



Exploring the Phenomenon of Timelessness in Morocco: Insights from Paul Bowles and Other Travel Writers

Mohamed El Mehdi Jouay, Ph.D. Student in English Studies

Professor Kamal El Fouadi

University of Cadi Ayad, Marrakesh

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the phenomenon of timelessness in Morocco through the insights of renowned travel writers such as Paul Bowles. It will analyze the representations of Morocco in Western discourse, particularly in the context of Western Orientalism. Thanks to decolonization, deconstructionism, and Edward Said's Orientalism, hitherto neglected travel writing has elicited academic responses from scholars who have recognized that travel writing is not simply an innocent and objective description of a traveler's encounters in a foreign land. Instead, it is a genre that is inherently political, intertwined with projects of orientalism, colonialism, imperialism, and post-colonialism, and characterized by a hegemonic gaze directed towards the other, often marginalizing the voices of peripheral people. This research references books, notable authors, and Western explorers who commonly mention the unchanging quality of time in the Orient, particularly in Morocco. Additionally, the study will draw on the insights of Edward Said to explain why this timelessness was prevalent during that period.

Keywords: Orientalism, otherness, timelessness, postcolonial theory, Edward Said

Introduction

The notion of timelessness is a recurring theme in various travel writing books, prompting an exploration into why it is frequently employed by writers in this genre. This paper aims to explore this recurring theme in various travel writing books, with a particular focus on its significance in Western representations of Moroccan cities. Despite being briefly mentioned by Edward Said in his works on Orientalism, the implicit meaning of timelessness has yet to be fully examined, leading to its widespread but largely unconscious use. By investigating the concept of timelessness and its role in Western discourse, this paper seeks to shed light on the intricate dynamics and strategies at play in the representation of non-Western cultures. Specifically, this paper argues that timelessness is one of the many tactics employed in Western discourse to “Other” non-Western cultures, and that its widespread use in travel writing reinforces existing power dynamics and reinforces dominant narratives about the East. By critically examining this theme, this paper hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of the complex ways in which Western representations of the “Other” are constructed and perpetuated.

Understanding timelessness through the lens of Edward Said

Edward Said was a prominent Palestinian-American scholar and literary critic who is best known for his influential work “Orientalism.” In this book, Said examines how Western scholars, writers, and artists have historically constructed and represented the “Orient” (which includes the Islamic world) as a homogeneous, exotic, and inferior “Other.” Said’s work has had a significant impact on postcolonial studies and has challenged the dominant narratives and representations of non-Western cultures. He argues that Orientalism perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces power imbalances, and distorts our understanding of diverse cultures and societies. Said argues that Western representations of the Orient, including the perception of timelessness and lack of development, were not objective observations but rather products of a deeply entrenched Orientalist discourse. This discourse served the interests of Western colonial powers by justifying their domination and control over non-Western societies.

“Among the many illusions that persisted in modernization theory was one that seemed to have a special pertinence to the Islamic world: namely, that before the advent of the United States, Islam existed in a kind of timeless childhood, shielded from true development by an archaic set of superstitions, prevented by its strange priests and scribes from moving out of the Middle Ages into the modern world.” (Said, 2008, p. 30).

This passage from Said’s book, *Covering Islam*, reflects a perspective that was prevalent in modernization theory, which was a theoretical

framework developed in the 1950s and 1960s to explain the processes of social and economic development in non-Western societies. One of the central assumptions of modernization theory was that Western societies represented the pinnacle of development and progress, while non-Western societies were seen as lagging behind and in need of catching up. The passage focuses on the perception of Islam and the Islamic world within this framework. It suggests that Western observers held the view that Islam was stuck in a “timeless childhood” and was resistant to progress and modernization. The passage aligns with Said’s critique of Orientalism in his book of the same name. It highlights the Western perception of the Islamic world as being trapped in a state of backwardness and resistance to progress. This perception is often rooted in the assumption of Western superiority and a desire to justify Western intervention or influence in these regions. In *Orientalism*, Said references T.E. Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia, who was a British archaeologist, military officer, and writer. Lawrence’s experiences and writings about the Arab Revolt during World War I played a significant role in shaping Western perceptions of the Arab world:

