

Representations of Social Reality in the Algerian Sahara in the Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt

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Abstract

Human beings are closely connected to place, through which relationships among individuals are established and their characteristics become firmly rooted. Place plays a pivotal role in shaping human perceptions of reality; it is not merely a geographical location, but rather a space of belonging and an embodiment of identity. It encompasses memories and shared experiences within its boundaries. The Algerian Sahara constitutes a distinctive setting in which various social relationships have taken root, reflecting solidarity and cooperation as essential means of survival and continuity in this harsh environment. This makes it a fertile space for the development of human interaction that is distinctive from that found in other environments. Such characteristics have attracted the particular attention of many anthropologists and Western travelers, including Isabelle Eberhardt, who devoted considerable interest to studying patterns of life and social interaction in the region, viewing it as an environment that reveals patterns of social cohesion, complex tribal affiliations, and diverse customary practices. How, then, did Isabelle Eberhardt portray the social reality of the Algerian Sahara through her representation of family relationships, love, marriage, and prostitution? What are the various meanings and implications embodied in her writings?

Keywords: Isabelle Eberhardt; social reality; Algerian Sahara; family; love and marriage; prostitution.

Introduction

In the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt, the Algerian Sahara represents a space in which geography intersects with society and culture. It does not appear merely as an isolated natural environment, but rather as a setting that accommodates human relationships, collective values, and distinctive ways of life. Through the writer's movement across several Saharan regions and her encounters with their inhabitants, her texts construct multiple representations of everyday life, revealing the nature of emotional and familial bonds, the social status of marriage, the limits of social authority, as well as manifestations of marginalization and deviance embodied in the phenomenon of prostitution.

The significance of these texts lies in their combination of travel observation and literary imagination. Eberhardt does not present Saharan society as neutral descriptive material; rather, she reconstructs it through her own perspective, her selection of characters and events, and her distribution of description and analysis between what is visible and what remains unspoken.

Therefore, studying her representation of Saharan society and the Algerian Sahara requires an examination of the mechanisms of representation she employed, as well as an exploration of the values and conceptions underlying the descriptions, scenes, and relationships reconstructed through her discourse.

This study seeks to examine the presence of the themes of love, marriage, family, and prostitution in Isabelle Eberhardt's writings, not as separate subjects, but as interconnected elements that contribute to the construction of a social representation of the Algerian Sahara. The family represents a domain of belonging, solidarity, and social control, while love reveals the nature of individual desire and its limitations in the face of social conventions. Marriage, in turn, refers to the social institution and the constraints it imposes, whereas prostitution is examined within a network of meanings associated with the body, poverty, marginalization, and social disintegration under French colonial rule, without reducing it to a predetermined moral judgment. Accordingly, this study raises a number of questions, including:

How is the image of the family constructed in the Algerian Sahara? Does it represent a space of protection and belonging, or rather a space of authority and social control?

What image of love and marriage in the Algerian Sahara did Isabelle Eberhardt construct?

Did Isabelle Eberhardt present "prostitution" as a form of moral deviance, or as a consequence of specific social, political, and economic circumstances under French colonial rule?

What meanings and implications do these various themes reveal in her writings, and to what extent do these representations reflect the social reality of the Algerian Sahara?

To answer these questions, the study adopts the thematic approach, which is appropriate for identifying, classifying, and analyzing these thematic dimensions and their interrelationships within the texts. It is described as "a method without a fixed identity, a fluid field of criticism in which various philosophical perspectives and critical approaches intersect and converge in an attempt to identify the dominant themes in texts and examine their integration with the linguistic structure that conveys them."¹ The study also draws upon certain mechanisms of the semiotic approach, which are appropriate for tracing the meanings and significations of the various signs present in the texts. Accordingly, the analysis does not merely identify what the writer narrates about society; rather, it goes further by examining how this representation is constructed, the symbols through which it takes shape, and the meanings acquired by characters, places, bodies, and social relationships within the discourse.

1. Family and Social Relations

The family constitutes the foundation upon which society is formed. It is a set of rules and relationships that regulate the lives of individuals within the group. In the desert, the family is characterized by the multiplicity of authority figures, such as the grandfather, father, uncle, brother, and others. This is attributable to the customs and moral values of the inhabitants of the region, which have been inherited from one generation to another since ancient times. These values emphasize loyalty to the family and respect for elders in the management of their various

¹ Yousef Wagheissi, *Methods of Literary Criticism*, Jousour Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2007, p. 147.

affairs. Family members generally do not contradict the decisions of their elders, who are regarded as the wise figures of the family and those endowed with sound judgment.

The “family” is “the institution concerned with love, relationships, marriage, reproduction, the socialization of the child, and the various conditions and roles involved in the organization of kinship. The family is therefore a remarkable institution.”¹ This concept attaches great importance to the family, considering it a set of diverse social rules and structures whose primary role lies in ensuring the proper socialization of the child, as the person who will become the man or woman of tomorrow. The family is an effective institution within society. In ancient Greek and Roman societies, the family had the right to recognize or deny a child, as the members of the council would gather to issue a ruling concerning the child's status: “If they accepted the child, his lineage was attributed to his father, and he was considered a member of his clan; if they rejected him, his connection with his father and clan was severed.”² This position demonstrates that lineage was based on recognition or claim rather than on blood ties and biological logic, as is the case in contemporary societies.

