

Metaphorical Images of the desert in Paul Bowles ' The Sheltering Sky

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Abstract

The issue of travel and touring has been central in American literature. Just when travel writers move from one space to another, they bear with them a whole repertoire of past experiences and conceptions and try to get them tested in and by other new and usually unfamiliar settings. To understand those new and unfamiliar spaces, travel writers tend to employ some familiar metaphors to meet the new challenges of the new spaces. In this article, I will try to broach the issue of space and how it is depicted metaphorically by a famous American writer Paul Bowles in one of his popular novels; The Sheltering Sky. I argue that Bowles used a conceptual structural metaphor that is "travelling to a new space is an adventure" to highlight the contrast between familiar western spaces and unfamiliar "other" spaces. In the meantime, I would like to suggest that Bowles' reading of North African spaces (exactly Morocco) can be interpreted as a postcolonial attempt to scrutinize the impact of colonialism on the generally depicted less advanced "Third World people". However, it is also our target to decipher the different stereotypes used by both Bowles and his fictional characters to project the people of Morocco and by analogy all other non-western peoples as primitive and alien. The Sheltering Sky though seems to fight colonialism; it seeds a new discourse that assures the cultural superiority of the western "I" vis-à-vis a less developed and inferior "Other".

The article is divided into four main parts. First, I intend to proffer a brief summary of the novel's plot and characters. Second, relevant travel literature concepts will be presented and discussed like that of "imperial eyes" and home/abroad. In the third part, the role played by Bowles and his fictional characters in uncovering the responsibility of western imperial powers for the other's degradation will be considered. Yet the last part will thrust the major argument of the paper, notably the role played by the novel to perpetuate imperial and racist stereotypes of the "other" in the minds of the "I".

Key words: Metaphor of space- Orientalism – the "Other"- images of the desert.

1) Introduction:

The author of The Sheltering Sky is Paul Frederic Bowles. He was an American travel literature novelist. During the thirties, forties and the fifties, Bowles journeyed relentlessly to and from New York, into the depths of North Africa's deserts and the tropical forests of Latin America and other spaces. In his fictional worlds, Bowles tries to feature American travellers in mysterious and aggressive foreign settings who experience disease, psychological disintegration or terror, and he also tries to spotlight the nature of the land and the culture of the people in his novels such as Let It Come Down (1952), the Spider's House (1955) and above all The Sheltering Sky (1949) which he wrote in Morocco in 1949, the place where he spent much of his life.

The novel is divided into three major parts (or what Bowles termed books). Each part is given a specific title but they all refer to spaces. Part1 is entitled "Tea in the Sahara," part 2 is "The Earth's Sharp Edge," whereas the last one is called "The Sky." Thus, the novel is rather a trip across three different spaces: the Sahara, the earth and the sky (either literally or metaphorically).

The novel is about two major characters Port and Kit Moresby, a young affluent, well educated American couple in their thirties who have become both sexually and emotionally estranged, are attempting to reconnect and find a place of repose where they feel capable of combating the disaffection and alienation that have become the dominant tenor of their married life. Port hopes their sojourn into the desert will bring them closer together and restore the love they once shared. Kit, not so keen on either the desert or Port, has nevertheless agreed to Port's wishes. Accompanied by their friend Tunner, They choose to travel to North African desert and especially that of Morocco, a place that was not touched by the war. Aimlessly, they struggle to find intimacy and connection in the wild emptiness of the new space. They end to lose themselves and then each other. However, as soon as they go deeper into Morocco, they discover the difficulties and even the impossibility to cope with such "hostile space". Port and Kit meet extreme hardships. Tunner was separated from them. Port ends up dying out of typhoid and his wife Kit, after being sexually harassed repeatedly, becomes insane. Paradoxically, the couple, while trying to restore serenity and peace, ends up losing their lives and wisdom.

