



## **An Insight into Life in the Algerian Desert through the Lens of Isabelle Eberhardt**

### **Un aperçu de la vie dans le désert algérien à travers l'objectif d'Isabelle Eberhardt**

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#### **Abstract**

If one may talk about travel literature, the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt cannot be denied. Her fascination with the Maghreb and the Algerian desert more particularly resulted in many works where she described her closeness to the region and its culture and people. Early before living in this part of the world, she engaged in a correspondence with a French officer stationed in the Sahara who was looking for a penfriend. The depth of insights in her works intrigued the readers especially after the publishing of her first short story and an essay “*Vision of the Maghreb*”. For many writers the desert represented freedom and non-conformism, it is directly associated to the release from the clichés and habits of the occidental life and culture. My presentation aims at questioning the representation of the desert in Isabelle Eberhardt writings. More precisely, the strong link she made between nature, the life, and the comportment of the people of the region, their personality and perception of life. In addition, the fact of making of nature a tool that gives more aesthetics to her writing.

**Keywords:** desert- nature- travel literature- description- comparaison

#### **Résumé**

Si l'on parle de littérature de voyage, les écrits d'Isabelle Eberhardt sont incontournables. Sa fascination pour le Maghreb et plus particulièrement pour le désert algérien a donné lieu à de nombreux ouvrages dans lesquels elle décrit sa proximité avec la région, sa culture et ses habitants. Peu avant de vivre dans cette partie du monde, elle a entamé une correspondance avec un officier français stationné dans le Sahara qui cherchait un correspondant. La profondeur des réflexions contenues dans ses œuvres a intrigué les lecteurs, en particulier après la publication de sa première nouvelle et d'un essai intitulé « *Vision du Maghreb* ». Pour de nombreux écrivains, le désert représente la liberté et le non-conformisme, il est directement associé à la libération des clichés et des habitudes de la vie et de la culture occidentales. Ma présentation vise à questionner la représentation du désert dans les écrits d'Isabelle Eberhardt. Plus précisément, le lien étroit qu'elle établit entre la nature, la vie et le comportement des habitants de la région, leur personnalité et leur perception de la vie. De plus, le fait de faire de la nature un outil qui donne plus d'esthétique à son écriture.

## **Introduction**

Literature permits the reader to travel; it gives wings to escape and develops our imagination through visualizing and identifying places we had never seen. Whether through novels, essays or poems, the reader dreams and travels through the words of a writer wishing to restore reality through writing. Moreover, the study of literature through a feminist lens involves analyzing the impact of gender on the creation, interpretation and reception of literary work. When applied to Isabelle Eberhardt novels, a feminist perspective of travel literature allows us to delve into the ways in which people struggle against nature to survive and have a decent life. The writer's lens seeks to highlight the representation of the desert in the novel and the role it plays in shaping the personality of people of the region and how it influences their interactions and the challenges they face against this harsh nature. Isabelle Eberhardt was among the writers who contributed a lot in the transmission of realities about the places she traveled to. Her writing is not a simple imagination but an authentic testimony of the description of the environment and the society with characters and stories in the desert space and elsewhere.

The desert has always been a prominent theme, symbolizing both harshness and freedom. Many authors explored its complexities, reflecting the socio-political landscape. In Algerian literature desert is always referred to as a metaphor for struggle for freedom or search for identity. A perspective on the desert in travel literature often emphasizes the informative power of arid landscapes for the characters and protagonists. The desert becomes a metaphor for self-discovery, resilience and braving free from societal restrictions and constraints. focus on the perspectives from which the term desert is tackled notably whether it is presented as a synonym of isolation and emptiness or as a space of collectivity and solidarity. Travel literature broke that stereotype of the desert as an empty space reformulating it to contemplated inspiring area. Thus, this paper highlights the importance of considering multiple points of view and perspectives when analyzing any literary work.

