imaginative drive that needed to be put into writing for it to come alive:

It is a burden that needs to be put off the shoulders of the couple and the best way for it to be expressed is in writing, with taste and passion, and since it is being recorded, the impact is amplified. (Fortune: 5)

In Le Clézio's work, we envisage a shapeless truth, a timeless perfection, the faultless logic of reverie- un absolu irréductible and the primordial setting where everything may be understood and imagined. The protagonists (the couple) in *Gens des nuages*, set out to seek deeper truths about themselves and the world around them, and Le Clezio's language successfully depicts the perfect logic of reverie—the place where reality and fantasy overlap. Le Clézio transports readers to his family's dreamy ancestral past with this rich vision, where imaginations, memories, and wants collide. We see the pair having deep realizations during these reveries, which reveal their innermost feelings and ideas. The couple's perception of the real world is mundane. Therefore, bringing imaginations to life

was one of the end goals of the authors. We could say as a result of this that the tale given by his wife, the traditions passed down by his grandmother, and the travelogues of the French, Spanish, and English explorers of the era all served as inspiration for him. These travelogues provided insights into diverse cultures and landscapes and most likely fuelled his interest in the interconnectedness of humanity and the impact of encounters between different civilizations, themes often reflected in his works.

Furthermore, in the prologue of *Gens des Nuages*, we learn that Le Clézio's former book *Désert* is a source of inspiration and documentation that is used by the couple to navigate through the history of the unrest in Western Sahara, such as, for example, the fight against the colonial power. Hence, The starkness and simplicity of these desert dwellers' lives, their kindness, their lack of fear in the face of strangers, and even this enigmatic spirituality uniting against oppression appear to pervade the Sahara area.

...une armée de guerriers luttant contre le pouvoir colonial français et espagnol. (*Gens des Nuages*: 17)

Aside from the inspiration gotten from *Désert*, the stories and lecture given by Jemia's mum also served a good course on this journey, as is reflected in the prologue of *Gens des Nuages*:

La mère de Jemia nous avait parlé de Ma el Aïnine, un parent par alliance. (*Gens des Nuages*: 17)

To further authenticate the source of this oeuvre, we can see in the book that Jemia takes personal and academic interests in searching for documentations that reflect her interests in the Western Sahara as it relates to her family lineage. This view is supported in the prologue of the book:

De son côté, Jemia avait commencé une recherche de documentation en vue d'un mémoire de droit sur le Sahara occidental.
(*Gens des Nuages*: 17-18)

The journey was first envisioned or imagined by the couple before embarking on the journey. The pair enters the endless, monotonous, and almost sepulchral desert of a beauty beyond human measure via the Gadda plateau in Western Sahara which, in colonial times, belonged to the Río de Oro province (*GN* p. 38). They get the feeling that they are near the Earth's core, at the level of the ferrous rock that makes up the planet's core, and are being inundated by the sun's light unrestricted. One thing is for sure at this point and that is the fact that it was part of an imagination coming through for the couple:

Le plateau de Gadda est bien tel qu'il l'a vu, sans fin, monotone, presque sépulcral, d'une beauté hors de la mesure humaine. Minéral : au fur et à mesure qu'on avance vers le Sud, la végétation rase des abords du Draa s'amenuise, se fait plus chétive, plus noire, jusqu'à être réduite à néant.
(*Gens des Nuages*: 38)

Therefore, the desert fuels the imagination of the writer and his wife. The desert is suddenly present everywhere, parched and scorching country devoid of life for the Western people. Jemia put such imagination into writing:

Ce pays qu'elle porte sans doute dans sa mémoire génétique. Jemia s'est tue toute cette journée : c'est son pays, le pays le plus ancien, et en même temps le plus jeune, une terre que l'âge des hommes n'a pas marquée.
(*Gens des Nuages*: 31)

Personal journeys from *Désert* to *Gens des Nuages*: The centrality of the Sahara in Leclézian prose

Taking readers on a historical journey is a hallmark of Le Clézio's prose. For him, history plays an important role – correcting, remembering, and relating to the present. Knowing that history is subject to the unfolding of times, Le Clézio would easily see this as a journey in life. This is one of the reasons why the author enjoys taking the readers on such a historic ride which affects himself and those readers seeking to know more about history. *Gens des Nuages* is a prime example of when Le Clézio seeks to invite the reader to one of these personal journeys – in this case, involving himself and his wife. Holzberg references this as part of the characteristics of Leclézian literature:

La lecture de l'œuvre de Le Clézio offre une invitation au voyage à travers un monde éternellement détruit et reconstruit. Il est surprenant de remarquer, cependant, qu'une fois qu'on pénètre à l'intérieur des textes touffus, on y trouve une lutte continue contre les mots, système inefficace de communication. (Holzberg 1981: 7)

This journey started in *Désert*. However, it is in *Gens de Nuages* that the indirect autobiographical nature of *Désert* is fully revealed. In the same way, the heroine of *Désert* did, the ancestors of Jemia who were forced to leave Saguia el Hamra endured war, poverty, and exile—things that rip at, exclude, condemn, and pollute modern society. As a way of finding a lost legacy, the heritage of his wife is something that Le Clézio always strives to get closer to in *Gens des Nuages* and *Désert*.

The journey undertaken by the couple and the travel photographer in *Gens des Nuages* was a planned journey that would act as a completion of what had initially been written in the book *Désert*. One could say that it was a long overdue journey by the couple, an adventure that has been set ahead in their minds. This is affirmed by Salles:

La récente publication de *Gens des Nuages* (1997), que Le Clézio a écrit avec sa femme Jemia pour raconter leur voyage à la Saguia el Hamra où se déroule une partie de *Désert*, apporte des précisions sur l'écriture de ce roman. L'auteur révèle l'existence d'une première version du livre, conçue quand il avait treize ans après un voyage au Maroc... (Salles 1999: 12)

The motives behind the personal journeys in this novel range from intimacy to purposeful exploration. By intimacy, we are referring to the use of the first person plurals- *Nous* and *On*. This first (intimacy) could indicate that they are embarking on this journey with one heart, goal, and purpose. However, we

find cases where the couple refers to each other's names without using- Nous.

This is also a sign of their intimacy with one another:

Pour les enfants qui jouent autour de lui, JMG n'est qu'un étranger de passage... Et pourtant, Grâce à Jemia, il appartient tout de même un peu à ce lieu... (*Gens des nuages*: 98-100)

The second (purposeful exploration) could also suggest that the couple has other motivational tendencies for embarking on the journey to the Sahara or has something to comment about how the journey was affecting the other emotionally while journeying on the reality of their reverie. This leaves us with two narrators in the traveling journal- the husband and his wife. Thibault refers to this as a story with two voices:

Gens des nuages est un récit à deux voix. Si les deux narrateurs sont animés par la même quête d'ailleurs, la même soif de découverte, leurs voix se différencient dans l'approche. Pour Jemia il s'agit vraiment d'une quête des origines, de son passé : « l'expérience de Jemia est celle de l'entre-deux ou du dédoublement culturel » (Thibault 2015 : 186)

For Jemia, the journey was first about her trying to connect to her past. It is usually one of the characteristics of Leclézian literature to relate to the past to find peace in the present. Thorborn rightly emphasizes the importance of the past in Leclézian writings:

Le Clézio's use of the past generally goes beyond the setting and the inclusion of historical events. He demonstrates his dedication to providing a credible representation of the past through his careful choice of words and detail. (Thorborn 2012: 50)

Jemia had imagined on her own these monumental places and figures that mark her genealogy and was ready to embark on this journey in order to encounter the reality of this reverie. The journey was satisfactory for Jemia when she reached the Rock. Nothing else is conceivable. Personally for the narrator, there is nothing else that could exist because the adventure marks the end of her voyage and quest to trace her family line. This is captured in *Gens des Nuages* while she was at Tbeïla, le Rocher:

Pour Jemia, être venue jusqu'à ce rocher marque l'accomplissement du voyage. Il ne peut rien y avoir d'autre. (*Gens des Nuages*, p.132)

Apart from engaging on this journey with his wife, le Clézio had his imagination and curiosity to build upon. He was glad to be there even though he was referred to as a witness. We are familiar with the philosophical underpinnings of Leclézian literature, which is acutely aware of the excesses of Western cultures. The trajectory of this journey is a first for this witness- Le Clézio; he is looking for solutions to address the shortcomings of contemporary civilization, unlike the wife who is tracing her genealogy.

JMG n'est qu'un témoin, un curieux, en vérité pas différent d'un touriste qui passe, frissonne et oublie. Mais, pour elle, ce doit être comme de toucher à sa vérité, à un double, à la fois très proche et inaccessible.
(*Gens des Nuages*: 132)

The couple embarks on this journey in order to fulfil their personal desires and thoughts. They had something in common to achieve and something personal to embrace. It was invariably the end of the journey for Jemia. However, Le Clézio could have a choice to return yet for another piece of story on this terrain.

Towards the end of this oeuvre, it becomes quite evident that the wife was more emotionally attached to the journey, compared to the husband. Part of Jemia's burden was to put her thoughts into action. The last statement made at 'Tbeïla le Rocher' summarises this point:

JMG pourrait revenir chaque jour. Dessiner, prendre des photos, grimper au sommet du Rocher par l'échelle mystique, boire à la source du vent. Mais Jemia? Il semble que cette ultime étape lui a enlevé quelque chose, en même temps qu'elle lui apportait la certitude de la véracité. Peut-être que ce qui a été enlevé et ce qui a été donné sont une seule et même chose. Au cœur, au centre de la pierre, au centre de l'être, une porte ouverte sur la Voie.(*Gens des Nuages*: 132)

From the citation above, we could suggest that the path taken by the couple corresponds to the same journey (but in the other direction), that Jemia's parents took to move to another country, to the cities and nations of the North. It is also the same route that the nomadic tribes who tried to flee from the French occupying force at the start of the twentieth century, led by Sheikh Ma el Aïnine,

decided to take. Le Clézio, his wife, and their photographer personally traced this difficult and protracted journey in the desert from one location to another.

From the Wadi Draa, the couple's quest leads us along the desert road. In this journey, they elaborate on the complexity of the various tribes, ethnic groups, and peoples who live in the desert as well as their traumatic history, which is filled with wars, uprisings, and insurrections, as well as their ongoing struggle against conquerors such as the French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Also, the White invasion (conquerors) prevented the ancient Shaykh from traveling to Fez to join Moulay Hafid, who was resisting French encroachments. Being mindful of which boundaries to step into, we are informed in the book of the nomads' failed attempt to fight back:

Son rêve d'une confédération de toutes les tribus nomades du Sahara unies pour jeter à la mer les envahisseurs français, portugais et espagnols s'est brisé. (*Gens des Nuages*, p.30)

'Toutes les tribus nomades du Sahara' as indicated in the citation above clearly suggests that these are tribes with different names that have come together for the sole purpose of uniting together to fight for their freedom from the colonial masters with much courage. The names of these tribes, their towns, people, and places serve as a background on which history and genealogy are built. Historical names have an important role in *Gens des Nuages* because they place the story in certain cultural and historical settings, which helps the reader to better

comprehend the characters and their origins. The authors enhance the depth and authenticity of their stories by using genuine historical persons or historical event metaphors. They establish a connection between these names and more significant historical and sociological changes by incorporating them into the story.

Using historical names, for instance, highlights the passage of time and the changes that have happened since the time of their ancestors and arouses feelings of nostalgia or desire for a bygone period. As previously mentioned, these names can function as markers of fortitude or resistance against repressive structures as characters negotiate their identities within historical bounds. In addition, the historical names in this book serve as markers for readers, encouraging them to consider the events and topics discussed in the novel in the context of a larger historical context.

The authors encourage readers to interact with the intricacies of history and its influence on our lives by firmly rooted the narrative in historical fact. In general, the inclusion of historical names in *Gens des nuages* enriches the story and increases the reader's sense of immersion in the book's and its characters' realities. Relating this to the quest in this oeuvre, we are introduced to the towns, the people, and their ethnic groups. Historical names such as La Hamada du Draa, Gaa, L'Imrikli, Oued Noun, Jbel Tiris, Smara, Les Aït Jmal, and Berik Allah were

mentioned by the couple. Arroussiyyine- the camel people and other mystical names were also mentioned. These names form part of Jemia's heritage:

La route est une digue qui franchit des plages de galets, des cours d'eau presque secs. C'est ici. C'est le Draa. Rien de spectaculaire, et pourtant cela fait battre le cœur... C'est par la route du Draa, à travers le Jbel Sahrho, qu'en février 1897 le cheikh Ma el Aïnine, au milieu de son armée d'hommes bleus... (*Gens des Nuages*: 29)

These are historical names, tied to historical events that happened in Jemia's lineage and the mentioning of these names enrich the plot of the novel and also shows the couple's intimate love and connection to Africa. Moreso, the names reflect the reality and authenticity of the memories and events related to the novel.

In this chapter of the research about *Wanderings in the wilderness*, three important aspects of the journey were critically analyzed in this novel as it relates to the desert. Firstly, by referring to genealogy and cross-cultural trajectories, we established the fact that the main purpose of the journey was to trace and authenticate the events that took place in Jemia's ancestral lineage. Le Clézio himself serves as a witness to this historical, ancestral and academic survey of his wife's ancestral lineage. Secondly, *rêverie* was discussed as a literary device that the authors used to engage with the Western Sahara. This suggests the notion that the journey to the Sahara was premeditated, fantasized, and planned for. More so, everything that the couple had envisaged was brought into reality in the process of the journey. Lastly, we established the relationship between *Désert* and *Gens*

des Nuages by identifying both books as personal journeys taken by the authors to a common location, the Sahara Desert. The Sahara therefore plays a central role in the books.

