

# The Peculiarities of Presenting Violence in the Work of Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio

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Professional Biography

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## Abstract

The theme of violence in the work of Le Clezio is first of all created by contrasting the special units such as nature and urban environment and the images and symbols reflecting their opposition. A modern city through the eyes of a writer poses a danger to the existence of the human being, since it generates false values of life. Its extremely abstract architecture emphasizes the suffocating nature of the space. The influence of modern technologies on human beings is also considered as forms of violence. So are the consumer principles that are revealed at its most precisely in urban environment. The existence of a human being under such conditions is evaluated as a war.

**Keywords:** *Imagination, violence, city, nature, war.*

The theme of violence and aggression appears to be one of the most significant aspects in the work of the modern French writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio. Le Clezio, the Nobel Prize holder of 2008 keeps expressing from his first novel his frustration over the degradation of existence and the mortal influence that modern technologies have over people. Le Clezio presents such nuances of the modern life where the artificial character of life is revealed. The writer wants to show that the true existence is "elsewhere" and "on the other side" and calls the reader to find seek that place. Le Clezio's characters, possessed by the same quest are constantly in motion, they are traveling, move from one place of the world to the other or they just wander in nature. Yet, their wandering does not mean visiting exotic places according to the prearranged route. The travels of the characters is presented as a spiritual search, in which the priority is given to discovering and perceiving the smallest and the least meaningful that develops an alternative vision of reality. Refreshing one's vision and creating a new optics of eyesight is the key to obtaining a true existence.

There is falsehood, in the opinion of the writer, that reveals most of all within the urban environment and which is also the source and a promoter of aggression. Aggression, which generates and develops within this space, is unnoticeable at the first glance, but it fully consumes human individualism and identity. We speak of the aggression of psychological nature, which accompanies human life in a hyper-commercial world guided by modern technologies. The source of violence in such a world is identified as social system, the basis of which is the principle of provoking desires and then satisfying them.

In this setting the needs and necessities of people are determined by advertising and human beings turn only into consumers. In the environment of mass consumerism, when production takes place in excess and the pressure of advertising is enormous, human being becomes dependent on things. Development of modern technologies increased the role of material things even to a greater degree that caused the decline and degradation of natural human skills. Human being, pressurized by the invasion of material objects, becomes and acts like a robot, which continues his/her life in an automatic mode according to the rules preset by the system. In this situation human being appears as a victim of the violent system, since his/her prior right to live according to natural human needs is violated. Demonstration of this very type of violence is the motto of Le Clezio's works. The writer equals it to war to live in a society like this and he believes this war undermines individualism. The theme is particularly urgent in his earlier works, particularly in 1960-ies and 1970-ies. This is the time when the invasion of modern technologies in social life gained unbelievable pace and became the object of discussions for intellectuals as an existential issue. Miriam Stendal Bullo reckons that Le Clezio experiences the influence of the philosophers of that generation and particularly that theory of Martin Heidegger, which applies to the human dependence on material things [ბულო, 1999:185]

Le Clezio's approach to the hierarchy established between humans and things is obviously voiced by the view of the late philosopher, who notes in one of his works: "We can say 'yes' to the ineluctable use of technological objects and can at the same time say 'no' to them, insofar as we refuse to allow them to claim us exclusively and thereby warp, muddle, and, ultimately, lay waste our essence" [Heidegger, 1976:145].

Precisely the sorrow over the existence emptied by technologies highlights the novels by Le Clezio such as *The Interrogation* (1963), *War* (1970), and *The Book of Flights* (1969), which has been selected as the research corpus for this article. This article will try to study all the important aspects of the research be it linguistic construction, image, symbol or a myth, the combination of which makes it possible to read the theme of violence in the above mentioned novels.

The reference to violence becomes clear even in the titles of the mentioned works. The title *The Interrogation* brings an association of sentencing related to crime; The work presents an unbelievable violence exercised on human consciousness by modern lifestyle: "I'm crushed by the weight of myconsciousness. I'm dying of it"[Le Clezio, 1963:56]. This Phrase of Adam Pollo fully reflects the acuteness of psychological aggression highlighted throughout the novel.