On another level, the anthropologist and social scientist Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that the family “is based on the principle of a relatively enduring union, defined by society between a man and a woman and their children.”³ This statement implies that a family cannot be considered a family unless there is a formal union between a man and a woman within the framework of marriage, while children complete this enduring social institution. This subject is clearly reflected in the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt, which constitute the focus of our study. Her works portray the social and familial relationships among individuals in the Algerian Sahara. She was fascinated by the social structures that shaped the life of Saharan society, while her close interaction with Saharan families also helped her understand the ways in which this society thought and conducted its various affairs.

1.1. Paternal Authority

In her work *Oum Zahra*, she states: “They had lost the woman they loved and, from their earliest steps, had been subjected to the arduous household chores under the very strong authority of their father, a highly mysterious and stubborn man whom they rarely saw because he worked outside in the orchards. They had learned to tremble in his presence just as their mother did.”⁴ In this story, Isabelle Eberhardt recounts the lives of two girls from the Oued Righ region who lost their mother at a very young age. They were consequently forced to assume responsibility for the household, a burden that weighed heavily upon them, and to confront life with vulnerable hearts and sorrowful eyes under the authority of a firm and strict father. Such a characteristic was regarded as almost sacred in the traditional conception of the Saharan man: he was the head of the household, responsible for managing its affairs and determining the fate

¹ William M. Kephart, *Family, Society and the Individual*, University of Florida Libraries, The Gift of Ruth Albrecht, 1853, p. 3.

² Ali Abdel-Wahid Wafi, *The Family and Society*, Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-Arabiyya, Isa al-Babi wa Shurakah, 2nd ed., 1948, p. 9.

³ Yves Michaud, *What Is Society?*, Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, Vol. 3, 2005, p. 693.

⁴ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sand*, translated by Abd al-Salam al-Mu'adhdhin, al-Jamal Publications, Beirut, Lebanon, Vol. 2, 2014, p. 136.

of its members. He was considered strong and wise, possessing the ultimate authority in all matters.

In his view, however, the woman was traditionally perceived as lacking in reason and religious capacity, and as too weak to manage the affairs of a family. Her voice carried little weight in the presence of male authority, and she was expected merely to listen and obey. Within the framework of traditional perceptions and inherited social structures, the character of Hadj Saad conceals, behind his harshness and severity, a deep affection for his deceased wife. She had been obedient, devoted, and extremely dutiful; nevertheless, he concealed these feelings. A strong man from the Oued Righ region was not expected to openly display emotional attachment to his wife, as he remained committed to the practices and values inherited from his ancestors.

We can also observe the harshness suffered by a child who loses his or her mother, the primary source of tenderness, affection, and reassurance. This is precisely what happened to the two girls, Oum Zahra and Massouda, whose father frequently punished them for even the simplest matters. She states: "When they were sad, when their father beat them, they would go there, to Alloula's grave, to tell of their distress in low voices."¹ They found no one to embrace their complaints except their mother's grave, a place that becomes almost personified, capable of listening and understanding what surrounds it through a hidden emotional bond. This scene reveals the orphaned child's deprivation of the mother's emotional tenderness and affection.

In the context of concealing paternal emotions, "Isabelle" acknowledges in Tassadit the love that "Errezgui" bears for his only daughter, "Tassadit." She states: "Errezgui loved his only daughter; however, he never caressed or showed affection toward her. She respected and feared him, just like her mother, who had spent her entire life as a submissive servant to the Sheikh."² This scene depicts an emotional dryness that reflects paternal authority in its most severe form. From an early age, the girl is gradually conditioned to obedience and loyalty, as the father represents a symbol of authority and power. Perhaps such treatment stems from the rejection of having a daughter, which can be attributed to the tribal and nomadic nature of desert society, where the birth of a boy is celebrated while the birth of a girl is met with sorrow. In this context, "Isabelle" states: "Errezgui preferred silence, and his old wife, Mabrouka, gave him an only child. It was a girl, and happiness never entered the Sheikh's house."³ This reflects a patriarchal and male-dominated outlook that venerates the male child, who, in their view, embodies strength and the continuity of lineage. He is also regarded as a symbol of honor through whom the family's reputation is preserved and its happiness secured.

1.2. Marriage

Marriage is a social institution based on the legitimate union between a man and a woman. It is a sacred bond founded on affection and mercy within a spiritual and humanitarian framework, thereby ensuring the stability of the family. Marriage rituals vary from one society to another

¹ Ibid., p. 138.

² Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sands*, Vol. 2, p. 236.

³ Ibid., p. 235.

according to the customs, traditions, and cultural practices of each region, which are shaped by the legacy of previous generations.

