

Two Questers in the  
Twentieth-century  
North Africa



# Two Questers in the Twentieth-century North Africa:

*Paul Bowles and Ibrahim Alkoni*

By

Imen A. Cozzo

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*I dedicate this work to  
My family, Daniele and Yasmine,  
For their constant support and unconditional love.  
I love you all dearly*



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## ABBREVIATIONS

- SS* Bowles Paul, *The Sheltering Sky*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- SH* Bowles Paul, *The Spider's House*, California: Black Sparrow Press, 1982.
- BS* Alkoni Ibrahim, *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Trans. Mayya Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley, Great Britain: Arris Books, 2003.
- Anubis* Alkoni Ibrahim, *Anubis: a Desert Novel*, Trans. William M. Hutchins, Cairo: The American University Press, 2005.
- GD* Alkoni Ibrahim, *Gold Dust*, Trans. Elliott Colla, London: Arabia Books, 2008.
- MG* Alkoni Ibrahim, *My Great Desert*, 'Ammân: Mu'assasa al-'arabiyyah lil Dirâsât wa al- Nashr, 1998.

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 7

In *Desert Divers*, Sven Lindqvist follows the Western questers' paths into the North African Sahara. In this travel book, Lindqvist confesses his ideas about the desert and refers to the well-known description of the surrounding environment that the European travellers provided. He writes:

The Moor doesn't defend his freedom, for in the desert you are always free. No visible treasures, for the desert is bare. No, the Moor defends a secret realm and that's why I admire him.<sup>1</sup>

Lindqvist reveals that the above-mentioned words are of Saint-Exupery, written during the French expedition in Morocco in 1927. The disclosure serves to remind the reader that the Western adventure in North Africa is nothing new. The Western explorers - Paul Bowles is one among them - found more than Saint-Exupery's nothingness and the fixity of the desert to carry on fighting the 'Moors' as the writer admits. Lindqvist shows the historical figures who brought the various colonial apparatus in order to conduct their “one-sided affair with the desert.”<sup>2</sup> The writer's fascination with the “million monotonous variations of the sandy colours”<sup>3</sup> expanded over while “the desert opens up around [them].”<sup>4</sup> This is how the process of documenting their findings on the desert attracted the writers, who loved it and admitted that “in the desert all changes have already occurred. Nothing grows, nothing dies, and nothing decays. Everything has gone. Only eternity remains.”<sup>5</sup>

Elements that contribute to the understanding of the peculiarities of the desert, like time in relation to space, nature, culture and politics, are the main concerns of this book. My aim is to explore, uncover, analyse and

comment on the novels written by Paul Bowles and Ibrahim Alkoni.<sup>6</sup> This study will concentrate on the literary representation of the desert from a comparative perspective through which the Western individual confronts native exploration of what is politically considered to be the Arab World, while geographically labelled as being both African and Mediterranean.

Situated opposite Europe, the North African Maghreb has long been considered a gateway to Africa. The geographic position of the Maghreb, seen as a strategic location by various imperial governments, led to many heterogeneous peoples from across the region and indeed the wider world, either settling in or being relocated there. This social diversity has made issues of identity so complex that, with time, the coloniser becomes *ex* and his culture becomes deeply rooted in the place. From its colonial roots and into the postcolonial era, North Africa's history and geography therefore have shaped literature. Viewed from a Western perspective, North Africa is considered as an extension of the Middle East (usually referred to as the MENA region in academia) and might be perceived as the Orient with all its entailments. Alternatively, during the twentieth century and the colonial era, the Maghreb in literature is presented in a different manner to western travellers - one in which the fractures of the region paved the way to a North African identity inherent with its own peculiarities and traditions.

On the other hand, the Western critic might wonder whether it is enough to understand the other side of the world from the writings of an outsider; or if there is an urgent need for literature and criticism to bridge the academic and linguistic gap between Orient and Occident. The world has shrunk because of new forms of technology, which in turn has led to the emergence of different types of travellers and migrants. The continual and fast change of places and their populations are thus reflected in literature, mainly in fiction. The legacy of the oil industry and the boom of the modern city, therefore, form considerable discursive nodes, alongside other key sites, such as the desert, the colonial cities within the old cities, and the post-colonial place that is in continual change.

While the French established discourse remains the dominant narrative on the Maghreb, this book offers a unique literary perspective on themes and topics too often perceived from the perspective of the "I" or the "Other" in English. This study confronts works by the authors Paul Bowles and Ibrahim Alkoni, who better confront both the Western and the Maghrebian interpretations of the space. North Africa is an ex-colonised space, where defining identity seems to be difficult because of the presence and interplaying nature of a multitude of social, historical, geographical and ideological characters. For this reason, the postcolonial discourse is synchronous and coexistent with other theories and

approaches that help understand the space and texts in question. Using fiction, travelogues, history, memoirs, letters, poetry, essays and journal articles, this comparison of the two novelists will expand over two separate parts. Each part is so structured as to explore one of the literary representations of the twentieth-century North Africa. First, due to the different cultural backgrounds of the two writers, the strict literary context, biography and opera are analysed in the beginning of each part. Second, a summary of their selected works is given in the opening pages of each part. Third, a fully-fledged analysis of their premises is extended to put forward their representations of the space. Finally the concluding chapter, informed by postcolonial concepts, will bring the two writers together in order to interact with each other from a comparative perspective. Chapters are roughly arranged in chronological order around particular sites and topoi, while the literature from these two authors and others of British, American, African, Arab and Amazigh descent is represented.