“The great drama of Lawrence’s work is that it symbolizes the struggle, first, to stimulate the Orient (lifeless, timeless, forceless) into movement; second, to impose upon that movement an essentially Western shape; third, to contain the new and aroused Orient in a personal vision, whose retrospective mode includes a powerful sense of failure and betrayal.” (Said, 2014, p. 241)

Said suggests that Lawrence’s work embodies the desire to awaken the Orient (referring to the Arab world) from its perceived lifelessness and timelessness. This reflects the Orientalist perspective of the Orient as stagnant and lacking agency or vitality. Lawrence’s efforts to stimulate movement in the Orient are seen as an attempt to impose Western ideas and structures upon it, reflecting the underlying assumption of Western superiority and the desire to reshape the Orient according to Western norms. Furthermore, Said notes that Lawrence’s personal vision, which includes a sense of failure and betrayal, seeks to contain the newly aroused Orient within a retrospective mode. This implies that even when attempts are made to bring about change or movement in the Orient, the outcome is often shaped by Western perspectives and ultimately falls short of the desired result.

Paul Bowles’s Morocco: A journey through time

Bowles “may have chosen Tangier because, when he arrived for the first time, it was a place almost wholly devoid of the concept of time, and of

the West's compulsion to be constantly on the go" (Choukri & Shukrī, 2008, p. 153).

According to Bowles, the preservation of customs and cultural practices in Morocco over several generations was the underlying reason for the perceived sense of timelessness in the region. The notion that Morocco's past and present seemed to exist simultaneously and that individuals could lead their lives with minimal influence from temporal progression consumed him. He made a conscious decision to designate Tangier as his place of residence due to its timeless lifestyle, despite his reluctance to identify any particular location as his permanent home. Bowles perceived himself as a voyeuristic individual who was exiled and relegated to the role of a spectator or observer. His primary aim was to cultivate his imagination for his artistic pursuits. Rather than establishing permanent residency in Morocco, he regarded it as a customary ritual of personal growth and development. He expressed a disinclination to revisit his native city of New York.

"Bowles was born with a compulsive longing to escape" (ibid., p. 157).

"He is at home everywhere and nowhere." (ibid., p. 151).

Bowles is famous for making the distinction between the tourist and traveler in his book *The Sheltering Sky*, thereby clarifying the factors that render a successful journey precious to him.

"He did not think of himself as a tourist; he was a traveler. The difference is partly one of time, he would explain. Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another" (Bowles, 1949, p. 14).

"Another important difference between tourist and traveler is that the former accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking" (ibid.).

Choukri contends that Bowles "hardly distinguishes between past and present. The future is nonexistent for him. In fact, what he wants is to live in a world that is static and primitive—but civilized! How could a people be civilized and primitive at the same time? Bowles never enlightened us with an answer" (Choukri & Shukrī, 2008). Bowles held an appreciation for primitiveness and backwardness, as it provided him with the impetus to exist in the present moment. He held the belief that, following Morocco's attainment of independence, the city of Tangier underwent a significant transformation. The cultural phenomenon experienced a decline in its allure as it underwent a process of increasing Westernization. He held the view that the decline of traditional Moroccan culture and its loss of distinctiveness

could be attributed to the process of Westernization. Bowles posited that the introduction of Western cultural values, consumerism, and industrialization had a detrimental effect on Morocco's social structure and its relationship with the environment. Bowles expressed concern regarding the impact of industrialization and consumerism on the traditional customs and beliefs of Moroccan society, which has resulted in a decline in cultural identity. On the flip side, he expressed admiration for the norms and traditions of Moroccan society, deeming them essential to maintaining its unique character.

Bowles' perspective on the universe was characterized by a significant degree of distortion, and as such, any analysis of his representations of Morocco and its people must take into account his unique worldview. His perception of Morocco was shaped by his own personal desires and aspirations, particularly his fascination with the perceived primitive way of life and less developed populace of Tangier. This allure aligned with his personal preferences and may have contributed to his decision to remain in the city. Bowles's distorted worldview can be seen as a reflection of his own experiences and desires, rather than an accurate representation of Moroccan culture and society. Despite this distortion, Bowles was able to capture the enigmatic quality of Tangier in his writing. In his essay "The Worlds of Tangier," he portrays the city as possessing a multifaceted nature that compels individuals to explore its historical background and cultural richness.

