

The Image of Algeria in The Travel Literature of the Swiss Isabelle Eberhardt

Souad Oukaci

University of Dr. Yahia Fares in Médéa (Algeria)

oukacisouadmedea@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This article explores the image of Algeria in Western travel literature through the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt. It examines her impressions of the Algerian people, the Sahara, and local customs, highlighting how her portrayal differs from that of many Western travelers who often depicted Algeria in a stereotypical or inferior manner. The study emphasizes the value of travel literature as a tool for understanding the Other and transmitting cultural knowledge, and it underscores the literary and historical significance of Eberhardt's texts within Western travel writing.

The research adopts the historical method to trace the development of travel literature among Arabs and Westerners, and uses imagology as a theoretical framework. A descriptive and analytical approach is applied to identify the features of the image Eberhardt constructed of Algeria.

Findings show that Eberhardt offered a notably positive and nuanced representation, blending careful observation with narrative description and personal insight.

Keywords: Algeria; travel literature; Isabelle Eberhardt; cultural image; Western travelers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Travel literature is one of the most significant literary practices that enables researchers to examine the interaction between the self and place, between imagination and reality, and between different cultures. It is a narrative that recounts the experience of travel and movement, yet it is also a cultural and intellectual text that allows the traveler to express perceptions of the Other and of the visited space, thereby producing mental images that oscillate between reality and imagination. From this perspective emerges the importance of studying the image in travel writing—known as *imagology*—as an analytical tool that helps uncover the mechanisms through which such images are constructed and reveals the cultural, social, and political factors influencing them.

In this context, Isabelle Eberhardt stands out as a European traveler who lived an exceptional experience in Algeria. She went beyond the distance of the typical Western visitor, fully immersing herself in Algerian reality by engaging in the daily life of cities and oases, embracing Islam, and freely roaming the desert. Her writings—such as *In the Land of Sand* and *The Diaries of a Traveler*—represent a unique model through which the image of Algeria can be studied from an imagological perspective, far removed from the dominant colonial stereotypes of the nineteenth century.

This study aims to analyze Eberhardt's representations of the Sahara, customs, and traditions through three main axes: first, examining *imagology* as a theoretical framework for image analysis; second, discussing the concept of travel literature and its cultural and social dimensions; and third, presenting the image of Algeria in Eberhardt's texts and assessing its authenticity and depth compared to the European colonial discourse. The central question posed is: How did Eberhardt construct an image of Algeria from within, and in what ways does her discourse differ from the dominant colonial narrative in European travel writing? By addressing this question, the study demonstrates that Eberhardt's writings form a unique bridge between Algerian reality and the European imagination, revealing an Algeria as lived by the traveler and experienced by its inhabitants.

First: The Theoretical and Methodological Framework

1. Imagology

Imagology is considered one of the fundamental fields within comparative literature, as it is concerned with “studying, analyzing, and observing the cultural image that peoples construct of one another within specific objective conditions”(Dhakir, 2014, p. 26), and with examining how these representations function within various literary discourses. This field has attracted increasing attention among researchers in narrative studies due to the approaches it offers for uncovering the mechanisms of identity representation, cultural interaction, and the limits of imagination in shaping the image of peoples in relation to one another. Consequently, imagology has become an important intellectual framework for understanding the nature of cultural relations and their transformations through literature.

As defined by Saïd Allouch in his dictionary, imagology is a term that emerged in comparative literature to refer to the study of the image of one people as constructed by another, an image that is often inaccurate or biased in certain cases. This field seeks to understand how such images are formed in literary texts, particularly in travel literature accounts, as examined by scholars such as J. M. Carré and A. Luca.

Imagological studies rely on concepts drawn from psychology and sociology, making it a point of convergence between the humanities and literary studies. This interdisciplinary nature allows for a deeper understanding of cultural relations among peoples through literature, especially concerning the analysis of stereotypes and identity constructions(Allouch, 1985, p. 137). This definition highlights the complex nature of imagology as a field built upon extensive interdisciplinary overlap. In analyzing representations of the Other, it draws on insights from psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and social psychology, all of which contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and cultural mechanisms that produce stereotypes and representations of the Other in literature.

