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Asts. Prof. Serap SARIBAŞ

Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey University, Faculty of Literature, Department of English Language and Literature, Karaman / TURKEY

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MAN(NER) AND NATURE: CULTURE AND EXISTENCE IN PAUL BOWLES' "A DISTANT EPISODE"

We are encamped in nature, not domesticated
Ralph Waldo Emerson

ABSTRACT

Ralph Waldo Emerson, as one of the pioneers of the existentialist movement, describes human individuality with nature. From his perspective, all-natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. The institutions in a society/culture are not natural and they prevent people from "being" human. In order to be free of factitious authority, a person needs to reunite himself with nature and move with its flow. Otherwise, he will be tested on non-being, although he presumes himself to be "being". Barry Tharaud explains that Paul Bowles is generally concerned with the way culture blocks Being as consonant with the basic transcendental views of Emerson. In Bowles' "A Distant Episode," the protagonist experiences the same situation. Step by step, he realizes his presence in nature: who he was before, who he has become now, and how things led him to come to his present position. By analyzing what has befallen the protagonist in this short story, this paper will incrementally examine the symbols and the awareness or/and unawareness of consciousness.

Keywords: Existential View, Pseudo-Consciousness, Institutionalized Culture

İNSAN/TUTUM VE DOĞA: PAUL BOWLES'İN "DİSTANT EPİSODE" ADLI ESERİNDE KÜLTÜR VE VAROLUŞ

"Biz doğaya kamp kurduk, evcilleşmedik."
Ralph Waldo Emerson

ÖZET

Varoluşçuluk hareketinin öncülerinden biri olan Ralph Waldo Emerson, insan bireyselliğini doğa aracılığıyla tanımlar. Emerson'un bakış açısına göre, "bilinç etkilerine açık olduğunda, tüm doğal objeler aynı türden etki yaparlar." Toplum/kültürdeki yapılar doğal değildir ve bireylerin "beşer olmasını" engeller. Sahte otoriteden arınmak için, insanın kendisini doğa ile birleştirmesi ve akışına bırakarak hareket etmesi gerekir. Aksi takdirde, kendini var olduğuna ikna etse de var olmamak üzerine test edilecektir. Barry Tharaud, "Paul Bowles, genellikle kültürün var olanları ahenkli olarak Emerson'ın temel doğaüstü görüşleriyle birlikte engellemesinden endişe duyar," diye açıklar. Bowles'ın "Distant Episode" adlı eserinde, başkahraman aynı durumu yaşar. Adım adım, kendi varlığını doğada fark eder: Daha önce kimdi, şimdi kim oldu ve mevcut durumuna gelmesine neler nasıl etki etti. Bu çalışmanın amacı, bu kısa hikâyede başkahramanın başına gelenleri inceleyerek, sembolleri ve bilincin farkındalığını ve farkında olmamasını irdelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Varoluşçu görüş, Sahte Farkındalık, Kurumsallaşmış Kültür

1. INTRODUCTION

In the story, Bowles names the protagonist "the Professor". This title, in fact, does not reflect any place in nature but it initially gives the impression that the character is a member of the intelligentsia and has been shaped according to an institutionalized culture. Nature already has its own design and human beings try to reshape it according to their man-made society. Thus, what can be noted here is that the professor with his title, indeed, is not a native in nature, but a primitive being with his distant unnatural constructed self-being. Until he unifies himself with nature again, he will be a distant person, as referenced in the title of the story, "A Distant Episode," to the others in nature. When the *gaouaji* took

the Professor to find his friend “Hassan Ramani” and lit a cigarette, the Professor found himself saying “These people are not primitives” (Bowles,1998:5). He tries to convince himself that he is not in danger and that the people in Ain Tadouirt are friendly.

Nature is the only thing that can lead a person to find “self-ness.” In human nature, there are five recognizable senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. These senses help one be an individual and create an identity which is connected to the cultural form of a familiar lifestyle for him in society. These feelings are both primitive and the basic elements of what makes a human a cultured being by letting him recognize everything around him. In “A Distant Episode”, the description is very alive and natural. The professor descriptively portrays everything around him using his five senses, especially smell. This seems to indicate that language is essential for describing the world around us. Like Emerson says: “Words are signs of natural facts” (Emerson,2009:10). In order to understand the facts in the story, language has the most significant role. Reflections of reality are made using language, which is the reason why different languages such as French, Maghreb, Arabic, and English are used throughout this short-story.

2. THE WHOLE NATURE IS A METAPHOR OF THE HUMAN MIND

Each word spoken in different languages in the text has been chosen as a symbol related to that particular culture and the character that utters it. Emerson defines the world as emblematic and says that “parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (Emerson,2009:13). In the beginning, the Professor speaks French with the driver. Instead of using the word “driver”, Bowles prefers calling him “chauffeur”. This word might refer to the Professor’s expertise. He is a linguist in search of an old Moroccan friend. French can be interpreted as a reflection of the Professor’s literate side. However, one thing to be considered is that the driver also speaks French with him and asks the question “Vous etes geologue?” (Bowles,1998:1), and the Professor answers with pleasure: “A geologist? Ah, no! I’m a linguist” (Bowles,1998:1). He is pleased with his job and sure of what he is looking for: new Maghrebi dialects. In this part, one might believe that the story includes the theme of colonization as well since the two speak in not Maghrebi but French. However, Bowles intends neither to give an Orientalist point nor to point out the colonialist problems in the region. The language only emphasizes the capriciousness of human nature. By taking to the roads to unknown lands for the Professor in search of “Hassan Ramani” who is not actually his close friend, the Professor opens a door to his new Being too.