"I have not discovered very much, but at least I am now convinced that Tangier is a place where the past and the present exist simultaneously in proportionate degree, where a very much alive today is given an added depth of reality by the presence of an equally alive yesterday. In Europe, it seems to me, the past is largely fictitious; to be aware of it one must have previous knowledge of it. In Tangier, the past is a physical reality as perceptible as the sunlight" (Bowles, 1958).

This excerpt captures the essence of Tangier, highlighting how the past and present coexist in harmony. It suggests that in Tangier, the past is not merely a distant concept but a tangible presence that enriches the present. Bowles contrasts this with Europe, where the past may feel more distant and disconnected. This evocative description emphasizes Tangier's unique ability to make the past come alive. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port, the main character, inquires of Kit, "What's a week to them? Time doesn't exist for them (Bowles, 1949)." In his paper dubbed "Why Did I Defend Paul Bowles", Hisham Aidi describes Bowles's analysis of the representations of Morocco in his novels and stories. Aidi has gone through Bowles' works in detail and has identified various tropes or common themes that are often associated with Orientalism. These tropes include exoticism, a sense of timelessness, and a portrayal of the East as barbaric or uncivilized.

“In my paper, I had scoured his novels and stories parsing his representations of Morocco, and concluded that although all the tropes of the Orientalist tradition—exotica, timelessness, barbarism—were there, Bowles should be spared the charge.”(Aidi, 2019, p. 6)

Despite the presence of these tropes in Bowles’s work, the author of the paper has concluded that Bowles should not be accused of perpetuating Orientalism. He argues that Bowles should be spared the label “Orientalist” because he places an ironic twist on Orientalist themes, essentially demonstrating their absurdity. The author suggests that Bowles is interested in studying Moroccans as a people, rather than as remnants of a primitive past. Additionally, the author highlights Bowles’ genuine intellectual interest in Tangier’s history and folk culture, which sets him apart from other expatriates in the city. However, upon closer examination of Bowles’s portrayals of Morocco and its people in his novels, short stories, and interviews, one can observe a multitude of elements that align with the literary and post-colonial theories of scholars like Stuart Hall and Jenny Kidd. Upon reading Bowles’s stories, it becomes evident that he falls into the category of Orientalist writers, sharing many similarities with other writers of the same tradition, which I will talk about shortly. His storytelling is marked by the inclusion of stereotypical representations of Morocco and its people, perpetuating Orientalist tropes and exoticizing the culture. Bowles demonstrates a fascination with the exotic, romanticizing the environment and portraying it as timeless and primitive. These elements align with the characteristics commonly associated with Orientalist literature. Contrary to Hisham Aidi’s argument, it is clear that Bowles’ works reflect an Orientalist perspective. His portrayals of Morocco are rooted in a Western gaze that often exoticizes and simplifies the culture, reinforcing existing power dynamics and the dominant narratives about the East. While it is important to acknowledge Bowles’ contributions to Moroccan music and his interest in Tangier’s history, it is equally important to critically examine the ways in which his writings perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes. Bowles’s works cannot be exempted from the Orientalist label. His depictions of Morocco align with the broader tradition of Orientalism in literature, emphasizing the need for a critical analysis of his writings and a recognition of the power dynamics inherent in his representations of Moroccan culture and society.

Timelessness: a pervasive theme in Moroccan travel literature

The idea of timelessness has been frequently applied to all things considered “different” in Morocco, including Tangier, the Moroccan souks, and the famous square in Marrakesh. For Western visitors, the sounds, sights, and smells of these places are a source of great fascination and allure. However, it is important to recognize that the discourse surrounding the