Imagology emerged as an independent intellectual field in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its early development was

linked to a desire to understand other peoples and their cultural representations within literature. Some scholars argue that the intellectual roots of imagology go back to the nineteenth century, when the writer and thinker Madame de Staël traveled to Germany during a period of tension between the two countries, with relations strained by mutual misunderstandings. During her visit, de Staël was surprised by the widespread ignorance among the French regarding Germany, despite the countries' geographical proximity. She discovered that the French were largely unaware of many aspects of German society, culture, literature, and nature, and that they imagined the German people as rude, uncivilized, speaking an unattractive language, and lacking literary or cultural achievements worthy of recognition. In short, this stereotype represented one people's perception of another as an undeserving enemy.

Madame de Staël's journey to Germany in the early nineteenth century revealed a completely different image from the prevalent French imagination of the German people. Through direct contact with German society, she observed that Germans possessed clear human and moral qualities, such as kindness, integrity, and honesty. She was also struck by the beauty of the German landscape, especially the banks of the Rhine and the Black Forest, and she admired the richness of German literature and the prominence of German philosophy during that period.

De Staël expressed these impressions in her famous book *De l'Allemagne*, in which she sought to correct the distorted stereotypes held by the French about Germans and their culture. This work, considered one of the earliest texts aimed at presenting the Other through a relatively objective perspective, can be seen as a precursor to what later became known in comparative literature as *imagology*, a field concerned with analyzing the images that peoples construct of one another (Hammoudk, 1995, p. 113).

It can be argued that Madame de Staël's engagement with German culture represents one of the earliest efforts that paved the way for the emergence of imagology, as a discipline focused on studying representations of the Other in literature. These early experiences show that imagology arose in a context of growing interest in understanding the image

of the Other within literary works, particularly in texts reflecting direct intercultural encounters.

This approach has been closely linked to travel literature, as travel accounts are considered “a source from which members of a nation obtain information about other peoples, and undoubtedly, this information has a significant impact on defining peoples to one another and connecting them to their literature. In fact, the images drawn by travel literature of any nation resonate in the stories of writers and the poetry of poets”(Al-Din, 2003, p. 111).

Travel literature experienced significant flourishing during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both in the context of colonial expansion and exploratory journeys of cultural and civilizing character. These travels produced multiple representations of other peoples, some of which were objective or close to reality, while others were distorted or laden with preconceptions.

Accordingly, critical studies on travel literature have developed into two main approaches: a historical school, which focuses largely on summarizing the traveler’s life, the names of places visited, and the time and route of the journey; and an analytical school, which is concerned with examining the traveler’s texts and deconstructing their discourse(Al-Hajri, 2008, p. 3). Thus, travel writing has become a fertile field for studying representations of the Other and analyzing the mechanisms through which images are constructed in literary discourse.

2. Travel Literature

Travel has been a longstanding and integral human phenomenon throughout the history of societies, and this experience has provided rich material for travel literature, serving as a valuable source from which writers draw their descriptions, reflections, and narratives. The journey also gains significance from its ability to convey and introduce the image of the Other. Travel writers such as IbnFadlan, IbnJubayr, and Ibn Battuta provide detailed accounts of the customs, cultures, and lifestyles of the peoples they encountered. In this way, travel literature becomes a bridge that allows the traveling self to engage directly with the Other. “One cannot speak of travel without fully linking it to otherness, meaning that a travel text produces

truth only through engagement with everything foreign, unfamiliar, and extraordinary”(Rachid El-Khodari et al, 2013, p. 23).

This engagement enables travelers to construct a mental image of the Other based on direct observation and experience. Such images are then transmitted to the reader through the travel text, forming representations that may be objective and close to reality, or influenced by pre-existing cultural frameworks that can produce stereotypical or derogatory images imbued with hidden intentions or biases. As noted, “Travel and its literature have remained among the greatest means of communication, contributing to conveying the image of a nation and its literature to other peoples and nations” (Nasira, 2020, p. 346).