PART II

CHAPTER 3

Beloved Africa:

Childhood Memories and Personal Introspection in *Onitsha*

Set in 1948 following the aftermath of WW2, Le Clézio's 1991 novel, *Onitsha* refers to the city of the same name, one of the busiest and largest metropolitan areas in Nigeria. Before the Second World War, Onitsha had always played a vital role in the commercial history of the country that became Nigeria in 1907. Its role was even consolidated after the war. Okeke, in his book *A Political History and Administrative History of Onitsha*, underlines the commercial prosperity of the city as early as the 19th century:

By the standards of the time, the volume of trade in Onitsha must have been large: in the middle of the nineteenth century, the explorer William Baikie was so impressed by what he saw there that he described it as "the most strategic trading nucleus on the Niger." (Okeke 2010:3)

Le Clézio's *Onitsha* could result partly from the author having a first-hand experience of living in Nigeria, which provided him with intimate knowledge of traditional African names and customs. Through a close analysis of this narrative world, this chapter will examine symbolic representations of childhood memories in *Onitsha* in order to understand and analyse better some of the literary elements

and memorable events that influenced the writer's childhood in Africa. In "Getting to Know Le Clézio," Woodward asserts that the book *Onitsha* can be understood as a slice of the author's childhood memories:

His 1992 novel, "Onitsha," offers us a child's perception of what seems to be a slice of Mr. Le Clézio's boyhood. (Woodward 2008:3)

Along the same lines as Woodward, Roussel-Gillet (2011) draws a link between the narrative of *Onitsha* and the author's own childhood experiences, offering a narrative lens which he refers to as a *souvenir*:

L'Africain, dans la lignée de quelques passages d'*Onitsha*, est une évocation de l'enfance au Nigeria passée au filtre du souvenir...
(Roussel-Gillet 2011: 71)

According to Yillah (2008), this *souvenir* explores political issues. In political discourse, he explains that *Onitsha* serves as a lens through which to examine the dubious methods employed by European powers, particularly the British, in establishing and upholding colonial authority in South Eastern Nigeria. It is imperative, however, to exercise caution in interpreting the novel as a factual account of Britain's conquest and governance in that specific African region. Nevertheless, it is evident that the realities of British supremacy shed light on Fintan's and his parents' entirely fictional encounters within black Africa; these realities are not directly replicated in their unaltered form, but rather refracted,

adjusted, or molded to align with Le Clézio's overarching fictional narrative. (Yillah, 176).

This chapter begins by presenting the historical background of Le Clézio's childhood experiences and then goes on to explore their links with his portrayal of Africa, specifically Onitsha in Nigeria, examining the narrative potential of this 'souvenir' and its implications for our understanding of the role of Africa in Le Clézio's prose.

Le Surabaya: Happiness or a nostalgic metaphor for Solitude and parental separation?

While childhood often evokes nostalgia and celebration of (a lost) innocence, it is just as frequently used to cast a critical eye over significant moments of social conditioning or indoctrination, and their consequences. (Hardwick, 2013: 1)

The trajectory of childhood memories in this semi-autobiography starts inside *Le Surabaya* – the name of the ship that Fintan, his mother (Maou), and his grandmother boarded to reach Nigeria. Through the lens of the fictionalized character of Fintan (the main character), Le Clézio begins to look into events that involved his family in the 1980s. He was drawn in by the prospect of his family's secrets which includes his grandfather's search for a lost treasure and his own attempts to get in touch with his ghost ancestor. This prospect is depicted in two of his novels: *Le Chercheur d'or* (*The Prospector*, 1985) and *Voyage à Rodrigues* (*Voyage to Rodrigues*, 1986). As we advance through the generations in *Onitsha*,

Le Clézio's connection to Africa and his family history as a writer of fiction becomes more intense and passionate because the narrative of the book gradually tells the true story of Le Clézio's challenges of not having both parents as well as his quest out of this solitude in his distant childhood:

Le Clézio partage sa passion pour l'Afrique, leur maison, leur patrie.
(Ugochukwu 2016: 10)

Onitsha describes the journey that Fintan and his Italian-born mother Maria Luisa made onboard the *Surabaya* to see Fintan's illustrious English father, Geoffroy Allen, in the Nigerian river town of Onitsha. It shows the difficulties that arise between these three people and how they interact with the British colonial government. The novel explores the lasting effects that their time spent in Africa has on their psyches and shows how this experience affects them when they are forced to return to Europe.

A sense of fantasy comes into play in Fintan's mind as he prepares for a journey to meet his father, whom he has not seen for a long time, believing strongly it would be a place of peace. As he sails on *Le Surabaya*, we get to understand more background information on the reasons why Fintan is embarking on this journey with his mother and grandmother, Aurelia, to reunite with his father. *Le Surabaya* is not only the ship that takes the family to their destination, but also serves as the backdrop before which feelings of loneliness within the family are discussed, at the same time as the events that lead to the separation of

the parents of the main character. This ship is introduced at the very beginning of the book, establishing its significance within the fabric of the novel and the beginning of crucial events in the narrator's childhood:

Le Surabaya, un navire de cinq mille trois cents tonnes, déjà vieux, de la Holland Africa Line, venait de quitter les eaux sales de l'estuaire de la Gironde et faisait route vers la côte ouest... (*Onitsha*, p.13)

Inside *Le Surabaya*, the narrator takes us to Fintan's past by specifically mentioning that he was 12 years old when he embarked on the journey to Onitsha. This is highlighted by the fact that we are dealing with the childhood memories of adult Fintan (fictionalized adult Le Clézio). The ship is likened to a machine that is "immobile comme le ciel", suggesting a reduced level of activity or a form of aloofness. (*Onitsha*, 26). This imagery connects to the childhood memories of the writer as well as expresses the painful rupture that the adult writer investigates and rediscovers through his love for literature. On the ship, we learn more about the child's identity and losses. Damamme-Gilbert (2008) supports this argument:

Le Clézio crée l'image remarquable d'une machine dévorante, celle du navire Surabaya, qui correspond à l'imaginaire féerique de l'enfant mais exprime aussi la coupure traumatique que l'écrivain adulte redécouvre et explore par la littérature: Le Clézio fait état d'une perte brutale, d'une angoisse que l'on peut comprendre comme la rupture d'un lien sur lequel l'identité de l'enfant s'était jusqu'alors forgée. (Damamme-Gilbert: 20)

While Le Clézio would always hope to meet with a better future as we would see in *Onitsha*, one can easily sense an atmosphere of certainty in this

journey below the voice of the narrator, especially after Fintan and Maou board *Le Surabaya*. (O,31) It is established from the beginning that Fintan's father was not around while he was growing up (O, 18), so there was a void that the father needed to fill. Being left alone with the mother would not have been an easy task, especially at that time after the Second World War when women needed emotional and physical support from men regarding protection from the unsettled war environment, finances, and food.

The narrator draws our attention to the fact that the child became increasingly fond of the mother because he saw her often at a much younger age. This could be likened to Sigmund Freud's Oedipal complex (1909) related by Mcleod (2024:2) who defines the term as a 'young boy feeling an unconscious desire for his mother, which sets up the Oedipus complex—or, more precisely, the conflict that follows'. This oedipal connection first plays out between Fintan and his mother (Maou) on board *Le Surabaya*:

Fintan voulait voir encore une fois le profil de Maou comme une ombre sur la lumière du ciel. (*Onitsha* :15)

Other than the common factor of child development, the child had to be very close to his mother because his father – with whom he could have shared this intimacy– was not around, and this would reflect even in the way in which he refers to his mother, deciding at age 10 to refer to her only by the nickname of

‘Maou’, given to her because the younger Fintan was unable to pronounce her given name.

Quand il avait eu dix ans, Fintan avait décidé qu’il n’appellerait plus sa mère autrement que par son petit nom. Elle s’appelait Maria Luisa, mais on disait: Maou. C’était Fintan quand il était bébé, il ne savait pas prononcer son nom, et ça lui était resté. (*Onitsha*, p. 13)

The separation of Fintan’s parents caused him to channel such attraction towards the mother to the point of having a special name for her. This separation caused some loneliness in the life of the child and as a result, his journey on the ship becomes a quest to explore whether the void in his life might be filled by his father’s love.

The ship *Le Surabaya*, therefore, plays a vital role in Fintan’s childhood quest towards his father. On the ship, we learn about what had led to the separation of the family as well as how the child viewed his father. (*Onitsha*:18-19) *Le Surabaya* represents a post-colonial relic in the aftermath of the colonial era in Africa. This is another reason why, through the movement of *Le Surabaya*, we can see him taking us to the shores of Africa, through the Niger until he gets to the place where he envisaged that his happiness would be – and that is Onitsha. However, the journey becomes more interesting as the main character is set to have a different outlook on what he was told about Africa and Onitsha. Moreover, his spirit of adventure and curiosity to rejoin his family will be put to the test the moment he steps on *Le Surabaya*. Miriam Stendal Bullos (1999) in her book

Chemins pour une approche poétique du monde: Le roman selon J.M.G Le Clézio

explores the polyvocality of the narrative, writing that:

Trois narrateurs sont mis en scène pour nous présenter trois versions de cette rencontre, mais surtout pour illustrer trois visions différentes d'une Afrique si différente de celle qu'ils avaient imaginée au départ. (Bullos, 1999:48)

Inside *Le Surabaya*, Fintan develops a nostalgic feeling towards the place where his father, Geoffroy, was. Therefore, the book can be seen as exploring the lasting impressions that their time spent in Africa leaves on their psyches and describing how this experience affects them when they are forced to return to Europe. It is for this reason that the book has received high appreciation from Anderson (2008) for its use of classical language characterized by standard and simple French, and its cathartic nature as nostalgic writing:

I possibly hinted at the fact that Onitsha became a translator's pleasure previously. It's a straightforward, classical language that is expressive without being overly complex. For those who have read the original, this could seem apparent. (Anderson 2008: 3)

However, the journey that seemed to be a family reunion and a possible way out of solitude for Fintan would turn out to be worse than he had envisaged because Fintan would see so many reasons why he needed to hold on to his oedipal complex as explained previously. Levy (1998) summarises this oedipal drama thus:

However, the obvious honesty of its structure and the impact of its style as conveyed must not make us lose sight of the relevance of the Oedipal drama portrayed or cause us to disregard the deep conflicts in the main characters' roles, which demonstrate how much they use a largely imagined past as a defence for apathy in their current circumstances.

(Levy: 2)

Furthermore, even though the book starts as an expression of nostalgic feelings, the readers' minds will eventually open up to how deeply the environment has changed Geoffrey, as well as the amount of influence these changes had in the childhood memories of the younger Le Clézio, represented in fiction in the character of Fintan. This influence is reflected in his attempt to discipline Fintan following a misdeed. Initially, the incident made him lose interest and hope in his father. However, in a second movement which involved the boy spending the night outside, this particular event would get the boy angry and prepared for revolt:

Fintan ne lui parlait jamais de Geoffroy. Seulement une fois, après la nuit passée dehors, près de l'eau *mbiam*, Geoffroy l'avait fouetté à coups de ceinture. Fintan avait montré les marques sur ses jambes, sur son dos...

(*Onitsha*, p.28)

Moreover, Fintan was the only child of his mother for the first twelve years, and the father was never involved. Maou (Maria Luisa), is simultaneously the boy's carer, sibling, and potential love interest (*O*:15). The encounter with his unknown father and the trip to Onitsha represent a threat to the boy's oedipal

relationship with his mother, which is perceived as both severance -the wrenching away, the hole in memory (:16), and rebirth – “dans le ventre du *Surabaya*” (*O*:15), at the same time. This departure is a challenge since it represents a rebirth that fatalistically reproduces the current circumstances.

...et le grondement bien tempéré des machines dans le ventre du Surabaya, émiétté sur le dos fuyant des vagues tout sonore et figé dans l'air immobile comme les parcelles d'un rêve,.. (*Onitsha*:16)

More unforgettable events would unfold inside *Le Surabaya*, including the strengthening of the bond between the first pair (mother and child). Fintan's voyeuristic gaze is given even more prominence in such circumstances through observations that reflect his outsider status and highlight the complexities of the cityscape that leads to Nigeria. Fintan will never forget the enticing and agonising view of Maou bathing (*O*:34) or the overtly sexual sight and taste of the pale green obscene forbidden fruit, which Maou continually urges him to try. He refuses to try just the same way he “refusait de porter un chapeau” (*O*:54). The avocado and the mother's exposed body in opposition to one another establishes the visual context for Fintan's continued rapt gaze and fetishization of the avocado shape of the womb to uphold his conception of maternal plenitude in his interactions with Maou and other females:

Il faisait si chaud dans la cabine que Maou s'endormait nue, enveloppée dans le drap blanc, qui laissait son corps sombre en transparence. Il y avait les moustiques déjà, le gout amer de la quinine. (*Onitsha*: 35)

On the other hand, a look at the events that precede the childhood memories of Fintan inside *Le Surabaya* in *Onitsha* reveals the tense connections between a father and a son, and a husband and a wife who are strangers to each other, reinforcing the unsettling atmosphere of the plot Fintan is chilled by their initial encounter on the harbour quay while he is still on the boat and spends his time isolating himself in his cabin. Geoffrey Allen, the father, gives Fintan a brief and harsh handshake. They jump into the Ford and drive out in the direction of Onitsha. (O:65) Fintan eventually acclimates to his new life and learns to value his father. This is done with the help of the son of a local fisherman named Bony.