2) Travel Literature and its role in flourishing colonial discourses:

In this second part I will try to briefly present the major concepts and lexicon of travel literature which is directly linked to colonialism like "imperial eyes", contact zones, home/abroad, and displacement. Also, the role played by travel literature in erecting the discourses of western superiority will be reviewed and evaluated.

Travel literature is basically concerned with outsiders and other spaces. It is a popular genre of a long intellectual history. However, it is seldom an objective and scientific recording of conditions in other lands. As a literary genre, it has certain conventions and theoretical jargon. Travel literature readers are generally seeking the exotic, the other, the different in the places they explore in literary mode. Travel literature writers (or Travelogues such as James Clifford, Sara Mills, Umberto Eco, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha) were interested in interrogating the impact of imperialism on other lands and peoples. The theoretical jargon they employed reflected such concern. Concepts such as imperial eyes (how

travel books by Europeans create the domestic subject of European imperialism), contact zones (a social space in which cultures meet and clash), home/broad, and displacement were pivotal in such literature. They reflected a sense of contact or rather lack of contact between two antithetical cultures: the West and the rest. However, travel literature was also an agent for the expansion of imperialism and colonialism. As Percy Adams stated in his influential book Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel (1983) travel literature was indispensable in the widespread of colonialism. He claimed that "as propaganda for international trade and for colonization, travel accounts had no equal" (1983: 77). The same arguments were pushed further by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal book Imperial Eyes (1992) when she postulated an intimate link between western imperial ideology and the travel writings.

The Sheltering Sky, falling within the tradition of travel literature depicts a journey away from the apparently safe and domestic (the USA, the West), towards the dangerous, the exotic and the alien other (Morocco, the East) that is in binary opposition to the west and viewed by westerners as empty spaces that lag behind in terms of socio-political, economic and cultural domains. However the settings both cultural and natural are means used by writers to project the primitiveness and the emptiness of the outsider.

3) The Sheltering Sky as an anti-colonial text:

In the coming part, I'll Show how the novel can be read as an anti-colonial (postcolonial one). How it proves that imperial France (west) is responsible for the underdevelopment of Morocco.

Bowles is aware of both the repressiveness of the French military apparatus and the selfishness of the individual Westerner in respectively maintaining and seeking the exotic in Arab lands. There are numerous examples in the text which highlight French responsibility for the underdevelopment of Morocco. However, we focus on one representative example in page 117 for the sake of clarification. In this page, we could easily detect an ironic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in which a concocted (imaginary) harmony is being forged. Such harmony depicted between the commander of the military post of Bou Noura, (a region in Morocco) lieutenant d'armagnac and the natives is not innocent. It's shown as an ideal and utopian relationship in an unspoiled community. "His overt attitude toward the people of Bou Noura was that they were an accessible part of a great, mysterious tribe from whom the French could learn a great deal if they only would take the trouble" (p 117). After three years the lieutenant's true enthusiasm for the natives came to an end. He "ceased thinking about them and began taking them for granted" (117) because he has no more the pleasure of discovering and living in the exotic. The latter becomes ordinary and unveiled.

Paradoxically, French hegemony had created "from the European viewpoint", an ideal small unspoiled rural community. This harmonious and cross cultural encounter is clear in the novel also when visitors are invited by local residents in the evenings to play cards, eat almonds, drink tea, smoke, listen to the flute, and smell mint in the air: a utopian space where nearly all the senses are present: Smells, tastes, sights and sounds. Bowles admits that foreign visitors to primitive spots usually hope that such enclaves remain technologically underdeveloped even if the status quo is not in favour of the inhabitants.

4) The Sheltering Sky as source of western superiority stereotypes:

I argue that the true aim of the novel is to give anti-African and anti-Arab images and stereotypes wide currency. I suggest that the large amount of negative metaphors will inevitably be digested by the general reader as the true nature of the other. The novel thus helps to cultivate colonial and race-related images more than fighting against them.