Travel literature is one of the deeply rooted forms in Arab culture and heritage, and it has attracted significant attention from scholars and researchers as an independent literary genre. It differs from other literary forms in its focus on travel, movement, and journeying from one place to another, as well as in recording personal impressions and documenting other cultures. “It is a collection of literary works that present the author’s impressions of his travels to different countries, often including descriptions of observed customs, behaviors, and morals” (Ansa'id, 2009, p. 31). Travel literature is not only concerned with narrating events or describing places for benefit or enjoyment, but also serves as an intellectual tool to understand, interact with, and engage the Other by studying various cultural, social, and historical aspects. This diversity of purpose has made it challenging for scholars to provide a single, comprehensive definition of travel literature.

In general, travel literature is defined as “a narrative material based on travel and movement, where the traveler acts as a temporal explorer, recording accurately events that took place in multiple locations at past times”(Ali, p. 31). Travel is among the oldest human practices, undertaken both within one’s homeland and abroad according to need. Many journeys have been linked to literary writing, giving rise to travel literature. Over time, this genre evolved from merely recording geography, monuments, and cultural landmarks to including travelers’ daily experiences, their emotions and reflections, all presented in a narrative style.

Thus, travel shifted from a purely itinerant and mobile activity to a literary form that combines knowledge, personal experience, and creative writing. Travel literature emerged as a genre that unites documentation, knowledge, and the traveler's subjective experience. It represents one of the earliest forms of writing associated with human curiosity about discovering the Other and conveying what travelers observe to others. The earliest features of this literature can be traced back to civilizations with widespread travel, particularly Islamic civilization, where Arabs traveled extensively for religious purposes, education, trade, or pilgrimage. Arab and Muslim travelers were careful to record their journeys and experiences, producing writings similar to daily journals, documenting moments associated with discovering the culture of the Other, including its architecture, customs, traditions, and more.

Travel is one of the oldest human practices, as humans have engaged in it since ancient times, both within their own countries and abroad, according to necessity. Many journeys have been closely linked to literary writing, giving rise to what is known as travel literature. Over time, this genre evolved from merely recording geography, monuments, and cultural landmarks to focusing on the traveler's daily experiences, emotions, and reflections, presented in a narrative and storytelling style. In this way, travel shifted from a purely itinerant and mobile activity to a literary form that combines knowledge, personal experience, and creative writing.

Travel literature thus emerged as a distinct literary genre that unites documentation, knowledge, and the traveler's subjective experience. It represents one of the earliest forms of writing connected to human curiosity about discovering and understanding the Other, and conveying what the traveler observes to others. The earliest features of this literature can be traced back to civilizations with extensive travel, particularly Islamic civilization, where Arabs traveled frequently for religious purposes, education, trade, or pilgrimage. Arab and Muslim travelers carefully recorded their journeys and documented their experiences; their writings resembled daily journals in which they noted moments related to discovering the culture of the Other, including its architecture, customs, traditions, and more.

Over the centuries, travel literature has experienced significant flourishing, especially with the diversification of cultural environments and the increase in travel activity. A number of travelers emerged who documented their journeys in a narrative style that allowed them to compare their own civilization with that of the Other. Among the most notable figures in this genre is IbnJubayr, whose famous work *The Travels of IbnJubayr* provides a detailed description of the Hijaz, Egypt, and al-Andalus. Ibn Battuta is also a leading figure with his monumental work *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travel*, which chronicles his extensive journeys from Morocco to India, China, and Africa. IbnKhaldun similarly contributed to the genre, with his book *Al-Ta'rif* including significant observations and impressions from his travels to the east and west.