Le Surabaya for Maou is a place of happiness, the type of happiness that the woman was searching for at that point in time in her life. It was a way to escape for some time from the shackles of war. Fintan's mother searches for the right place where she could stroll around without obstruction and *Le Surabaya* offers the ideal arena for this meandering:

Maou n'avait jamais connu un tel bonheur. Le Surabaya était un navire agréable avec ses ponts couverts où on pouvait se promener, s'allonger dans une chaise longue pour lire un livre et rêver. On pouvait aller et venir librement. (*Onitsha*:21)

The view of *Le Surabaya* as well as the glimpses into neighbouring towns and places Fintan's family encounter along the way to Onitsha, serve to make this

journey feel like a refreshing one for all of them. (O:25,41,57) Fintan follows M. Heylings and takes time to look at the valves that move in alternate directions. Maou also accompanies her son on another walk to the engine of the ship. These two events form an important part of the child's memories:

M.Heylings, le second capitaine... Il l'avait emmené avec Maou visiter la salle des machines... Fintan était resté longtemps à admirer les soupapes qui se soulevaient alternativement... (*Onitsha*: 21)

Le Surabaya transported them to Nigeria to begin a new life—the life they had always imagined. Before their journey, Fintan, Maou and the grandmother only had a limited understanding of this area owing to the letters sent by Geoffroy Allen. Travellers can take a few walks during the ship's numerous stops in the various coastal cities to get in contact with nature, the local environment, new people, and other discoveries that serve as a preface to their life in Nigeria. However, once in Onitsha, these characters adjust to the way of life and environment. Le Clézio introduces the difficult connection between father and son while they are still in *Le Surabaya*. Fintan cries out that he hates his father and that he does not want to leave thus:

...Fintan écoutait la voix qui parlait toute seule... Déjà, il avait mal d'oublier. Je le déteste, je le déteste. Je ne veux pas partir, je ne veux pas aller là-bas. Je le déteste, il n'est pas mon père! (*Onitsha* :17)

It is reasonable to suggest at this point that inside *Le Surabaya*, Fintan is in disarray since a mystery man he has never met has turned his life upside down. In *L'Africain* (52), the author also argues that it is not Africa that caused a shock, but the discovery of this unknown, strange, possibly dangerous father and Fintan expresses the same thoughts by saying he does not want to travel to the father. It is in this complex context that local toponyms and patronyms would come to play a central role in the narrative structure of the novel, as we shall see now.

Representation of memorable events through Indigenous names of objects, people and places in Africa

The names of things, towns, people and places serve as a background on which histories are built. Connecting with these names meant connecting to one's lineage and genealogy. Moreover for Le Clézio, connecting to these names means revisiting his childhood memories. This is also based on either the roles that the names play or what they mean. When it comes to writing about Africa, Le Clézio attempts to prove to the audience that he is still conversant with the terrains he spent part of his childhood, hence the use of names attributed to memorable events and places. For example, it is logical for the narrator to prove to us that he is familiar with the history of the battle for the Western Sahara.

As we have already seen, in the analysis of *Gens des Nuages* in Chapter 2 (p.25-27), the names of places and people identified help to define the importance and unfolding of events at every step taken. This also helps to offer a good

referential opportunity as it relates to one of the most important messages of *Gens des Nuages*, which is rooted in the fact that Western Sahara and Morocco are presented as a continuum and that the political division resulting from Western imperialism plays a great role in the centre of this historical battle. Seddon (1987) comments on this continuum:

While public attention was focused on the Moroccan-Saharan border at Tarfaya near the Atlantic coast, as a consequence of the Green March, Moroccan forces moved into the territory from the North-East to crush the Polisario (The popular liberation front which opposed Moroccan irredentist claims as well as continued Spanish colonial occupation) and to seal off the border with Algeria. (Seddon: 24)

Le Clézio sides with the Moroccan narrative relating to the Western Sahara, and implicitly debunked that of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. He does so by demonstrating a high level of cultural familiarity with the local customs, which he illustrated through toponymy (identifying the names of places he visited) and patronyms (identifying the names of people around these places). By exploring the connection between both concepts, Le Clézio analyses the intricacies of identity, memory, and the interplay between individuals and their environments in his literary works.

In the quest to discover the Western Sahara, we are introduced to the towns, various peoples', and ethnic groups' names, such as La Hamada du Draa, Gaa, L'Imrikli, Oued Noun, Jbel Tiris, Smara, Les Aït Jmal, Berik Allah. Arroussiyyine, the camel people and other bearing mystical names:

La route est une digue qui franchit des plages de galets, des cours d'eau presque secs. C'est ici. C'est le Draa. Rien de spectaculaire, et pourtant cela fait battre le cœur... C'est par la route du Draa, à travers le Jbel Sahrho, qu'en février 1897 le cheikh Ma el Aïnine, au milieu de son armée d'hommes bleus... (*Gens des Nuages*: 29)

We encounter a similar style in Onitsha as the narrator also endeavours to tie memorable places and people to the plot of the fictional biography of his life. Indigenous names of people like Okawho, Oya and Bony play fundamental roles in the development of the travelogue as these people had great influence in Fintan's childhood, thereby making them a part of his childhood memories. Aro Chuku, Meroë, Omerun, and Ugo (the falcon) belong to the same African pantheon with the names associated with memorable events that took place in the narrator's life while he was still very young and living in Nigeria. The fact that Meroë (in today's Sudan) is part of the name, symbolises the narrator's long-term connection with the continent in all its geographical and cultural diversity.

Childhood memories as an antidote to colonial cultural confrontation

Le Clézio construit une histoire nourrie de ses souvenirs, certes, mais qui est aussi motivée par deux forces plus profondes: d'une part il insère son histoire dans l'héritage culturel, historique et mythique de cette région d'Afrique et d'autre part il tisse un réseau de symboles, et une interprétation qui portent au plus profond, sur son identité à lui et en particulier exprime un fantasme sur sa naissance. (Damamme-Gilbert :24)

To some audiences, Le Clézio's writing about childhood might serve as an introduction to a foreign civilization or rather events that have taken place in such foreign civilizations. These events can be considered mythical, cultural, and historical, depicting Africa's heritage and civilization. The displacement of Aro Chuku by the British was one of such events. During the 19th century, British colonial forces sought to expand their control over the region, leading to conflicts with indigenous people such as the Arochukwu people. The British ultimately defeated the Aro confederacy on the 28th of November 1902: "...Aro Chukwu est tombé aux mains des Anglais..." (O:243) This displacement had profound social, economic and cultural consequences for the people of Arochukwu which included loss of autonomy, land and traditional ways of life. It was carried out by professionals from different fields of life. This showed how organised the British were. Yillah (2008) supports this argument by describing the nature of this invasive displacement:

The most accurate explanation of these forces' destructive power may come from the factual and detailed portrayal of their actions, which includes the precise timing of the action, the type and quantity of personnel involved, the military objectives of the action, and the strategies employed to achieve those objectives. The forces engaged are called "un véritable corps expéditionnaire"; in addition to the military, the group includes physicians, geographers, government servants, and even an Anglican clergyman. (Yillah, 177).

On the other hand, those who are acquainted with the setting that is depicted particularly may find it to be an act of consolidation. The narrator depicts

Fintan's childhood events and having gained much knowledge about the negative effects of colonialism in Africa, he confronts these issues from the point of view of an adult Fintan. The confrontation made by the narrator in *Onitsha* is a consolidation of the innocence of young Fintan's childhood memories. The childhood memories of Le Clézio in this book are therefore influenced by his innocence regarding the events that took place around him while and after he left Onitsha. The growth of the colonialist state of Britain was developed in Nigeria via cultural awareness, practices, and structures (especially communication and education), or it was developed via the methodical subjugation of religious preferences, cultural identities, and conceptual structures. The development of this project was carried out by British envoys, mercenaries, missionaries and soldiers. Sèbe (2013), defines these classes of people as Imperial heroes, and the definition of imperial heroes according to Sèbe embodies the characteristics of British imperialism in Africa:

Imperial heroes embodied the symbolic implementation of the colonial project and performed a highly mythologized meeting between conquerors and the conquered. In short, they were a crucial element of the European encounter with Africa that took place as part of the Scramble for Africa. To the Western public, they personified the arguments of duty, responsibility, and justice commonly used in imperial propaganda to support overseas territorial expansion... These exemplary figures led local soldiers, braved indigenous resistance and an inhospitable environment to carry out their explorations or to convert native populations, playing the role of pathfinders propagating the ideals of Christian service and sacrifice,... (Sèbe:1-2)

The propagation of the ideals of Christian service as mentioned by Sèbe or the colonial rule in general is questioned by the narrator in *Onitsha*. As different events unfold within the childhood memories of the narrator, we understand better how the narrator is able to confront some of the religious and conceptual structures taught by the British. The aspect of religion played a huge role during the colonial era and like Britain, Belgium implored the same tactics. Drawing from Freddy Tsimba's experiment with the archival resources from the colonial period in a temporary exhibition held at the African Museum in 2021, Fraiture (2022) identifies these religious tactics that were used by Belgium in the Congo:

These artifacts speak to colonial and post-colonial oppression and are presented alongside photographs of colonial and present-day Pentecostal churches, they also testify to the enduring influence of the missionary enterprise in contemporary DRC: 'Religion has always played an essential role in the Congo to control people's minds. It erases ancestral memory and influences imaginaries'. (Fraiture: 24-25)

Fraiture's assertion above makes it understandable that Africans were made to believe that the religious beliefs of their colonial masters were more supreme, compared to their deities. The narrator in the novel, therefore speaks from a point of having experienced the effects of colonial rule in Onitsha, Nigeria. Hence, he understood that one of the goals of the colonial masters was to take away any figure of worship or deity that the Africans had so that their religious aims would stand firmly. The removal of Aro Chuku by the British remains one such example.

Aro Chuku is one of the prominent names mentioned in the novel. The fact that a chapter is dedicated to it shows how the narrator tries to draw our attention to the historical background of the demolition and rebuilding of the Aro Chuku shrine as well as the role that the British played in it eventually. In the original sense, Nwa-Ikenga (2010:1-2) says that the name Aro Chuku is a representation of the culture and tradition of Eastern Nigeria. He adds that the events that took place around the people and their shrine go a long way to show the resilience and beauty of African traditional spiritual practices. They do this by pressurizing the British into knowing what happened to their oracle, whilst working hard to rebuild the shrine because it was the source of their spiritual strength. The greatness of the kingdom where this god and her people are found is expressed by Sirax:

If you are familiar with Igbo history, you must be aware of the Arochuku Confederacy. This Confederacy is regarded as one of the greatest Confederacies in Igbo history. (Sirax 2022:1)

In contrast to prevailing societal conventions or historical events, le Clézio's work often depicts innocence as a connection to nature, spirituality, admiration, or a purity of soul. Aro Chuku, being an example of such spirituality, plays an important role in the British invasion of Africa. Through the concept of Empire, the British ended up ruling a quarter of the world, with colonies in South Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, South East Asia, and Africa, including

Nigeria. In so doing, they began to rule the local populace. The cultural phenomenon of colonized Nigeria is shown in Aro Chuku, which is connected to Nigerian mythology and history. By imposing their purportedly superior White culture, colonizers violated the native cultures of a colonized nation like Nigeria. Gabunia (2023) comments on the damaging effects of such enforced superiority by referring to Fanon's postcolonial theory in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

Fanon contends in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism is fundamentally damaging. In the opinion of Fanon, the introduction of colonial identities is detrimental to the psychological well-being of those who are oppressed. Fanon called for intense opposition and emphasized the dehumanizing characteristics of colonial control (Fanon, 1963: 250 cited by Gabunia 2023: 3).

The supposed superiority of the White culture comes in contact with the confrontational views of young Fintan's memories of childhood innocence. The narrator brings this into play by highlighting the complexities and contradictions within colonial relationships. Rather than presenting White culture as inherently superior, Le Clezio's narrative challenges this assumption in *Onitsha* by depicting the cultural clashes, misunderstandings, and injustices that arise from colonial encounters. An example of this is found in pages 240-245 which relate the Anglo-Aro war that led to the displacement of Aro Chuku. Aro Chuku is depicted as being fragile and vulnerable hence, it cannot fight for itself while the Whites are the forces beyond. One way they did this was to bring down the shrine in 1902 as

a way of fighting against the prophecy and the myth they heard about and in expressing this, the narrator takes the audience into the feelings of the children who saw the event. He does this with a very subtle but regretful tone:

Aro Chuku, l'oracle, a cessé d'exister. Seul vit encore, sur le visage des enfants premiers-nés, le signe *itsi*.. (*Onitsha*: 247)

Furthermore, the name of a major city in Abia State, Nigeria, is now Aro Chuku, and the British-destroyed shrine there is still known by that name despite the original being lost forever. All trade and commercial activity in this Igbo territory was dominated by the Arochuku people, but this supremacy was short-lived since the British colonial overlords posed a danger to it. Since the beginning of the 19th century, the British government has made unsuccessful attempts to fully annex the Arochuku Confederacy to the British Empire. The Arochuku Confederacy was not destroyed until the British invasion of the Igbo country between 1901 and 1902. In the novel, this story is one of how the narrator highlights the complexities and contradictions within colonial relationships.

