

Travel and Desert Landscape in *The Sheltering Sky*

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Abstract Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) narrates the story of Port Moresby and his wife Kit, a married couple originally from New York who travel to the North African desert accompanied by their friend Tunner. Parting from a highly American commercial civilization, the Moresbys' journey, initially an attempt to resolve their marital difficulties is later made fraught by the travelers' ignorance of dangers that surround them. The desert is a real and imaginary geographical place which takes part in the process of identity of its pursuers. The desert in this novel can be realized as either the actual desert or the inner desert of human psyche. The indeterminate, expansive environment of the desert testifies the Moresby's love and bound to each other. The desert thus gives scopes not only to the impressive solitary landscape for travellers, but also to the deepest desire hidden in human's psyche.

Keywords Travel, Desert, Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*

1. Introduction

Travel, often regarded as a productive movement inclusive of departure, arrival and multiple possibilities of events and experiences, takes various forms. In the forms of literary expression and representation, travel has been distinctively defined and established as a newly thriving field guided by the interplay of difference. Edward Said's *Traveling Theory* proposes the significance of the word "travel", which serves to vary "from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another" [1]. In this respect, every action when traveling reveals its changeable essence and features a unique orientation and transgression of all its aspects, especially through the subject in travel, i.e. travellers. Travellers' patterns of cognition, aesthetic experiences and traces of transformations are heavily imbricated in their journeys. They experience an extensive difference of space and time by themselves. If there were gain in travel, the gain would be, "directional rather than intentional" [2]. The intentional journey would focus on the place that travelers choose, whereas the directional one

signifies why travelers choose and determine to go there. Two major preoccupations are of concern: one is how the subject in travel faces potential changes in his/her journey, and the other, how he/she reacts to a precarious encounter with a particular place. Van Den Abbeele places a fundamental structure of travel from "a teleological point of view" within "an economic conception of travel" [3]. On the basis of such structure, the destination and the time one's travel takes to complete is subject to more emphasis than are other elements in travel actions.

Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* provides sophisticated insights into travellers' affections and their inner struggle between a fusion of contradiction and identification in a trip into a desert region. The characters get into the plight entangled with unsatisfied desire and imagined threats from reality. Bowles himself described the novel as "an adventure story in which the adventures take place on two planes simultaneously: in the actual desert, and in the inner desert of the spirit" [4]. Bowles' comment helps to reflect travelers' desire in their trip: How does travel arouse man's desire for another location much more than his home? How do travellers proceed from their journey through an ambivalence of home and destination, the target of travel? What do travellers gain in their journey and return? The novel gives readers an impressive travel itself with not only the widely spread landscape of the desert, but also the deepest desire hidden in human beings as life-long travellers.

2. Tourist, Traveller, or in Between?

Definitions of the terms "tourist" and "traveller" remain unsettled and controversial. Who is a tourist or a traveller? This question may properly lead to another: How do humans start to travel? Paul Bowles indicates, that in the case of Port and Kit Moresby, "they wanted to travel, a simple, innocent motivation" [5]. A traveller's motivation is simply "the motivation to travel", and nothing else, whereas a tourist's motivation could be more than that. At the very beginning of the novel, the distinction of tourist and traveller is brought into consideration through the main characters: an American married couple, Port Moresby and Kit, and their friend, Tunner.

The protagonist Port “did not think of himself as a tourist; he was a traveller” [6]. The direct difference between a tourist and a traveller is time: “Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveller, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, for one part of the earth to another” [6]. Time plays a pivotal part in such distinction. A tourist travels within a certain period of time during which he may complete his journey and then go back home; a traveller takes time in his movement and the traveling time may last longer. The difference also implies that the goal of a tourist may be a trip and a return, that of a traveller, a fascination with travel, or just the desire to travel. Port’s travel, as Joseph Voelker describes it, is a “drifting” which “comes from a movement away from his past” and “a deeper penetration into the alien” [7].

Another difference between tourist and traveller lies in the attitude towards the aim of travel: the former “accepts his own civilization without question” and the latter, “compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking” [6]. A tourist’s unquestionable acceptance of his own civilization shows that on the journey, he embraces cultural and social presuppositions from what he has learned. A traveller is the one who practices a constant reflection of himself and what has been given to himself through his itinerary. Port, in this sense, seems to “float in the action, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it” since his journey has “neither aim nor end” [8]. As he says, “My only plan is I have no plan”—a drifting from place to place which brings them no closer to happiness or a resolution than before” [6]. As a consequence, Port is definitely a traveller “on a journey to nowhere in particular, never arriving at a destination, but simply moving on” [8]. For a traveller like Port, “Whenever he was in route from one place to another, he was able to look at his life with a little more objectivity than usual. It was often on trips that he thought most clearly, and made the decisions that he could not reach when he was stationary” [6].