In the modern era, with the development of transportation and communication, this literary genre evolved further, opening up to wider perspectives and exploring diverse representations of the Other and their culture. In the West, travel literature appeared in the 13th century as a form of geographical writing aimed at discovering new peoples and lands, as exemplified in the journeys of Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama, and Christopher Columbus. It later developed in the modern and contemporary periods in connection with orientalist waves and explorations with scientific and political purposes, such as the journeys of European orientalists to the East and those of Livingstone in Africa. Thus, it is clear that travel literature developed among both Arabs and Westerners, albeit driven by different motives and interests.

Travel literature holds great significance, as it contributes to preserving the cultural memory of peoples and allows readers to gain insight into different places and eras. It serves as an intellectual window through which readers can explore diverse civilizations and cultures, conveyed through the perspectives, observations, and experiences of the traveling self. Travel literature does not merely describe locations; it is a means of understanding both the self and the Other through their differences and complexities. This makes it a human record, a cultural and historical document, and a valuable reference for future generations,

reflecting the traveler's contribution to enriching scientific and historical literature.

Moreover, this literary genre holds considerable importance in contemporary and comparative studies, particularly in the field of imagology, as it reveals how the Other is represented and how mental images of them are constructed.

2. The Image of Algeria in Isabelle Eberhardt's Travel Writings

Throughout history, Algeria has been a destination for numerous Western travelers seeking to explore and write about it. However, most of these accounts carried a condescending and derogatory perspective toward the country and its people. Several travelers, such as Léon d'Aventin, Eugène Fromentin, Alexandre Dumas, and Edmond Pellamy, presented a distorted image of Algeria as a culturally and socially backward land, reflecting the colonial context that the West sought to justify at the time. Their texts were filled with negative portrayals of Algerians and depicted the geographic space as chaotic and primitive, aiming to create a mental image that would legitimize colonial domination and expansion.

Nonetheless, not all Western travel writings adhered to this perspective. More objective voices emerged, conveying a different image of Algeria, its people, and its landscape. The German traveler O. Habsträit, in his journey to Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripoli (1732–1145 AH), is considered among those whose writings were distinguished by accuracy and objectivity in describing events and reality in Algeria. His works reflected the social and architectural structures of Algeria (Abdelali, 2018, p. 346). Unlike other travelers, he understood the tendencies and characteristics of local communities, particularly the people of the countryside, and provided insightful, honest opinions about what he observed in the Maghreb (Saidouni, 2008, pp. 12-13).

Among the most notable figures is Isabelle Eberhardt, who offered a positive perspective that reflected her admiration for Algerians and highlighted the beauty and charm of the Sahara. She presented a humane and in-depth depiction of Algerian society, free from prejudices. Thus, the image of Algeria in Western travel literature was not uniform; it ranged

from a colonial, derogatory discourse to one that recognized and celebrated the country's uniqueness. This contrast raises a central question: Who was Isabelle Eberhardt, and what image did she present of Algeria in her travel writings?

1. A Brief Biography of Isabelle Eberhardt

Isabelle Eberhardt is a remarkable figure who has long intrigued researchers and attracted the attention of scholars from various fields, due to the mystery surrounding her personality and the uniqueness of her lifestyle and writings. She possessed sharp intelligence, a vivid imagination, and a strong sense of independence. Eberhardt was adventurous by nature, inclined to travel and wandering, and deeply passionate about exploring different cultures and immersing herself in them.

Isabelle Eberhardt was a writer, journalist, and exploratory traveler. "She was born on 17 February in a villa located in the 'Les Grottes' district of Geneva, Switzerland—a neighborhood that still bears her name today"(Eberhardt, n.d, p. 7)

Much debate has surrounded her lineage, as several accounts have been proposed regarding the identity of her father. Among them is the suggestion that "she was an illegitimate child and that her father might have been the French poet Arthur Rimbaud"(Eberhardt, 2015). However, these hypotheses are not supported by conclusive evidence.

As for the surname Eberhardt, it is believed to originate from her maternal grandmother, Nathalie Demar, a German woman descended from an aristocratic family(Eberhardt, n.d, p. 8).