Le 28 novembre 1902, Aro Chuku est tombé aux mains des Anglais, presque sans résister... Mis au courant de ces racontars, Montanaro, craignant la désertion, décide d'attaquer Aro Chuku cinq jours plus tard, le 2 décembre. (*Onitsha*: 243-244)

Onitsha gives a hint to the reader as to how the sentiments of the local Africans were never comprehended by the colonizers. The majority of colonial

leaders used violence to assert their power, and they could not stand the thought of their government officials being even the slightest bit liberal, or sympathetic to the plight of the local population. This reflects the nature of violence that Belgium exacted on their colonies as related by Fraiture. In light of this, Fraiture foregrounds the issue of violence as a recurrent theme during the colonial era, citing the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi:

Until the bitter end, then, Belgian colonialism, in the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, remained a violent, discriminatory, and coercive system. Violence and coercion were also at the roots of the epistemological invention to which these colonies were submitted. (Fraiture: 13-14)

Fraiture's standpoint above implies that submission was based on a process of forceful assimilation and not by association and consensual dialogue. Therefore, not willing to listen to the plight of the people characterizes the colonial masters as self-centered and exploitative. This also typifies Césaire's (2001) argument as stated by Gabunia (2023):

Colonialism, according to Césaire, has never been kind. The colonists' intentions were, instead, invariably egotistical and deceitful. A society that justifies colonization, in the author's words, "is already a sick civilization," and "no one colonizes innocently." (Gabunia 2023:4)

The tactics of exploitation are carried out with the assistance of the district officers. The colonists' district officer, Gerald Simpson, makes fun of Maou's inquisitive trips into town and her relationship with the spouses of the fishermen

or the market vendors. Simpson once more enjoys scaring her by stating that fifty miles away from there, near Owerri, there used to be the oracle of Aro Chuku, the center of sorcery for all of West Africa where they advocated holy war against the British Dominion.

Interestingly, Aro Chuku – which is both the name of a town in Abia state Nigeria and the Long Juju shrine – is nowhere near the town Onitsha which is in Anambra state, Nigeria. Both Anambra and Abia states (created 27th August 1991), used to be part of Imo state (created 3rd February 1976) in Eastern Nigeria. Therefore, Fintan journeyed around a wider eastern Nigerian Igbo community rather than just a region. Onitsha was part of those regions he visited. This reminds us of one pertinent element of Leclézian literature which is the love for travelling. This also explains the fact that Fintan's childhood was marked by a series of movements through other cities in Nigeria, hence he had a lot to draw from his childhood memories having understood better the aftermath of colonialism.

The process of 'drawing from his childhood' as stated above implies that the writer is relating what is true. Hence, the novel *Onitsha* can be considered to be a recit d'enfance from a unique perspective. Though the narrative device does not suggest an autobiographical story, there are reasons to believe that the author was talking about his past under the guise of a fictitious main character (Fintan) and narrator. He visited Onitsha at the age of eight and came with his mother and

grandmother about 3 years after the Second World War. More interestingly, the book *L'Africain* which was published years after, followed the same narrative but with much concentration on the father's character.

Le Clézio hid behind the shadows to give an autobiographical account of himself in *Onitsha* but in *L'Africain*, he stepped out of the shadows to give an autobiographical narrative to the same story. Just as it has been established in previous chapters that Désert was the foundation upon which *Gens des nuages* was built, we can also suggest while considering both significant perspectives of recit d'enfance, that *Onitsha* is the foundation upon which *L'Africain* was built. Hence, the author can be said to have been initiated into an unknown society (Africa-Nigeria-Onitsha) at a very young age. Influenced by significant events in this region, he decided to select some of the events he experienced to share with the public who most possibly should understand this stage that they have also passed through. This is what constitutes the argument of Hardwick (2013) in her introduction to the subject of childhood and autobiography in the Francophone Caribbean:

Representations of childhood are anything but simple. Childhood may be, on the one hand, a democratic trope that derives its appeal from the fact that it is a stage common to all humankind, or it may serve to emphasize the intense alienation and isolation of individual experience. Writing about childhood can function as an initiation into an unknown society, with the child's learning curve correlating with that of the reader. Alternatively, it may be an act of consolidation, as readers – particularly those who are familiar with the context being described – identify recognizable experiences. While childhood often evokes nostalgia and

celebration of lost innocence, it is just as frequently used to cast a critical eye over significant moments of social conditioning or indoctrination, and their consequences. (Hardwick: 1)

Following Hardwick's definition, we can agree that the narrator in *Onitsha*, conveys the children's feelings in a way that reflects their inherent innocence, as previously said and this is likened to him telling the readers exactly how he feels. He narrates that the young Aro children marked with its symbol, the sun, the moon, and the feathers from the falcon's wings and tail continue to walk the streets begging for food. Until he encounters Oya, who brings the last word of the Oracle, Okawho, a servant in Sabine Rodes' home, develops in the same manner. In the end, he also narrates that the Ndri sons confirm the oracle correct by removing the English from the country of Black Natives and eradicating their power for good. All these were narrated from the eyes of a young child whose sentiments were turned down by the psychological and spiritual agony children like him had to go through in the light of such events.

Aro Chuku forms a part of the memorable childhood memories of Fintan who in this semiautobiographical work is most likened to Le Clézio and the result of this is what influences the third chapter in *Onitsha*. The trajectory of this influence draws out a very sentimental moment with the narrator relating how he felt as a child when Aro Chuku was taken and people were killed for it. Due to the importance of the name Aro Chuku playing a huge part in the Nigeria's history, the narrator deemed it fit to offer a critical analysis of this deity in depth in chapter

3 of the novel. It is therefore treated in such a way that when the audience readers will learn much about the people of Aro Chuku, their oracle, and their beliefs. This is also an invitation to understand spiritual practices in Africa.

Okawho and Oya: Voices of resilience and survival

In order to overcome British colonialism, many African countries had to find a way to survive daily, stay resilient against the challenges they faced as well keep hope alive amidst these situations. (Parashar and Schulz, 2021: 2-3) Looking at the contribution of the couple consisting of Okawho and Oya to the development of this fictional autobiography, we can propose that the narrator uses this couple to signify survival, confrontation, resilience, and hope for the African continent, as it stood against the colonial masters. So, these two names bring hope alive for the narrator. The narrator can put in characters who would guide us through some of the events that influenced his childhood memories.

In the novel, Indigenous women were the target of a personal desire for colonizers. In some cases, they were treated as domestic servants and made into slaves. The ladies were treated unfairly with lesser or no benefits. They were quiet and afraid to speak out in opposition to the wishes of their White rulers. Additionally, this can be likened to Hewson's (2000:13-17) proxy notion of agency where an employer acts on behalf of someone else who sets the rules and regulations. The ladies are the employees while the Whites are the employers who set the strict rules and regulations. Maou is blunt in her criticism of the English

commanders' habits of this nature: she is deeply rebuked by the behavior of White colonial rulers. Oya, a female domestic helper, lives with Sabine Rodes- a peculiar loner who appears to exist in a different reality from British society.

Maou becomes hostile and violent as a result of witnessing Oya's boring and depressing life in the home of a colonial lord. Sabine Rodes is threatened by Maou, and she asks her to leave her alone and that she is not insane. She however stated also that no one has the right to treat her like a slave owing to the fact everyone can take advantage of her because she is a helpless, deaf, and stupid girl. (*Onitsha* 142).

Oya as a name has quite a useful meaning and this would have an influence on the departure of the British from that territory. As a Yoruba term, Oya refers to the spirit of a warrior goddess that has the ability to use the wind to pursue her enemies away. This wind blows until the enemies have finally left. This could be likened to the retaliation of the Blacks. The situation in the country spirals out of the hands of colonial authorities as the native insurrection becomes more and more violent. The Blacks attack the colonizers fatally and seriously. To preserve their lives, all British settlers and administrators get terrified and flee. The aides who were meant to be the closest ones to the English officers forsake them and leave them alone in the novel's ending portion. They experience such extreme levels of terror that they even lock themselves in a room to block out the outside

world. They remain furious and helpless. Sabine Rodes chases Okawho and Oya into hiding:

He shut himself into the big, dark room with its masks and its windows forever sealed. (*Onitsha*:172)

Bony and Omerun: Positive influence vs multifaceted nature of the African child

Bony is one of the fictionalized versions of characters who form part of the list of people who had a positive influence on the narrator's childhood. For Fintan, Bony would be the symbol of exploration, peace, and calm. With Bony, Fintan travels to visit the Black inmates. He is interested in getting to know more about the lifestyle of Black Africans. When Fintan is with Bony, he is reluctant to return to his parents. Therefore, it would be right to say that Bony is that symbol of "feeling at home" for Fintan. This is one of the situations when both of them went to the river:

Bony est retourné vers le fleuve. Il ne disait rien. Fintan est allé avec lui jusqu'à l'embarcadère, pour regarder le lent mouvement de l'eau. Il ne voulait pas rentrer à Ibusun. Il voulait partir, embarquer dans une pirogue, et glisser n'importe où, comme si la terre n'existait plus. (*Onitsha* :122)

This source of exploration, peace, and calm would eventually be cut off. Fintan looks regretfully as the ragged convicts move briskly, one following the other, each holding a shovel or a pick on their shoulders (*O*: 120-121). Fintan

feels as sympathetic to the Black captives as their family members or relatives are. Their bodies were covered in crimson powder and their faces were glistening with sweat. The ladies and children standing by the roadside who made attempts to give their prisoners what they had brought are stopped from doing so by the soldiers/guards on duty on each side of the prisoners:

Les uns derrière les autres, les prisonniers en haillons marchaient vite, portant sur l'épaule la pelle ou la pioche... Les femmes au bord de la route appelaient les prisonniers..., mais les policiers les repoussaient : « Go away !Pissop fool ! » (*Onitsha* :121)

With Omerun, Fintan's childhood had its fair share of pain, grief, and regrets. Omerun in the case of the novel *Onitsha* represents separation and grief. The events that took Bony to Omerun had a negative influence in the life of the young Fintan who happens to have seen his very close friend moving away to stay at that place. Fintan adores Bony, but he no longer wants to see or talk with him after the inmates' insurrection on Gerald Simpson's ranch. One of the prisoners that Lieutenant Fry's soldiers shot against the fence is Bony's uncle, while another is his older brother. Fintan detests the occurrence as much as Bony does, yet Bony is still upset with him. When Bony ignores him on the trip to Omerun, Fintan is embarrassed. This is one of the events that represents Fintan's rage and fury towards the colonial order in Africa:

Il avait dit: «Un jour, tu viendras avec moi à l'eau mbiam.» Fintan comprit que le jour était arrivé, parce qu'il devait s'en aller d'Onitsha. Cela fit battre son cœur plus vite. Il pensa à Maou, à ses larmes, à la colère de Geoffroy. (*Onitsha*:181)

Eventually, two things were going to happen, either Fintan would be moving from Onitsha or Bony would be doing the same. Bony, on his part, would be the first to move away as the place no longer made any meaning to him anymore, knowing that he had just lost two relatives from the brutality of the Whites.

The Falcon, or the premise of cultural beliefs

The incident of Ugo (the falcon) underlines the cultural beliefs and customs of the Igbo people of Nigeria, whereby some animals in the African traditional religion tend to be tied to some cultural beliefs. Geoffroy was not able to draw this line in *Onitsha*. While it was drawing circles over chickens in the sky, Geoffroy in the book shoots the falcon bird (Ugo), which is revered by the inhabitants and is thought to be a deity.

According to the report, Geoffroy placed his rifle on his shoulder, fired, and the bird fell. Geoffroy had no idea that it is a serious offense in African culture to kill the falcon-headed bird (Ugo/God), according to local custom. He casually kills the falcon without feeling sorry for it, which contributes to an overall impression of disrespect towards West African customs and culture. Geoffroy

Allen's action made Bony highly enraged, for he considers the bird to be a God and makes gestures towards the barren area of the sky where the falcon had been drawing circles. If at this point, there is one thing that the young Fintan learned during this incident, it is the fact that there are some animals that are very vital to some African traditions and customs. Having known this, it would be wise to always get hold of such information as this would guide anyone on how to treat such animals when they come across one.

Le Clézio's awareness of the importance of local knowledge is evidenced further through the use of indigenous names in the novel, which reflect his good knowledge of the people, and the different places that he visited, passed by, or already had an experience of, during his stay in Nigeria. The names of many towns and country capitals were mentioned. This reminds us of the love that the writer has for travelling and exploration in general, which started while he was still young. Most of these names still reflect in the childhood memories of the writer.

