

RESEARCH ARTICLE



DREAM AND REALITY: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF PAUL BOWLES'S *THE SHELTERING SKY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), one of the salient novels written in contemporary era in the realm of Desert Writings. The author of this paper discusses how sound knowledge of desert helps one in more efficient reading and understanding of the text adding deeper insights. Desert influences the life of characters largely and gives unity to the texts. The novel, adapted into a well-known film, is a controversial one and stirs much thoughts on issues like love, moral ambiguity, cultural clash, physical and historical contexts, World Wars and so on. Moreover many novels of the contemporary times envelop apparent hints of identity and existentialism and this novel is not excluded.

Key Words: Dream and Reality, Culture Clash, Desert, Absurdity, Morality, Existentialism

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INTRODUCTION

Shortly speaking, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) – hereafter is referred as *TSS* – is an existential novel by the American writer Paul Bowles in which a married couple (Port and Kit) originally from New York along with their friend (Tunner) travel to the North African desert shortly after World War II to resolve their marital difficulties. But by their ignorance of local culture and imminent dangers around them, they soon fall prey and the trip becomes treacherous. It is a fiction of post-colonial alienation, culture clash and existential despair that was a great success and sold well.

Time magazine introduced the novel in its TIME 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005. In 1990 the novel was adapted by the stellar director Bernardo Bertolucci into a notable film with the same title.

Paul Bowles was an “American novelist, poet, [classical music] composer, translator, short-story writer,” and film scorer who married the novelist Jane Auer (Birch and Hooper 82). He was a harsh critic of western civilization, Americanization, technology, “mechanization, pollution, noise – all the things that twentieth century has brought and scattered over the world” (Caponi, *Conversations*

184). This made him to remove himself physically and psychologically from America (Perlow 189) and establish himself in 1947 in Morocco, because it seemed to be more aloof from the modern world. After 1948 the couple lived intermittently in Tangier and thus the place changed to a spiritual zone for hippies and members of Beat Generation¹ because Bowles's version of existentialism was central to them.

Author Norman Mailer once wrote in *Advertisements for Myself* that "Paul Bowles opened the world of Hip. He let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square (Port Moresby), the call of the orgy [and] the end of civilization" (468). Tennessee Williams reviewed Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* in The New York Times Book Review and wrote that "it brings the reader into sudden, startling communion with a talent of true maturity and sophistication of a sort that I had begun to fear was to be found nowadays only among the insurgent novelists of France, such as Jean Genet and Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre" (sec.7). Thus *The Sheltering Sky* is the manifestation of a pure subjective reality. Such a reality would be called 'perplexity' if we could adventurously approach the wide realm of terms associated with it.

I: Treatment of Desert in the Novel

In Bowles's fiction in general and *TSS* in particular what is made prominent is writers' mind and psychology. The actual locales hide under the text. The desert thus acts as a metaphor in *TSS*. The indifference, aridity, monotony and bleakness of desert mirror the same qualities in the love relationship of the couple while highlighting, on a larger scale, the meaninglessness of twentieth century relationships. They are alone even when they are together. The book "explores the limits of humanity when it touches the unfathomable emptiness and impassive cruelty of the desert".²

After 12 years living with each other and now a sexless marriage, Port and Kit start a journey to a place which is away from the effects of World War, hoping to solve their marital problems and escape the monotony of their own life. However, being not prepared and qualified for such a journey, they travel haphazardly and thus paradoxically everything gets worse – a Heart of Darkness. Even the sky, which the novel has been named after it, does not

shelter them "from what's behind" (*TSS* 94) and they became more aloof from each other. At last even Port which seems to be more optimistic reaches death.

Different scenes in the novel and in the film³ also infuse such a sense of loneliness and indifference. The dirt, tediousness, gross atmosphere and superficial feelings are felt by any reader and audience. They act as a real drama leaving the readers half way into the characters and at last a desert of the heart remains within them.

Here Bowles's Sahara is akin to T.S. Eliot's 'waste land', Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play *No Exit*,⁴ and Bernardo Bertolucci's two other great films – *Agonia* and *Last Tango in Paris* – which both take place in a closed room. Bernardo Bertolucci himself hints on such similarities. He sums up this line of argumentation when he asks: "Isn't the empty flat of *Last Tango [in Paris]* a kind of a desert and isn't the desert an empty flat?" (Quoted in Loshitzky 133).

In both the film and the novel, there is a scene which shows the couple going on top of a mountain while the vast and desolate desert is below. Such a scene symbolically depicts the deepest and widest gap that may exist between two people.