North Africa, just like the people who inhabit it, is metaphorically represented as an alien space so incompatible with western metaphors of familiarity and success. Africa or specifically North Africa as a space is represented as an adventure. The novel thus is a journey and a voyage into uncertainty, risk, discovery, hostile and unfamiliar space. It's a long journey into dimness, obscurity, and gloominess. It's an unpleasant voyage fraught with problems. The travellers are clearly aliens in a strange space which they do not understand. Their journey changes them for the worst, leaving them at a loss and on the brink of insanity. They begin their journey together, but they are separated and experience different aspects of the culture of the region.

For instance, *The Sheltering Sky* depicts North Africa and Morocco in specific as a timeless place. For example, after bribing an official in order to give him and Kit seats on a bus, Port remarks that the original ticket holders won't mind being bumped from their places because "what a week to them? Time doesn't exist for them." (177). Furthermore, besides being timeless, the space is characterised, according to the novel, by emptiness and harshness. The space, from the characters' viewpoint, proves to be hostile and deadly as they travel into the Sahara farther and farther in search for revitalization. Port and Kit have come to Africa with the hope that this trip will bring reunion and strengthen their marriage but sarcastically the opposite happens; the space, as the novel evinces, is far away from being a shelter or a refuge as the title suggests; the title itself is an ontological metaphor. The sky is constructed as a living entity that is capable to be a shelter. However, what we find out later is the opposite. It is used to prove that this new space is but an exile and banishment for the characters and their wishes. Port and Kit obtain only madness or death as a result to their African adventure. Port catches typhoid upon reaching the town of El Ga'a and spends his last days dying of fever in a room in a French fort (military post). He loses his life just when he already lost his passport. Port talking to a French officer claimed: «ever since I discovered that my passport was gone, I've felt only half alive. But it's a very depressing thing in a place like this to have no proof of who you are, you know». After the death of Port, Kit met almost the same seamy fate, she started losing her identity when she lost her western clothing and her name when, Belqassim, her new Arab rescuer, in order to introduce her to his wives, made her get rid of her western clothes and take an Arab male name: Ali. She gave up both her cultural identity and sexual one.

For Port and Kit, Africa is not a land that revitalizes, renews and generates the self but rather a space that peels them off their identities. Both natural and cultural aspects of North African settings push the characters toward death, isolation or madness. The desert, as the natural setting, with its hostile character, "oppressive" heat and abundant flies affects the moods of the characters. It is shaped by a lack of sympathy as depicted by Kit when she becomes aware «for the first time of how cruelly lacking in that sentiment (sympathy) was the human landscape here" (p 212). From a cultural perspective approach, people are viewed as being dirty, unenergetic distrustful and wary. Port doubts whether these people are friendly.

He wonders (16): “how friendly are they? Their faces are masks. They all look a thousand years old. What little energy they have is only the blind, mass desire to live, since no one of them eats enough to give him his own personal force”. He also reveals the hypocrite and indeterminate identity of these people when he says in the same page (16) “they have no religion left. Are they Moslems or Christian? They don’t know. They know money, and when they get it all they want is to eat”. They are often depicted as enigmatic characters whose inarticulate strangeness seals the travellers off even more completely from the culture in which they are travelling, causing their fierce attachments to one another to unravel (untie). In addition we notice a lack of communication between the natives and the visitors. When the latter are obliged to speak, they say just brief utterances though they are able to speak French the language natives are acquainted with. Moreover Tangier as a city is described as being either dark or colourless, the same for the hotel room where the characters first settle. From the very beginning, the atmosphere seems uncomfortable and unfamiliar and the space is neither reassuring nor consoling; the room is characterized by a mess in colour, absence of air and apathetic designs. It’s so ‘difficult’ to ‘accept the high, narrow room with its beamed ceiling, the huge apathetic designs stencilled in indifferent colours around the walls, the closed window of red and orange glass’ (p9).

