Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Interview

Label France: Your work is described as mystical, philosophical and even ecological! Do you recognize yourself in these descriptions?

J.-M. G. Le Clézio: It is difficult to describe what you do yourself. If I had to assess my books I would say that they are what are most like me. In other words, for me it’s less a matter of expressing ideas than expressing what I am and what I believe in. When I write I am primarily trying to translate my relationship to the everyday, to events. We live in a troubled era in which we are bombarded by a chaos of ideas and images. The role of literature today is perhaps to echo this chaos.

LF: Can literature affect this chaos, transform it?

LC: We no longer have the presumptuousness to believe, as they did in Sartre’s day, that a novel can change the world. Today, writers can only record their political impotence. When you read Sartre, Camus, Dos Passos or Steinbeck you can clearly see that these great committed writers had limitless confidence in the future of mankind and in the power of the written word. I remember that when I was eighteen, I read editorials by Sartre, Camus and Mauriac in L’Express. They were committed essays which showed the way. Can anyone conceivably imagine today that an editorial in a newspaper could help solve the problems that are ruining our lives? Contemporary literature is a literature of despair.

LF: If people think of you as an unclassifiable writer, it may be because France has never been your only source of inspiration. Your novels are part of a globalized imaginary world. A little like the work of a Rimbaud or a Segalen, authors that French literary critics have always found difficult to classify.

LC: First, I shall say that it doesn’t upset me at all to be unclassifiable. I think that the main characteristic of the novel is that is unclassifiable, in other words that it is a polymorphous genre which is part of an interbreeding, a brew of ideas which is, ultimately, the reflection of our multipolar world.

That said, I think, like you, that the French literary establishment, heir to the so-called universal ideas of the Encyclopédistes, has always had a deplorable tendency to marginalise any ideas from elsewhere by describing them as "exotic". Rimbaud and Segalen paid the price in their time. Even today, writers from Southern countries are only published here if they agree to be categorised in the "exotic" category. The example that comes to mind is the Mauritian writer, Ananda Devi, whose work I championed when I was on Gallimard’s panel of readers. Their response was that her manuscript was not exotic enough!

LF: Why are you so fascinated by other cultures?

LC: Western culture has become too monolithic. It places the greatest possible emphasis on its urban and technical side thus preventing the development of other forms of expression: religiosity and feelings, for example. The entire unknowable part of the human being is obscured in the name of rationalism. It is my awareness of this that has pushed me towards other civilisations.
LF: In this other place you have sought, Mexico in particular and the Amerindian world in general occupy a predominant place. How did you come to learn about Mexico?

LC: I was sent to Mexico to do my military service. During the two years I spent in the country I had the opportunity to travel. In particular, I went to Panama where I met the Emberas. I spent four years (1970-1974) with this Indian forest population. It was a deeply moving experience, because I discovered a way of life that had nothing to do with what I had been able to experience in Europe. The Emberas live in harmony with nature, with their environment and with themselves without needing to refer to any sort of legal or religious authority. I found that staggering and when, on my return, I wanted to talk about the social cohesion of this community, the critics accused me of being naive, simplistic and falling for the myth of the "noble savage", although this was not at all what I meant. I could never say of these people with whom I lived that they were savage, or that they were noble. They lived by other criteria and other values.

LF: These days, you divide your life between Albuquerque, in New Mexico, Mauritius, from where your family came, and Nice where you grew up and where your mother still lives. Like you, the characters in your fiction are torn between continents. For example, Cœur brûlé et autres romances is partly set in Mexico. The first piece in this collection tells the story of two young women who lived in that country when they were small. It was a traumatising childhood. They both seem obsessed by their past. Could it be said that the two sisters are victims of a nomadic life?

LC: They are victims of having belonged to two different cultures at the same time. It is very difficult for children to relate to two cultures as different as Mexican culture, which is more of an immediate, street, outside culture, and European culture which is based on the home, the indoors and school rules. It was the clash of cultures that I wanted to recount.

LF: So why a "romance"?

LC: This was a slightly ironic word to describe some tragic situations. The book consists of seven dark short stories. In romantic fiction feeling takes precedence over sociological truth. I think that the role of fiction is to highlight this constant slippage between emotion and the social, real, world. On the other hand, all the stories in this collection are based on actual events that I have adapted. So they are true stories. They have an element of the "sentimentality" that you also find in the "News in Brief" pages of the newspapers.