A vivid contrast to Port, Tunner, the friend of Port and Kit, is considered a tourist and he also identifies himself as a typical tourist. Tunner always wants to go out somewhere, see new things and keep himself occupied in the trip. He treats his company with Port and Kit as a training of his personality since both of them are of different backgrounds: “Doubtless the principal reason why he had been so eager to accompany Port and Kit on this trip was that with them as with no one else he felt a definite resistance to his unceasing attempts at moral domination, at which he was forced, when with them, to work much harder; thus unconsciously he was giving his personality the exercise it required” [6]. Moreover, he has a purpose for this journey: to seduce Kit. Unable to comprehend Kit and Port’s apparent acquiescence to the situation, Tunner continues his efforts and hopes “someday to have intimate relations he considered Kit the most unlikely, the most difficult” [6]. The aim of his journey is fulfillment of physical desire. He believes in the efficacy of his actions; he can alter his situation to achieve his purpose.

He also believes that he can succeed in stealing Kit away from Port through his charm, his champagne, and so on. In short, Tunner is truly a busy tourist in the journey.

Port is a traveller, and Tunner is apparently a tourist. What about Kit? Voelker contends that Kit is simply put as a traveller as Port. To be specific, Kit’s travel could never be exactly the same as Port’s and her travel is much more complicated than Port’s. Her attitudes are ambivalent and undergo great changes. In the first period of travel, she has much to do to alleviate the underlying tension covered up by Port’s apparent act of alienation: “It made her sad to realize that in spite of their so often having the same reactions, the same feelings, they never would reach the same conclusions, because their respective aims in life were almost diametrically opposed” [6]. Port’s disaffection and Tunner’s intrusion muddles her mind so that she hardly thinks of herself or her trip: “El Ga’a, Timbuctoo, it’s all the same to me, more or less” [6]. Port’s death, however, has a drastic impact on her. Since Kit relies completely on Port’s direction in the desert, she is suddenly thrown totally upon herself after Port’s death. When this happens, she acknowledges the absurdity of her existence: “the sudden surfeit of time, the momentary sensation of drowning in an element become too rich and too plentiful to be consumed, and thereby made meaningless” [9]. Caponi claims that Kit “traces her escape from and eventual return to the pain of Port’s death” [10]. After Port’s death from typhoid, Kit’s trip starts. Kit’s solitary wanderings urge her to become a real traveller who defies any monolithic experience of difference and becomes susceptible to what constitutes the journey.

Why do people travel? Travellers do not have final answers because they travel simply for its own sake. A traveller’s desire is impossible to reduce to a specific intention which may limit itself to a dead end. Desire rather than intentions calls for largely fluid relationships with exterior places and forces. Dennis Porter suggests that a psychoanalytic theory may be helpful in the interpretation of motivations of travel and approves the dialectical relation between travel and desire: “most forms of travel at least cater to desire: they seem to promise or allow us to fantasize the satisfaction of drives that for one reason or another is denied us at home. As a result, not only is travel typically fueled by desire, it also embodies powerful transgressive impulses” [11].

The characters make explicit the difference between a tourist (Tunner) and a traveller (Port) and a possible “in-between” of a tourist and a traveler (Kit). Such differentiation is evident in the setting of the extensive Sahara desert area where the characters’ interrelations and perceptions of space would be respectively reformulated and reshuffled.

3. Desert Landscape

Dick Hebdige points to the way in which the desert metaphor functions as “the place at the end of the world

where all meanings and values blow away; the place without landmarks that can never be mapped; the place where nothing grows and nobody stays put" [12]. In Gilles Deleuze's term, the place without landmarks that can never be mapped is a "deterritorialized" landscape [13]. He argues that a desert is a symbol of deterritorialization since it is one of the "smooth spaces" where "one no longer goes from one point to another, but rather holds space beginning from any point" [13]. In this space, "one occupies it with a vector of deterritorialization in perpetual motion" [13]. In terms of its borderless character, the desert breaks the overlapping accounts of civilization. Renciere views the desert as "a space of indeterminacy where there is no 'here' or 'there'" [12]. It is a space without spatial sense, which matches Deleuze's concept of deterritorialization.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, the desert is the real and imaginary geographical place which exerts profound influences upon the Moresby's love and ties to each other. As Bowles explains, "The desert is the protagonist," and the story he wants to tell is "what the desert can do to us" [14]. The desert is a real place where most plants and creatures barely survive; it is also an imaginary place in vivid contrast to the urban bustle. The barren, desolate and wild features of the desert serve to reflect what and why of being human. If meanings and values no longer exist, identities and concerns could simultaneously disappear and dissipate. If nothing could have been pinned down, the conventional cultural and social framework of human relations would have been unstable. This specific landscape exerts a variety of significance on travellers. Port and Kit, or any human beings in general, would examine the significance of civilization aroused by going to such a primitive place.