They sat down on the rocks side by side, facing the vastness below. She linked her arm through his and rested her head against his shoulder. He only stared straight before him, sighed, and finally shook his head slowly. (*TSS* 93)

The empty and silent desert and mountains highlight the very lack of emotion, communication and warmth in the couple's relations. In the film they are shown even having a quick, shallow and emotionless intercourse. They have a little mutual understanding yet they were pretending to have love or make it possible at least. Port wants to convince her about the desert sky, which shelters them, but Kit resents such words.

He sat up, put his arms about her neck, kissed her, drew back and looked at her, kissed her again, drew back again, and so on, several times. There were tears on her

cheeks. She smiled forlornly as he rubbed them away with his forefingers. (TSS 94)

The vocal manifestation of such loneliness and an intellectual solitude can be summarized in an extended 'sigh' exerted by Kit in the film. This 'sigh' comes from what Austrian philosopher Karl Popper calls civilization pressure or "the strain of civilization" (Magee 87; Fox 39). Globalization has broken the geographical borders, but impelled and fortified the inner separateness while increasing the mental isolation borders to the infinite.

II. Loss of Identity

The desert is the archetype of freedom and where the bounds are absent. By entering the desert (interior or exterior) one loses identity and finds a new beginning. As Christine Walter Paintner asserts:

Anytime we have a desert experience in our lives, something is stripped away. The experience may bring a loss of possessions, loss of identity, or loss of a loved one . . . This stripping away forces us to return to the essence of all things. We are thrust into the arms of what is most sacred to us. (72)

As the poet Edmond Jabès asserts one may not go to the desert to find identity, but to uproot his personality and become anonymous – an embodiment of void and silence (xvi). In *The Sheltering Sky* Port's loss of his passport is symbolical. This makes him as an unknown and anonymous man in the desert for a while. He is neither an American anymore, nor westernization and prestige can help him now.

. . . Port's next words. "It's strange," he said with a deprecatory smile, "how, 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." (TSS 154)

Later on, in the last days of his life and in the throes of his hallucinations, Port projects his fear and bewilderment of such anonymity and loneliness as well as being here and there.

"So alone I can't even remember the idea of not being alone," he was saying When I'm there I can't remember being here; I'm just afraid. . . . It's awful to be two things at once. You know that, don't you?" (TSS 210)

The couple find and lose their identities in the course of the narrative. To make its goal complete, the desert grants Port death at last. According to Jabès, as mentioned earlier, death is the real silence and anonymity. Likewise Kit's identity changes gradually, especially after she enters the desert and joins Belqassim's Caravan. She surprisingly starts loving the arid land, the oases, their people and primitive cultures. She disguised from Belqassim's wives and becomes his captive and mistress.

As the morning passed, the landscape took on a gaiety and softness that were not quite like anything Kit had ever seen. . . . For the first time she felt a faint thrill of excitement. "It is rather wonderful," she thought, "to be riding past such people in the Atomic Age." (TSS 179)

Thus Kit reaches a new identity and she seems much happier now. Her loss of identity in the novel is therefore connected to what Miss Ferry remarks: "The desert's a big place, but nothing really ever gets lost there" (310). Such a strange behaviour of Kit made many critics to call her insane. However, Syrine C. Hout in her paper disagrees and justifies Kit of being wise and conscious after bearing much toil (*Grains of Utopia* 122-3). In fact Kit's identity proves the main quote they had at the beginning of the novel and the film about the difference between a tourist and a traveller (TSS 6). But Kit even goes beyond that.

III. An Existential Novel

Existentialism focuses on the human being's position in the universe as a self determining agent responsible for the authenticity of his or her choices. Such a philosophical attitude, opposed to rationalism and empiricism, encompasses absurdity and nihilism as well. Among its main founders are Heidegger, Sartre and Nietzsche. This philosophy is

summarized in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as follows:

Its fundamental premise, that 'existence precedes essence', implies that we as human beings have no given essence or nature but must forge our own values and meanings in an inherently meaningless or *absurd world of existence. Obligated to make our own choices, we can either confront the anguish (or **Angst*) of this responsibility, or evade it by claiming obedience to some determining convention or duty. . . . Paradoxically, we are 'condemned to be free'. . . the absurdity of existence could be redeemed through the individual's decision. . . . (120)

Search for existential identity and meaning in a vast and bleak landscape as well as the nihility of life are vividly represented in *TSS*. The characters decide to redeem the absurdity of existence, make their own choices and confront the anguishes. The novel served as inspiration for the Beat Generation for its existential perspectives. For the Beats, directionless travel was proof of life.