In the desert, marriage is arranged through consultation among the elders of the family, who select a woman of noble lineage and, in many cases, from the same ethnic group, with the aim of strengthening social ties. At times, however, material or social interests may constitute the basis of marriage, whether for the sake of wealth or to enhance one's status and standing within the community. Engagement represents the first stage of this bond, followed by the bridal gift (*sadaq* and *mahr*), and finally marriage.

Once a woman reaches puberty, she is often married to a man chosen for her by her father. His advanced age, marital status, or having children is not necessarily considered an obstacle; what matters is that he is regarded as a man who follows the religious tradition of God and His Prophet. "Isabelle" addressed this subject extensively throughout her writings, which drew upon her various journeys through the Algerian Sahara. Through her stories, she portrayed different situations and diverse narratives: some embody deeply rooted customs and laws that form part of the region's identity, while others express a desire to break free from the constraints imposed by the community and to rebel against traditions through profound human emotions expressed under the name of love.

In her story *Oum Zahra*, "Isabelle" emphasizes the fate of girls in desert society, stating: "Oum Zahra and Massouda began working for their father alone, and he would give them, one after the other, to two men whom he would choose himself. They would become their servants, and then the beautiful day of motherhood would also come upon them."¹ From childhood onward, the course of a girl's life is predetermined: childhood, puberty, marriage, and childbirth. This is regarded as the established way of life in the desert.

The same scene is repeated in her story *Tassadit*. As soon as she reached the age of eleven, she was married to a merchant Sheikh from her tribe who worked in the southern region. She states: "The train stopped at its final station, and the door opened, allowing her to catch sight of the Sheikh they had presented to her, with whom she had exchanged no more than ten words during the four days she spent under his marital authority."² This scene portrays a silent form of female alienation under the guise of an arranged marriage imposed without consultation or consent.

Men of the family would often continue to live together after marriage in the same house, thereby forming an extended family consisting of sons' wives, brothers, brothers-in-law, and other relatives. This situation often gave rise to numerous problems and disputes among the women. In this regard, Isabelle describes the relationships among the members of the extended family in her story *Tassadit*, set in Wadi Souf, stating: "As for the modest Muslims who did not own a house of their own, several families lived in the same house, and the women lived like sisters, although quarrels were common; they worked together and helped one another."³ Nevertheless, what predominantly characterized them was a spirit of cooperation and solidarity, enabling them to live together in peace.

¹ Ibid., p. 137.

² Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sands*, Vol. 2, p. 237.

³ Ibid., p. 237.

Tassadit was also characterized by modesty and shyness, which enhanced her femininity and honor, particularly in the eyes of her husband's family. Modesty is regarded as one of the branches of faith and is a characteristic traditionally associated with Saharan women. Among the examples provided by Isabelle is the following statement: "Tassadit wanted to lift part of the curtain, but she did not dare to do so."¹ She also expressed this idea in her story *The Friend*, whose events take place in Wadi Souf, where a strong friendship developed between Dahman Boussaid, a soldier and marksman, and Lombard, a French soldier who had come to the South. The latter was surprised by the scarcity of women walking around the town and asked: "Tell me, why do the women hide their faces, and why are there so few of them in the town?"² Boussaid replied that the women of the South were veiled and that it was not customary for them to go out. This narrative passage reveals the value attributed to women in Saharan society: she was regarded as a precious pearl, accessible only to a man of noble origin and honorable lineage.

Moreover, the Bedouin man traditionally favored having children out of a desire to perpetuate his lineage, thereby strengthening his sense of power and pride within his tribal ancestry. Preserving his name among his peers was of great importance, and he particularly cherished the prospect of having a son, as the son represented his source of honor and strength in times of prosperity and adversity and on the battlefield. This was precisely what Tassadit's husband, the Sheikh, had long dreamed of. His wife's infertility darkened his life, and he eventually died grieving over this unfulfilled desire.

As for *Al-Fajjara*, which recounts the events observed during Isabelle's journey to the South, she highlighted the authenticity and noble character of Mubarakah, an Aurès woman of good nature, portraying her as a devoted wife who supported her husband in both prosperity and adversity. She accompanied him to his distant place of work, circumstances that had been imposed upon him by the conditions of warfare: "They had been married for several months when her husband enlisted at the storehouse of Djennan Eddar, and she had to follow him into poverty and insecurity in the heart of the Land of Gunpowder, filled with marauding armies."³ Isabelle thus portrayed the Saharan woman through the highest expressions of sacrifice and devotion. She was her husband's support and his partner in the daily struggle, bearing responsibility for the family and patiently enduring her husband's poverty.

The desert man is also characterized by a strong sense of protectiveness toward women and by lowering his gaze, which is one of the most prominent traits distinguishing the men of the open desert due to the sense of honor and pride in which they were raised. This is not merely a feeling, but rather an instinct inherent in a man who holds women in high regard, considering them a matter of his honor and dignity. He does not allow them to be harmed or subjected to any form of abuse, whether they are his wife or one of the women of his tribe or clan. He regards himself as their protector and the guardian of their honor. This attitude stems from his manliness and noble moral character.