*Two Questers in the Twentieth-century North Africa: Paul Bowles and Ibrahim Alkoni* breaks new ground in its comparative exploration of the work of American expatriate author Paul Bowles and exiled Libyan author Ibrahim Alkoni: it is, to my knowledge, the first full-length comparative treatment of these two authors. The book makes a powerful rebuttal of Western notions of the ‘empty’ desert, populating it with heterogeneous communities, storytelling traditions, histories, ontologies and epistemologies. The writer uses a postcolonial theoretical methodology, most successfully at the interface of postcolonial and magical realist paradigms. She further specifies the mythic elements of Alkoni’s work with reference to ethnography, particularly on Berber culture, and to material also published in Arabic, which she translates herself. She makes some very useful critical points in the book, for example when challenging simplistic Western/North African and coloniser/colonised binaries by arguing that Bowles – an American – orients himself against French colonialism and that Alkoni sees non-Berber influences in the region, over a long historical span, as colonising. The final section specifies numerous resonances between these cosmopolitan, polyglot authors, who both focus on modernity’s contamination of authentic spaces; emphasise quests towards solitude, and often through violence; pit nature against culture; collect, preserve and transmit oral narratives and myths; generate hybrid forms with strong oral and mythical elements; resist linearity and teleology in their narrative forms; and present the desert as a site of wisdom and sublime aesthetics. The fact that the candidate is multilingual facilitates her distinctive comparison of these writers. The manuscript constitutes a

distinctive contribution to knowledge that is commensurate with the award of a doctorate in comparative literature.

On the one hand, there is a commitment to show how Bowles' perspective witnessed a gradual shift from the Eurocentric cultural perspective, which speaks of the silent subjects of the Orient, to give free rein for the ex-colonised natives to have space in his writings and become authors of Moroccan tales. On the other hand, the endeavour is meant to explore Alkoni's conception of the desert from an 'oriental' point of view, the one that comes from within.

These two authors have two different cultural backgrounds. If Bowles belongs to the last Western generation resorting to the colonial literary genre, Alkoni writes about the ex-colonised space that needed to establish its voice and represent its own identity. The comparison of the two novelists will expand over two separate parts of the thesis. Each part is so structured as to explore one of the literary representations of the late twentieth-century North African desert. First, due to the different cultural backgrounds of the two writers (Bowles is American and Alkoni is North African), the strict literary context, biography and opera are analysed in the beginning of each part. Second, a summary of their selected works is given, in the opening pages of each part. Third, a fully-fledged analysis of their premises is extended to put forward their representations of the desert.

*Two Questers in the Twentieth-century North Africa: Paul Bowles and Ibrahim Alkoni* will include three main parts. First, "Paul Bowles: the Western Quester for Identity" is the section that examines North Africa from a Western perspective, in the selected writings of Paul Bowles. Bowles' quest for the Western identity is within the tradition of travel writings. The aim of the following analysis is to pinpoint the Western vein in Bowles' treatment of the North African space and to underline his cultural background and maturational process of his writing, to which the argument is leading.

Second, "Ibrahim Alkoni: The Quester for a Mythical Identity Construction in the Desert" addresses Ibrahim Alkoni's quest in the twentieth-and-twenty-first-century North African desert. Ibrahim Alkoni, as the spokesperson of Berbers' collective identity and imagination, articulates the stories of the tribes' origins and founding fathers. His novels enshrine the places, events, and rituals that constitute a unique and collective experience of the tribes' shared imaginary and in doing so; he lays out the bonds that mark the tribes' identity and which distinguish them from other societies. Based on the importance of myth in the North African desert novels by Alkoni and their relationship to magical/mythical

realism and cultural identity, the main idea is to demonstrate how the recreation of myth delineates and transmits a specific cultural identity, directly related to its historical and cultural context.

Finally, the conclusion is a full chapter that offers a Comparative Reading of Bowles and Alkoni. This section considers a comparative discussion which brings Bowles and Alkoni together as two authors whose focus is the North African space and mainly its Sahara desert; and which scrutinises their convergences along with their divergences in order to conclude that having both worked on a hybrid identity which is the fruit of their hybrid cultures, they both meet on the hybridised space of the desert. This concluding chapter, informed by postcolonial concepts, will bring the two writers to interact in a comparative perspective. Indeed, North Africa is an ex-colonised space, where defining identity seems to be difficult because of the presence and interplaying nature of a multitude of social, historical, geographical and ideological characters. For this reason, the postcolonial discourse is synchronous and coexistent with other theories and approaches that help us understand the space and texts in question.

