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Exploring Franco-Moroccan Colonial and Social Drama Through an Ethnographic Lens: A Study of Paul Bowles's The Spider's House

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Abstract

This article examines Paul Bowles's *The Spider's House* through the lens of literary anthropology, focusing on Morocco's socio-cultural transformation during the anti-colonial struggle of the 1950s. While Bowles's works have faced critiques for perpetuating Orientalist tropes, this study argues that *The Spider's House* transcends such criticisms by functioning as a nuanced form of ethnographic fiction. Using Victor Turner's concept of "social drama," the article demonstrates how the novel captures the dynamic tensions between colonialism, nationalism, and tradition. Bowles's portrayal of Morocco reflects not only political conflict but also personal liminality, where characters navigate the complex interplay between belonging, identity, and change.

Keywords: Ethnographic fiction, liminality, social drama, Moroccan independence, Paul Bowles, colonialism

Introduction: Fiction as a Liminal Space between Anthropology and Narrative

Anthropology and literature, long thought to be distinct fields, converge meaningfully through what Karin Barber (2007) describes as the interplay between texts and the social practices that surround them. Literary anthropology positions fiction not merely as entertainment but as an artifact capable of reflecting cultural tensions. Geertz (1973) argued that texts provide "thick descriptions" of social life, revealing underlying cultural logics. In a similar vein, Richardson (1989) suggests that both anthropologists and novelists are storytellers, observing the human condition to narrate it through varied lenses: "Our task is to tell the story of humanity in as many forms as Gilgamesh's story has been retold" (p. 38).

Bowles's *The Spider's House* exemplifies this form of storytelling, serving not only as a narrative but also as a cultural document. Written during a time of political upheaval, the novel reflects the tension between tradition, colonialism, and the emerging nationalist movement. Bowles originally intended to depict the continuity of life in Fez, yet the unfolding political turmoil forced a shift in his narrative. "I wanted to show Fez as it had always been, but I found myself writing about the dissolution of that world instead" (Bowles, 2009, p. x). Through characters like Amar and Stenham, Bowles explores how personal identities become fragmented in moments of social transition, reflecting what Turner (1980) identifies as social drama.

Exploring *The Spider's House* through Social Drama and Liminality

Bowles's narrative unfolds within the historical context of Moroccan resistance to colonial rule. Turner's

(1980) framework of social drama, with its phases of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism, aligns closely with the novel's structure. The breach begins with the exile of Sultan Mohammed V, a symbolic event that disrupts Moroccan society's equilibrium and heightens the tension between traditionalists, nationalists, and colonial collaborators. In Fez, a city that Bowles uses as a microcosm for the nation, different factions wrestle with competing visions for the future (Ikeda, 2015, pp. 15–16).

Amar's journey encapsulates the experience of individuals caught in a state of transition. Raised in a deeply conservative household, he interprets the political upheaval as a spiritual test: "It must be that Allah is watching to see what is in the hearts of the Muslims" (Bowles, 2009, p. 70). His perspective reflects Turner's (1969) concept of "liminality," a state of uncertainty where traditional roles are suspended. Amar's struggle to reconcile his father's religious teachings with the appeal of nationalist ideals mirrors the broader societal dilemma, as Morocco navigates the path between tradition and modernity.

Amar's father, a staunch traditionalist, expresses disdain for political movements, dismissing them as inherently dishonest: "Politics is the French word for lying" (Bowles, 2009, p. 47). His skepticism reflects the ambivalence many Moroccans felt toward the nationalist cause, fearing that political change might erode Islamic values. Turner (1980) explains that social dramas reveal latent conflicts within communities, compelling individuals to confront competing loyalties. Amar, although sympathetic to the nationalist goal of independence, remains spiritually conflicted. His longing for revenge against the French becomes intertwined with religious duty: "By inflicting pain, despair, and humiliation upon the oppressors, we fulfill the will of Allah" (Bowles, 2009, p. 129). This portrayal of Amar highlights the psychological impact of colonial violence, showing how the desire for justice can become entangled with the need for retribution.

Stenham, an expatriate character, embodies the tension between romanticism and disillusionment. At the outset of the novel, he views Morocco as a place untouched by modernity, admiring the simplicity and magic of daily life: "There was music and dancing and magic every day in the streets" (Bowles, 2009, p. 187). However, as the political crisis deepens, Stenham realizes that his idealized vision is unsustainable. Turner's (1980) theory of liminality suggests that individuals must undergo personal transformation when confronted with new realities, and Stenham's disillusionment reflects this process.

Stenham's interactions with nationalist leaders further complicate his sense of identity. When he insists that he is not aligned with French interests, one of the nationalists responds: "The arms used against the Moroccan people were largely supplied by your government. They do not consider America a nation friendly to their cause" (Bowles, 2009, pp. 226–227). This exchange underscores the complexity of political allegiances during moments of crisis, as even outsiders find themselves implicated in the unfolding drama.

While Stenham grapples with disillusionment, Lee embraces the inevitability of modernization. She dismisses traditional practices as relics of the past, stating: "They need electric lights and buses, not magic" (Bowles, 2009, p. 188). Lee's perspective reflects a Western inclination to equate progress with technological advancement, often disregarding the cultural value of tradition. Her views align with the frustrations of younger Moroccans, who resent the preservation of Fez as a historical monument: "Why not make it a French city? Why keep it as a museum?" (Bowles, 2009, p. 252).