The constant preoccupation with local toponymy reflects a wider concern with the significance and impact of travel in general. Fintan's family goes from one region to another, one continent to another, one country to another. As the voyage progresses, a spatial itinerary forms that may be understood through a variety of spatial configurations. Reconstructing the cartography of the locations traveled through, visited, or inhabited by travelers is a clear aspect that structures

Onitsha. The main characters of *Onitsha* departed from the port of Nice on March 14, 1948, and they did not get to their final destination until April 13, having stopped at most of the ports along the coast of West Africa. In this excerpt, the narrator insists on the toponymy while allowing these breaks to reflect the crossing of various spaces:

C'était la nuit, on allait vers d'autres ports, Freetown, Monrovia, Takoradi, Cotonou, (...) On allait vers Takoradi, Lomé, Cotonou, on allait vers Conakry, Sherbro, Lavannah, Edima, Manna, Sinou, Accra, Bonny, Calabar (...) On allait vers d'autres ports, d'autres embouchures. Manna, Setta, Krous, Tabu, Sassandra, (...) Volta, Lagos, Victoria, etc.
(*Onitsha*: 40-46).

In addition to the narrator's mastery of the region, reflected by the use of traditional names, the narrator also mentions other regions within Nigeria while Fintan was still in *Le Surabaya*:

(...) Il [*Le Surabaya*] glissait le long des quais, il allait vers la passe, vers Cape Coast, Accra, Keta, Lomé, Petit Popo, on allait vers l'estuaire du grand fleuve Volta, vers Cotonou, Lagos, vers l'eau boueuse du fleuve Ogun, vers les bouches qui laissaient couler un océan de boue, à l'estuaire du fleuve Niger (*Onitsha*: 53).

Through a careful depiction of names of places, we can say that Le Clézio, fictionalised by Fintan, creates a vivid and immersive sense of landscapes, cultures, and histories of these regions. This remains one of the key aspects of Leclézian literature in *Onitsha*.

Le Clézio's juxtaposition of diverse cultures, histories, and spiritual traditions spanning across different eras and regions may present a unique

perspective on diversity that diverges significantly from what Edward Said referred to as the stark reality that defines the experiences, narratives, and traditions of the diverse African communities that serve as a backdrop in *Onitsha*. As a fictional narrative, *Onitsha* should not necessarily be evaluated based on its fidelity to an accurate representation of the African setting it portrays. The real power of the book lies in its creative interpretation and manipulation of the source material. Its portrayal of Africa is multi-dimensional, capturing the nuances and complexities of the continent's cultural landscape compellingly. (Yillah, 187)

In this third chapter, we emphasized the influence that the *Onitsha* community had on Fintan's childhood. The most likely voice behind the narrators is Le Clézio and the writer, who uses indigenous names to reflect his mastery of these communities. By incorporating local names into his narrative, Le Clézio pays homage to the specificity and diversity of Igbo states and their culture. These names not only serve to authenticate the setting but also contribute to the richness and authenticity of his storytelling. Through his skillful use of names, Le Clézio captures the essence of *Onitsha* and invites readers to explore its complexities and nuances through his literary works. Every principal name in the book plays an important role in the life of the narrator who seeks to look closely at the father's journey in particular. These principal characters therefore play significant and symbolic roles in the plot of the story. We have made attempts to define the symbolism of these names. It is because they influenced the narrator's life that

these names contributed to his novel. This also draws our attention to the fact that the narrator still has a good knowledge of his childhood memories on the African continent (Onitsha to be precise) and has not lost sight of the names of some people he met over there that played a significant role in his journey.

CHAPTER 4

Connecting The Past And Present: Photography And The Long Shadow Of The Father in *L'Africain*

The narrator in *Onitsha* explored memorable events that marked Fintan's childhood memories in Africa, specifically in the Nigerian city of Onitsha. The novel has a semiautobiographical aspect as it combines fictional and autobiographical material, with an uncertain Le Clézio hiding behind the shadow of Fintan, who was yet to understand his father's actions. However, in *L'Africain*, Le Clézio revisits some of these events, with more emphasis on autobiographical aspects. This time, there is much certainty on the part of the writer who is also the narrator Le Clézio himself. He disengages himself from standing behind the shadows, rather, he walks in the shadow of the father with much certainty and understanding of the father's actions in the past, hence, the use of photographs to strengthen the reality of this certainty. Unlike *Onitsha* where Fintan (the writer's fictionalized self), is the main focus and protagonist, the father in *L'Africain* because he is the main focus.

In *L'Africain*, Le Clézio speaks much about his childhood experiences in Africa, pays tribute to his parents and especially his father. The introduction of the novel denotes autobiographic writing, depicting the novel as an autobiography. Dirda (2013) connects this work with his trajectory:

This brief memoir serves as a suitable starting point since it pays tribute to Le Clézio's mother and father as well as his lost African upbringing.
(Dirda: 1)

Africa, according to the writer, could be said to be a land of enigmatic and indeterminate freedom. In a? succinct introduction Le Clézio, describes how he came to create this little book *by quickly stating* in the first sentence *that “Tout être humain est le résultat d’un père et une mère.” (L’Africain:7)* However, as he suggests in revealing how he once saw himself, it is clear that the author made up a life story and a past for himself to escape the real world and then comprehend the aspects that have changed after a long time. In doing this, he uses images to draw our attention to his life story and to the way things were in the past with his father, starting from when he met him in Nigeria at the age of eight.

L’Africain takes a look at the unconventional childhood of the writer as the memoir directly studies the father and how Le Clézio's unconventional upbringing influenced his life thereafter. The writer is set to realize the challenges that come with adulthood and understand better what the father went through in Africa. They resided in Ogoja, a place in Africa where there were no Europeans and, to the boy, just the Ibo and Yoruba people comprised mankind in this area. Le Clézio describes his arrival in Africa as ‘l’entrée dans l’antechambre du monde adulte. (*L’Africain*: 47) Describing Ogoja as an antechamber is a way of taking us the audience, to the past to envisage what that kind of antechamber to life this remote place would be. Using the term ‘antechamber’, Le Clézio implies that

while in Africa, the writer's family lived in a remote area which he likened to a hinterland. The writer conveyed that he had first-hand experience residing in such an environment

L'Africain is not a confrontation with the writer's father but rather an effort to comprehend both the man's life and the impact it had on Le Clézio's own trajectory by vividly concentrating on the description of memorable events attached to the past. This period of childhood may be vaguely recalled because the narrative often explores the complex interplay between memory, perception, and the passage of time. The period of childhood that is vaguely recalled and the portion of life that is conveyed in the memoir is undoubtedly tied to the childhood emancipation journey of the writer, a childhood that was influenced by the culture and traditions of indigenous Africa. In this chapter, we will be taking a look at two layers of representations of shadows used by the writer as a way of remembering Africa in his book which include photographic shadow and genealogical shadow of walking in paternal ancestry relating to the author and his father.

«Entre images et écriture»: Dimensions of photographic shadows in *L'Africain*

The writer and narrator (Le Clézio), launches a memorable inquiry into his lineage in *L'Africain*, a history of his father combined with a memoir about Africa

where he spent his formative years. He supports his narrative with fifteen photographs selected from his father's collection of photos since the latter found that photography was a more natural form of expression than words. Le Clézio consequently sets out to encounter a memory that is not only his, but also the memory of the time that preceded his birth as it is described in the book:

C'est en l'écrivant que je le comprends, maintenant. Cette mémoire n'est pas seulement la mienne. Elle est aussi la mémoire du temps qui a précédé ma naissance. (*L'Africain*, p.104)

The author's memory is sometimes defined by challenging representations, and most often enigmatic dialogues between text and images. This according to Maynard (2014) would also qualify the book to be called a biography:

L'Africain by Le Clézio appears as an attempt at a biography of his father, a bush doctor in Cameroon (district of Bansa) then in Nigeria (district of Ogoja) for twenty-two years. (Maynard, p.3)

This book is written as a homage to this mysterious and misunderstood father, but it could just as easily be read as an autobiographical extract, with the father's photos and the writer's recollections, introducing other memories and experiences from much later in life to the surface. Le Clézio's comments also specifically state the absence that a photograph is unable to capture:

Quelque chose m'a été donné, quelque chose m'a été repris. Ce qui est définitivement absent de mon enfance : avoir eu un père, avoir grandi auprès de lui dans la douceur du foyer familial... Tout cela qu'aucun portrait, aucune photo ne pourra jamais saisir. (*L'Africain*, p.103)

The boundaries of the photographic act in this book are enriched by number of pictures taken by the writer's father in Africa as illustrations or rather as accompaniment. This brings up the important question of the function and significance of including these photos in a written narrative: they serve as a source of motivation and early remembrance of the act of writing, as Le Clézio did for the writing of *Onitsha*, the corresponding novel of *L'Africain*. This oeuvre describes the outlines of something "unimaginable and indescribable throughout the course of its pages using words and pictures." (Buignet: 2008).

The inadequacy and even representation of pictures are evident from the opening lines. According to Le Clézio (p. 9), "Sur les photos, je détournais les yeux, comme si quelqu'un d'autre s'était substitué à moi." The image can only depict what Roland Barthes refers to as the spectrum, according to his definition of himself in this passage (1980).

Seeing myself as the go-between for all things photographic. Three parties make use of the photograph: the target, which is the photo's topic (i.e., the referent); the operator, who doubles as the photographer; and the observer, who doubles as the audience. The Spectrum serves as the point of reference, adding "the return of the dead" to every image
(Barthes, 1980, pp. 8–9).

Le Clézio essentially changes beings, or more precisely, replaces them with ghosts. Therefore, he would never assert that through his father's images, he can somehow capture the spirit or being of his father. On the other hand, he emphasizes the necessity of their inclusion in the work since they let the father participate in it posthumously and indirectly:

I can't imagine this book without the pictures. I would not have been won any other way, I would have had the feeling of something abstract. The photos are also a bit of the subject's participation in the book that talks about him. (Cortanze, p.68)

The subject is the writer and narrator, Le Clézio himself. Reading through the novel can easily put one in a state of fantasy, wanting to see what the writer is talking about, hence Cortanze believes there was no better way to relate these fantasies rather than bringing the imagery to life through photography., this is exactly what the author did as a way to authenticating a story personal to him. In reality, this father, who exhibits these literary elements, prefers to communicate through photography, to the point where Gérard de Cortanze might claim that his pictures "are virtually a journal of a man who has never really been capable of talking to his kids" (Cortanze 2004:70). The author describes his father's tenure in English Guiana at the same time as a man who is less defined by his gesture or his status as a photographer than as a collector of fixed moments in time:

Il prend des photos. Avec son Leica à soufflet, il collectionne des clichés en noir et blanc qui représentent mieux que des mots son éloignement...
(*L'Africain*, p.51)

Therefore, the images in the book illuminate Le Clézio's connection to this father and the African continent. Two subjective experiences coincide in this book, that of the father unquestionably, as well as that of the son due to the choice of images and the potential cropping that he may have applied to some. Some pictures were edited by the son, meaning, the son did not want the reader to see some things from the father's perspective but also his perspective.

Fifteen photos and a handwritten map of the region discussed in the text are placed at various points throughout the book. In *L'Africain*, an attempt to revisit the writer's childhood memories created a pathway to images playing a significant role in conveying the sensory richness and cultural diversity of the African landscapes and experiences. I will be classifying these images into four categories, including:

Natural and Geographical landscapes: Descriptions of the African terrain, such as vast savannas, lush forests, and expansive deserts, evoke a sense of the novel's setting and the protagonist's (the father's) connection to the land. These include a handwritten map illustrating the area of wilderness surrounding Ogoja that the doctor's father was in charge of and is located on page one of the book (unnumbered); an image of a scene with two palm trees that stand out against a backdrop of hills or mountains and the sky (p. 21)- it might be a close-up of a photo mentioned in the text before (p. 20); a body of water making up a landscape

(p. 48)- later in the book (p.57), there is a reference of this circumstance but not the cliché; at the base of a cliff; an image of a herd of cows in front of mountains (p. 72) and a massive, two-page landscape image of Victoria's river mouth on pages 62 and 63.

Cultural imagery: Depictions of indigenous peoples, their traditions, rituals, and ways of life provide insight into the diverse cultures and communities encountered throughout the narrative. These include two black children on the banks of a river, depicted in a text-framed, half-page image (p.11); a photograph of three men dancing, presumably sorcerers dressed in ceremonial garb and sporting feather or palm leaf headdresses (p. 18). They may be the soldiers of the monarch of Bamenda, according to a tale that appears much later (p. 64); a picture of a sitting black guy wearing a hat, collar, and fly swatter in front of a bushy background (p. 68)- the narrative speculates that it is Bansa's King Memfoi (p. 74); an indigenous old man (p. 84); three indigenous people, two adolescent girls, and one boy in the middle (p.93) and a woman carrying a baby (p.101).

Colonial and post-colonial imagery/presence: References to colonialism, imperialism, and the legacy of European presence in Africa are woven throughout the narrative, offering commentary on historical and social dynamics. These include a photo of Westerners boarding or disembarking from a boat, wearing traditional clothing, including the pith helmet, usually worn by colonial soldiers (p. 44); a full-page shot of a white man in colonial attire, most likely the father,

on a rope bridge traversing a body of water while facing us (p. 75) and a picture of a White man at the edge of a river, most likely the father image.

Symbolic imagery: Le Clézio often employs symbolic imagery to convey deeper themes and emotions, such as motifs of light and darkness, animals, and elements of nature, which add layers of meaning to the text. These include the top two-thirds of the page, which are taken up by a plate of rock carvings, where we can see symbols that may be considered early writing or graphics as well as oval forms that oddly resemble drawings of shoe prints etched in the stone (p. 14); a photo of a sizable hut with a thatched roof (p. 36) and an image of a herd of cows in front of mountains (p. 72).