„War“ has a direct connotation of a concrete form of violence. "A war has started" [Le Clezio, 1973:7] – proclaims with a prophetic tone the incipit of the novel „Each second, as it rolls on, it uproots all things in its path, reduces them to dust ...Nobody will survive unscathed. ... Nobody will remain on foot, nobody will be spared [Le Clezio, 1973:7]. This is the continuation of the incipit and the whole of the novel follows the peripeteias of the brutal war. The apocalyptic discourse that permeates the narrative of the novel makes the anticipated results of the war look even more disastrous: „Destruction is already near. It will happen shortly. This is written in the centers of crossroads, when it is blocked by the moving knot of a crowd; it is written on traffic roads, by the funny insects made of metal that fly 120 km an hour and on the wings of aircrafts. This is

painted on the white facades of erected houses, on the rows of the dirty glasses of windows, on stations, hospitals. This is written everywhere but nobody wanted to read it” [Le Clezio, 1973:233].

As about *The Book of Flights*, the title presents a reference to the theme of violence since it speaks of flight, of escaping something that is intolerable and unbearable. Ogan feels the suffocating power of the city and one day he decided to leave. So the image of the city as a violent space is shaped, which the writer contrasts with nature as an opportunity of existing in absolute freedom and truth. Opposition between nature and urban world emerges in all three novels and the imaginary structure of violence is based on it. Natural landscapes, their frequent and long descriptions, the excitement of characters over the particulars of nature and emphasizing the physical experiences drawn from the influence of nature obviously refers to the priority of natural space and diminishes the urban space. The letter only creates aggressive background in all his novels.

Le Clezio mentions his negative attitude to city life in more than one interview. He says in his article published in 1969 in the newspaper “Le Monde” that the city is a certain enticement that induces people into itself thanks to the amazing effects of modern technologies, while in truth it induces them into eternal battle, which is the synonym to the daily life in the city: “There is no peace in them [/cities]. There is always war between their walls along their streets”[Onimus, 1994:78].

Le Clezio considers the urban space as an artificial space created by human hands and therefore damaging the authentic, original image of nature. In this context, the writer detects the dangerous signs brought about by the progress of civilization. The degeneration of original space or primordial nature reaches such a level thanks to the incredible speed of the development of modern technologies, that it becomes perilous to human existence: “This advancement [...] of what we call civilization, does not go quietly and peacefully but it takes an aggressive form and this development leads us to a certain battle, to constant fight between people and between the human being and nature ... [Lost, 1971:63].

By danger Le Clezio means first of all, a human right to moving freely that is complicated in the space obstructed by concrete reinforcements. The excess of topographic details, which are required by the city décor contrasts with the “empty order” of natural space. Various scholars single out certain metaphors and linguistic elements accompanying special structures, which present at its best the opposition between nature and the city. To be more precise, these terms are “ordre vide”(“empty order”), or “terrain vague”(“wasteland”)[Michel 1986:23], which are used in relation to natural spaces and their opposite term “trop- plein” (“overfull”)[ Thouraya Ben Salah 2014:81], which defines the character of urban space. The writer prefers the emptiness of landscape, since it contains freedom, looks like an empty paper and is the symbol of openness to all kinds of opportunities. The characters in their escape from this dull daily existence find a shelter precisely in wandering throughout this empty landscape and spend their days in the discernment of nature. The shelter for the characters, which voluntarily parted with society is to be found mainly in the beach, mountains or desert. The letter becomes the object of excitement in more than one novel due to its “empty order”, especially in the novel *Desert*.

The “nakedness” and “emptiness” of the landscape characteristic to the desert, does not diminish the meaning of space at all. On the contrary, the writer shows that this “emptiness” is the fullest since it contains in itself the original state and a chance of recovery. This is the place where everything can start again. The wish for recovery and renewal is the prerequisite to true life. There is only one opportunity within the modern city: One can only live according to the preset order, which undermines freedom. This very limitation reveals the first sign of violence: endless cascades of streets, buildings, cars and their audio and visual effects, which create the urban space, causing disorientation and vertigo. Le Clezio explains this suffocating aspect in one of his interviews and speaks of the priority of the “empty space”, which, at least provides a chance of “walking”: “What is terrifying in the city, it is .... the sense of belonging, impression of everything being overcrowded, that everything is occupied. I often tell to myself, it should be appalling to be born nowadays, to be born into this world, where everything is already occupied, where you already no longer have a chance to not only own something, but even to walk, because the empty ground is precisely the place to walk” [Ezine 1995:58].