The tension between tradition and modernity reaches its climax when Amar pursues a car heading toward Casablanca, hoping to escape the constraints of tradition. However, "the gap between him and the car widened, and his sandals slipped from his feet" (Bowles, 2009, pp. 397–398). This moment encapsulates the difficulty of transformation, as individuals must abandon familiar identities to embrace change. The

loss of Amar's sandals symbolizes the sacrifices required to navigate liminal spaces, reflecting the complexities of Morocco's postcolonial transition.

Bowles also explores the psychological impact of colonial violence through vivid, unsettling imagery. Stenham listens as Moss recounts a harrowing scene: "Hundreds of Arabs were mercilessly beaten, knocked down, kicked, and tortured at the police station" (Bowles, 2009, pp. 230–231). These depictions illustrate Turner's (1980) observation that social dramas often lead to schism, where competing values result in lasting divisions. The novel suggests that Morocco's journey toward independence, though filled with hope, leaves unresolved tensions that continue to shape the nation's identity.

Conclusion: Schism, Liminality, and the Ambivalence of Postcolonial Transition

Paul Bowles's *The Spider's House* offers a richly layered exploration of Morocco's journey through political upheaval, cultural dislocation, and personal transformation. At its heart, the novel serves as a mirror to the fragmented reality of Moroccan society during the final years of colonial rule, where nationalism, tradition, and colonial power clash in an unresolved struggle. Through the intertwined experiences of Amar, Stenham, and Lee, Bowles vividly captures the complexities inherent in this transitional period. Turner's (1980) framework of social drama provides a useful lens through which these tensions can be understood: the stages of breach, crisis, redress, and the uncertain conclusion of either reintegration or schism correspond to the evolving dynamics in both the novel and Morocco's political reality.

One of the novel's most striking achievements is its depiction of liminality—the in-between state that affects both individuals and nations caught in the throes of transformation. Liminality pervades not only Amar's spiritual journey but also Stenham's evolving relationship with Moroccan culture and Lee's unwavering embrace of modernization. Bowles suggests that to exist in a liminal space is to confront disorientation and uncertainty, yet also to encounter possibility. Just as Amar finds himself questioning the values he once held sacred, Morocco itself stands on the threshold between old traditions and new political ambitions, between loyalty to Islamic heritage and the desire for independence. This duality, highlighted through Turner's (1969) concept of the liminal phase, underscores the novel's broader commentary on the cost of progress and the difficulty of achieving cultural continuity amid social change. Bowles's portrayal of Moroccan society grappling with competing ideologies underscores the emotional toll of postcolonial transition. While some, like Amar, view resistance as both a political and spiritual act, others—such as Stenham—find themselves paralyzed by the realization that their romanticized visions of Morocco are no longer sustainable. This tension resonates with a broader theme in postcolonial literature: the difficulty of preserving cultural identity while embracing necessary change. The novel suggests that even as individuals seek new roles and identities, they are haunted by the loss of what must be left behind. This struggle is poignantly captured in Amar's pursuit of the car to Casablanca, a moment that symbolizes not only the desire for escape but also the painful reality that some parts of the self—like his sandals—must inevitably be abandoned along the way.

Bowles's novel emphasizes that transformation is neither linear nor conclusive. Turner (1980) reminds us that social dramas do not always resolve with clear reintegration, and *The Spider's House* reflects this ambiguity. The unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity, nationalism and conservatism, linger beyond the narrative's final pages, mirroring the real challenges faced by Morocco after independence. Even as the novel gestures toward hope and renewal, it leaves open the possibility that these fractures may persist, shaping future struggles for identity and belonging.

Furthermore, Bowles critiques both the colonial mindset and the nationalist movement's tendency to idealize modernization. While characters like Lee embrace technological advancement as progress, Bowles warns that such a simplistic equation risks erasing the cultural foundations that give life meaning. Similarly, the novel exposes the shortcomings of political rhetoric, as seen through the figure of Amar's father, who distrusts the very language of politics. By juxtaposing these perspectives, Bowles encourages readers to reflect on the ambivalence of postcolonial transition, where progress comes at a cost and the pursuit of freedom can entangle individuals in new forms of dependence.

The exploration of violence in *The Spider's House* further deepens its commentary on the psychological toll of social change. Through graphic depictions of brutality, Bowles reveals how colonial oppression fosters cycles of revenge and retribution. Stenham's horror at the sight of tortured bodies and Amar's prayer for divine vengeance underscore the emotional weight carried by those caught in conflict. Bowles's treatment of violence not only reflects the historical realities of Morocco's anti-colonial struggle but also highlights the ways in which personal trauma becomes intertwined with political ambition. In this way, the novel serves as both a literary and ethnographic document, offering insights into the lived experiences of those navigating the complexities of social transformation.

Ultimately, Bowles leaves readers with an unresolved question: What does it mean to be free? The novel suggests that independence, whether personal or political, is not a final destination but an ongoing process of negotiation and compromise. The characters in *The Spider's House* illustrate that identity is never static but always in flux, shaped by historical forces and individual choices. As Morocco steps into the future, Bowles's narrative remains a poignant reminder that the past cannot be entirely discarded, even as the nation seeks new paths forward.

Through this lens, *The Spider's House* transcends its initial reception as Orientalist literature, offering instead a profound meditation on the human condition. It captures the fragility and resilience of individuals and societies standing on the brink of transformation, balancing hope with uncertainty, and tradition with innovation. Bowles's work thus invites readers to reflect not only on Morocco's postcolonial journey but also on the universal challenges of change, identity, and belonging that resonate across cultures and historical moments.

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