Paul Bowles's Portrayal of Islam in His Moroccan Short Stories

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There has been a veritable cult following for Paul Bowles's works since his novels and short stories were first brought to the attention of American readers in the 1940s and 1950s; even in recent years his short-story collections have alternately shocked, puzzled, and entertained devoted readers with their North-African subjects and themes. However, despite Bowles's long familiarity with the culture of the Moroccan Arabs amongst whom he has chosen to live for over forty years, his stories reveal his penchant for suggesting an inaccurate image of Islam. By briefly examining some Moroccan-based short stories from his two major collections, *Collected Stories*[1] and *Midnight Mass*,[2] I intend to demonstrate that Paul Bowles consistently portrayed the most simplistic believers as Muslim representatives. These are characters who misunderstand or deviate from the basic principles and injunctions of Islam with the same lack of insight into Islam that Bowles had. To lend credibility to this examination, I will also explore some of Bowles's statements regarding his attitude toward Islam as a means of assessing his characterization of Muslims.

It would be of little use to write Bowles off immediately as a mere miscreant, for it is reported that Bowles himself never intended to embrace Islam. Bowles has firmly asserted the impossibility of Western minds understanding the Muslim mind; in a 1952 interview, he made the following extreme remark: "I don't think we're likely to get to know Moslems very well, and I suspect that if we should we'd find them less sympathetic than we do at present. . . . Their culture is essentially barbarous, their mentality that of a purely predatory people."[3] In his 1963 collection of essays entitled *Their Heads are Green and Their Hands are Blue*, Bowles took a disparaging look at what he considered a representative Muslim man in "Mustapha and His Friends." Mustapha, as a typical illiterate city dweller, gives the Western reader a very limited, distorted impression of an Islamic follower—one who believes in "peace as that boring and meaningless interlude between wars."[4] Later passages indicate Mustapha covers truth with devious reasoning, has little respect for women, and has a proclivity for violence. While Bowles's perception of Muslims was perhaps mitigated in his later years (we witness the removal of this essay from a later edition of *Their Heads are Green*), Patteson claims that Bowles never entirely accepted the possibility of completely understanding the Muslim world: "In a much more recent interview he was asked

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[1] Paul Bowles, *Paul Bowles: Collected Stories 1939-1976* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1979). Subsequent references will be to *CS* in the text.

[2] Paul Bowles, *Midnight Mass* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981). Subsequent references will be to *MM* in the text.

[3] Paul Bowles, "A Talk with Paul Bowles," *The New York Times Book Review* 9 March 1952: 19.

[4] Paul Bowles, *Their Heads are Green and Their Hands are Blue* (New York: Random House, 1963) 60.

about the possibility of a Western-style relation with a Moroccan and replied, 'No, no. That's an absurd concept. Like expecting a boulder to spread its wings and fly away.'"[5]

That Bowles never fully expressed any great desire to absorb and appreciate the basic tenets and principles of the Islamic faith is readily apparent; he gleaned a superficial knowledge of the faithful's devotion through his connections with limited segments of North African society—those that suited his own quirks and tastes. For Bowles, Morocco proved to be an intriguing place to carry on with his disaffected, experimental life-style. The local people fascinated him with their extreme simplicity of faith and inability to grasp the workings of the Western intellect. However, the fact that so many Arabs accepted him and accommodated his life-style speaks more for his adaptability, finesse, and social malleability than his willingness to embrace Islamic traditions or to be a Muslim man. As Goldstone shows, "In his thinking, as revealed in his conversation, there is not the slightest whiff of Islam."[6] Where it would appear that Bowles is being sympathetic to Muslims in his fiction "even to the point that one is tempted to think that in *The Spider's House* he shares Stenham's [the main character's] desire to be a believer—the advent of modern Western civilization has made religious beliefs untenable."[7]