Isabelle Eberhardt grew up in circumstances clouded by mystery, which made her life a rich subject of interest for scholars. She was raised in Geneva alongside her mother and siblings under the care and guidance of Trofimovsky, who took charge of her education and the shaping of her personality—regardless of whether he was her biological father or not.

She lived in a neighborhood marked by ethnic and cultural diversity, where various European nationalities mixed and multiple languages—such as French, German, and Italian—were spoken. This environment broadened her intellectual horizons and made her more open to others from a young age.

The multicultural environment in which Isabelle grew up had a significant impact on nurturing her love for adventure, travel, and exploration. During her youth, she moved to North Africa and settled in Algeria. At the age of twenty, she lived in the province of Annaba, where she learned the Arabic language and embraced Islam. “Her short life was filled with adventures and journeys across a desert unfamiliar to her. She experienced the hardships of Algerians, shared their struggle and their faith as well, before passing away tragically when a powerful flood destroyed her home. The local residents later found her still dressed in her riding attire, and she was buried in SidiBoujemaa, where her grave has become a historical landmark.” (Mohamed Al-Asfar: Isabelle Eberhardt, Algerian Life Springs Magazine).

After her passing, Isabelle left behind a collection of travel writings and journalistic articles in which she documented her observations and impressions of Algerian society, its customs, and its traditions—especially her writings on the desert, which gained a distinguished place in travel literature. However, these works were neither published nor translated until after her death. Thanks to her friend Victor Barrucand, they were preserved and later published; otherwise, they might have been lost forever.

Among her published works is *Yasmina*, translated into Arabic by the Algerian BoudawoodOmari in 2015, which includes five main stories. In addition, her literary legacy contains several other works, such as *In the Warm Shadow of Islam*, *Notes from the Road*, *Islamic Traits*, *In the Land of Sand*, and *My Diaries*. She also wrote *Writings on the Sand*, *Notes*, *letters*, *diaries*, and *Yasmina*.

Most of these works are marked by an autobiographical character, as she recorded her diaries, her life in the desert, and the details of Bedouin life. Her texts combine journalistic reporting with narrative description, conveying the details of daily life with great precision. This made her writings resemble personal memoirs, granting them significant literary and intellectual value for the study of Western travel literature and for exploring the image of Algeria within it.

2. The Image of Algeria in the Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt

This applied section aims to examine the image of Algeria that the traveler Isabelle Eberhardt conveyed to the outside world through her writings. It also seeks to analyze the descriptions she crafted and the impressions she formed through her direct experience of Algerian society and her close contact with the local environment and its people. Isabelle was not merely a passing traveler; rather, she deeply experienced daily life in Algeria.

The image she presented is divided into several sub-elements to highlight the main aspects she focused on in her accounts of the desert, customs and traditions, various places, and the suffering of Algerians under French colonial rule.

–The Image of the Desert and Nature in Algeria

The Algerian desert constitutes a central and recurring theme in the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt. Hardly any of her travel works are free from evoking its enchanting landscape and profound aesthetic values. While some Western travelers viewed the desert as a barren, desolate, and insignificant place, Eberhardt saw in it an alternative homeland. She became deeply attached to its charm, to the point that she was called “the lover of the desert.” She left behind the noise and agitation of European cities, preferring the calm and silence of the desert over what she considered the superficial grandeur of Western civilization. She chose to live a quiet Bedouin life, moving between mud-brick houses and golden sands in various regions such as M’Sila, OuedSouf, El-Hamel, Bousaada, and AinSefra. Each of these places left a mark, an impression, and an emotional trace in her memory.