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Often, postcolonial and magical realist writers destabilise the canon using a kind of "militant" aesthetics. As a result, born as a reaction to a spatial, social, political and historical experience, postcolonial literature is still complex to define. Its traces date back to the colonial era that started in India at least four centuries ago. In the North African context, European colonisation occurred much later, though the geographical area experienced continuously turbulent conquests and subduction.

The postcolonial phenomenon proves willing to operate a continuous reversal of colonial conditions. The literature under this umbrella concept, supported by a solid critical background, is engaged in targeted writing; for instance rewriting those works which are regarded as classics of the emblematic colonial encounter from the point view of the marginalised, as evidenced by Chinua Achebe, with his *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which is considered a way of "writing back" or rewriting Africa. Postcolonial writers, as Bhabha would put it, show their inability to return to the pre-colonial past and consider colonial heritage as a human linguistic and cultural enrichment.<sup>7</sup> Paul Bowles, the American writer, in the process of writing North Africa, faces in his work the complex issue of being the outsider-author who tells the silenced subjects to abandon the Western superiority and in so doing becomes the translator-writer of stories spoken by the natives. His protagonists fight for their authentic space and against

Western influence. Others, like Ibrahim Alkoni, use literary work as a vehicle for the reconsideration of the official historiography, in an attempt to reconstruct a collective memory devoid of manipulations by successive regimes before, during and after European colonialism.

Moreover, an important part of the postcolonial project is entrusted to the reconsideration of the representations of the world outside Europe that this latter continent has constructed from centuries spent influencing the development of colonial relationships and maintaining the domination over the colonised territories. This is how representation plays a crucial role in the postcolonial discourse. It is often the double edged sword that, on the one hand, triggers resentment to an "inferior Other," but, on the other, also fuels the desire to explore the "exotic" alternative of a rigid reality.

Therefore, one of the purposes of this study is to apply the theories of representation within postcolonial space on the North African region, which seems to be underrepresented in academia. In particular, postcolonial studies on the representation of space are perforated by new concepts and ideas that have constantly been redefined as a sign of the viability of these debates. The same term, post-colonialism, is indeed a subject of debate that bears different definitions. Robert Young treats post-colonialism as an alternative to the term "Third World" and, therefore, tends to exclude such terms as "settler colonies" or "white colonies" such as Canada and Australia, on the basis of a purely economic identification of the Third World.<sup>8</sup> While Stephen Slemon considers it as a synonym of the term "Commonwealth (Literature),"<sup>9</sup> which generally tends to include the settler colonies and what he regarded as "the Second World."<sup>10</sup>

The nature of the colonial phenomenon sparked the reaction of the postcolonial world. Accordingly, Ahmed Aijaz declares: "Understandably, then, it has become the project of post-colonial literatures to investigate the European textual capture and containment of colonial and post-colonial space and to intervene in that originary and continuing containment."<sup>11</sup> The post-colonial discourse is defined as a reaction to a cultural reading and hegemony offered by the West in its colonial process. And thus, the post-colonial answer sets out that it is necessary to complete, chastise and rewrite the literature of the ex-colonised space.

With regards to the relationship between post-colonialism and magical realism that is going to be explored more deeply in the second part of this thesis, the idea that magical realism as a mode happened to be coined, at least in its early decades, in the ex-colonised Latin American hemisphere says much about its answering-back form of writing, especially when compared to the ex-coloniser's realist mode. In the present work, we will



follow this same idea in the North African context. In her research entitled "Exploring Native American Culture through Conflicting Cultural Views," Jeanette Gonsior declares that magical realist writers have "in-between identities" and explore space from "inside-out."<sup>12</sup> She alludes to Brenda Cooper's argument on "Third-World cosmopolitans," such as Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie, Isabelle Allende, Garcia Márquez and Louise Erdrich, who share:

A declaration of cultural "hybridity" – a hybridity claimed to offer certain advantages in negating the collisions of language, race and art. This hybridity is at the heart of the politics and the techniques of magical realism.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this blurring of the confines between reality and its interpretations that magical realists realise their hybrid techniques. Giving the parole to natives, instead of representing them through an outsider's eye, shows a reality that is negated in the highly toned realism in Europe. Events in Caribbean literature, for instance, are explained by natural, real, supernatural, magical and spiritual phenomena. The same idea is expanded on by Salman Rushdie, when he stresses his self characterisation as an "inescapably international writer," referring to concepts like "cross-pollination" while also admitting belonging to "a polyglot family tree" and different cultures at the same time. He argues that this gives him, as a writer, the freedom to fuse identities and have different perspectives in approaching life.<sup>14</sup>