The novel starts with Port waking up from a dream and the principal meaning of the text is projected by its interpretation. This opens the way for discussing psychoanalytical theory of Freud and Yong. But what is that secret meaning of life which is hidden in the interpretation of a dream? Whether a dream is achievable or not? Can a dream lead to reality or give knowledge about existence? Isn't interpretation the result of human being's hallucination, imposing irrelevant concepts and making them more complex? Whether a dream tends essentially to be interpreted or often escapes from it? Whether reality is according to dream or dream is according to reality? George Berkeley (1685–1753), who introduced the theory of "immaterialism" and was called the father of idealism, once held that objects are not what they seem immediately.⁵ Being more in favour of mind, he denied the matter and substance.

IV. Moral Ambiguity

Analysing moral perspectives in the novel can also shed light on better understanding of the

text. Disloyalty as an interesting theme has arrested many writers and filmmakers in recent years.

"But they were husband and wife," pursued the lieutenant softly. "Of course. Of course," said Tunner with impatience, feeling that for him even to engage in such a conversation was disloyal. (*TSS* 246)

Such an instinctive and natural pull is so strong and perpetual that it is observed even in a Bedouin Arab of desert i.e. Belqassim's betrayal towards his wives.

On the floor among the cushions sat Belqassim's three wives, staring up at her in wide-eyed surprise. (246)

However, such a theme in the novel indicates a kind of 'freedom' and 'going beyond boundaries' which leads to the threshold of surrealism in postmodernism. On the other hand disloyalty in the first glance may seem immoral. Yet in its essence, it shows man's escape from his own-made restrictions and leads to the creation of another world with different moralities. It is in such status that the individual or better to say the spirit escapes the burden of the body. In this regard Viorica Pâtea and María Eugenia Díaz comment in *Critical Essays on the Myth of the American Adam* that

In *The Sheltering Sky*, the privation of Kit, who nurses [Port] in his last days, [is] only relieved by the attentions of the living: the nomadic tribesmen who allow her to escape the isolation of El Ga'a and join their caravan. The tribesmen rape her repeatedly, but Kit eschews alienation and finds herself attracted to the predatory sex of her captor, Belqassim. Belqassim's attention is compensation for her husband's physical incapacity and derangement in El Ga'a. In a landscape suffused with "an excrescence of hatred" (288) she experiences "a gnawing desire to be close" to someone, a yearning brought on not by the fear of the rape but the prospect of celibacy. (200)

Having much in common with the Beats, Bowles had tendencies towards and projected objection against the social norms. In a section added to 2005 edition of *TSS* namely "A Chronology of Paul Bowles's Life" we find that Bowles wrote, as

his early composition, an opera titled "Le Carré: An Opera in Nine Chapters".⁶ The plot is about "two men who want to exchange wives . . . [at last] by procuring divorces, but once the new arrangement has been made the [unhappy] wives endeavor to get their husbands back" (Sawyer-Lauçanno 18).

There is also criticism of the novel and film for projecting the Arabs and eastern people as trivial and slaves and their places of living as dirty. The religion is not welcomed with open arms as well.

V. Culture Clash

TSS is about encounter with a new landscape, people and culture. In fact Paul Bowles "examines the ways in which Americans' incomprehension of alien cultures leads to the ultimate destruction of those cultures".⁷ Accordingly it shows the culture clash that occurs in such situations. As mentioned earlier such a clash can also be understood from the famous quotes at the beginning of the novel and the film. The conversation goes like this in the film:

Kit Moresby: Tunner, we're not tourists. We're travelers.

Tunner: Oh, what's the difference?

Port Moresby: A tourist is someone who thinks about going home the moment they arrive, Tunner.

Kit Moresby: Whereas a traveler might not come back at all.

Tunner: You mean I'm a tourist.

Kit Moresby: Yes, Tunner. And I'm half and half.

So the concept of time manifests the main difference between a tourist and a traveller. Such a concept is highlighted also in another part of the novel regarding the couple's life:

Because neither she nor Port had ever lived a life of any kind of regularity, they both had made the fatal error of coming hazily to regard time as non-existent. One year was like another year. Eventually everything would happen. (*TSS* 127)⁸

The people of the arid lands are the ones who are accustomed with hunger, thirst, harshness, hardship and renunciation of worldly desires. In such

lands spiritual quest is often associated with suffering. On the contrary westerners' futility and idleness of life made their spiritual quests pointless and deeply dull. The desert, the place of trial and faith, can be exploited for the imperialistic desires.