Isabelle documented her impressions and observations with great precision, highlighting the beauty of small details—from the sand dunes and tall palm trees to the magical sunsets that painted its silence. Whenever she was away from the desert, she was overtaken by intense longing. This deep attachment to OuedSouf in particular appeared clearly in her texts, especially in her book *Notes de route*, where she wrote:

“From Saïd to my sunlit land forever, with its white zawiyas, its modest houses, its vast horizons, its sands, and its kind and loyal servants—

Souf, my humble and faithful companion; and my rabbits, my chickens, my pigeons, and all that quiet, modest routine there.”(Eberhardt, 1980, p. 45)

This excerpt illustrates her profound longing for OuedSouf, her deep appreciation for its simple natural landscape and rural Algerian life, and her emotional connection to the place. It also reflects her attention to small everyday details that characterize the Bedouin environment. The passage highlights places that she remembered with nostalgia—its zawiyas, domed houses, stretches of sand, and scenes of rural life. It also shows her tenderness toward the animals she cared for, such as her rabbits, chickens, and pigeons, demonstrating the sincerity of her observations. This sincerity is what distinguishes her writings from those of other Western travelers who often presented a superficial or condescending image of Algeria.

Isabelle returns in another passage to describe OuedSouf with poetic depth, reflecting the extent of her attachment to the place:

“As if it were ready to capture us and hold us forever. O burning and fiercely beloved land of Souf, why did you not keep us—those who loved you so deeply and still love you, those whom the memory of you haunts with restless longing without end?”(Eberhardt, 1993, p. 118) This passage reveals the spiritual and emotional bond between Isabelle and the desert, showing the powerful attraction the place held for her. Her descriptions of the dunes, the sands, and the silent solitude create a poetic image of the region, proving that her view of the desert was not superficial but profoundly intimate and contemplative.

What distinguishes Isabelle’s depiction of the Algerian desert is that it breaks away from the conventional pattern found in most Western travelers’ writings, who often presented an orientalist image portraying the desert as a barren, dangerous space, inhabited by strangeness and primitiveness. Isabelle, however, offered a completely different vision: for her, the desert was not a space of aimless wandering, but one of belonging, tranquility, and freedom. She saw it as a living human world and conveyed its details from within, rather than from the perspective of an outside observer. This difference in perspective allows her writings to contribute to reshaping the image of Algeria outside the traditional colonial discourse, presenting the country as a space with its own beauty, depth, and spirit, rather than as a

“backward” area in need of reform.

Thus, Isabelle’s description of the desert transforms from a mere portrayal of natural scenes into a cultural document that reveals an intimate relationship between the traveler and the place. This is evident in the following passage, where Isabelle writes:

“After a night spent in the tower listening to the songs of the camels and Lakhdar, we set out at sunrise, the deep red sun rising above the muddy shores. Although my path was filled with contrasts between salty and rocky lands, I was captivated once again by the charm of ChottMelghir, which appeared like a milky sea without horizon, dotted with white islands. As we walked, we saw traces of life around us: a fresh water well hidden in the shrubs, hunters carrying wild rabbits. Despite the hardships of the journey, these daily details—the shared sleep with Razki, the magic of the horizon—gave the trip a special depth that I could not abandon.” (Eberhardt, 1993, p. 108)

This passage exemplifies the profound documentary approach that Isabelle Eberhardt employed in her diaries. She did not limit herself to geographical descriptions, such as portraying ChottMelghir as a milky sea, but enriched her records with social and cultural observations, demonstrating the depth of her integration. Isabelle not only recorded the names of places and types of terrain but also documented the genuine familiarity she developed with local companions, such as Khalifa and Razki, and carefully observed aspects of rural life, such as listening to the songs of the camels. This combination of documentary detail and aesthetic expression confirms that her diaries are a vivid and intimate testimony to the desert reality, far removed from the superficial perspective of passing, exploratory travelers.

Isabelle’s relationship with the desert was not a fleeting fascination but transformed into a profound spiritual love, which she expresses sincerely in her diaries, where she writes:

"I thought with love of this desert that has captivated me for life, and of the joy of returning to it... I felt a sense of boldness in facing fate and of stubborn energy."

2. The Image of French Colonialism in the Travel Writings of Isabelle

Eberhardt

Depicting the reality of Algeria under French colonial rule was one of the main concerns emphasized by Isabelle in her writings, and her work as a journalist greatly facilitated this. She documented the lives of Algerians under French colonization since 1830, revealing its harsh reality and exposing the inhumane practices and abusive treatment inflicted upon the local population. Isabelle was no longer merely a curious, exploratory traveler; she became a war reporter of sorts, aiming to cover colonial events, uncover the crimes of the colonizers, and expose their oppressive practices.