LF: In your books the boundaries between genres are blurred. They are a long way from traditional fictional narrative. Do you believe that the novel, as a genre inherited from the 19th century, is still too strongly marked by its bourgeois origins and that it cannot, as such, reflect the complexity of the postmodern, postcolonial world?

LC: The novel is effectively a bourgeois genre. Throughout the 19th century it magnificently embodied the fortunes and misfortunes of the bourgeois world. Then the cinema arrived. It stole its starring role and proved itself a much more effective way of representing the world. So writers sought to extend the scope of the novel genre by making it somewhere to express ideas and feelings. They then realised just how malleable and fluid this genre is, lending itself easily to experiments in form. Since then, each generation has revamped the novel, reinvented it by bringing new elements to it. I am thinking of the Mauritian
novelist, Abhimanyu Unnuth, who I discovered recently when the new translation of his book, Lal Pasina, was published. This is a novel which in some ways reminds you of Eugène Sue. Unnuth uses the traditional novel form, but the better to subvert it by introducing epic elements, songs and a rhythm which belongs to Indian poetics. The result is The Wandering Jew or Les Mystères de Paris, Ramayana [1] revisited!

**LF**: Your novels also have an autobiographical side. Do you get the impression of being the archivist of your own history, of your own experience of life?

**LC**: My favourite novelists are Stevenson and Joyce. They drew their inspiration from their first years of life. Through writing they relived their past and tried to understand the "whys" and "hows" of it. When you read Joyce’s Ulysses, you truly have the impression that Joyce was not aiming to relate the story of the present moment, but to express everything that was in him, everything that made him what he was. He resurrected the slightest sounds of the street, snippets of conversations, the corporal punishment suffered at school and which still haunted him like an obsession. Naipaul too, returns in his imagination to his first years of education. Literature is only strong when it manages to express the first sensations, the first experiences, the first ideas, the first disappointments.

**LF**: One often has the impression when reading your work that your characters, in your image, are looking for a homeland which goes beyond the traditional and slightly narrow concept of nation. Salman Rushdie talks about "imaginary homelands" when describing the new relationship that the exiled writer tries to establish with the country from which he comes. What is your imaginary homeland like?

**LC**: I consider myself an exile because my family is entirely Mauritian. For generations we were fed on Mauritian folklore, food, legends and culture. It is a very mixed culture, a fusion of India, Africa and Europe. I was born in France and raised in France with this country’s culture. I grew up telling myself that there was a somewhere else which embodied my true homeland. One day I would go there, and I would know what it was. So in France I always thought of myself a little bit of an "outsider". On the other hand, I love the French language which is perhaps my true country! But thinking of France as a nation, I must say I have rarely identified with its priorities.

**LF**: Your ancestors were French, I believe?

**LC**: In fact the Le Clézios were from Morbihan, in Brittany. At the time of the Revolution, one of my ancestors, who had refused to enlist in the revolutionary army because they insisted he cut his long hair, was forced to flee France. He embarked with his entire family on a boat called Le Courrier des Indes with the intention of going to India. But when the boat put in at Mauritius, he got off because his wife came from the island where she still had family. The Mauritian branch of the Le Clezio family is descended from this adventurous and rebellious ancestor. In fact, he’s the hero of my next novel. At this very moment I’m in the process of writing the story of how he settled on Mauritius. I feel close to this man who was exiled to the other end of the world in order to flee from something. I feel I understand him.
LF: It is said that you are a potential Nobel prizewinner. Let’s imagine that you are awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature tomorrow. What would you like to say at the award ceremony?

LC: That’s a very hypothetical question! I don’t know for the Nobel prize but I know what I would like to talk about publicly. I would like to talk about the war that kills children. This, for me, is the most terrible thing of our age. Literature is also a means of reminding people of this tragedy and bringing it back to centre stage. In Paris recently, statues of women were veiled in order to condemn the fact that women in Afghanistan are denied freedom. That’s very good. In the same way, we should mark all the statues of children with a big red spot over the heart as a reminder that at every moment, somewhere in Palestine, South America or Africa, a child is killed by bullets. People never talk about that!

Interviewed by Tirthankar Chanda Academic in Le Magazine littéraire