3.1. The Desired Traveller: The Husband Port

The nature of the setting enables the Bowlesian protagonists to quest for an authentic self which is related to each other's presence on their journey. First of all, for the husband Port, the desert designates a place where he avoids the power of civilization which prevents him from becoming his real self. He decides to venture into the desert by virtue of his disappointment with reality: "If he had not been journeying into regions he did not know, he would have found it insufferable. The idea that at each successive moment has was deeper into the Sahara than he had been the moment before, that he was leaving behind all familiar things, this constant consideration kept him in a state of pleasurable agitation" [6]. His emotions in regard to the desert are both excitement and anxiety.

The loss of his passport serves as an act of escaping civilization. The passport assures and solidifies one's national identity granted to secure boundaries and the protection of certain political forces so that one is able to be identified as a member in a society. The passport signifies what may have changed "as we move from national to transnational eras" [15]. When Port discovers that his passport is gone, he feels "only half alive" physically; he

admits that "it's a very depressing thing in a place like this to have no proof of who you are" [6]. Despite that, he runs away from Tunner, who accidentally picks up Port's passport and symbolizes "all super-egos (a moralizing tyrant)" which keeps Moresby in check [16].

Losing his passport gradually turns him into "a man unhealthily preoccupied with himself" [6]. As Port walks in the desert, he perceives that death means nothing more than a symbolic return to his favorite desert: "More mobile, he followed the course of thoughts because he was tied on behind. Often the way was vertiginous, but he could not let go. There was no repetition in the landscape; it was always new territory and the peril increased constantly . . . It was an existence of exile from the world" [6]. The desert image in Port's mind absolutely overcomes the binary sense of life and death, and then achieves a unification of human and nature.

The sky is also relegated to a part of the desert. Bowles identifies the desert and the sky: "It's all one: they're both the same, part of nature" [14]. There is a major scene describing the sky as an existential meaning of life. As Port says to Kit, "The sky here's very strange. I often have the sensation when I look at it that it's a solid thing up there, protecting us from what's behind", Kit asks, "But what is behind?" Port replies, "Nothing, I suppose, just darkness. Absolute night" [6]. The sky itself cannot offer shelter; the sky "can only underscore the violent terror of Bowles's characters with its silent and unnerving distance" [4]. Port "aspires to the state of consciousness symbolized by the vast, reciprocal blankness of the African desert and sky" in which Port has come to deny all purposes to the phenomenon of existence [17]. The vast, borderless desert and sky enable Port to quest for an authentic self as he contemplates his existential values.

In Port's case, he is suspicious of the love between him and Kit, seeking an intimacy with his wife which is both spiritual and physical. Yet ten years' disturbances and hindrances of his love relationship stop him from going straightforward. When Port wanders the streets, a scene comes into his mind: "A faint vision began to haunt his mind. It was Kit, seated by the open window, filing her nails and looking out over the town. And as he found his fancy returning more often, as the minutes went by, to that scene, unconsciously he felt himself the protagonist, Kit the spectator. The validity of his existence at that moment was predicated on the assumption that she had not moved, but was still sitting there. It was as if she could still see him from the window, tiny and far away as he was, walking rhythmically uphill and down, through light and shadow; it was as if only she knew when he would turn around and walk the other way" [6]. The vision appears again and again as he goes somewhere else: "Slowly the image of Kit sitting in the window began to take shape again in Port's mind. At first, when he became conscious of it, he felt a pang of guilt" [6] and "He found himself imagining that Kit was a silent onlooker" [6]. Port's vision of being seen by Kit results from his foremost guilt, a preoccupying state that he is becoming

afraid to develop their relationship.

In order to improve the relationship, Port and Kit once go biking, and it does help a little: "Since the day he and Kit had gone bicycling together he had felt a definite desire to strengthen the sentimental bonds between them" [6]. Although a close bond begins to emerge in the wake of their interaction, Port imagines the burden of giving himself: "for much as he desired the rapprochement, he knew that he also dreaded the emotional responsibilities it would entail" [6]. In this respect, Port is "unable to resolve the conflict or express his anger openly without guilt" and "remains in a state of acute loss" [15].