Isabelle's journeys were among those that "worked to reveal the ostentatious colonial policies cloaked in slogans of justice, brotherhood, and equality, and to show the miserable conditions and the social, educational, and cultural struggles faced by Algerian citizens." (Samira, 2024: 114, *Feelings and Observations of the Swiss Traveler Isabelle Eberhardt on Algeria and Its People – Literary Attempts and Ethnographic Notes*, Journal of Cultural, Linguistic, and Artistic Studies, Arab Democratic Center, Berlin, Germany, Issue 33, Vol. 8)(Ansa'id, 2024, p. 114)

Isabelle dedicated her pen to defending the Algerians and their causes. She wrote about them in her works and supported them through her positions, as "she drafted her journalistic articles in a style not far from narrative, following a method based on close observation and documentary knowledge"(Eberhardt, n.d, p. 21). This approach, grounded in observation and documentary evidence, enabled her to convey an accurate picture of the oppressed locals, capturing their daily suffering and deeply human details.

However, she faced continuous harassment from the colonial administration, which posed an obstacle to achieving her goal. Perhaps this is what led her to write: "I must begin writing as a defender of my brothers, the visiting Muslims... oh, if only I could say everything I know and everything that runs through my mind" (Eberhardt, n.d, p. 21)

What distinguishes Isabelle Eberhardt's writings from many literary works that emerged in the late nineteenth century by various Western writers and travelers is that they were not merely superficial exploratory

stages. Rather, they reflected a lived experience in which she deeply integrated into Algerian society and adopted its daily, social, and human concerns. For this reason, her writing is closer to a living testimony than to an orientalist text based on representation or objectification.

While some European writers and travelers sought to distort the image of Algerians by focusing on customs and traditions that seemed strange or “Bedouin” to them, Isabelle aimed to deconstruct these stereotypes and present an insider’s perspective that highlighted the dignity of the Algerian people, the simplicity of their lives, and their deep connection to their land. In this way, her writing became a voice of resistance, restoring respect for the Algerian self and confronting the colonial discourse that sought to reduce society to folkloric practices. Therefore, Isabelle Eberhardt’s works can be considered among the most important foreign writings that contributed to reshaping the image of Algeria, moving away from colonial distortion and toward a perspective that respects human dignity above all else.

3. The Image of Algerian Customs and Traditions in the Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt

Isabelle Eberhardt was not merely a passing traveler who set foot in Algeria out of curiosity or the desire to move between its different regions. Her presence went beyond that of a casual tourist, reaching the level of deep integration into Algerian society, from which she presented a vivid, sincere, and insider perspective, arising from her full immersion and direct lived experience with its people.

Her adoption of the persona “Si Mahmoud” allowed her to penetrate the social fabric deeply, making her writings a mirror reflecting traditions in their daily dimensions and intricate details. This gave her an advantage over all travelers who preceded or were contemporary to her in portraying authentic Algerian life. Isabelle lived for many years in Algeria, interacting directly with its people, which enabled her to understand its rich and diverse culture, as well as the customs, traditions, and daily practices of its people, including rituals of joy and sorrow.

Her travels across southern regions such as OuedSouf, Bousaada, and

M'Sila deepened her knowledge of desert life and the characteristics of the Bedouin environment. Her marriage to a local man, learning Arabic, and conversion to Islam had a significant impact on her full integration into desert society. She did not stop there; she also compared Algerian customs with European norms, highlighting the authenticity and social depth of the former.

During her journeys in the Algerian desert regions, Isabelle meticulously documented various social phenomena and recorded a rich lexicon of local terms. As the researcher Mohamed Rachid notes in his book *The Last Journey in the Warm Shadow of Islam*, she recorded 100 words, including terms from Algerian dialect such as kouba, burnous, turban, baroud, chachia, gourbi, bendir, ghaita (Eberhardt, n.d, p. 30), reflecting daily life and Bedouin society.