Le Clezio turns to extreme abstractionism while picturing urban landscapes and presents the city as the piece of land consisting of concrete constructions. The writer brings to the front the details such as asphalt roads, electric and railway lines, crossroads, glass decorations, lights, monotonous houses and the buildings of various functions: parking places, airports, hypermarkets and their endless sections, shopping malls, night clubs: “A few million tons of gigantic cement blocks are erected on earth... kilometers of railway and highway roads, the woods of columns and telegraph posts, lakes, glass cubes, nickel beaches, wavy fields. No other landscape has been so broad, so deep. Never have the mountains been so high, the canyons so dizzy. There has never been so many metal and stone, so much material” [Le Clezio 1973:66].

In the opinion of Jeanne Onimus, the city presented by Le Clezio is the fruit of abstract way of thinking, which banishes idea and subsequently the reign of technologies reaches its peak: “The city, like a drug, drives the human being insane” [Onimus, 1994:75]. It is also an expression of emptiness, “a desert full of many rooms” [Le Clezio, 1969 :182] and, where the spirit is lost. Order, perfectionism and technologies, which should signify the glory of the city, reaches such a level that instead it becomes intolerable and causes the degradation of thinking. Extreme abstractionism, which is defined in the décor of the city, is precisely the sign of regress and has destructive power. It is directly linked with mechanics and produces analytical thinking. Modern world is the result of analytical thinking and is turned into techno structure [Onimus, 1994:76]. This form of thinking diminishes and sterilizes human existence and creates a ground for the battle against nature. It destroys peace, separates us from our roots and induces us into the whirlpool of violence. This form of thinking makes mechanized human mind and soul by imposing on them recurring work, during which the speed of execution increases. Anxiety and restlessness takes over. People walk in streets briskly, everybody is in a hurry [Onimus, 1994:65]. They look like marionettes led by invisible hands: “The world is populated by marionettes; automatic creatures live in the world [Le Clezio, 1969:182].

Urban environment, as a techno structure, can only produce material things: “they are here, the damn things: they rest along the corridors in supermarkets having come from all the corners of the world” [Le Clezio, 1973:232].

Thinking gets lost in the number of things: “Here we have a quantity, no individual thought, not even wishes” [Le Clezio, 1973:92]. In the process of production of things, the human being turns into a mere tool for creating things [Onimus, 1994:66]. If the human being loses the skill of producing, he/she is only rejected by the structure. Therefore, the urban space offers to the human being only a limited and artificial existence. The misery of it also reveals in the characters’ attitude to the city who are possessed by a passionate desire for escaping from the city: “The city of metal and concrete, I no longer want you, I reject you!” [Le Clezio, 1969:63] – this is how escaped Ogan sees the city.

Endless streets and the people roaming about in them, who Le Clezio calls a crowd, are the inseparable elements of the city décor. The crowd presents an empty and dull existence of the people who depend on things on one hand, and on the other, it implies to indifference kindled within this existence. The writer calls the movement of the roaming mass of people a motion of people who are doomed to death: “these are the people who are moving towards death, death is their fate” [Le Clezio, 1973:77].

The mechanical existence excludes the ability of compassion. Therefore, the communication among people is reduced to minimum. Each of them is enclosed in his/her self and cannot understand the other person. This phenomenon is often illustrated by the blocks of flats that fill up the urban space. These “white” “multi-windowed” [Le Clezio, 1973:60] buildings refer to the existence becoming monotonous. At the same time, they point to the isolation of human beings and the absence of the desire to overcome “Me” for the sake of understanding the other: “Human beings shut themselves in shells and walk in streets like in cars with tinted windows” [Le Clezio, 1973:90].

The houses are those very “shells”, where human beings are shut and try to communicate with others and to understand them. Calling the house windows as “uniform detention cells” [Le Clezio, 1973:169] in the novel *War*, he associates houses with a prison and intensifies the sense of closure and isolation. The main character of the novel *The Book of Flights*, young man Ogan running away from home since it seems like a prison to him: “Everything started that day when he discovered a prison. He is looking around him and sees walls that retain him he sees the vertical panels of the wall, which obstruct his success. Home is a prison. The room he is in is also a prison [Le Clezio, 1969:35].