From Bowles's autobiography and the few biographies about Bowles, one can get a picture of where his sympathies might really lie. He was physically attracted to a few young Moroccan men; some became his lovers. One of these young men, Ahmed Yacoubi, was professedly Muslim, although his quickness to accept a homosexual relationship with Bowles, his delight in introducing Bowles to the pleasures of smoking *kef* (marijuana), and his participation in other infidelities portray him as a Muslim lacking the convictions of his faith and bowing to the expediency of a lucrative prospect. This behavior was not unusual for poor Moroccans at that time; in a statement indicating the preponderance of this activity (unfortunately couched in language insinuating an intrinsic Islamic degeneracy), Michelle Green asserts that "in an era when at least 90 percent of all natives were illiterate and the best that many youths could hope for was a job as a sweeper, impoverished Moslems saw nothing shameful about playing consort to a discreet foreigner. The prevailing view was that Christians had been put on earth in order to be exploited, and most Moroccans believed that overcharging a Nazarene for a glass of tea and entering his household as a paid companion were equally acceptable."[8]

Yacoubi's behavior was an apparent reality, but it should not be taken (which was the case with Green here) to speak for all of the Muslim world; it speaks for those weak souls who gravitated towards Paul Bowles and his en-

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[5] Richard F. Patteson, *A World Outside: The Fiction of Paul Bowles* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1987) 75-76.

[6] Richard H. Goldstone, "A Paul Bowles Collage," *Twentieth Century Literature* 32 (Fall/Winter 1986): 277.

[7] Hanz Bertens, *The Fiction of Paul Bowles: The Soul is the Weariest Part of the Body* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi N.V., 1979) 12.

[8] Michelle Green, *The Dream at the End of the World: Paul Bowles and the Literary Renegades in Tangier* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 99.

clave of expatriates, people including the heavily *kef*-smoking Mohammed Mrabet and the tale-spinning Larbi Layachi. It appears Bowles did not have much contact with the intellectual and more devout Muslims, but rather preferred associations with the deviant or weak followers who were willing to share in his life-style.

Add to the difficulty of understanding Islam from the stories, Bowles's tendency to concentrate on that limited element of society with which he was most comfortable, and the Western reader receives a very lopsided fictional "account" of the true practices and principles of Islam; the society of Bowles's Morocco dictates the reader's perception of Islam. The Western reader remains virtually saddled with his/her negative image of Islam: "For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there."[9] Paul Bowles does not do much to alleviate this ignorance.

The most salient characteristic of Paul Bowles's earlier short stories is his tendency to dwell on what he perceives as the violent, cruel nature of the Arab world of North Africa. Although undoubtedly the Morocco of Bowles's short stories was a land beset by many violent acts due to excessive poverty and ignorance, the reader's urge to equate the society with Islam is made very enticing through Bowles's use of simple characters who appear to try to justify their cruel actions with invocations to Allah and repeated references to religious beliefs.

The first short story in the *Collected Stories* (when considered chronologically) that deals exclusively with native Moroccans, in a terribly violent scene, is "The Delicate Prey" (1948). In this story the reader infers that the characters who encounter a murderous mountain man are devout Muslims, although Bowles avoids excessive reference to religious phrases; Bowles does, however, show that the characters "engage in complicated theological discussions," and they later utter phrases such as "S'I'm Aleikoum" and "with God's aid,". indicating their religious affiliation to the Muslim faith. Nevertheless, readers frequently proffer this story as one of the most memorable in its violent portrayal of acts of cruelty amongst native Moroccans.

In "The Story of Lahcen and Idir" (*CS*), two friends perpetually engaged in drinking, smoking *kef*, and chasing prostitutes come to fight over a beautiful prostitute and inflame each other's jealousy. In a sexual encounter set up by Idir to test his friend's loyalty, Idir discovers his friend's betrayal and kills him, proudly winning the approval of the girl and claiming her for himself. Bowles depicts the characters as Muslims who invoke the name of Allah during their undertakings—one even dreams of a mosque, indicating his token grounding in Islam. In "The Wind at Beni Midar" (*CS*), out of vengeance for a *cabran* playing a joke on him which causes him to become superstitious, the young man Driss beats, knifes, and poisons the *cabran* and then thanks Allah for breaking the "spell" that the *cabran* had leveled on him. Bowles situates Driss in Islam at the beginning of the story by having the reader believe that Driss is bothered by his conscience for having

[9] Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) xv.

doubted his father: "Driss had expected his father to speak this way, but when he heard the words he was ashamed. Some of his friends were without respect for God. They ate during Ramadan and argued with their fathers. He was glad not to be like them" (*CS* 328). Yet he is glad to have unjustly killed someone, because of a superstition, in the name of Allah.