“timelessness” theme can be equated with notions of “backwardness” or “primitive nature.” Travel writers often describe feeling transported through time and space when encountering “different” and “exotic” environments, perpetuating the idea that non-Western cultures are static and unchanging. This fascination with the “magical world of the Orient” is often built upon the books and media consumed by Westerners, which reinforce stereotypes and romanticize Oriental countries like Morocco. Several Western travel writers who have traveled to Morocco have observed the distinctive correlation between time and Moroccan cultural practices. These authors have depicted the experience of residing in Morocco as a phenomenon where the passage of time appears to decelerate or halt entirely, as though the nation occupies an alternative temporal realm in comparison to the rest of the globe. The Moroccan perception of time is frequently associated with the nation’s abundant historical and cultural legacy. Scholars from the West have observed that Moroccans exhibit a distinct temporal orientation that diverges from that of Westerners, characterized by a heightened emphasis on present-focused living and the appreciation of the current moment. In its rural areas, Morocco has largely retained the same way of life it has had for centuries. Tourists have the opportunity to witness individuals adorned in customary attire, observe agricultural laborers utilizing manual implements to cultivate the land, and witness skilled craftsmen meticulously creating handmade goods. These visual stimuli have the potential to evoke a sense of temporal suspension, wherein the passage of time appears to decelerate and existence manifests at a more measured and intentional rhythm. The topography of Morocco is a contributing factor in engendering a perception of enduring temporal qualities. The country’s natural splendor, ranging from the rugged Atlas Mountains to the vast Sahara Desert, can elicit a sense of timelessness and awe. The phenomenon of time seemingly coming to a halt in Morocco is frequently attributed by Western travel writers to their encounter with a culture that adheres to a distinct rhythm from that to which they are accustomed in their native land. In addition to Bowles, there are other writers who make multiple references to the perpetual nature of existence in Morocco. Here are other cases where Western authors have employed the notion of timelessness to characterize Morocco. Peter Mayne, in *A Year in Marrakesh*, writes:

“Time is unimportant here (Mayne, 2002, p. 58).”

“For him, time does not exist and so cannot drag. I don’t get bored either because my mind is busy all the while. It is mental fatigue or my dinner-time that stops the lessons, not boredom” (ibid, p. 62).

Here, Mayne is describing a sense of timelessness that he experiences in Marrakesh. He is suggesting that time is unimportant, even nonexistent, which allows him to focus on the present moment and stay mentally

engaged. He contrasts this with other situations where time can feel like it is dragging or where he may become bored. By highlighting the lack of time pressure in this place, Mayne is emphasizing its unique qualities and suggesting that it offers a different kind of experience from what he is used to. Mayne posits the notion that Moroccans may not place a high value on time or possess a level of productivity and efficiency comparable to that of Westerners, thus portraying Morocco as an exotic travel destination for many travelers. Its cities, especially Marrakesh, Tangier, and Essaouira, are well-known for their lively markets, commonly referred to as souks, where vendors offer a diverse range of goods and services. Their bustling atmospheres overwhelm visitors who are unaccustomed to similar environments. The sensory stimuli emanating from the crowded thoroughfares can lead to a state of sensory overload for pedestrians traversing these commercial hubs. As a result, this creates a perception of being situated in a distinct historical epoch and being isolated from the bustling external world, which is associated with the West. In the following excerpt from *Voices of Marrakesh*, Elias Canetti provides a vivid depiction of the enduring sentiment he experiences while being fully engaged in the Jamaa El Fna square:

“I had the feeling that I was really somewhere else now, that I had reached the goal of my journey. I did not want to leave; I had been hundreds of years ago but I had forgotten and now it was all coming back to me. I found exhibited the density and warmth of life as I feel in myself. I was the square as I stood in it. I believe I am it always” (Canetti & Underwood, 1981, p. 45)

The natural beauty of Morocco, with its vast deserts, rugged mountains, stunning coastlines, and bustling souks filled with the fragrant aroma of spices, creates a timeless feeling of being transported through time. For example, the presence of magnificent landscapes can evoke a sense of insignificance among individuals from other countries and engender a perception of inhabiting an alternate reality. Walter Weiss mentions in his literary work *Morocco: In the Labyrinth of Dreams and Bazaars* that:

“Time seems to have stopped in this mountain town that until 1920 no Christian was allowed to enter” (Weiss, 2016, p. 21).

“We feel suddenly transported to the seventies” (ibid).