¹ Ibid., p. 237.

² Ibid., p. 217.

³ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sand*, Vol. 2, p. 401.

In this regard, Isabelle states: “During the first days, the men would shout ‘The way!’ as they entered, causing all the neighboring women to flee as lightly as birds taking flight. Si Larbi, Tasadit’s husband, was an elderly and respected man who rarely spoke to young women.”¹ This behavior reflects that of a man of noble character who is concerned about his reputation and that of his family. This is conveyed through such expressions as “the way,” “respected,” “elderly,” “does not speak to,” and “flee.”

On many occasions, families refuse to marry their daughters to men from outside their tribe, motivated by a desire to preserve the purity of lineage and noble ancestry, as well as by considerations of social status, since the woman’s family may regard the prospective husband’s social standing as inferior to their own. Consequently, the woman’s desire to choose her future husband is suppressed, and she is compelled to marry a man belonging to the same ethnic and genealogical lineage, without consideration for her feelings or wishes.

At this point, however, rebellion against ancestral laws and local customs emerges, as the young woman submits to what her heart dictates, casting aside the inherited values of modesty and obedience. It is a desire to reclaim her agency and her usurped right to choose her life partner, thereby creating a rupture within the tribal system and collective identity. Isabelle documented this situation in many of her writings as part of her observation of the contradictions between the individual and the collective. In her story “In the Dune,” set in Wadi Righ, she portrays a scene of rebellion against custom, stating:

“The full moon rose over the desert, and while Saadia was filling her water skin, with her arms immersed in the basin, she saw a shadow among the fig trees in the orchard. Saadia—Hamouat Sarir seized her by the wrist and dragged her behind him. When she said, ‘I am afraid,’ he stopped. He forcibly lifted her into his arms, for he knew that that moment belonged to him, and that life was against him.”²

Through this passage, the narrator explores the idea of love and rebellion against the authority of the collective. The man in love becomes a hero in the eyes of his beloved because he refuses to abandon her and confronts the tribe and the community in order to have her for himself and marry her forever. In doing so, he announces the conflict between the heart and custom, showing no concern for the consequences.

1.3. Love

Love is regarded as a sacred feeling, representing a union of the mind, the heart, and the soul. Human beings are naturally inclined toward love and goodness, and love is perhaps the most profound of human emotions, as interpersonal relationships are built upon it, fostering affection, harmony, and fraternity among people. In the desert, however, love conceals itself among the sand dunes and the lament of silence, like a secret buried deep within the hearts of lovers, where emotions are stifled by the constraints of custom and tradition. In her writings, Isabelle portrayed all the forms of love she encountered during her journeys through the desert, including sincere and genuine feelings of affection. She also depicted forbidden love between

¹ Ibid., p. 238.

² Ibid., p. 172.

a Saharan woman and a French man, whose relationship ended tragically, with the woman ultimately being the greatest loser.

In this regard, the French traveler Alfred Baraudon expressed his view of love, stating: “As for love in Algeria, it has always had its own altars of sacrifice.”¹ Love is thus marked by contradictions and is sometimes subjected to social, cultural, and religious authority. For them, it may be regarded as a grave sin and an eternal disgrace. In *Yasmina*, Isabelle portrays scenes of love between the French lieutenant Jacques and the Bedouin woman Yasmina. He met her while she was tending her flock in the valley and became fascinated by her, allowing a profound love to develop between them—a love that was ultimately destined to be defeated. She writes: “Jacques had begun to love Yasmina passionately, with the intensity of a first love experienced by a man who was both sensitive and dreamy. At such a moment, love becomes spiritual and is enveloped in genuine tenderness. Yet what Jacques loved in Yasmina was precisely her complete ignorance of the Bedouin spirit; she was a creature of imagination and, undoubtedly, unlike reality.”²

He loved her spontaneity, simplicity, and sincerity, and she became his only source of solace in that place. He was a dreamer and an adventurer whose passionate love eventually led him to contemplate abandoning his family and France and remaining in the desert, dressed in Saharan attire, so that he could live a life of enchantment and happiness with his beloved. Yet he soon dismissed these thoughts from his mind when confronted with reality—the reality of the Other, France, whose glory he served.

After receiving orders to transfer to one of the southern posts, he experienced a genuine inner conflict, caught in a moment of uncertainty between the logic of reason and the authority of the heart. He considered abducting her and marrying her, and even contemplated resigning from his position. After bitter deliberation, he resolved to tell her that he was leaving for the Oran South. Her dreams collapsed; she suffered, wept, and eventually surrendered to the hope of his return. She waited and waited, but he never came back. Jacques had forgotten her.

Isabelle thus brings this defeated love story to its conclusion, writing:

“His mind opened onto new horizons, and after some time he changed his position. He met a beautiful young Spanish woman and fell in love with her. Thus, the enchanting image of Yasmina gradually receded into the distant waves of memory, where complete oblivion prevailed.”³

Thus ended this defeated love story, constrained by the boundaries separating the Self—the East—from the Other—the West. The heart did not triumph; rather, fear prevailed, as the Frenchman feared tearing down the walls of his own civilization for the sake of an Eastern woman.