Images related to the narrator's childhood experiences, such as play, exploration, and moments of wonder, contribute to the nostalgic tone of the novel and shape the reader's understanding of the protagonist's journey as narrated by him. These classifications help to illuminate the multifaceted nature of the imagery in *L'Africain* and its role in shaping the novel's themes, characters, and overall atmosphere.

In general, the collection includes a handwritten card, a large drawing on rustic engravings, five landscape photos (two of which show a case or a herd of cows as the first scene), nine portraits of people, including six of indigenous people, and two photos of a man who is probably the father but is difficult to make out in the natural setting in which he is shown. Only King Memfoi is

positioned seriously in the bulk of the pictures, which have a feeling of spontaneity about them since the actors seem to be gazing straight at the camera, pointing out that these are sepia-toned images rather than black and white ones.

Looking at the images portrayed in *L'Africain*, we can say that photography helped the writer to bring his past to life. It is therefore a link between his past and his present., The use of images taken by his father the novel, is his own way of connecting to his childhood memories and reliving the emancipative and memorable events that have greatly influenced his life even till this point in time. Le Clézio in his way, describes the features of the average African environment, and some of these features are mentioned by Wisner (2013):

...African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers, and ancient wise men living in hermitic splendor.
(Wisner, p.10)

Additionally, he chose images that allowed him to examine fully his father's personality above those that blatantly referenced his own experience of Africa. Each image takes up a whole page or half a page, oftentimes in the middle of text that has no connection to it save from the title page artwork, which is a full page. Le Clézio believes that the book's one image, which fills two entire pages, has special importance since his father believed it was exceptionally gorgeous and important for memories. The illustration is also followed by a lengthy comment from the author that takes up a whole page.

Some images have a documentary or even a picturesque feel (although if Le Clézio would not be familiar with the term), such as the one of the three dancers with feathers and palms in their hair (p.18), the one of King Memfoi, or the one showing the somewhat antiquated way of boat docking in a nacelle. But viewers are often surprised by how little local emotion, sorrow, or even local colour is conveyed in the bulk of the images. Le Clézio may have been driven to utilize subtle imagery to convey a sense of distance as a result. Therefore, photography can both abolish and create distance with the viewer and this is what Sontag (1997) refers to as an aesthetic distance found on the thread of photographic experiences:

Aesthetic distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs, if not right away, then certainly over time. Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art.
(Sontag: 21)

Photography in this sense, goes beyond distance, hence, it has more to do with time which according to Sontag, can position photographs. Snyder and Allen (1975) support this notion by using a photograph of five horses to describe a movement from distance to time:

In a photo-finish, we see five horses that were at the same place at different times. When we look at the nose and tail of a single horse in the picture, we are still looking at things which were recorded as they occupied the same place at different times. As we move from left to right across the picture, we are not looking at distance, but at time. (Snyder and Allen: 159)

When it comes to the father himself, we are ironically offered a skewed representation through both images and words. The writer's unwillingness to divulge his identity, surname, or face is another issue that is regularly brought up by journalists and critics. The two photographs, where the father may be observed standing far away in a jungle scene, or at least where it is thought that he is, can be used to infer indirect mental and physical representations of the father. However, Le Clézio concedes having long envisioned it utilizing lorgnons:

La première fois que j'ai vu mon père, à Ogoja, il m'a semblé qu'il portait des lorgnons. D'où me vient cette idée ? Les lorgnons n'étaient déjà plus très courants à cette époque. [...] En réalité, mon père devait porter des lunettes à la mode des années trente, fine monture d'acier et verres ronds qui reflétaient la lumière. (*L'Africain*, p.43)

Only the reader's imagination can conjure up this image because there are only two images of the father featured in the book, who may or may not be clearly visible. As a result, it is impossible to tell whether or not he wears spectacles and much harder to identify his physical appearance. Le Clézio's isolation from his father, who is viewed as unusual and foreign, may be attributed to both his childhood experiences and as an adult at the time of the story's publication. Notwithstanding how the image must have looked like in the novel, it is better than having no physical representations of one's childhood memories. This departure from the written or visual representation of the traits is also congruent with the idea that Africa displays the body but hides the appearances:

Il me semble que c'est de l'entrée dans cette case, à Ogoja, que date l'effacement de mon visage, et des visages de tous ceux qui étaient autour de moi. (*L'Africain*, p.10)

Discussing the two pictures of the father, Mary B. Vogl writes «à peine un individu, il fait plutôt partie du paysage». (Vogl, p.82) The reader may find it challenging to distinguish the bridge's cables in the photo on the last page due to the father's employment of such a cliché to represent him, which also lowers the topic to nothing more than a weak tiny white silhouette against a black background. It is challenging to speak and depict the parent; the best one can hope for is an interpretation of the persona.

In reality, such a representative stance reflects a literary choice. Referring to the father by his first name, portraying him in great detail, and putting him in a painting too near to the viewer would all compromise the father's yearning for autonomy, which has led him to missteps and exile throughout his life. These missteps and exile are metaphorical and follow the son's experiences growing up in Africa, his struggles with identity and belonging, and his eventual return to France as an adult. As he navigates the complexities of cultural and social differences, his experiences of displacement are evident throughout the narrative in *L'Africain*, as he (the son) grapples with feelings of alienation and longing for a sense of home. As a result, the son's verbal depiction of his father, which was completed by the pictures his father took, must inevitably stay lyrical. The verbal

and visual portrayals, which are both based on landscapes, only obliquely refer to the feelings and attributes of this individual. They do not reflect any of the stereotypes of White people relating to colonial-era Africa.

In general, pictures unmistakably help to establish a certain mood in the writer's childhood that words alone cannot. For instance, while imagining a landscape with a lake or pond at the foot of a mountain range, the scene assumes a more artistic rather than picturesque dimension, and there are no evident man-made structures that would allow one to identify the precise place. There are also no longer any aquatic creatures swimming or crawling about. Nearly anywhere may have been used to take the contested photograph. Overall, the contested nature of this photograph reflects broader debates about representation, power, and ethics in the portrayal of colonial histories and indigenous cultures. No matter how hazy some of them might be at times, the photos have a special way of spatializing the words. They are therefore not evenly dispersed throughout the text, and as we shall see, they continue to have a shaky connection to the words. As a result, the scansion effect is a little off-balance and seems purposefully random, as though the pictures are drawn to themselves the most frequently.

Montier (2008:8) asserts that the connection between photography and writing is «tout le contraire d'une complémentarité naturelle, d'une complicité sans nuages. » This idea could be especially relevant to Le Clézio's book since it highlights the problematic or at the very least perplexing nature of the link

between word and picture. The appearance of some photographs, which are not explicitly referenced in the text but are instead hinted at or alluded to, may at first seem unexpected to the reader and may even appear to be gratuitous or independent.

It is not all the photographs that get to be referenced in the text. The appearance of some photographs, which are not explicitly referenced in the text but are instead hinted at, may at first seem peculiar to the reader and may even seem gratuitous or independent. As an example, the cliché used to illustrate rock art engravings (p.14) may only be important in terms of aesthetics unless it can also be seen as Le Clézio's attempt to convey visually the mystery of his childhood, the past, and the cosmos he explores. Could we also be right if we say that it is another way of keeping the past alive by purposely using the novel as a storehouse for memorable events and activities? Some of them appear nearly odd or at least confusing. The reader-spectator is a little bewildered by this image because they lack the necessary codes to interpret it.

Regarding interpretation, several of the illustrations that the text references to are not included in the book. It would be wise to acclaim critically that the pictures chosen are deliberately selected to show some important liberating and sensational moments in the author's life. However, the author continues without really presenting the several pictures of English Guiana that the father took:

Sur ses photos paraissent la solitude, l'abandon, l'impression d'avoir touché la rive la plus lointaine du monde. [...] Les photos que mon père a aimé prendre, ce sont celles qui montrent l'intérieur du continent, la force inouïe des rapides que sa pirogue doit remonter, halée sur des rondins, à côté des marches de pierre où l'eau cascade, avec sur chaque rive les murs sombres de la forêt. (*L'Africain*, p.51)

Once more, we are given an open representation of parental psychology. Without a doubt, the absence of pictures would provide Le Clézio with greater liberty to analyze his father's photographic selections, leading our interpretation toward his preference for the solitary and violent nature of the elements. The fact that he selected certain pictures above others shows his evolving tastes. Then, by creating a sensual allusion to this supposedly mysterious individual, he offers a specific connection to his past in Africa. However, there is an unraveled sensuality that the author's illustrations can only hint at, and the reader is invited to visualize it for themselves in light of these words:

Sur la photo apparaît l'étrave de la pirogue en train de descendre le fleuve, je la regarde et je sens le vent, l'odeur de l'eau, j'entends malgré le grondement du moteur le crissement des insectes dans la forêt, je perçois l'inquiétude qui naît à l'approche de la nuit. (*L'Africain*, p. 53).

The image's evocative power enables us to not only see but also hear, feel, and touch (via the effleurage of the wind on our skin). Additionally, a sixth sense is opened up, enabling one to detect the tension in the night-time air. When the son adds a few more lines later that he has also followed in his father's footsteps,

one of the first things we learn from this is that his childhood encounter with his father has influenced his life as an adult. In other words, his imagination is also tied to his childhood photographic experiences and some of these liberating experiences is what we see him bring out in the photos. Here, autobiography and biography are used interchangeably:

Moi aussi j'ai acheté une pirogue, j'ai voyagé debout à la proue, les orteils écartés pour mieux agripper le bord [...]. En examinant la photo prise par mon père à l'avant de la pirogue, j'ai reconnu la proue au museau un peu carré, la corde d'amarrage enroulée et, posée en travers de la coque pour servir occasionnellement de banquette, la canalette, la pagaie indienne à lame triangulaire. Et devant moi, au bout de la longue « rue » du fleuve, les deux murailles noires de la forêt qui se referment.
(*L'Africain*, p.82-83)

A few times, Le Clézio also makes a direct connection between the written word and the visual image. The latter acts as commentary or a decryption or so that the former appears as an example proving the truth of the narrative. Sometimes the text uses clichés verbatim, like when the white colons are omitted:

L'Afrique, pour mon père, a commencé en touchant la Gold Coast, à Accra. Image caractéristique de la Colonie : des voyageurs européens, vêtus de blanc et coiffés du casque Cawnpore, sont débarqués dans une nacelle et transportés jusqu'à terre à bord d'une pirogue montée par des Noirs. [...] C'est cette image que mon père a détestée.
(*L'Africain*, p.57-58)

Looking at the original drawings taken from the writer's childhood down the pages, we could say that the visuals provide the reader a different route from

the sentences, serving as a sort of fictitious map. From the title page, which appears before the text, to the photograph that appears after the last line of the book and likely features the subject's father riding a horse across a river, the placement of the images in the book creates a different path than the one taken by the reader, enriching and crossing paths with them at various points along the way. Furthermore, many illustrations, as was already said, are not explicitly included in the text; should they thus be viewed as completely independent from it? Wouldn't sending an ad hoc delegation make more sense in place of this? By enabling readers to develop freely and subjectively their own links between the text and images, Le Clézio seems to be assigning each reader full responsibility for those relationships. Meynard (2014) supports this development:

Ainsi, certaines photographies ne sont pas explicitement décrites ni même évoquées mais peuvent pourtant être mises en rapport avec des passages du texte, éventuellement situés loin dans le livre. (Meynard:15)

This is the case of one of the childhood archives of the writer with the image of the three Africans clothed in caps that look to be painted and embellished with feathers or palm leaves, whose move appears to be a dance (page 18): in the lack of any caption, the observer concludes that they may be sorcerers because they were all dressed with traditional attire (clothes and leaves). However, the text wryly and bluntly refutes this hypothesis much later in the

passage. Le Clézio even refers to a situation where His Majesty's police and the District Officer came to Bamenda to honour the king:

Une photo prise par mon père, sans doute un peu satirique, montre ces messieurs du gouvernement britannique, raides dans leurs shorts et leurs chemises empesées, coiffés du casque, mollets moulés dans leurs bas de laine, en train de regarder le défilé des guerriers du roi, en pagne et la tête décorée de fourrure et de plumes, brandissant des sagaies.

(*L'Africain*, p. 64)

If the photograph that was released indeed captures this cliché, one may understand this reconstruction as a posthumous tribute to the irreverent father, with the son entirely deleting himself from the image that these despised authorities intended. Notwithstanding, there are possibilities the son was there when some of those pictures were taken because the exact timing was not specified. This is also possible by believing that most of the pictures selected by him represent special moments which he encountered, hence there are others he left out. The reader is always left with just a speculative conclusion since the text is always so far from the visual and there is never any clear connection between the two. Comparably, the memorable close-up image of the unclothed African child (p. 93), who has scars on the lower part of his face and is surrounded by other naked bodies, including a woman, shocks us on two levels: first, because of the child's intense gaze, and second, because of the peculiarity of the sharply-cut frame, which obscures the faces of all the other characters. Could that be a revision by the author? Or maybe the photographer just decided to do it at

random. Le Clézio remained silent about it. Since it underlines the juvenile and dark side of this adolescent look, such a cliché is disturbing, surprising, and even distressing.