The aim of this paper is to explore the aspects of travel literature in the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt, notably her representation of the Algerian desert, which is a flexible world in travel Algerian literature and focus on its importance in building the hectic plot and the characters of her writings. In this paper, we will attempt to analyze the presence of the desert, its evocations, its symbols and the use that both authors makes of it in their novels as well as the reports, which are established between this space and the characters.

## **Travel Literature**

Travel literature is one of the types of literature in which the traveler narrates his experience through his voyages and journeys to many different lands of the world. During his trip, the traveler describes what he sees, what happens, what he feels; and sometimes makes comparison with his homeland. The writer in his narrative also talks about the people living in that place; their lifestyle, traditions, and even languages. It helps the reader to discover new lands and new places without caring of moving there. It can be the author's imaginary story presented as if they are real events like the adventure stories.

This genre of literature emerged in the 15th century when many travel descriptions were created by discoverers of the time including Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci. However, this type of literature got more popular and widely read in the Victorian era. The most popular travel adventures were Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, travel narratives became more written and more read. Many new travelers started to note their real experiences in traveling or creating a story from their own

imagination, so many readers wanted to explore new lands by traveling through the lines of the work (Fahim 34).

Travel literature can be divided into three categories. The first is called travel guide, this one helps tourists in travels. The writer should be faithful in the dates and places. The other type is historic- geographical that is known in Renaissance writings. It describes numerous geographic regions, towns and areas and narrates regional anecdotes and stories. Ibn Battuta's *The Travel* is the best illustration of this category in which he recounts the trips of his adult life. Personal discovery is the last type and the new one in the world of literature. Unlike the two precedent types, this one underscores the author's voyages to make an interrelation between him and that space. It reveals the inner psychological, spiritual and existential themes. This type is represented in Isabelle Eberhardt writings about the desert, where she speaks about it to refer to her emotions and its relation with it (Gharib,78).

In addition to what has been said previously, travel literature has inspired other art forms, including films, photography, and art. Exploring these works provides a holistic understanding of how travel influences not only the written word but also visual and cinematic expressions.

The purpose of Travel Literature is to know more about other people and their traditions, customs, beliefs and languages. It also helps to discover new lands and places without going there in person. Travel Literature is still an important form of literature since it is the hard copy of the real world. The narratives of Isabelle Eberhardt are among the best illustrations of Travel Literature. She wrote stories according to her personal experiences in the Sahara of Algeria of which she got obsessed.

Through her writing, Isabelle Eberhardt tried to transfer her feelings about the desert to the reader and how it made her feel. More it affected her to think twice about the existence. Traveling and living in this fascinating and at the same time arid area, she knew that she had to transmit the impact it had on her to other people.

#### **About Isabel Eberhardt:**

Isabelle Wilhelmine Marie Eberhardt was born as an illegitimate daughter to a mother from Russian nobility of German origin, Natalia de Moerder, and of a father born in Armenia, Alexandre Trophimowsky, anarchist and Tolstoyan thinker. She grew up near Geneva at "La villa Neuve". She received a polyglot education, which allowed her to communicate in Russian, Italian, German, French, Arabic and Turkish.

In 1897, she settled with her mother in Algeria, more precisely in Annaba (Bone); she preferred to live in Algeria because she hated the European environment. She had a relationship with Mohamed Khodja during his stay in Bon and started to become attracted to the Muslim religion before she finally converted to Islam.

Isabelle Eberhardt then settled in Batna in the Aures in 1899. After the death of her mother, she lived for many months as a nomad between Batna, Beni M'zab and Oued Souf. In 1901, she was the victim of assassination attempt because she had been suspected of being a French spy and was forced to quit Algeria.

Her marriage to Selimane Henni a Muslim with a French nationality, allowed her to come back to Algeria as a war reporter to the *Al-Akhbar* newspaper and was sent to Ain Sefra then to Bechar in 1903. She was known by her man dressed appearance to attend the meetings in the mosques and Zaouias her house in Batna and Kenadsa (Bechar) still exist and classified as an historical Algerian heritage and still visited by many tourists.