Isabel also recalls for us, in the story *Tears of Almonds*, set in the region of Bou Saada, the features of a bygone love through the words of the two elderly women, Saadia and Habiba.

¹ Alfred Baraudon, *Algérie et Tunisie: Récits de Voyage et Études*, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1983, p. 180.

² Isabelle Eberhardt, *Écrits sur le sable*, Vol. 2, p. 114.

³ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Nehîb al-Lawz wa-Qisas Ukhra* [The Lament of the Almond Tree and Other Stories], translated by Ahsan Dawas, Dar al-Amir Khaled, Algeria, 2013, p. 119.

They remember what they experienced in their youth with their lovers, Si Chaalal and Si Ali, both of whom have been worn down by age and old age. She says with a tone of regret:

“Look, Saadia, there is Si Chaalal, the judge, who was once my lover. How elegant a horseman he was! How skillfully he used to ride his black horse! And now he is an old, frail man; women no longer dare to look at him.”¹

Habiba responds in a similarly regretful tone:

“Yes, and there is Si Ali, the first lieutenant, who came with Si Chaalal as a simple horseman in the French army. How I loved him! What a memory he is, too. He was a horseman, courageous, daring, and a charming young man. How much I cried when he left for Médéa. He must have forgotten me. That is how men are. He died last year; may God have mercy on him.”²

This dialogue between Saadia and Habiba reveals the place that love occupies in the hearts of desert women despite the passage of time. Love is not merely a feeling; rather, it is life in all its details. The desert is a space for contemplation. Although love may remain hidden and deeply rooted in the mind and heart, it is eternal. It also reflects the inherent sincerity of women in love, even as they grow older. Despite her reproachful remark, “That is how men are,” she does not harbor eternal resentment in her heart, as she prays for mercy for him. She remains faithful to his memory despite his abandonment and denial of her.

2. Social Deviations

2.1. Prostitution and Alcohol Consumption

Prostitution is considered one of the socially rejected practices in Algerian society in general and in the Sahara in particular. This foreign phenomenon became increasingly widespread throughout the Algerian Sahara as French colonial penetration into the region intensified. It was often practiced secretly and away from public view within a conservative society that rejected deviation in all its forms.

In the past, the term “deviance” referred to a lack of organization or illness, and it was not used as a scientific concept in sociology until the late 1950s. It refers to “a set of individual or collective behaviors that are inconsistent with the expectations, norms, and values expressed or shared by the members of a given group, thereby creating an atmosphere of tension and leading to the outbreak of conflicts.”³

The subjects related to deviance are numerous, and prostitution constitutes a fundamental and central issue within this field. Its significance derives from the fact that it strikes at the very foundations of a society’s morality and undermines its principles. This phenomenon has existed since ancient times, dating back to the Roman and Greek eras. Roman empresses, for instance, practiced vice under the influence of the Hellenistic East. While Greek courtesans occupied positions of influence and authority, Roman rulers also resorted to prostitution.

In fact, prostitution at that time did not take the same form as it does today, that is, it was not necessarily practiced in exchange for monetary compensation. Rather, it represented a form of

¹ Ibid., p. 78.

² Ibid., p. 79.

³ Gilles Frioul, translated by Bassam Muhammad Al-Asaad, *Dar wa Maktabat Al-Hilal*, Beirut, 1st ed., 2011, p. 70.

sexual liberation, a luxurious lifestyle, and a rebellion against the restrictions imposed by a traditional and conservative society.

“Since ancient times, the Circus and the Aventine Hill had been sites of both itinerant and permanent prostitution. They also contained brothels, which may have been associated with the nearby Temple of Venus, which had been sacred since 295 BC.”¹

This statement indicates that prostitution in Roman society took two forms: itinerant prostitution, practiced in various places, and prostitution practiced in designated locations. It also combined religion and sexuality, giving rise to the notion of sacred prostitution in the Temple of Venus, the Roman goddess of beauty, where some women offered their bodies as sacrifices to the gods.

These indecent gatherings are accompanied by bottles and glasses of alcoholic beverages that impair the mind and consciousness, causing intoxication. Therefore, the two cannot be separated as socially and religiously prohibited behaviors. Almighty God has forbidden both in the Holy Qur'an through admonitory verses intended to preserve the dignity and honor of the pious and chaste person and to protect them from His punishment.

The consolidation of French colonial influence over the Algerian Saharan region had various repercussions on its social and cultural structure, particularly as a result of the new culture introduced by the colonizers. Their religion was different, their customs were different, and what was permissible for them was prohibited and forbidden for us. Prostitution spread as a result of contact with the French in various fields, as well as due to the widespread poverty in the region, in addition to ignorance and the absence of awareness. The French authorities worked to suppress educational institutions and religious zawiyas with the aim of eliminating the Arabic language and the Islamic religion, spreading Christianity, and transforming everything Algerian into something French. This was part of an Orientalist project intended to undermine Algerian unity and dismantle social bonds. When the moral structure collapses, society collapses along with its foundations, whereas morality constitutes the basis for continuity and civilizational flourishing; in its absence, nations and civilizations disappear.