Once again, it is evident how important children are to this author since they frequently have the memories and knowledge of the world that adults have lost. It is up to us to understand this photo in all of its perplexing depths. The words appear to contradict the picture, which is an exact representation of a child's head, yet they could help us comprehend the enigmatic wall separating this face from us. The text is broken up by images, which encourage the reader, who is now a spectator, to choose an alternative route.

The writer continues to reminisce on his childhood and times with his father by making attempts to connect images and text together in various cases in the novel. This is the case with the uncommented image of two Black children facing the camera at a river's edge on page 11, which was probably shot in Africa and maybe a reference to the text's mention of two Indian children near the mouth of the River Demerara on page 52.

The handwritten map of the land of Brousse that the father was in charge of creates a separate path through the book that focuses on place names and is significantly distinct from the other visual content. Meynard (2014) interprets this significant distinctiveness as a way for the author to write under the aegis of his father:

Le Clézio a sans doute choisi de ne reproduire qu'une partie de la carte établie par son père, car cette dernière semble coupée sur la gauche. Elle occupe une position stratégique dans l'ouvrage, puisqu'elle figure juste après la première de couverture, avant même la page de titre, et donc avant que le texte ne commence. Peut-être faut-il y voir une manière pour Le Clézio de mettre son écriture sous le patronage de la seule trace graphique paternelle qui subsiste. (Meynard, p.16-17)

From the citation, the exploration of the father's authority could be strategically seen to act as guide for the writer who under the aegis of his father explores the multifaceted dynamics of the father-son relationship and its significance within the broader context of Africa.

Genealogical trajectory in *L'Africain*: Walking in the shadow of paternal ancestry

The autobiographical content of *L'Africain*, which was released in 2004 by Mercure de France, is the culmination of Le Clézio's continuous progression towards an ever more personal narrative. *L'Africain* does not engage in this type of writing where biographical elements feed fiction but rather presents itself as a strictly biographical text, not attempting to conceal the experience of the real life behind any fiction-making techniques. *Onitsha* (1991) already contained firmly biographical elements about the author's upbringing. This time around, the author wishes to return to his early years, which were essential to his growth as an author and traveller as well as to this brief African childhood that has had such an impact on him.

A kind of destiny for his future seemed to be confirmed by the image of his father which draws memories from his childhood in Africa. It is the embodied otherness in which the author finds himself and through which he pursues an intergenerational journey inspired by utopia, and whose outcomes constitute less an end in itself than a means. In this journey, Le Clézio attempts to relive the life of this valued stranger and beloved adversary (his father). This choice foregrounds his childhood quest as a central subject in the book. Le Clézio recreates a crucial moment from his early life the moment he learned about his father and creates an image of him. The paths of one and the other eventually cross. Also taken into consideration will be the issue of paternal ancestry and its transmission via writing. Given the analysing the writer's genealogical trajectory in this oeuvre, two significant points of discussion will be uncovered.

The first point of discussion in this return-to-childhood quest is in remembrance of the father- a very important figure of motivation to him. Levesque (2015) describes who this father is to the writer and the audience:

Qui est ce père, l'Africain dont Le Clézio fils entreprend le récit? Ancien militaire britannique mauricien, il fut chirurgien de campagne, mais aussi un aventurier infatigable cumulant les voyages, toujours à la recherche de nouveaux territoires, qui garde de l'Afrique une aura de mystère, mais qui, en fin de vie, revenu en Europe, n'est plus qu'un « vieil homme dépaycé, exilé de sa vie et de sa passion, un survivant »
(Le Clézio 2004, cited by Levesque 2015, p.2)

During this visit to Europe, the author will see his father a second time. However, the meeting that is the subject of this tale is the one that forever altered Le Clézio and turned him into the writer and son of the African because he began writing books during the protracted ship journey, which lasted more than 15 days. Thus, according to Gérard de Cortanze (1999), the biographer of Le Clézio:

L'expérience de ce voyage est double : un voyage qui rapproche géographiquement du père, un voyage en soi par le biais de l'écriture. »
(Cortanze, p.46)

The writer feels as though he is removing himself from history and obtaining a past when he is left at the age of eight in 1948 to join his father on a continent he had never heard of:

Ce que je recevais dans le bateau qui m'entraînait vers cet autre monde, c'était aussi la mémoire. Le présent africain effaçait tout ce qui l'avait précédé. (*L'Africain*, p.14)

The structural coherence of *L'Africain* still appears to be influenced by themes whose setup mainly emphasises the adoption of the male-dominated heritage through the young Le Clézio's experience which makes this encounter important. Treating the father figure through the concept of structure is indeed ironic, but this is not the case with *L'Africain*. The concept of the father figure is not necessarily ironic but rather complex and multifaceted. the son's relationship with his father in the narrative, reflects the broader themes of identity, belonging and the search for meaning. The father figure which serves as a symbol of stability

and paternalism is also challenged by the son's desire for independence and self-discovery. By diverting us from one figure to the next and requiring us to recognise the importance of the other in the first, these diversions have the effect of balancing the composition.

The second point of discussion as it relates to the quest of the writer's past is based on the fact that Africa is considered the main point or body of discussion. The word 'Africa', as it stands, would directly remind the writer about his past and childhood. A conversation between Le Clézio and Gérard de Cortanze that was reconstructed from snatches of past conversations was published in the Literary Magazine less than a year after Le Clézio received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008 (de Cortanze, 2008). The relevance of autobiographical writing for going back to one's beginnings is underscored in the essential and thorough rebuilding indicated there. Thus, childhood experience changed into an event that influenced adult life. Le Clézio does not use an adversarial tone to support this view, and he avoids using the word "wild animals" in any context; rather, it is in line with his experience:

Je suis resté un an en Afrique. Un an de grandes vacances. C'était prodigieux. J'ai toujours l'impression que je n'aurai fait qu'un seul voyage dans ma vie : celui-là. Les autres, ce ne sont pas des voyages. Prendre un avion et aller quelque part, ce n'est pas un voyage. Même aller passer six mois dans la forêt... (Cortanze 2008, cité by Levesque-2015, p.3)

Furthermore, *L'Africain* enables Le Clézio to examine this pivotal time in his life and appreciate its effects nearly 60 years later. The habitus question takes centre stage in this intimate tale because it goes beyond just portraying this period in African history. It could also be a vision of the past. The first natural character in the episode is not further explained by the author. When he landed in Africa, he compared the conditions there to those in Nice, where he had lived in two identical rooms since he was five years old. Then, to his greatest astonishment, he discovered a body (referring to his unforgettable experiences in Africa):

L'Afrique qui déjà m'ôtait mon visage me rendait un corps, douloureux, enfiévré, ce corps que la France m'avait caché dans la douceur anémiant du foyer de ma grand-mère, sans instinct, sans liberté. (*L'Africain*, p.14)

Talking about the past, the writer claims that it exists only in an idealised form, more like a dream than a real experience. It is common to use a metaphor to refer to the recollection of the year that was spent in Ogoja as a period of time: « passé à bord d'un bateau, entre deux mondes » (AF, 20) : « un moment, sans aucune explication, sans regret, sans avenir, presque sans mémoire. » (AF, 29). *L'Africain* shares with us a moment in the author's childhood that spearheaded a revolution: « L'arrivée en Afrique a été pour moi l'entrée dans l'antichambre du monde adulte. » (AF, 47). The area of literature is being revolutionized by a writer who writes in the first person and presents himself as his father. This shows the great influence that meeting with the father at Ogoja had on the writer's childhood.

On a third note, the writer suggests Africa to be the mediocrity of the Western world. Moreso, a remembrance of the author's childhood in *L'Africain* is a way of remembering how he fled mediocrity at a point in time in his life. This kind of journey according to Levesque (2015) is utopic: "Plus qu'une quête, c'est une utopie qui est en jeu." (Levesque:5) A movement of profound reconciliation that is simultaneously a search towards utopia, or, to put it another way, a journey away from oneself with the long-term goal of bettering oneself. Le Clézio's father is shown to us as an adventurer who, more than any other, is driven by the need to flee from a society from which he feels stranded and cannot accept the hypocrisy, deceit, or ideals he believes to be incorrect:

Il avait choisi autre chose. Par orgueil sans doute, pour fuir la médiocrité de la société anglaise, par goût de l'aventure aussi. Et cette autre chose n'était pas gratuite. Cela vous plongeait dans un autre monde, vous emportait vers une autre vie. Cela vous exilait [...], vous rendait, d'une certaine façon, inéluctablement étranger. (*L'Africain*, p.43)

For him, his wife, his child, and their progeny as well as succeeding generations, the utopian ideal comes true, and becomes reachable, or possibly everlasting, in the centre of the mountains. According to Jacqueline Dutton (2003), loneliness plays a significant part in the likelihood of considering paradise to be a reality:

La situation géographique de l'utopie exprime le besoin de s'isoler, de protéger du reste du monde la perfection de la société utopique, telle une plante exotique qui doit être cultivée à l'abri de l'équilibre naturel. Cette enclave idéologique [...] est un monde clos, représentant par sa fermeture l'achèvement, la totalité, et l'unité. (Dutton, p.41-42)

In contrast to corrupt civilization, whose complexity is cut off from its source, the idealized world of this father who sleeps soundly in paradise is built on this bond with nature and viewed as primal. Le Clézio discusses a photograph his father took at the start of his afro-peregrinations:

Au premier plan, tout près du rivage, on voit la case blanche dans laquelle mon père a logé en arrivant. Ce n'est pas par hasard que mon père, pour désigner ces maisons de passage africaines, utilise le mot très mauricien de « campement ». Si ce paysage le requiert, s'il fait battre mon cœur aussi, c'est qu'il pourrait être à Maurice,... C'était bien la même terre rouge, le même ciel, le même vent constant de la mer, et partout, sur les routes, dans les villages, les mêmes visages, les mêmes rires d'enfants, la même insouciance nonchalante. Une terre originelle, en quelque sorte, où le temps aurait fait marche arrière, aurait détricoté la trame d'erreurs et de trahisons. (*L'Africain*, p.61)

This sentence implies a dual relationship to primal sources—the innocence and purity of childhood and of nature. In the words of Jacqueline Dutton, "The attempts to pare down the existence of humans, a subject that continues to grow, lead to a revaluation of primitiveness and childhood as anchor points in the face of modern scientific and technological progress" (Dutton, 2003, 85). Primitivism, this type of utopian escape into the exoticism of a world unlike one's own, where one may forget oneself, presupposes simplicity which is consistent with the father's way of life. However, in a utopia, people want no extra riches attained via asceticism; rather, they seek the sole satisfaction of their sincere needs.

Considering it is a criticism of bourgeois society, the primitive thinking movement is opposed to all luxury and extravagance. Marin (1973) supports this statement thus saying that:

L'ascétisme est ainsi, dans la perspective utopienne, comme l'inverse négatif des faux plaisirs de la richesse ostentatoire et de la gratuité ludique des comportements. La critique de l'ascétisme au nom de la raison et de la nature circonscrit, avec celle des faux plaisirs, l'espace même de l'idéologie bourgeoise. (Marin, p.224)

Furthermore, being a part of colonial powers, according to the father, is what most seriously undermines utopia: "Practising medicine is also exercising power over people, and conducting medical research is also conducting political research." (AF, 84) The author comes to the following conclusion, turning utopia into dystopia: "This same African country had destroyed his family life and his love for the Siberian people, in Banso, in Bamenda, where he had experienced the joy of sharing the adventure of his life with a woman." (AF, 92)

The sole purpose of leaving Africa is so that he would no longer be able to claim his African identity: The worst part of his life was after he left Africa. He must have experienced animosity in his household, which made adapting more difficult. He was exasperated and out of proportion in his fury. (AF, 94) The father seemed to have a desperate yearning to go, to continue his incomplete, confined search for pleasure, and to seek recompense for his prior pain. Unfit for Europe as an old man, he keeps plotting his escape right up to the very end:

Il avait fait le projet de retrouver l'Afrique [...] Puis il avait imaginé s'installer aux Bahamas, acheter un lopin à Eleuthera et y construire une sorte de campement. Il avait rêvé devant les cartes. Il cherchait un autre endroit, non pas ceux qu'il avait connus et où il avait souffert, mais un monde nouveau, où il pourrait recommencer, comme dans une île. (*L'Africain*: 100)

The various points that have been discussed as regards issues relating to the author's childhood in this part of the chapter so far, establish the fact that the author's description of past events in Africa means that he was still very much sensitive to, and willing to relive, his childhood memories. To this effect, he finds himself being captive of such experiences. Reliving the moments of the past through writing, photography, and by any other memorable means needed this was his own way of embracing the true freedom that he enjoyed back then as well as reminisce on the challenges he had had to surmount. The sensitivity and features of these memories are further described by Dutton (2003):

Cet enfant qu'il n'est plus, même s'il lui arrive encore de sentir en lui, dans sa chair, dans sa mémoire sensitive, ce qu'il a été ; cet enfant demeure captif du passé, il appartient aux « mythes du paradis perdu, [...] des origines, et de l'enfance [...] s'inscrivant dans ce mouvement régressif qui est souvent étudié chez Le Clézio et qui suggère un retour à la source, à la nature, à l'origine » (Dutton :289).

Eventually, when the African finally agrees to prolong the first, he is bringing to an end a personal revolution that the evocation of memory might restart. Although he is somewhat the son, he is largely reliving the father's life.

Hence, his encounters in Africa are still influencing his life and writings to this day.