Hybridity renders ambivalent and paradoxical texts, spaces and identities. It fascinates because it foregrounds difference against a backdrop of the established order. In literature, hybridity pushes discursive and generic boundaries while partially maintaining them. Speaking of hybridity in literature is to speak of identity in literature. It simply allows a continuously simultaneous crossing of the boundaries. It is in this context that we will explore the way Paul Bowles' and Ibrahim Alkoni's texts are hybrid and their being "inescapably international writers."<sup>15</sup>

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Defining the concepts of representation and hybridity will illuminate the rest of the analysis. Representation, derived "(in the sense 'image, likeness'): from the Old French *représentation* or Latin *repr̄sentatiōn*, from *repraesentare* 'bring before, exhibit'."<sup>16</sup> is defined as: "The action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone or the state of being so represented, the description or portrayal of someone or something in a

particular way, the depiction of someone or something in a work of art and synonymously as picture, model, or other depiction of someone or something.”<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, the idea of representation in literature can be used conversely to mean image, prejudice, cliché, stereotypes and the conception of space. Beyond the specific definitions of these concepts, the notion of representation is often considered common to all, as it derives from the awareness that they come from the attempt to represent what is different from oneself. These representations tend to easily transcend the boundaries of literary work to approach cultural, social, political or national ensembles that would define the “I.”

Representation and space studies often intertwine with postcolonial studies. Studies of post-colonialism have always been involved in the consideration of issues relating to “otherness”, which represents one of the fundamental concepts of criticism and literature in this vein.

The linguistic area selected for this comparison is the literature of North Africa in English and Arabic. The decision to focus on the North African desert rests on many reasons. This space seems to be marginalised by its people’s literature, while it is the object of major interest by Western, mainly French, writers. Compared to the Arabian Desert, the North African Sahara was further marginalised by English explorers and writers, mainly T.E. Lawrence, Wilfred Thesiger and many others that belong to a tradition of writers on the Orient who ignored it.

In dealing with postcolonial theory, the danger one can run into when using the unidirectional definition of the theory is to replicate one of the strategies implemented by the colonising powers in representations of the territories and colonised peoples, known as the flattening of differences:

An equally fundamental constraint is attention to precise location. Every colonial encounter or “contact zone” is different, and each “post-colonial” occasion needs, against general background principles, to be located and analysed precisely for its specific interplay.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, British colonisation, for instance in India, was different from the French one in Algeria or the Italian one in Libya. Many factors account for such differences, including the duration of the colonial period, and the social and political acts on the colonised space. This implies that the themes and narrative strategies used to address the colonial issues are differently dependent on the geographical area.

In general, postcolonial literature is a genre of writing, which has been “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day.”<sup>19</sup> Although the writing from different formerly colonised

countries has distinctive features, postcolonial literature shares some significant concerns and characteristics that include concerns about space reclamation and the representation of the Other.

On the one hand, if colonising means claiming and exploiting foreign lands, resources, and people by subduing the colonised to different forms of enslavement, indentured labour, and migration, an act that forced many native populations to move from the places that they considered “home”, postcolonial literature attempts to counteract their resulting alienation from their surroundings by restoring a connection between native people and places through description, narration, and dramatization.

On the other hand, while the native populations’ cultures of the countries, while subjected to foreign rule, were often marginalised, suppressed, and openly denigrated in favour of the social and cultural preferences of the colonisers, much postcolonial literature seeks to assert the richness and validity of pre-colonised cultures, while trying to restore identity and to decolonise the “I.”

As colonisers often depicted their colonial subjects as existing “outside of history” in unchanging, timeless societies, unable to progress or develop without their intervention and assistance, revising history to usher the silenced voice of the colonised is thus a major commitment of postcolonial writing. Thus, the act of representation in postcolonial studies needs to be defined as a fundamental act to promote pride and identity in culture and literature.

The representation of space is central in postcolonial criticism. It is, in fact, related to the phenomenon of what is generally interpreted as an act of ‘categorisation’. This phenomenon occurs every time one thinks of the other’s place not as being unique and independent, but as part of a region or culture on the basis of geographical and physical characteristics (weather, life style, age, skin colour, sex... ) or on the basis of other characteristics (occupation, religion...). In addition, the categorisation is not only a spontaneous phenomenon but is a cognitive process or mental map that the Western mind enacted within its framework for centuries, “Thinking in relation to categories is a necessary way of organizing the world in our minds, creating mental maps for working out how we view the world and negotiate our ways through it in our everyday social relations and interactions. It would be difficult to imagine how the world would seem without using general categories in speech and writing as basic tools for organizing our understanding.”<sup>20</sup>

However, categorisation is often the basis of prejudices and negative racial and ethnic stereotypes: the categories may be more or less rational. Cultural and social categorisations are not as rational as scientific ones,

however. Indeed, some categories such as "Italian fascists" or "male Italian Latin lover" are not based on the same degree of truth or probability. However, "our minds seem to make no distinction in category formation: irrational categories are formed as easily as rational."<sup>21</sup> Once formed, categories are retained in memory as cognitive representations. In particular,

Representations consist of words and images which stand in for various social groups and categories. They provide ways of describing and at the same time of regarding and thinking about these groups and categories.<sup>22</sup>

Such representations, also called group prototypes, contain the associations between a specific category ("colonised") and traits that are assigned to this category ("primitive"). This implies that, in the moment in which it is exposed to the category, associated traits are activated immediately as they are present in the cognitive representation stored in memory.