Weiss asserts that Morocco offers a unique experience to visitors, as they may perceive a blend of antiquity and contemporaneity, where the flow of time appears to be distinct and the historical and current aspects are closely interrelated. A comparable illustration can be found in *Tangier: From the Romans to the Rolling Stones* by Richard Hamilton:

“Tangier was Keith’s first experience of Africa and he fell in love with the city. He felt that he had been teleported back in time: ‘ You either

went “How weird”, or you went, “Wow! This is great” (Hamilton, 2020, p. 262).

The notion that time comes to a halt or decelerates in Oriental nations is a prevalent stereotype—a broad and all-encompassing one that has the potential to present difficulties and may not be entirely precise or equitable. There is diversity in the temporal orientations of Oriental or Eastern nations, and individuals belonging to these cultures may exhibit distinct temporal attitudes. This particular stereotype constitutes a manifestation of Orientalism. The Western tendency to idealize and sensationalize Eastern cultures represents a distinct form of discourse. John Davidson makes reference to the enduring nature of Morocco, particularly in his depiction of the local people:

“But the fact is, time is no object to the people here; their care is merely how to waste it; as soon as one meal is finished, they want to sleep till the time for the next arrives” (Davidson, 1839, p. 202).

Davidson correlates the concept of timelessness with indolence, insinuating that Moroccans, in contrast to individuals from Western cultures, exhibit a lack of productivity and disregard for temporal awareness. The stereotype of “Oriental laziness” lacks empirical evidence and is considered derogatory. This notion is linked to the stereotype that individuals of foreign descent lack diligence and aspiration and are only preoccupied with the consumption of food and rest. Such a misconception posits that these individuals lack the motivation or ambition to evolve or innovate and are content with a static and perpetual existence. The statement suggests a dichotomy between the West, characterized by dynamism and progressiveness, and the East, characterized by rigidity and resistance to change. Travel writers reinforce the stereotype of the East as a region characterized by mysticism, spirituality, and timelessness, where individuals are perceived as idle and apathetic. The Western portrayal of Morocco has relied on the concept of Oriental timelessness to accentuate exoticism, orientalism, and mysticism. This representational technique depicts the country as a locale where time appears to be suspended owing to the perceived indolence of its inhabitants. The practice of assimilating diversity is a prevalent strategy utilized by travel writers, who frequently endeavor to comprehend the unfamiliar societies and individuals they come across while voyaging. This phenomenon pertains to the practice of regarding cultural distinctions as innate and unalterable.

Conclusion

The construction of the Orientalist stereotype of timelessness in Morocco finds its roots in Western perceptions and biases about the Orient. Western writers often describe Morocco as a place devoid of time, and this

portrayal emerges from a romanticized view of its people, culture, and society. The origins of this perception can be traced back to earlier Orientalist notions that were ingrained in Western minds from a young age. The construction of meaning surrounding the idea of the Orient as timeless is influenced by the stereotypes, books, and media consumed by Westerners. These intentional constructions of meaning and representations serve to reinforce the belief in Western cultural superiority while belittling the “Other.” Western consumers have consistently been exposed to narratives that depict the Orient as primitive, timeless, backward, and inferior. These qualities are often considered synonymous in these portrayals. The portrayal and depiction of the Orient play a significant role in shaping the identities, cultures, and communities of Westerners. It is important to recognize that representations are not fixed or static; rather, they are in a constant state of construction and reconstruction. The perpetuation of the discourse of Orientalism aims to undermine various cultures, including Morocco. Representation is closely intertwined with the concept of difference, highlighting the ways in which individuals and groups are seen as distinct from one another. Timelessness is one of the techniques employed by Western writers, alongside infantilization, stereotyping, depictions of nature and the picturesque, witchcraft, superstitions, and others that fall within the repertoire of Orientalism. From these representations, one can deduce that Oriental places are regarded as stagnant, where progress is hindered. Western perceptions suggest that Moroccans, unlike people from the West, are unable to be productive and instead prefer to live a timeless life. The concept of timelessness is depicted as an inevitable, inherent characteristic of Oriental people. In summary, the perception of timelessness in Morocco and other Oriental contexts is a product of Orientalist discourse perpetuated by Western writers. Through intentional and strategic constructions of meaning and representations, the West has succeeded in portraying the Orient as inferior and resistant to progress.

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