In this chapter, we have looked more into how le Clézio relived some memorable moments of his past by using photographic and paternal ancestry shadows in *L'Africain*. The classification of the 15 images in the book is depicted in four ways that resound some common themes in Leclézian literature about Africa such as natural and geographical landscapes, cultural imagery, colonial and postcolonial imagery/presence, and symbolic imagery. All these became a subject due to colonial presence in Africa. Sebe, Mechkarini & Rutherford (2023) relate this factual colonial presence while unmasking the colonial past through memory, narrative, and legacy:

As could be expected, the legal landscape was deeply influenced by the colonial experience. Scholars such as Salmon Shomade have traced the continued impact of British colonialism on the rule of law across Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. (Sèbe, Mechkarini & Rutherford: 829)

Realistically, the use of images in this book strengthens and shows the level of certainty and nostalgic feeling that the writer still maintains for Africa and Africans. This certainty was subject to his physical access to his father and his father's archives or memories.

CONCLUSION

J.M.G LE CLÉZIO'S PROSE AND THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

This research has been driven by the concept of “Le Clézio, L’Africain” as a way of capturing the place of Africa and Africans in the writer’s oeuvre. The writer’s interest in Africa is seen as a quest beyond his African descent. By this, we imply that the author is African, not only by descent but also as a result of his experience and knowledge about the African culture and terrain. His deep connection to Africa extends beyond his ancestry, permeating his oeuvre with a profound understanding and appreciation for the continent’s diverse cultures, landscapes, and histories.

This research focused on the question of Le Clézio being an African as a result of the way he critically depicts the continent, displaying in the process vast knowledge of its history, monumental places, and people. We may also argue that Le Clézio still seems to display a strong feeling of responsibility and kinship to African culture and civilization through his literary works that are connected to his African roots as shown in this research. Le Clézio wants to develop in his works a close connection with African culture, both historically and culturally. As an author, Le Clézio has effectively relived and reconnected with his past as seen by the variety of techniques he has employed to portray his recollections of Africa and Africa. More specifically, the use of texts, names, and symbolic pictures goes

further to demonstrate the emotional bond he has with a specific location in Eastern Nigeria, as we shall see below.

Through the case studies: *L'Africain*, *Onitsha*, *Désert*, and *Gens des nuages*, this dissertation has been able to point at issues relating to him as an African by knowledge, apart from the ancestral and historical links he has with these regions. With this knowledge, comes the ability to bring some cultural elements about Africa and Africans into play in these books, citing for example: his relationship with Africans, use of Indigenous names, geographical citing of places, and the occasional use of the Nigerian creole (Pidgin) in *Onitsha* and *L'Africain*:

“Big black fellow box spouse white man fight him, he cry too mus!”... “Spouse Missus catch di grass, he die.” (*Onitsha*: 61-62)

This use of the Nigerian pidgin shows an intimacy and a mastery of certain vital parts of the Nigerian culture as it acts as a unifying force for a country like Nigeria with many languages. Commenting on the significance of this pidgin, Adepaju (2003) cites:

It evokes the question of the possibility of a national language created in Nigeria by Nigerians that bears the imprint of Nigerian history... It takes us closer to the issue of the possibility of a national language that Nigerians identify with at a more intimate, visceral, closer-to-the-bones level than Standard English (Adepaju 2003:2)

Added to the use of pidgin is the geographical citing of places which are also found in the four books. A typical example is found in *Gens des Nuages* and *Désert*, where the writer significantly uses the context of the Saguia el Hamra and Smara, which are important historical locations in the Western Sahara. This reflects the fact that the author knows his whereabouts, be it in the Western Sahara or in Eastern Nigeria. This aspect of the author's knowledge of the terrain has contributed richly to the effective use of cultural and historical names in the case studies:

Quand on descend vers la Sanguia el Hamra, en venant de Smara, on ressent une autre émotion... (*Gens des Nuages*: 65)

A thematic approach will be used as a guide towards classifying the significant points that this thesis contributes to the body of research. Therefore, two major thematic approaches have been adopted to explore the place of Le Clézio's engagement with Africa and Africans in his oeuvre. These two key points are very significant and indicative of Le Clézio's depiction of Africa and Africans in the four selected books. The first point has to do with his show of intimate knowledge about Africa and Africans, demonstrated through his prose, and this very much reflects the significance of this intimate relationship or connection with this topic. Secondly, it has been established that childhood and personal connections or trajectories play significant roles in defining the writer as an African by knowledge and experience.

Establishing this first point makes it clear that the writer's knowledge about Africa and Africans is driven by his intimate relationship with the continent. To this effect, the analysis of the case studies has shown that the writer's knowledge about Africa and Africans is demonstrated by his understanding of the environment, culture, traditions, and customs of the African continent. The environment plays a vital role in the latter. Whilst the continent is often depicted in miserabilist terms, the author succeeds in demonstrating the exceptional variety of the African environment, its resilience, and the creativity of its populations. This dissertation has sought to use the African continent as a way of analysing and articulating le Clézio and the environment: two books of my corpus are about desert spaces (Sahara Desert) and another two are on are about tropical Africa. The combination of two very different biotopes on the African continent at the heart of these four books has strengthened the analysis regarding how le Clézio engages with environmental matters.

In addition, Le Clézio's engagement with environmental issues in our case studies involves portraying the destruction of nature, the loss of traditional ways of life connected to the land, and the consequences of environmental degradation on individuals and societies. To this effect, preserving the natural order as seen in the photographic memories of *L'Africain* (62-63) and *Gens des nuages* (12-13) and reconnecting with the earth to achieve a more sustainable and balanced

existence feature amongst the author's desire. Esposito (2009) comments on such desire:

Like the Darién, the desert is home to indigenous people who live nomadic lives. It is characterised more by its unforgiving nature than by any human-caused alteration. According to Le Clézio's description in his book, it is an area of natural order, uncrowded by humans, and devoid of the oppressive contemporary order that rules in more developed areas. When colonial troops encroached on the more economically significant areas of their nation, the indigenous people were able to flee to this site since it had little productive value. (Esposito, 2009:2-3)

Regarding the issue of knowledge, it is also important to mention that the study of these four books made possible an engagement with the different customs and traditions of Africa, some of which are animist and attached to West Africa (*Onitsha* and *L'Africain*), while others (*Gens des nuages* and *Désert*) are Muslim and attached to the North African region. Both regions are historically, ancestrally paternally or maternally linked to the authors (Le Clézio and his wife). The case studies were used to reveal the longstanding attachment of Le Clézio to indigenous cultures and traditions in Africa. Le Clézio can therefore be seen as a writer who has an interest in indigenous or primitive cultures with two significant examples like the Hassaniya-speaking Moors (in Saguia el Hamra) – especially the Aroussiyine tribe in *Gens des nuages* and *Désert*. Jemia shares common ancestors with the Aroussiyine tribe to whose territory she returns two generations later. Also, it is through Le Clézio's wife that the mother's voice may be heard when she converses in her ancestors' native Hassaniya language (*GN*:85). This is

the voice of a lady from the desert who sings love songs, epic tales, and poems, as well as the voice of the mother. This articulates Le Clézio's knowledge and love for Indigenous and primitive cultures and traditions in Africa:

Pour Jemia, la langue Hassaniya est facile à comprendre, c'est la langue que sa mère lui parlait dans son enfance pour l'habituer à ses sonorités si différentes de l'Arabe dialectal en usage au Maroc. (*Gens des Nuages*:85)

The author's knowledge about Africa and Africans is justified by the experience he has gathered over time while travelling through the continent. This introduces the second thematic point of view that is reflected across the case studies as his personal experience which has been highlighted in this thesis as another crucial part of Le Clézio's engagement with the African continent. This brought me to the analysis of the relationship between the formative years of the writer and the narrator. These formative years and personal trajectories form part of the writer's experience because *Gens des Nuages* for example, is based on his knowledge of the subject, thanks to his wife while *L'Africain* and *Onitsha* are about his experience as a child. These show how this literature is fed by the personal experience of the narrator /author relationship.

Furthermore, it has been shown in this thesis that part of Le Clézio's experience with Africa and the African continent saw him moved from an uncertain consciousness of hiding behind the shadows of the narrator or protagonist as a fictitious character (Fintan) in *Onitsha* to reveal himself, to a state

of realistic consciousness of walking in the footsteps of his father and wife's lineage both in *L'Africain* and *Gens des Nuages* respectively. It can therefore be described as a study of the long shadow of the African continent in Clezio's oeuvre which resonates with the metaphor of following in his father's footsteps. These thematic elements are found across the four chapters.

This study has also revealed that this state of consciousness is backed up by photography in *Gens des Nuages* and *L'Africain*. It shows that the writer understood better the intentions of the father as well as what made him an African. This realisation results in him backing two of our case studies with photographic memories. The images serve as a link between the author and his father. With the help of these pictures, the author may more readily take a hypothetical trip into the past and experience the world through the father's perspective. What this shows is that the author has been effective in experiencing and re-establishing a connection with his history in Africa via the use of images and writings. In *Onitsha* and *Désert*, no photographs were taken, thereby depicting his uncertainty about the events surrounding these books. However, in the other two books, his level of experience and certainty about the continent and his father were brought to reality. It can therefore be argued that the author consistently examines and reflects on the relationships between persons and society, nature, and tradition in his writings. His love of photography developed into a hue of dream, fantasy,

myth, and adventure because of these themes. Yu (2019) outlines the potential effects that reading Le Clézio might have on the reader:

Reading and studying Le Clezio's works requires not just critical thinking but also introspection. We are able to acquire lessons, to regain the serenity, harmony, and balance that our age is losing by examining the allegorical meaning and warning in his works. (Yu, p. 26-27)

The case studies have been used as a medium in this thesis to present lessons about cultural diversity, unity, and harmony found within the African community which the writer invites other races living outside the continent to understand better. It has been established that the writer has always been inspired by the African culture and civilization since when he set foot on the continent as a child. This says much as to why he has explored many parts of Africa. Chaudey (2023) supporting this statement says:

Le Clézio est comme l'explorateur d'une humanité au-delà et en dessous de la civilisation régnante. (Chaudey:1)

Moving on to add a third note of consideration, the analysis of the author's relationship with Africa in this thesis has created a pathway to understanding other possible lines of influence in Le Clézio's literature such as geographical influence, cultural exploration and socio-political commentary. Regarding geographical influence, it should be noted first that Le Clézio spent a significant portion of his childhood in Africa, particularly in countries like Mauritius and

Nigeria. His first-hand experiences of African landscapes, cultures, and people deeply influenced his writing style and thematic concerns in the four books used as case studies in this thesis: *L'Africain*, *Onitsha*, *Désert* and *Gens des nuages*. Next comes what I identify here as cultural exploration. Through this dissertation, we have shown that Le Clézio often addresses the complexities of African cultures, traditions, and histories. His works are imbued with vivid descriptions of African landscapes, customs, and languages, reflecting his deep appreciation for the continent's rich and diverse heritage. Le Clézio engages with several African civilizations in his cultural inquiry, sensitively and deeply capturing their customs, dialects, and ways of life. The nomadic tribes of North Africa and the indigenous tribes of West Africa exhibit this. Through this dissertation, we have sought to provide detailed insights into the intricacies of the human experience in many African cultural contexts.

Lastly, social and political commentary appears to be another main line through which the influence of Africa can be felt in these novels. The case studies serve as a lens to examine some of the most striking social and political issues facing the African continent, including colonialism, post-colonial struggles, environmental degradation, and globalization. His writing reflects a deep engagement with the socio-political realities of Africa and its peoples.

Overall, these findings about the role Africa and Africans in Le Clézio's oeuvre can be viewed as being heavily influenced by the African continent,

attempting to capture its essence, complexities, and enduring influence on his literary imagination. The beauty of nature in Africa is also at the heart of the corpus under study. Le Clézio uses his writing to point the readers in a direction that leads towards a return to nature and a pure, unpolluted atmosphere. We can discern concern for the state of human existence, self-redemption, the way to flee and return to nature, to the non-ruling civilization, to regain the harmony and equilibrium that have been lost in the four works we have examined in depth. Therefore, the denunciation of the impact of materialism upon human well-being features among the hallmarks of Le Clézio's prose.

Finally, the case studies have shown that the author favours highlighting the collective pain of the oppressed people above exposing the personal flaws of city inhabitants. He opposes war and colonisation and is in favour of returning to the ways of purity and reconnecting with nature. The notion of returning to purity can be observed in his exploration of the simplicity and authenticity of indigenous cultures, particularly in African contexts. He often contrasts this with the complexities and alienation of modern society, suggesting a longing for a simpler, more harmonious way of life. The author has lived and travelled in places including Mauritius, Morocco, and Nigeria. The books that we studied all have a plot built around the settings of the last two countries mentioned. This would also imply that the author places a high value on any writing that relates to the African continent. Drawing from the analysis conducted on Le Clézio's works on Africa,

it can be inferred that this Nobel Laureate in Literature possesses a unique literary prowess that captures the essence of African borders, seamlessly weaving together diverse cultures and landscapes from these regions to create profound narratives of human life and existence. His body of work effortlessly traverses between the mystical and the palpable, beckoning readers, even those unfamiliar with the intricate tapestry of African history, to embark on a journey through the realms of imagination and the complexities of its historical, cultural, and visual realities. Africa represents the focal point and nucleus of Leclézian literature, serving as a rich source of inspiration and thematic depth throughout his writings.

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