What is described implies that categorising or representing (assigning certain traits to groups and places and consider those traits as "intrinsic" to the members of each group) is a completely natural phenomenon, as it is used to represent those categories around the world. To categorise, in this respect, is more allocating and judging than it is defining and describing.

Hence, the cataloguing of the rest of the world grew from the early texts that enact the colonial encounter, in which all new information on the cultures encountered by colonisers (explorers, anthropologists, missionaries...) were encapsulated in the category of the Other, which is constantly enriched with new traits, derived from the comparison with the category "we."

Initially, these texts are configured as the forerunners of what would later become the genre of colonial literature, describing a strange and exotic world. These representations were dictated by the need on the part of Western colonisers to understand the world and "come to terms" with diversity, leading to interpreting, understanding, comparing and categorising the Other's space.

The construction of the image of the Other was so addressed to the exaltation of difference, which became at once reason for and justification of colonial rule and, therefore, required actions aimed at civilising the local populace. Colonisation took on the appearance of an attempt to standardise the world outside Europe, which is central to Paul Bowles' interpretation of the North African space. Emblematic of this process of homogenising and flattening of diversity was also the system that Bowles fights in his novels.

Coming close to the space, where the sexed, dehumanised and silenced Other dwells, the Western traveller is confronted by two conflicting realities. The one reality is the sum of ideas inputted by his culture from an early age. The second is the reality perceived in a lively moment, yet conceived by the explorer's cultural background. This same idea is elaborated upon by Rana Kabbani's *Europe's Myth of the Orient* that traces the possible common features of Western voyagers in the Middle-East as a space of possibilities:

Europe was charmed by an Orient that shimmered with possibilities that promised a sexual space from the dictates of the bourgeois morality of the metropolis. The European reacted to the encounter as a man might react to a woman, by manifesting strong attraction or strong repulsion. E. W. Lane described his first sight of Egypt, the Egypt he had dreamed of since boyhood, thus: "as I approached the shore, I felt like an eastern bridegroom, about to lift the veil of his bride [...]."<sup>23</sup>

In fact, in confronting the Orient, the traveller sees his preconception of the territory. It is important, however, to highlight the idea that the Orient and its derivative concepts are used in the following corpus as inclusive of the North African region, which is often depicted as completely different from the rest of the Arab world from a Berber, African and Mediterranean perspective.

The many possibilities that the Orient offers to the visitor seem to include Western inhibitions rather than a real recreation of space. Identity and difference are often the controversies that the writer on the Orient faces. The "mysterious" space becomes the Other, who resists meaning of the colonising culture and rejects its power to define. The Western concept of the orient is based, as Abdul JanMohamed argues, on the *Manichean allegory* (seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites): "if the west is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil. Simply to reverse this polarizing is to be complicit in its totalizing and identity-destroying power (all is reduced to a set of dichotomies, black or white...)." <sup>24</sup>

Colonised peoples are depicted as being diverse in their nature and in their traditions, and their world is often explained by a geographical division of the planet, in which people are "totalised" or "essentialised" -- through such concepts as a black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture and so forth. In this respect, it is important to refer to Homi Bhabha on the complex issue of representation and meaning from his article in Greenblatt and Gun's *Redrawing the Boundaries*, "Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational." He explains that for culture to be transnational, "contemporary postcolonial" theories are

centred on a particular historical “displacement” or a movement from one state to another, which entails a cultural and civilizational alteration. Translational culture is “crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences -- literature, art, music, ritual, life, death -- and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value”.<sup>25</sup>

However, it is no coincidence that the two literary works considered most representative of the "colonial encounter, *The Tempest* (1623) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), enact the arrival of Europeans in uninhabited territories, which are not really uninhabited, and of which they declare themselves the masters, depriving the native peoples of their right to their land. In the Orient, the first impact is different in that the territories are partially emptied, but completely silenced. In silencing their subjects, the travellers in the desert fill in a linguistic void and speak on behalf of the native inhabitants.