In October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1904 the Oued of Ain Sefra flooded and the lower town, where she resided only one day before, is partly submerged. Her husband Slimane was found alive, but Isabelle perishes in the collapsed house. Her body was found six days later on October 27<sup>th</sup>. She rests in the small muslim cemetery in Sidi Boudjemaa in Ain Sefra (Kumph., 37).

Many of her works and stories were published after her death and present the daily life of the Algerian society at that time during the French colonization. Her travel journals and daily notes bring together her impression and thoughts of her nomadic passage in the Algerian desert. Some of her works had been published under the pseudo-names of Mahmoud Saadi and Nicolas Podolinsky.

### **The Desert in the Travel Journals of Isabelle Eberhardt:**

The writings of Isabelle Eberhardt are inspired by the landscape she discovered when she came to Algeria. What gives a realistic aspect to her works is the authenticity of the places where the characters move. Generally, she pulls the spaces from her travel journals to present them to the reader.

The second aspect is that the characters are always in osmosis with the place. The different cities and places cited in her works are authentic: Batna, El Oued, Algiers, Bousaada, Kenadsa...are among the places visited by the author. Her description to those places in her works is very authentic, giving importance to all the details and linking it to the characters to the actions she is going to relate. The places mentioned in the author's stories can refer either to cities she visited or to sites she discovered in her wandering and what she experienced and discovered during her travel and stay in houses, tents, and zaouias.

Starting first with the panoramas of the cities by an overall vision then a detailed one showing what characterizes them as in the short story *Le Major*, with the description of El Oued as discovered by the hero:

Des petites rues tortueuses, bordées de maisons de plâtre caduques, coupées de ruines, avec parfois l'ombre grêle d'un dattier cheminant sur les choses, obéissant elle aussi à la lumière, des petites places aboutissant à des voies silencieuses qui s'ouvraient brusquement, décevantes sur l'immensité incandescente du désert.. (Eberhardt, 2017,143)

In *Pleurs d'amandiers* it is the town of Bousaada which can be seen in a distance. The description of the author to it is marked by the feminist touch in a painting of an orientalist style:

Bousaada, la reine fauve vêtue de ses jardins obscurs et gardés par ses collines violettes, dort, voluptueuse, au bord escarpé de l'oued ou l'eau buisse sur les cailloux blanc des roses. Penchés comme en une nonchalance de rêve sur les petits murs terreux, les amandiers pleurent leurs larmes blanche sous la caresse du vent.. (Eberhardt, 2017,155)

In *Campement*, the description of Beni-Ouenif marks the authenticity of the place. A postcard where the author uses Arabic words to accentuate the familiarity with the place.

Le jour d'hiver se levait pale, grisâtre sur la hammada pierreuse. À l'horizon oriental au-dessus des dunes fauves de la Zousfana, une lueur sulfureuse palissait les lourdes buées grises. Les arêtes sèches les murailles abruptes des montagnes se détachaient en teints neutres sur l'opacité du ciel morne...les vieilles maisons en toub du ksar émergeaient jaunâtres, de l'ombre lourde de la vallée, au-delà des grands cimetières

désolés. Une tristesse immense planait sur le désert au-delà de sa lumière splendide »  
(Eberhardt, 2017, 173)

In *Les Enjolés* the story begins with the description of the riflemen parade the fact which puts the setting forward and gives value to the place showing that it goes hand in hand with the parade.

Le soleil clair d'automne effleuré d'une tiédeur attendrit les platanes jaunis et les feuilles éparés sur le sable herbue de la Place du Rocher, la plus belle de la croulante Ténès. Dans la limpidité sonore de l'air, les sons gais et excitants retentissent, alternant avec les accents les plus mélancoliques et plus africains avec la nouba arabe... (Eberhardt, 2015, 137)

What can be deduced from the previous extracts is that Isabelle Eberhardt has a particular sensibility for nature notably for the desert and Saharan Landscapes. The monotony of the desert reveals richness and a strength that fascinates her. Her description of this area makes the reader discover that she has an artist eye. Her description far from being meticulous like other authors do not lack precision and transmit a clear impressive message.