Isabelle Eberhardt documented this disgraceful phenomenon, which manifested itself strongly in the southern Saharan region as a blemish on the face of the area, and recorded it in her various writings. Each of the diverse characters she portrayed in her works had motives that drove them toward such disgrace and dishonor in a society that can simply be described as Arab and Muslim. These reprehensible phenomena became widespread and deeply entrenched among the Ouled Naïl tribe, which was named after the saint Sidi Naïl, Muhammad ibn Abdullah. He attained a high status because of his piety and obedience to God, and secondly because of his devotion to his spiritual master, Sidi Ahmed Ben Youcef. His obedience to saints, righteous people, people of virtue and piety, and religious scholars was regarded as obedience to God.² Some accounts found in books and historical reports state that his lineage goes back to Fatima

¹ Iwan Bloch, *Die Prostitution*, Louis Marcus Verlagsbuchhandlung, Berlin, 1912, p. 320.

² El Hadj Mebarki, *Images and Characteristics of Ouled Naïl Society*, Al-Sahl Publications, Algiers, 2009, p. 11.

al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). He was a jurist, a wise man, and a righteous and devout person.

The Ouled Naïl tribe is concentrated in the Algerian Sahara, and its origins can be traced back to the Far Maghreb, where Idris the Elder was the eighteenth ancestor of Sidi Naïl and the founder of the Idrisid Kingdom. He came there fleeing from Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, the Abbasid caliph, following the assassination of his two brothers, Ibrahim and Muhammad, and eventually settled there.¹ The tribe extends from the Ziban region through Bou Saâda and the Amour Mountains. "Its principal centers are Biskra and Djelfa; nevertheless, not all women who are generally referred to as Naïliyat belong to the Ouled Naïl tribe."² Many divorced women, widows, and women without shelter adopted this way of life in order to preserve their independence and freedom, engaging in the trade of their beauty and bodies in exchange for a few coins. "Trading in their charms is not considered particularly reprehensible in the eyes of their fellow citizens; it is generally understood that they seek to obtain a dowry by practicing prostitution in the ksour or in the coastal towns. They do not keep their earnings in monetary form, but instead convert them into necklaces or jewelry with which they adorn themselves."³ Women were often treated harshly by men, although at other times they were able to impose their authority over them, which made them worthy of respect within the region.

Relations between Algerian women and men and European women and men were numerous and varied. "Forty years ago, the rebellious prostitute could be found near the old barriers close to the barracks, covered in rags and seeking to surrender herself in exchange for a few cents. However, in the city and within the larger neighborhoods, she maintained a considerable degree of discretion and did not display her extravagance every evening before the eyes of passers-by"⁴ This passage reflects the misery suffered by women in earlier times, as well as the dominance of male authority. Near the barracks, a woman could attract as many clients and earn as many francs as possible, which illustrates the commercialization of the female body.

In her story Yasmina, the female author depicted the reality of a woman whose honor was violated as a result of a forbidden love affair with the French officer "Jacques," who suddenly abandoned her. She was then confronted with her family's decision to marry her to "Abdelkader Ben Ismail," a soldier in the local army. She suffered greatly at his hands, enduring beatings and harsh treatment. After he was imprisoned for his violent conduct at work toward one of his superiors, Yasmina separated from Abdelkader and could no longer return to the douar, as she did not wish to remarry and wanted to wait for "Jacques," that distant and elusive dream.

When her money ran out, she decided to leave the house and head toward the Black Village. There, she learned all the ways of a morally dissolute life: "A community of Black, Bedouin, Berber, Jewish, and Maltese prostitutes lived there, crowded together in disorder alongside

¹ Ibid., p. 12.

² Paul Bourde, *À Travers L'Algérie: Souvenirs de l'Excursion Parlementaire*, G. Charpentier, 13 Rue de Grenelle Saint-Germain, 13, Paris, 1880, p. 142.

³ Georges-Robert, *Voyage à Travers L'Algérie: Notes et Croquis*, Imprimerie de G. Rougier et Cie, 1 Rue Cassette, Paris, p. 371.

⁴ F. Carlier, *Les deux prostitutions: Études de pathologie sociale*, P. E. Dentu, Libraire de la Société des gens de lettres, Palais-Royal, Paris, 1887, p. 20.

suspicious individuals and pimps, most of whom had criminal records”¹ Yasmina became acquainted with various women and learned to smoke, drink alcohol to the point of intoxication, and sing in brothels and cafés, while engaging in prostitution practiced by the women in exchange for a few francs. This was done to entertain the soldiers of the military camp.