Therefore, the construction of specific images of the Other was functional in the support and implementation of the various projects that made up the program of the colonial enterprise. Colonial discourse theory has been primarily built upon the pioneering work of Edward Said. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said examines a range of literary, anthropological and historical texts in order to illuminate how the West attempted to represent the Orient as Other through Orientalist discourse. By portraying the East as culturally and intellectually inferior, the West was simultaneously able to construct an image of western superiority. In order to sustain these beliefs, objective statements were produced in a manner similar to realism so that they seemed to contain truth-value. These opposing representations of East and West were further reinforced by imperial power relations, which enabled the West to justify their process of colonisation as a ‘civilizing mission.’<sup>26</sup>

Said’s work is configured as a critical theory on the representation of the Other that has most influenced the post-colonial criticism, establishing itself as one of its founding texts. It laid the groundwork for the emergence of the critical current. This section focuses on the theory of creation and description of the East as it was outlined by the West in Said’s *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*.

Said believes that Orientalism therefore should not be understood as a product of colonialism, because the first, actually, precedes the latter. Said repeatedly stresses that Orientalism is not, by itself, caused by colonialism, but also states that the complex ideological apparatus and representation of the east by part of Europe has been one of the major thrusts of the colonial

experience. Said offers one main definition of Orientalism. It refers to the possibility of considering Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>27</sup> Said implies that Orientalism is a cultural fabric rather than a natural or geographical fact. In fact, the space is not only created but also “Orientalized” by the West, and hence he tries to debunk and depict the spurious claim on otherness.

An important interpretation of Said’s concept of Orientalism comes from Homi Bhabha. To this latter academic, the colonial discourse is based on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation. Bhabha says:

It connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated...<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, despite the play on demonizing and desiring in the colonial system, which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed and totalised subject, “It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth that is structurally similar to Realism.”<sup>29</sup> Referring to Said, ideas about the way the West intervenes within that system of representation by calling for a scrutiny of the varied European discourses, which represent “‘the Orient’ as a unified racial, geographical, political and cultural zone of the world,”<sup>30</sup> Bhabha agrees with Said’s designation of “Orientalism” as a “form of radical realism,” which means that the coloniser’s discourse tends to represent, “name, point to, fix” anything from a completely outsider’s angle of vision.<sup>31</sup>

The realism generated by the colonial discourse is the debate of the present corpus. Both Alkoni and Bowles express the desire for an originality which is threatened by the Westernisation of the Orient. The same idea of difference is chastised by Bhabha, who declares that the rejection of difference, in the coloniser’s discourse, “turns the colonial subject into a misfit - a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' [...]. The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality.”<sup>32</sup> The act of representation furnishes the debate on postcolonial theory with a pre-colonial, quasi one of the camps that paved the way to legitimise colonial atrocities.

However, the colonial erasure of the pre-existing culture proved successful to a certain point. One can see the revival of the pre-colonial

tradition in the postcolonial literature of many countries of the world, the magical realist text is set at the centre of this genre of writing that is often vehement to ensure that a return to the past is a way to regain identity and pride rather than joining the universal walk towards modernisation. It is the idea that both the writers of our interest tried to glorify in their works. Their reactions are against the intellectual closure and the oppressive act to make of the ex-colonised culture “closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yolk of oppression. Both present and mummified, it testifies against its members. The cultural mummification leads to a mummification of individual thinking.”<sup>33</sup>

In the core of the postcolonial thinking, space is given a central position. Man and his dwelling occupy the major seat in the construction of “otherness.” Yet, space is a broader concept that is not uniquely represented in the postcolonial discourse. After a close scrutiny of Gaston Bachelard’s *La Poétique de l’Espace*, one deduces that dealing with the desert requires a completely different approach from the intimate space this precious book develops. In fact, the desert is often considered nobody’s limitless and timeless space.

In the following part, there is an exploration of the theories that shaped our perception of space. Edward Said treats “the poetics and politics of space,”<sup>34</sup> offering a “spatial metaphoric” in the construction of identity. He argues that “through the universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is theirs.”<sup>35</sup> He insists on the idea that to construct identity it “involves establishing ‘opposites’ and others,”<sup>36</sup> who are called by their geographical belonging and pointed to on world map. Indeed, Said is less involved with “the poetics and the psychoanalytics than in the politics of space.”<sup>37</sup> Said’s argument is built upon the centrality of power relations, in the ‘contest’ of “the construction of identity through the poetics of space.”<sup>38</sup> The power of the Orientalist discourse, accordingly, is based on the representation of space.

Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, in their *Thinking Space*, highlight the broad aspect of space consideration, when they admit “Space is the everywhere of modern thought. It is the flesh that flatters the bones of theory. It is an all-purpose nostrum [...]”<sup>39</sup> In considering space, Crang and Thrift insist on the impossibility to deal with such concepts without considering time as they argue “space is exceedingly difficult to write about shorn of its relation to time.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, to deal with a timeless space, foregrounded earlier, is one of the colonial claims about the colonies and in the present work recalls colonisation and its posts when related to time. The novelists of interest to us are twentieth-century (Alkoni is still alive),



and started writing after the Second World War. Their works are not the outcome of a long tradition, but enact a space in 'process' or a continual change. It is indicative of "the passage points in current writing on space, all of which in one sense or the other move away from the Kantian perspective on space- as an absolute category- towards *space as process* or *in process* (that is space and time combined in becoming)."<sup>41</sup>