Isabelle Eberhardt can be considered as literary impressionist. For her the landscape is more than a physical object, she perceives the colors before anything else. For example when she says, the earth is ocher, she will speak of the ocher of the earth as well as the tears of the trees, of the hair of dreams about the rays of sunlight which slides on the trunks of the palm trees. She portrays the Saharan scenery that she loves so much as a painter having different palettes.

Her writings are neither folkloric nor romantic but they translate in a very transparent lens the real atmosphere that reigns in the desert and all the areas she described. Isabelle Eberhardt writings restore the daily life of the native community to a reality that European writers at the beginning of the twentieth century could not still truly conceive and less accept to see and describe to make it known. In *Journaliers* she writes:

Il n'y aura donc rien de ce qu'on est habitués à trouver dans les histoires arabes, ni fantasia ni intrigue, ni aventure. Rien que de la misère tombant goutte à goutte (Isabelle Eberhardt, 2017,126)

Through her writings and in her description of the nomad living in the desert, Isabelle Eberhardt could break the image some other European writers wanted to transmit showing the colonizer in a civilizing mission to those people. At the opposite, she described them as victims of colonialism and injustice. For her these nomads she lived with although poor and destitute, have more to teach than those foreigners who came with weapons to take their land and make fortune.

Her perception of happiness is at the extreme opposite of that of her compatriots. These men with whom she had built a strong relationship represented a lot to her; she loved them not only because they made her feel compassion and pity towards them but at the opposite because they had dignity and a lifestyle that could not be understood among Europeans who dream only of gold and power. The relationship between these men and the desert is like the one between a baby and his mother, a relationship of communion, which seemed odd to the colonizers who were not used to such an arid area.

The Islamic religion was of a big impact on Isabelle Eberhardt perception of the desert life. The Saharan nature is in the eyes of Isabelle the nature of Islam. For her being, a Muslim is living like a Muslim and among Muslims in the natural décor of their grandeur. For example,

the way she describes water shows the very version of Bedouins to this sacred liquid. She always speaks of Koubbas, the dome that reflects the saint place for Muslims: The Mosque.

Her writings revolved around how to live in such a geographical immensity. This challenging space reflected a perpetual quest for oneself. At the same time it contributes at the building of a new identity through meeting the other, and through writing about what is completely unknown for the reader making him curious to discover the area and live the same adventures. Showing that travel literature is not a marginalized genre of literature but it is of a great role in making people valorize an area and a space.

### Conclusion

Through her writing, Isabelle Eberhardt portrays the experiences of people who live in the Algerian desert in a very nuanced and complex way, the fact that led to many critique to her presence in the region. Although she grew up in Europe Isabelle Eberhardt knew the orientalist fever and colonial Algeria, she challenges dominant narratives that have historically defined the desert as an empty space without life. During her short life she had always been determined to live between traveling and writing. She never behaved as a tourist or a foreigner, at the opposite she merged in the Algerian society and did not manage any effort for that. She converted to Islam, she used pseudonyms to interact with marabouts imams and young Muslims, more she dressed as a man to attend the meetings in the mosques and zaouias.

Isabelle Eberhardt contributed significantly to the realm of travel literature as a literature exploring the different experiences, challenges and complexities faced by individuals who have been part of her stories. Her works definitely challenge and deconstruct stereotypes, inviting the reader to question their own preconceived notions and ideas on the desert. Her writings are the evidence that travel literature is the tool to make the reader live a faithful reproduction of a space instead of a picturesque dimension of this reality. They also stand as a testament to the enduring power of literature to reshape societal perspectives and foster empathy with their profound insights.

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