“Joking and lavish praise flowed in a mixture of Arabic and French. A conscript who had been sent to the Sahara, and who seemed attracted to Yasmina, spoke when her turn came and she went down into the hall: ‘I am not makoura, little one.’ She danced with the same solemn sadness as usual, wrapped in her submission and her dream before those men who would become her predators as soon as the door of the brothel was closed”²

In contrast to this debauchery, there were mosques located near the inns and cafés of vice, where the voices of the imams and their hearts, broken by grief, called for virtue amid this impure mixing. This was what the moral condition of society had ultimately become: after the mosque had once been a place of guidance, righteousness, and worship, it became an abandoned and lonely place, with no one knocking at its door.

“Isabelle” continues to describe the miserable reality of “Yasmina” there: “Confronted with the suffering and almost the death throes of the life she had been living for three years, her chest would usually tremble with a long, terrible, and painful cough that ended with a red stain appearing on her handkerchief. Sorrow, alcohol, and the many harmful circumstances in which she lived had taken a toll on the health of the young Bedouin woman, who had been accustomed to the pure air of the plain.”³ She had contracted tuberculosis. The atmosphere of bars and cafés, alcohol consumption, kif smoke, and excessive late-night revelry had taken a heavy toll on her, despite her young age.

“Jacques” got married, and during a hollow conversation in which he confided to his Parisian wife about his alleged love for the Bedouin woman, he said: “If only you knew, my darling, how foolish my thoughts were at that time. I thought of giving up everything for that little savage. What would have become of me had I surrendered to that madness?”⁴ Thus spoke “Jacques” in a condescending tone that revealed his sense of social and cultural superiority, describing what he had once felt as “madness.”

“Yasmina” had met him one evening in the Black Village, where he intended to spend the evening with his wife and some of his friends. Yasmina was delighted to see him and called out to him. He replied: “Listen, I am married and I love my wife. Stay away from me and do not try to see me again. Forget me; it is better for both of us.”⁵

She cried out in agitation: “Why did you follow me here? I was living happily with my sheep and my goats. Why did you use every trick to deceive me and take my virginity from me? You promised that you would come back to take me with you. Why, you son of a dog, did you come

¹ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sand*, Vol. 2, p. 126.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³ Same source, p. 129.

⁴ Same source, p. 130.

⁵ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sands*, Vol. 2, p. 130.

with your wife, three times accursed, only to despise me, even in this brothel where you abandoned me, leaving me here to die?”¹

Jacques wanted to get rid of her. In a scene devoid of humanity and remorse, and through a humiliating and arrogant gesture, he extended his hand holding gold coins toward her and said: “Here, you are poor and sick. Take care of yourself. Take this little amount of money. Farewell.”²

She now had nothing left but to await death. Her hope that the unbeliever, as she called him, would return had vanished. She wished he had died rather than returned to humiliate her. Yasmina sobbed bitterly and was choked by her tears before finally surrendering to her fate and dying. Death was the ending that “Isabelle” had given to the life of this Bedouin woman, whose existence had been filled with bitterness.

In her work *Oued Souf*, “Isabelle” also portrays, in her pioneering work, the story of a French physician named “Jacques,” who was transferred to Oued Souf. He was deeply imbued with a culture and humanitarian ideals, and he was astonished by this society in which some people earned their daily livelihood through their bodies, a practice he described as a “dirty profession.” Bars and places of debauchery were widespread in Souf.

He came to know “Mebarka,” a poor widow whose husband had been a poor farmer. After his death, she surrendered herself to soldiers and local men. She would go out drinking with them, and she was refused marriage because of her reputation and morals. Consequently, she was forced to live with her blind aunt in a dilapidated house and to engage in prostitution in order to provide for herself and her aunt.

One night, while Jacques was walking around, he came across her. He saw a lit lantern and heard her singing. He approached the source of the sound, where she took him by the hand and led him into the room, closing the door with stones and branches. Jacques became accustomed to this prostitute and visited her house every night.³

His views were peaceful, as he was spontaneous in his relationships and a lover of peace. He frequently quarrelled with his superiors at work because of his humanitarian convictions. Jacques wanted his work to be useful, humane, and French. The captain responded to him arrogantly: “We are here to keep the French flag flying high and to ensure that no one reaches it, and I believe that we have fulfilled this duty with the devotion of soldiers and the sense of duty of patriots. We cannot do otherwise; otherwise, we would fail to perform our duty.”

This statement illustrates the mission undertaken by French colonialism in Algeria, namely, a political and ideological mission aimed at disseminating French values throughout Algerian territory. It also reveals an attitude of superiority and condescension toward the Algerian people, whom the French described as “savage,” presenting themselves as the bearers of civilization and modernity who had come to liberate this people from their savagery and nomadic way of life.

¹ Same source, p. 131.

² Same source, p. 131.

³ Same source, p. 191.

“Jack” no longer found any refuge except in “Moubaraka’s house,” as she was the only one capable of making him forget his worries and satisfying his thirst for life and happiness. “Moubaraka did not ask him about the things that caused his sadness; instead, she would sit at his feet, singing to him or smiling at him. Jack discovered in her smile treasures of sorrow and pleasure. He loved her precisely because she remained mysterious and unknown, for in this he found the fascinating possibility of loving his own personal dream in her.”¹

The captain had warned him against this miserable relationship and, instead, ordered him to establish a relationship with a French woman who would provide him with greater honor and dignity than this degrading relationship, which, in his view, tarnished both them and their French reputation. One day, “Moubaraka” was taken to prison on charges of illegal prostitution and was imprisoned for fifteen days.