If the desert is a powerful, often frenzied propeller of mystical faith, it is also a product of the modern age, easily exploited by the soporific salestalk of entrepreneurs. In Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* (1994) the question of whether "any American" can understand a world where spiritual values are "synonymous with suffering" (Bowles 15) is investigated in a desert setting where "bland contentment" (7) and salestalk are denied. (Pâtea and Díaz 200)

As well-off members of New York and the main characters of the novel, Port and Kit both seem to have somewhat ignorant attitudes towards foreign cultures. However Kit's view at the first half of the novel is more negative towards such cultures and exotic places. She feels uncomfortable to see monotonous, dirty and barren cities and always wishes for luxurious amenities. Port seems indifferent and often in search of something.

The two minor character of the novel (Mrs. Lyle and Eric Lyle) act to intensify such a cross-cultural clash and the controversial views of East and West. They are two odd and hysterical characters. Eric is idiot, spoiled, corrupt and habitual to drink. He begs others for money and steals Port's passport. His mother is biased, ignorant and discriminatory to Arab people.

The Germans call a tourist a Wander-Bird and it refers somehow to Aldous Huxley's views on quiet and aimless travelling.⁹ The Lyles in *TSS* are the typical tourists that Huxley describes. Mrs. Lyle, a fake and lazy traveler, often wants to relax in hotel and do nothing.

. . . holding up her handbag: "I always carry the tea here in my bag with me when we're on a voyage. Otherwise I should have to wait forever while that wretched boy attended to the automobile and the luggage. I believe there's nothing at all to see in Boussif, so we shall be spared going into the streets." (*TSS* 62)

She often nags and complains negatively of other social classes as well as races like the Arabs. Rejecting Port's view of Arabs' sympathy, she believes them to be miserable, thieves and spy for the government.

"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. And so do the French. Oh, they loathe us!" "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." (63)

She mocks Jews of Spain as well, saying she "burst out laughing in [their] faces because of "their claiming to be Roman Catholics" and that their synagogue hadn't been used since the fifteenth century.

Mrs. Lyle cried: "Look, look! Mr. Moresby! That sweet burro! It reminds me of Spain. We just spent two months there. It's a horrible country," (she pronounced it hawibble) "all soldiers and priests and Jews." "Jews?" echoed Port incredulously. "Of course. Didn't you know? The hotels are full of them. They run the country. From behind the scenes, of course. The same as everywhere else. Only in Spain they're very clever about it. . . They all shook their fingers back and forth in front of my face, and shouted: 'Catohco! Catohco!' at me. (65)

CONCLUSION

In this paper we discussed Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* as one of the salient novels and landmarks of the twentieth century. Firstly the desert as an actual place as well as an interior space discussed while highlighting the fact that such a journey to the desert is one's own journey into the depth of his/her soul. Accordingly existential perspectives and the loss of identity became prominent. The novel remains a text of moral ambiguity and a topical lesson in culture clash. Such

a clash can be observed in the characters' views and behaviour as well as in the distinction between different social classes, religions and races.

Notes

¹ Beat Generation was a group of American post-World War II writers and poets known as the "Beats" who generated much of the social and artistic protest of the 1950s and 1960s. Notably among them were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, John Clellon Holmes, and William S. Burroughs. Central elements of "Beat" culture included rejection of received standards, innovations in style, experimentation with drugs, alternative sexualities, an interest in religion, a rejection of materialism, and explicit portrayals of the human condition. For more information see <http://www.onlineliterature.com/periods/beat.php>.

² See blurb on the cover of the book: *The Sheltering Sky* (2005).

³ The first scene in the film shows crowds at rush hour walking in the streets with a unique music. The scene which is in black and white shows the dullness of mechanical life of modern people. It makes the audience for the colorful and yellow desert scenes afterwards.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play *Huis Clos* (No Exit) also adopted into a film with the same title (2008). The film is directed by Britt Pitre.

⁵ For such ideas you may refer to "George Berkeley: Three dialogues between Hylas and Philonous" in page 142 of *Fundamentals in Philosophy* (2008).

⁶ See also "I Never Liked to Raise My Voice", an interview with Paul Bowles about his and other's music (1995) by Phillip Ramay. Bowles composed this opera when he was about nine. The Setting is Stanley, in the Falkland Islands, a place not on the map and unknown. You may refer to <http://www.paulbowles.org/paulbowlesmusic.html>, retrieved 1 Apr 2014.

⁷ See blurb on the cover of the book: *The Sheltering Sky* (2005).

⁸ These lines of the novel are repeated by the author himself in the film. Paul Bowles appears in the film few times in order to make the audience ready for what comes next. The film afterwards relies on the visual presentation of landscapes and the conversations among characters.

⁹ See *Along the Road: Notes and Essays of a Tourist* (1989) by Huxley.

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