In fact, the North Africa of the period in which Bowles wrote his texts witnessed the activist movements towards independence, last decades of colonisation, its intellectual elite spreading, its own voice rising, and the post-independence delusion and malaise. In that period, the otherness of the Westerner in the Maghreb was further enhanced and became unwelcomed by the natives who, for millennia, used to see the outsider as a guest to whom they had to prove generous. Then, hostility to the outsider is so deeply rooted that North African people unconsciously call Westerners "guerra," in colloquial language, an Italian word that means war. For Bhabha, "the colonial space is therefore an agonistic space. Despite the 'imitation' and 'mimicry,' with which colonised peoples cope with the imperial presence, the relationship becomes one of constant, if implicit, contestation and opposition."<sup>42</sup> Thus, a Westerner's presence is synonymous to threat and war. This idea is enacted by Bowles in his literature that expresses his deep concern and perfect understanding of society. The concept of space, timeless in this prospect, is approached differently by Bowles, Alkoni and the colonialist discourse.

The timelessness of the ex-colonised space, in the colonialist discourse, is often described as a way to put the ex-colonised countries out of the historical march and describe them as uncivilised, in the absence of manuscripts in the understandable logic and language of the coloniser. In Bowles' texts, timelessness takes the quester for aesthetics to an authentic living, still uncontaminated by the civilisation he evaded in New York. In Alkoni's work, timelessness means the circularity in time, a past that is present, ever-lasting ancestral wisdom, an act that defies the notion of time as defined by a Eurocentric discourse. The same idea of the need for historicity as defined, in the ex-colonised spaces, is expressed by Bhabha's "a conception of the native as historical subject and agent of an oppositional discourse is needed."<sup>43</sup>

Frantz Fanon describes the process that the "native intellectual" follows in representing himself through writing space. He observes that ex-colonised intellectuals used to write in order to 'charm,' to 'denounce' the oppressor and to enter Western history and declare their humanity through addressing the Other in the Other's language.<sup>44</sup> One notices the way Alkoni's texts address humanity and seek universality, as a way to

deconstruct the idea of the evil coloniser; when he shows that evil is human nature (manifesting itself in Cain and Dudu as it is argued in part II). Bowles, also, deconstructs the idea of evil and violence as generated by the coloniser to tell of human nature that rejoices in blood and culminates in death. Fanon argues, “Now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature. [...]. It is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space.”<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Alkoni’s literature proves to be a “literature of combat” because it fights the ex-coloniser’s and a present settler’s erasure of a whole ancient past, a post-colonial present, where people do not know the human value of scripts on monumental stones and enjoy destroying them as they enjoy slaughtering mythical creatures without reason. On the other hand, Bowles’ literature of combat confronts globalisation, the danger of the expansion of modernity and the price that desert people pay in this devouring process. Yet, it is worth noting that the colonial figure in Bowles’ texts is the French in an Arab territory; while, for Alkoni, the coloniser is the outsider to the Berber desert, whether Italian or Arab. This idea leads us to the deconstruction of the belief in one centre of power accumulation and foregrounds space against the background of the ideas about space.

Next we will deepen our understanding of this post-colonial space aspect in selected works of Paul Bowles and Ibrahim Alkoni.

**PART I**

**PAUL BOWLES:  
THE WESTERN QUESTER  
FOR IDENTITY IN NORTH AFRICA**

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE QUEST FOR THE I AND THE OTHER IN THE NORTH AFRICAN DESERT

### Introduction

“Right away when I got here I said to myself —Ah, this is the way people used to be, the way my own ancestors were thousands of years ago.

—Paul Bowles, *The Spider’s House*.

Paul Bowles is probably one of the best twentieth-century American writers on the exploration of new spaces. By leaving New York and settling down in Morocco, Bowles looked for discovering a different space, and rediscovering his identity. The historical period (following the Great Wars or "the Atomic Age" as Bowles liked to call it) urged many writers to question everything, and Bowles’ work answered a cultural need to quest for identity.

Bowles’ spatial preoccupations include the desert as the site of pure tradition and authenticity, the interzone of Tangiers, the Rif mountains, the medieval medina of Fez, pilgrimage sites and the tailored *villes nouvelles* of the Maghreb, as well as spaces within urban Morocco (in particular) where traditional practices— storytelling, magic, violent transcendent practices linked to Sufi brotherhoods—are sustained. His first novel, *The Sheltering Sky* announces and coincides with his arrival and settlement in North Africa. Bowles is the Western writer whose cultural background derives from the view of the Maghreb as Orient and here come the whole set of figuring the “exotic.” This explains Bowles’ initial interest in the desert. After *The Sheltering Sky*, the desert arguably diminishes in importance as a site for exploring what lies outside of, or in tension with, Western conceptions of modernity and progress. However, the Western depiction of the North African space as a desert—if this term explains the exoticism of the Other—keeps taking us back to *The Sheltering Sky* and seems to give us the key to approach the other novels, particularly *The Spider’s House*, which gets a full treatment. The analysis of the Moroccan

collaborations in writing the short stories and later novels is also strongly linked to the desert as the environment that generates the theme of the quest for identity in a completely cast away space.