Indeed, Port and Kit did not choose North Africa out of appreciation or satisfaction, but there are two reasons which propelled them to come to Africa. Apart from seeking an authentic experience to revitalize and generate them, for them Africa represents a world that is unspoiled by the war (world war 2), a conflict that ended only a few years before Kit and Port’s journey to the Sahara: its remoteness from the places which had been touched by the war and its closeness to western countries are the major reasons behind their travel. They thought: “in any case it was near Spain and Italy, and they could always cross over if it failed to work out”. (11). This implies the western feeling of superiority towards the ‘orient’ ‘by approaching the latter as a host of ‘others,’ whose differences from Europe, the West and the dominant white culture have imbued them with a supposed uniformity and inferiority and have viewed the other culture not just as ‘wrong’ or ‘backward’, but may also be seen by its uncooperative and irritable nature and its aggressively primitive ambitions to desire the subversion of Western progress. A culture characterized by ultimate strangeness: everything is strange the earth, the city, the air, the people even the sky looks strange in the eyes of the westerners, Port says to Kit “the sky here’s very strange”, there’s “Just darkness. Absolute night”. According to Bowles, there is no shelter; there is only storm, death and madness, nothingness or chaos--these are the alternatives Bowles believes await anyone who tries to venture into the depths of Africa. Neither the restrictiveness of the city nor the limitlessness of the desert has offered the travellers a punch of relief. The novel begins and ends in extreme sadness the mere naive release comes from the English woman, Mrs Lyle and her son describing the indigenous people, a talk which pleased Port and push him to communicate. Mrs Lyle says in page 55:

“The Arabs!” Cried Mrs Lyle. “They’re a stinking, low race of people with nothing to do in life but spy on others. How else do you think they live?”
 “It seems incredible”, Port ventured timidly, hoping in this way to call forth more of the same, for it amused him.
 “Hah!” she said in a tone of triumph. “It may seem incredible to you because you don’t know them, but look out for them. They hate us all”
 “I’ve always found the Arabs very sympathetic”, said Port. “Of course. That’s because they’re servile, they flatter you and fawn on you. And the moment your back is turned, off they rush to the consulate.” (55).

The pleasure Port felt is that of feeling superior to a different other. This is in general the western approach of the orient which is indeed created by the euro-centeredness concepts about the orient as whole. It depicts the other/outsider from a perspective that takes Europe as the norm, from which the "exotic", "inscrutable" Orient deviates as Edward Said puts it in his masterpiece Orientalism. Said explains that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts, but through imagined constructs that see all "Eastern" societies as fundamentally similar, all having nearly the same shape and characteristics. Such East-oriented knowledge is constructed by/within literary texts and historical records that often constitute a limited understanding of the facts of life in the orient (Wikipedia). Unlike those conceptions of "Western" societies, those stereotypical prejudices established the East as antithetical to the West. Said mentions that "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings..." (Ashcroft, *et al* 1994: 87).

Orientalist Western writings depict the Orient as an irrational, weak, feminised "Other", contrasted with the rational, strong, masculine West. Such contrast, Said suggests, derives from the need to create "difference" between West and East that can be attributed to immutable "essences" in the Oriental make-up. The same set of ideas is advocated by many other post-colonial writers who criticize the western claims of superiority in many crucial works such as Homi Bhabha in Location of Culture, (1994) Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks (1967) and Gayatri Spivak in "Could the Subaltern Speak?" (1985).

5) Conclusion:

To conclude, The Sheltering Sky is after all a work of art. It is, like all literary artefacts, a multi-dimensional and polysemic text. This allows us, as readers, to interpret and broach the novel from a plethora of perspectives. It is both a colonial and post-colonial text. It seems to give wide currency to racist ego-centrist stereotypes and metaphors, but also it refers to the colonial responsibility for the degradation and backwardness of the other (the oriental, the African, the Arab and the Muslim). The conceptual structural metaphor of "travelling to other spaces is an adventure" is so recurrent in the novel. All characters went into this adventure and met various kinds of hardships just to show how it is difficult to reconcile two different cultures; two different spaces.

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