Escape is the only way of fleeing this suffocating existence. Therefore, his characters often do that. The main character of *The Interrogation*, Adam Pollo prefers to live in an abandoned house in the suburbs, separated from all. The main character of *The Book of Flights*, Ogan, who ran away from home and from the city travels around the world. The nature of the voluntary flight from society of these characters and their isolation is explained by searching. This is a search for the true and authentic existence, going to a foreign land and knowing others that at the same time means knowing one’s own self. Remaining in the city makes them suffer from the sorrow of closure and loneliness Ogan feels himself entrapped between the walls erected at every step. Different kinds of noises of the city drain him and the endless streets are driving him mad: „It [the city] persecuted

him inconspicuously, entrapped him between its walls, wore him out by its volcanic noise, drove him insane by its straight roads, which had no end [Le Clezio, 1969:125].

Therefore, urban space is inclined towards suppressing and erasing identity. Escaped Ogan starts traveling around the world that ends with him discovering the civilization and cultures of “others” and his desire to share them. Le Clezio wishes to demonstrate the world in its colorfulness and all its expression. The human being ought to seek, see and experience each of these expressions since the true life is to be achieved only through the wholeness of all the constituent elements of the world. The city, meanwhile, encourages the opposite tendencies. This closed space of the city feeds the ego of the individuals living in it and offers them the Jungle Laws as the rule of their lifestyle. The individuals shut in the custody of their own “I” or their culture do not notice and cannot understand anybody and anything except their own selves. Precisely Jungles and Hell are the most frequent metaphors that Le Clezio uses as a reference to the meaning of the city: “As in jungles where there are millions kinds of leaves, millions of insects, fruit, worms, roots, snakes .... Exactly this way I want to learn walking in streets, because I know that there are mortal powers, dangers and poisons everywhere” [Le Clezio, 1973:189].

Unlike Adam and Ogan, the character of *War*, Bea B does not run away from the city, On the contrary, he spends all days in wandering about in streets. The girl observes every single detail that creates this space and the feeling of danger never leaves her alone” “It seems that all the violence of the world, all its glory and power have gathered and left the trace here”. The girl was walking in the street in the evening and could not feel peace” (Le Clezio, 1973:77).

The object of the girl’s observation are night club, supermarket, parking space, streets and the crowd walking in the street, traffic roads and the speeding cars through the tinted windows of which it is impossible to see human beings sitting inside” [Le Clezio, 1973:168]. The life of a human being in the city is like a war. It is a bloodless war without the dead and the wounded, the war of technologies and systematic order against living creatures: “This is a brutal and silent war, merciless, ungrateful, war without the dead where there are no wounded, nor were there the puddles of blood. This is without doubt a blind war, which was not conducted for the sake of some over-worshipped word or idea but it destroyed the world” [Le Clezio, 1973:27].

The phenomenon of the modern war can easily be understood by visiting different buildings, considering their content and their functions and it becomes obvious that that these buildings which look ordinary at the first glance such as railway, hospitals, morgues, banks etc... create the history and content of this silent war through their function, which defines the human existence: “If we wish to know the causes of war, its course, history,, we need to see these extraordinary places: railway stations, hospitals, dining halls, morgues, slaughter-houses, casinos, bars, shop chains, cold rooms, banks, petrol stations, churches, social security offices and airports”[Le Clezio, 1973:177]. Human beings become the victims of the constructions created by them and their meanings which given also by them and they agree to living under their power.

Therefore, we can conclude on the grounds of the present analysis that in the above listed novels Le Clezio presents a form of violence which takes place against the human being in the modern world and which is of a psychological nature. It is directed towards erasing

the natural human image and turning it into a soulless, technological instrument. The degradation of human existence develops with utmost force within the city. The writer sees the source of aggression precisely in the city, with its overloaded topography, with its extreme architectural abstractionism, order and perfectionism and functional content. In order to emphasize the aggressive character of urban space, the writer argues in preference of natural spaces, which as he believes, is the chance of eternal renewal and true existence.

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