What assumptions does one make about Islam based on this kind of representation? Apparently Wendy Lesser, a renowned critic and admirer of Paul Bowles's work, felt convinced of the unconscionable cruelty conveyed through Bowles's portrayal of the Muslim believer. In a rather sweeping generalization of Islamic society, she states: ". . . one of the more physically violent stories, 'The Wind at Beni Midar' . . . is less disturbing than many of Bowles' others [those that show Westerners dealing with the Arab world]. I think this is because the violence in 'The Wind at Beni Midar' takes place completely within the accepted standards of the Arab world. . . . Whatever shock value does accrue to the 'Beni Midar' story is brought to it by the European (in which I include American) reader, whose own proprieties are violated by the story's Moslem concepts of superstition and revenge."[10] Bowles himself, as mentioned earlier, was inclined to place credence in the violent nature of the Muslim man, describing the typecast Mustapha as thinking of "peace as that boring and meaningless interlude between wars"—this despite the Koran's injunction to work toward peace in Islam: "The Believers are but a single Brotherhood, so make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers,"[11] interpreted to mean Islam cannot be fully realized until this peace is achieved (*HQ* 1591). Bowles's characters, whom he portrays as carrying out violent acts of murder, seemingly have no compunction about their actions, as if these acts are condoned within their faith, resulting in those exciting and meaningful periods enveloping the boring, meaningless interludes of peace. Their consciences never grapple with the numerous Koranic injunctions against unjustifiable violence and the killing of fellow believers.

Another striking feature of Paul Bowles' short stories is the Muslim characters' extensive use of *kef*, the drug of choice and the one readily available to Moroccans during the years Bowles wrote his short stories. Bowles was convinced that Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol but are not specifically forbidden the use of drugs in the Koran.[12] However, the native Moroccans' simplistic interpretation of the Koranic injunction against wine consumption does not take into account the principle of *Kias* (analogy), which enjoins the faithful to make logical analogies to specific statements in the Koran, thus allowing the more astute Muslim to understand drugs to be a mind-altering substance which is just as harmful to the body as alcohol.

It is understandable, given Bowles's illusion that drugs are acceptable in Islam, to see characters in his stories making casual use of *kef* while attacking oth-

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[10] Wendy Lesser, "Murder as Social Impropriety: Paul Bowles' Evil Heroes," *Twentieth Century Literature* 32 (Fall/Winter 1986): 403.

[11] *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. with commentary by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance (Madinah, SA: King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 1410 H. [1990]). Subsequent references to Suras and pages of interpretation will be made to *HQ* in the text.

[12] See Lawrence Stewart, *Paul Bowles: The Illumination of North Africa* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1974) 119.

ers for making minor breaches of the Islamic code. In such stories as "A Friend of the World" (*CS*), "The Story of Lahcen and Idir," and "The Wind at Beni Midar," the Moroccan Muslims are shown to smoke one pipe of *kef* after another, often becoming befuddled and confused, consequently engaging in acts of violence or deceit no doubt linked to their state of mind. In "He of the Assembly" (*CS*), *kef* is the reward that helps the smoker find answers to puzzling questions and is, in essence, advocated as a way of avoiding excessive fear of Satan and of achieving strength. In "The Dismissal" (*MM*), the servant Abdelkrim dreams about and struggles to achieve a spot under a tree with a pipe of *kef*—the dramatic action of the story revolves around his inability to achieve this dream. Through the portrayal of simple Muslims with a proclivity towards drug use and violence, Bowles seemingly presents Islam as acquiescent to weakness and decadence. The picture given to Western readers is a disturbing portrait of the weak members of Islam misconstruing the interpretation of their faith to further their own desires and objectives.