Her use of these words demonstrates her profound understanding of local culture and her appreciation of the identity and uniqueness of Algerian society. Her writings show that she was fully integrated into the community, and they confirm that her work is neither superficial nor prejudiced. Instead, it offers a precise and realistic reading, far removed from the stereotypical depictions by some Western travelers, who often portrayed Algerian society as backward or savage.

To illustrate how Isabelle embodied these customs and traditions in her travel narratives, the following passage from her writings is presented, which clearly shows her immersion in daily life and integration into the rituals of the desert community:

"That evening, we settled in the fortress tower, enjoying the sounds of the camels and Lakhdar filling the hall with singing! There were no elaborate sleeping arrangements; Razki, Khalifa, and I shared the small room, while the rest of the group—from Hania and her son to the guides and exiles—spread across the other rooms of the fortress and outside. Here, in the desert, there is no stranger or boundary; everyone shares the scarce shelter, and this deep familiarity is the purest and most generous form of hospitality I have ever known." (Eberhardt, 1993, p. 108)

This passage reflects Eberhardt's rejection of the complexities of modern life, as she found in desert hospitality a model of equality and

inclusivity. Her sharing of the roof and mat with all members of the caravan, including the marginalized, demonstrates her full integration and acceptance of a social generosity that does not discriminate between guests, representing the highest degree of fidelity to the environment she chose.

While Isabelle presented in the previous passage a vivid depiction of hospitality rituals and social integration in the desert environment, her writings also reveal the deep spiritual dimension of this environment, as reflected in her view of sacred religious sites and maraboutic tombs and the meaning they impart to faith and daily life:

"Where is the land of sacred zawiyas and maraboutic tombs, the harsh and radiant land where the flame of faith burns, and where we were happy?" (Eberhardt, 1993, p. 113)

This passage reinforces the spiritual dimension in Eberhardt's literature, as she did not view religious institutions as an outsider or explorer, but with a sense of longing for spiritual refuge. Her direct association of "sacred zawiyas and maraboutic tombs" with "the land where the flame of faith burns" reveals her appreciation for the centrality of Sufism and asceticism as a source of true happiness and stability, thus highlighting the superiority of the desert community's spiritual structure over the trivialities of the Western life she had fled.

"The Muslims are asking for rain, this rain that will prolong a little of this fleeting and brief Algerian spring." (Eberhardt, 1993, p. 115)

This record documents the traditions of collective religious rituals practiced by local communities in response to environmental challenges. Eberhardt's reference to the rain request highlights the role of faith as a vital social adaptation mechanism, where a religious rite (the prayer for rain, *Salat al-Istisqa*) becomes a collective act reflecting solidarity and reliance on God, connecting spiritual life to the material needs of people in the harsh desert environment.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that Isabelle Eberhardt did not present desert customs and traditions as primitive or barbaric behaviors in a Western sense. Rather, she regarded them as an integral part of the human and cultural identity of Algerian society, embodying values and meanings that reflect their way of life and represent their cultural

distinctiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that travel literature represents one of the most important narrative forms through which the writer's self portrays and understands the Other. This genre provides a fertile ground for analyzing cultural and civilizational representations between peoples. Semiotics, as a branch of comparative literature, has contributed to uncovering the mechanisms behind the construction of mental images and highlighting their intellectual and historical backgrounds.

By examining the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt, it becomes clear that she offered a perspective different from that of many Western travelers. She experienced Algerian society closely and integrated into its culture, which is reflected in her depictions that are more realistic and humane—whether in her descriptions of the desert, its customs and traditions, or the suffering of Algerians under colonial rule. Her writings thus transcend the narrow orientalist perspective, contributing to a more just and accurate representation of Algeria and its people.

Therefore, this study has sought to highlight the most significant aspects of the image conveyed by the traveler about Algeria, while emphasizing that this field remains open for broader and deeper research.

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