In general, Port is greatly absorbed with the itinerary of desert: "The deeper Port moves into the desert, the further he moves into himself, the more clearly he is the victim of a hostile consciousness and aware of the destruction at the end of his quest" [14]. He craves for a different communication with Kit and a more profound awareness of his own existence. For him, the desert is "a dynamic medium", in which he can live, move, and have his own being [18]. Reflective of Port's desire being repressed under civilization, the desert also serves as a medium of exchange between him and Kit, that is, "the self and the other" [18]. At last, Port has no strong motivation to discover his passport, and his death implies his return to nature without regret.

3.2 The Desireless Traveller: The Wife Kit

Kit is another case of a travel. The desert for Kit is originally an unfriendly place because she is used to living a civilized life and enjoying urban convenience. She became more animated as she pointed to the window that gave onto the empty desert, "I felt I'd simply die if I didn't see something civilized soon. Not only that. I'm having a Scotch sent up and I'm opening my last pack of Players" [6]. At the beginning, she avoids an open contact with the desert, which remains an unbearable requirement from Port. However, when Port is seriously ill and at the edge of death, she gradually becomes intimate with the landscape and adjusts to the desert: "she had the impression that she was on the top of a great table, that the horizon was the brink of space. She imagined a cube-shaped planet somewhere above the earth, between it and the moon, to which somehow they had been transported. The light would be hard and unreal as it was here, the air would be of the same taut dryness, the contours of the landscape would lack the comforting terrestrial curves, just as they did all through this vast region" [6]. The vision of the desert grows in her mind as she is permanently stunned by the world of desert. The desert no longer serves as Port's own dogmatic destination, but as condense memories of their love. This transformation leads her to rediscover the landscape: she attempts to see the desert, feel the desert, and sense subtle changes of the desert. She seems to encounter an unprecedented sight of life derived from the desert: "She felt a strange intensity being born within her. As she looked about the quiet garden, she had the impression that for the first time since her childhood she was seeing objects clearly.

Life was suddenly there, she was in it, not looking through the window at it" [6].

Kit's attitude towards the desert is ambivalent, or more specifically, passive. She does not love the desert as much as Port does. She has no interest in the desert at all until Port's death. Since she is in the ambivalent emotion for the landscape, she is detached enough to see how the desert changes. Kit experiences the changing process of the desert in states of solitary, desolation, and despair. Entangled with a conflict of ambivalence, she runs away from the symbolic control of civilization and continuing loss in her aimless travel in the desert. As Mitchell contends, the desert greets human either as space or environment within which people may "find or lose" themselves [18]. To a certain extent, Kit is more like a desireless traveller since she experiences a transformation in her mind: from refusal to acceptance and from escape to contact.

4. Conclusions

The Sheltering Sky provides concrete and contextualized conditions and experiences of travellers. Parting from a highly American commercial civilization, the Moresbys' journey, initially an attempt to resolve their marital difficulties is later made fraught by the travelers' ignorance of dangers that surround them. Travellers are interwoven with varied space and time; at the same time, they change space and time. There is no equivalence between two travellers; their representations of psyche are unique and particular. Travellers' desire motivates them to travel, which later becomes a repetitious scrutiny of individual desire. Port and Kit are two types of travellers with subtle differences in their identities as travellers. Unlike sedentary and nomadic travellers on the basis of different spatial and structural frameworks [19], the Bowlesian characters seek the original travel out of desire and desire out of travel. For Port and Kit, the desert renders a world of desire anticipating uncertainty of life's meanings. The desert itself takes a peculiarly spatial form when it suggests a level of difference which is not, and cannot be, easily quelled by single travellers. The desert is a real and imaginary geographical place which takes part in the process of identity of its pursuers. The indeterminate, expansive environment of the desert testifies the Moresby's love and bound to each other. The desert is an immanently silent setting presented to human's harbored consciousness of existence. Port at last dies in the total darkness of the desert and the sky, whereas Kit returns to the spot where their travel began: "At the edge of the Arab quarter the car, still loaded with people, made a wide U-turn and stopped; it was the end of the line" [6]. Everything remains the same as when they had left. Whether desire or desireless, the desert landscape is treated as "a process by which social and subjective identities are formed" [18]. The desert sets their desire in motion individually, bearing a direct relationship to their existential consciousness, to which an obsession with the unstable and the unknowable is implicitly led. The desert

thus gives scopes not only to the impressive solitary landscape for travellers, but also to the deepest desire hidden in human's psyche.

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