Indeed, these characters exhibiting nonchalant violence and careless drug indulgence appear to provide the framework of Bowles's fictional work. A more subtle but no less significant quality of his short fiction within that framework is his portrayal of the Islamic conceptions of fate and free will in his Muslim characters. Bowles, like many non-Muslims in the West (including many erudite scholars) perceives of Middle-Eastern Muslims as being "fatalists" in a pejorative sense. Fate to the Western reader carries the implication that the believer is completely without free will to change what is predetermined by God as a blind force. As Peter Mayne (a journalist greatly admired by Bowles) put it, "it is no good making plans as if you were a free agent in the matter. No Muslim would consider trying."[13] Bowles likewise expresses himself: ". . . it is a refusal to believe that action entails result. To him [Believer] each is separate, everything having been determined at the beginning of time, when the inexorable design of destiny was laid out. All of life is a desperate gamble, and everyone has the odds against him."[14] However, in Islam, it is intrinsically understood that one's belief in Allah's merciful and compassionate determining will does not necessitate that one give up individual effort or take no responsibility for his/her actions; in fact, it is obvious logic that drives the individual to take the initiative within the design of Allah. Although the Muslim believer cannot know the will of Allah, there is a mystery and promise in acting upon it. "All actions have commensurate consequences, and by performing good deeds (*hasanat*) individuals help their destinies in this life and improve their chances in the life to come."[15] Personal responsibility for all deeds in this life will be enforced on the Day of Judgment (see *HQ* 1912).

In Paul Bowles's short stories, nonetheless, including those based on old Moroccan folktales, we see the subtly disparaging Western view of the fatalistic Muslim and the misrepresentation of the Islamic concept of *Maktoub* (what is written). In "The Fqih" (*CS*), we see a young boy relying on a religious scholar (*fqih*) to solve his older brother's problem—the brother is bitten by a stray dog and feared rabid. The *fqih* advises the young boy to lock his brother in a dark

[13] Peter Mayne, *The Alleys of Marrakesh* (London: John Murray, 1953) 25.

[14] Bowles, *Their Heads are Green* 66.

[15] Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, *Speak, Bird, Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989) 45.

shed until it is proven that the brother is not ill; then the *fqih* leaves town and is unavailable, resulting in the prolonged confinement of the older brother in the squalid shed. The younger brother, in his simplistic faith in the *fqih*, convinces his mother that "it is written" and must continue. When the *fqih* is finally contacted, he has the young boy release the brother and tries to convince the boy that his brother will not blame him. But the young boy, fearing the future, runs away and is never seen again. Here we see simplistic faith in a *fqih* overriding personal responsibility and logic, attesting to the stupidity of the young boy and his mother and their crippling inability to act—out of fear of what they perceived as already written by God.

In "The Waters of Isli" (*CS*), the orchard owner Ramadi wants to breed his treasured mare to the beautiful stallion of a saint but is ashamed to ask the favor. The saint's death wish is to have his corpse strapped to his stallion, which should be allowed to go anywhere until it stops, that spot marking the saint's burial site. When the saint dies and is strapped to his horse, Ramadi devises a deceptive plan to get the stallion attracted to his mare, diverting the horse from its chosen path in favor of a path to his mare by scaring the stallion with snakes placed alongside the road by a companion. The plan works. Ramadi benefits by getting a beautiful colt, and the town prospers because the saint's burial spot in Ramadi's pasture attracts pilgrims who bring money into the area. After the success resulting from this trick, "only Ramadi and the Aissaoui [his companion] knew of the part they had played in bringing about the stroke of good luck that had changed their village, and they considered it of slight importance, since everything is decided by Allah. What mattered to Ramadi was the beauty of the black colt" (384). The impression this story leaves on the reader is that deceptive acts are compatible with Islam as long as the end justifies the means. Ramadi is clever in referring to his own actions (willfully deceptive ones) as being God's desire.

Paul Bowles continues to write about North Africa in his attempt to make the region and its people more comprehensible to the West. However, in his Moroccan short stories, he appears to have gone awry in his presentation of Islam to his readers. If he had been convinced, like the fictitious character Stenham in his novel *The Spider's House*, that Muslims "embodied the mystery of man at peace with himself,"[16] he might have given the West stories with a more positive and enduring vision of the essence of Islam.

[16] Paul Bowles, *The Spider's House* (New York: Random House, 1955) 217.