“Everyone is talking now about the captain’s mistress. I will not be able to get her back to you after a scandal like this. If you take her back, it will cause a tremendous scandal.” Jack replied angrily: “So you are going to leave her in prison?” “You know that prostitution is severely punished. This woman cannot leave prison except to enter a brothel. She was found near the brothel with her face uncovered and was arrested.”²

For the French authorities, therefore, every Algerian woman who uncovered her face was considered morally depraved and suspected of engaging in prostitution. Algerian society was a conservative society whose women were veiled and did not reveal their faces. Consequently, imprisonment became the punishment imposed on any woman who dared to uncover her face, as this was perceived as undermining the stability of the French colonial order in Algeria and as contributing to the spread of immoral phenomena that were difficult to control.

Ultimately, the captain agreed to Jack’s request to be transferred from Souf and decided to abandon Moubaraka, who showered him with reproaches for leaving her imprisoned and recorded in the register as a prostitute. Through this story, the writer portrays the weak character of “Jack,” who made no effort on behalf of his beloved and abandoned her with ease, despite being an officer who was supposedly capable of everything. His indifferent behavior once again demonstrates that France’s interests came before everything else, and that his love was merely a passing whim. He regarded the house as a refuge for his sighs and an outlet for his sorrows, treating it as nothing more than a consumer commodity. This ultimately reveals the profound divide between the cunning French mentality and the sincere Algerian mentality.

Not far from this, and in another part of the Oued Souf region, “Tas’adit,” the protagonist of “Slavery,” a woman who had been forcibly married to an elderly merchant from Souf, rebelled against the society that had imposed restrictions and marriage upon her without consulting her. As a result, she committed adultery with a soldier attached to the Arab Bureau named “Abdelkader.” Consequently, she “became hostile, refused to perform household chores, and became insolent toward her mother-in-law. The old sheikh had no choice but to divorce her and expel her from the house. From that point onward, Tas’adit’s life descended into absolute vice,

¹ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sand*, Vol. 2, p. 191.

² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

as she lived with a suspicious old woman from El-Msaaba and continued to love Abdelkader without restraint.”¹

The First Lieutenant desired Tas‘adit and ordered that she be brought to the Arab Bureau in order to submit to him, after which he intended to keep her imprisoned on charges of illicit prostitution.

When Abdelkader returned from his tour, he learned what had happened and contemplated taking revenge on the lieutenant and killing him because he had taken his woman from him. He subsequently killed him and was punished by exile to another location. “Tas‘adit ended up in the house of Ben Dhaifallah, drinking absinthe with the sharpshooters and local soldiers. She became a withered old woman; nevertheless, she retained some affection for the mercenaries wearing red burnouses because they reminded her of the man for whom she still sometimes wept when she was drunk—the handsome man who had rescued her from the old sheikh’s aged lust, in exchange for wonderful embraces.”²

Absinthe was an intoxicating alcoholic beverage consumed in the desert. She also amused herself in the company of the sharpshooters and local soldiers. Abdelkader’s loyalty and jealousy toward his beloved were thus manifested to the point of murder; in contrast, he received nothing from her but ingratitude, as she remembered him only when she was drunk.

From this, it becomes evident that prostitution in the desert was a consequence of the restrictions imposed by social customs and traditions. It represented a form of rebellion against a rejected reality and reflected a conflict between values and the pleasures of life. Women were the victims of this conflict, while the French man represented a symbol of masculine and civilizational superiority through the logic of master and subordinate. This highlighted the power of the Other—the West—and the weakness of the Self—the East.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, it can be concluded that the writings of Isabelle Eberhardt constitute a complex portrait of Algerian Saharan society, revealing the following:

The study sheds light on the family as a sphere of patriarchal authority, as well as on bonds of love and marriage, while simultaneously revealing manifestations of social disintegration, particularly prostitution and alcohol consumption, which embody social fragility and the intrusion of alien mentalities.

The study demonstrates the importance that the Saharan man attached to the male child and his preference for the son over the daughter.

The study reveals the suffering of lovers in the desert, who found themselves in conflict with the traditions and customs of the tribe. Their relationships often ended in failure, or the young woman would elope with her beloved in order to marry without the consent of a guardian.

The study reveals an inherited social practice in the Algerian Sahara whereby women were not consulted regarding marriage matters. Nor was consideration given to the age of the prospective husband, whether he was young or old. Furthermore, marriage to a man from outside the tribe was rejected out of a desire to preserve noble lineage.

¹ Isabelle Eberhardt, *Writings on the Sand*, Vol. 2, p. 203.

² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Social ills were widespread throughout the Algerian Sahara under French colonial rule. Isabelle Eberhardt's writings reveal the practice of prostitution, which spread as a result of contact with the French in various spheres and as a consequence of the widespread poverty in the region.

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