*The Sheltering Sky* is Paul Bowles' early and important novel in depicting the writer's quest in the North African Sahara and the way he sees the desert as a 'protagonist,' he declares "[All my characters] are the professor... what I wanted to tell was the story of what the desert can do to us. The desert is the protagonist."<sup>46</sup> This selection favours the novels and short stories where the desert is the predominant setting. However, what is interesting is the maturational process of Bowles' aesthetic quest for identity and the desert plays a crucial role in defining the Orient from an American expat's perspective. This is why other texts are important in understanding Bowles' conception of the Other, as well as the general background that covers the North African area, its political, economic and spiritual situations. The work covers cities and villages that are often an extension of the desert. In this respect, *The Spider's House* helps widen the scope on Bowles' literature in general. It sets forth the encounter between the West and North Africa, as well as the maturation of Bowles' ideas.

In the beginning, Bowles depicts the desert, from a Western point of view, following the English and Orientalist traditions; the desert is described as exotic, empty and silent. One needs to observe Bowles' position vis-à-vis the exotic in order to highlight the originality of his fiction. According to Chris Bongie, in his *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle*, the exotic is the essence of romance. He alludes to Pier Paolo Pasolini, who declares that "the 'novelistic' is and has always been founded upon 'the sense of an elsewhere' ('il sentiment dell'*altrove*')"<sup>47</sup> and if writing fiction is in crisis, it is because this exotic *altrove* has ceased to be the centre of interest. What Pasolini and Bongie claim of European civilisation, as the cradle of "homogenised," "(post)-industrial" life is by no means new to humanities. The call for an "alternative space" is pivotal in the writings of Claude Levi-Strauss and others. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Strauss reveals his concern bluntly, "humanity is sinking in monoculture..."<sup>48</sup> a rather pessimistic view of the Western mission of acculturating difference. Strauss' mourning over the forced introduction of Brazil into civilisation is indeed a writer's terror at losing the *altrove* space or the essence of "novelistic" writing in Pasolini's terms.

Facing the emergence of this crisis, Bongie introduces the concept of "exoticism" as "a discursive practice intent on recovering 'elsewhere' values 'lost' with the modernization of European society."<sup>49</sup> In his "The Hollow Men," a treatment of the "savage" in Jules Verne's *Les enfants du capitaine Grant*, between a decadent Australia and a "still savage" New

Zealand, a critique of Pierre Loti, Joseph Conrad and many others, Bongie launches the alarm against the nineteenth-century project that aimed at the “loss of alternative horizons.”<sup>50</sup> What is interesting about these exoticist writers is that in their consideration of the loss of the alternative space, they believed in the possible transformation of the Other into a Same. Paul Bowles suggests, in his novels, another truth, the Other is lost but instead of becoming a Same, the alternative space is transformed into another, hybrid, “abject” space.

Paul Bowles shares and analyses these concerns, in his novels that start a Loti-like *The Sheltering Sky* and develop into a Strauss-like *The Spider's House*. Moreover, North Africa is one of the under-represented places in English literature, which adds to the originality of Bowles' consideration of space and identity.

### **The Desert in Bowles' culture**

In the following, there is an engagement with a wider range of ‘Western’ writers specifically on the desert. Historical context is provided through analysis of key writers such as T. E. Lawrence, Wilfred Thesiger, Isabelle Eberhardt, Loti and many others. On the other hand, there is a reference to the contemporary fiction that resonates with Bowles' depictions of the Sahara. Writers like Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992, set in the 1940s), and J. M. Gustave Le Clézio's *Désert* (1980) are particularly fruitful comparators.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the desert attracted world literature and travel accounts. In fact, the Napoleonic expeditions to Egypt were behind the revival of the desert in art and literature. Before Orientalism, the French travellers sought the desert as the “elsewhere” space to set their romance in. During the World Wars, North Africa was a place to map and define. Writers as Pierre Loti, in *Le Roman d'un spahi*, depicts the desert as that unattainable, desired and not yet penetrated horizon, “the charming unknown.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the period covering the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth was fascinating for the writers and the travellers, who saw the desert as the white zone in world map.<sup>52</sup> The North African desert was kernel in French literature. Famous writers and novelists as Guy de Maupassant, André Gide, Flaubert, Gautier, Peyre, Chateaubriand, Vigny, Balzac, Lamartine, Jules Verne, Eugène Fromentin, Pierre Loti, Eberhardt, Benoit and Saint-Exupéry dealt with the spiritual effect of the desert on their psyche while conducting their poetic quest in the avid space,