While the Professor was walking through the Ain Tadourit streets, he decides to visit Hassan Ramani’s café. Instead of finding Ramani there, he finds a new man tending the fire. There is only one guest in the café, which evokes a feeling of loneliness and distrust. Anything can happen at any time to the Professor, a foreigner in a foreign land. But still, he continues self-confidently using the Maghreb language, which he spent four years to learn. He asks for Hassan Ramani in Maghrebi, introducing himself as one of them. However, he is not aware that he needs to renounce his present self in order to be a native in Ain Tadourit. While the professor tries to establish a familiar image for himself, the *qaouaji* replies in bad French on purpose: “He is deceased” (Bowles,1998:2). First, it is not very clear whether he speaks bad French intentionally, or he intends to correct the Professor by implying that he is not a native, he is a stranger there. Second, the *qaouaji* prefers a more formal word to say Hassan Ramani is dead. The Professor feels lonely and starts discussing with himself. The only person he had a connection to in these lands is lost. Now, he is a real alien there.

However, when he asks for boxes made from camel udders, even though the *qaouaji* still has an insolent manner towards the Professor, he shifts to speak in Arabic. The professor offers the *qaouaji* ten francs for each camel udder but instead, they make a deal to go to an unknown location where the Professor can purchase as many camel udders as he likes. While waiting for the *qaouaji*, “the moon rose higher” (Bowles,1998:3) with the sound of howling and barking dogs. The moon refers to the darkness / night in a person’s life. “Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance” (Emerson,2009:10). The story starts with “the reddest” September sunset. Sunset, the moon, and the color red, used in superlative form, foreshadow what will befall the Professor in the future. His previous life is about to end, and he is about to wake into a new dawn and a new non-Being in a different land.

Emerson identifies nature with its appearances by saying: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (Emerson,2009:10). After the Professor meets the *qaouaji*, who is probably a Reguibat, the moon rises, darkness falls and the eerie sound of barking dogs surrounds the Professor. If he had been able to read the symbolism within nature and define himself with nature, he would have sensed what was approaching him.

Wild barking dogs are the symbol of the culture that blocks Being, or the culture of the Reguibat tribe who are difficult and uncompromising warriors difficult. Upon reaching the path where the *qaouaji* left the Professor to find boxes made from camel udders, “from somewhere down below, but very far below, came the faint sound of a low flute”, which is like an inner monologue’s background music. “The mute music” in nature is rising slowly. The *qaouaji* says “the rock is white; the moon is strong. So, you can see well. I am going back now and sleep. It is late. You can give me what you like” (Bowles,1998:4-5). Whiteness and darkness together in the middle of the night can be interpreted here as the presence of good and bad in human nature. And the path where the Professor is left to walk alone is the road on which he advances to his inner world. Music in the background is another language providing information about the soul. Perhaps, it is an invitation to a new world with new Being. The inner journey of Professor confronts the existentialist theme here. Tharaud also explains that “The movements toward a world beyond the intellect – a world of earliest childhood and nature – is typical of a Romantic concern for greater awareness of Being, and is also existentialist in a general non-doctrinal sense” (Tharaud,2009:97).

The further the Professor goes into nature, the more he examines it. He thinks that the trip “and the walk” exhausted him. “It occurred to him that he ought to ask himself why he was doing this irrational thing when he was intelligent enough to know that since he was doing it, it was not so important to probe for explanations at that moment” (Bowles,1998:6). Once he is sure of his mind/intellect, he is attacked by wild dogs. He refuses to die, which indicates that he has started to realize his own Being when he becomes integrated with nature. As Tharaud explains:

The professor “become(s) aware of his own Being and of existence in a larger sense through contact with nature, which is a realm apart from the distortions of culture and society, through the discovery of discontinuities within his own culture, which makes them aware of the arbitrary limitations on the individuals of that culture, or through contact with foreign cultures, in general” (Tharaud,2009:96).

When the boundaries between the Professor and his culture begin to separate, he regains his consciousness in a different way. However, before becoming aware of his own Being totally, he begs to lose consciousness in order not to feel pain while he was beaten by the Reguibat. “Someone dealt him a terrific blow on the head, and the thought: ‘Now at least I shall lose consciousness, thank Heaven’” (Bowles,1998:8). Since his consciousness is opened into a different world, “still he went on being aware of the guttural voices he could not understand, and of being bound tightly about the ankles and chest” (Bowles,1998:8).

According to Emerson, nature heals spiritual wounds. “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone” (Emerson,2009:6). In the story, the protagonist is physically wounded. These physical wounds also cause him internal, emotional damage as well. However, it is the physical injuries that cause him to change his way of thinking.

Even when all his wounds had healed and he felt no more pain, the Professor did not begin to think again; he ate and defecated, and he dances, when he was bidden, a senseless hopping up and down that delighted the children, principally because of the wonderful jangling racket it made. And he generally slept through the heat of the day, in among camels (Bowles,1998:9).

When he was first captured and enslaved by the Reguibat, he lived like an animal, mechanically going through life, without thinking. The Professor may be trying to cling to his old self here, from his previous life. We would expect him to regain this thought and realize his Being, but he fails. He gives up looking for himself.

When he was sold as an amusement slave to Tougara, an important event happened in his life: “for it was then the pain began to stir again in his being” (Bowles,1998:10). After one year of imprisonment and slavery, the Professor was now back in a familiar situation. He saw a respectable man in the house where he was kept, and “this person made a point of going into classical Arabic from time to time, to impress the others, who had not learned a word of the Koran” (Bowles,1998:10). Now, the sense of hearing began to make sense to the Professor. He became conscious of the words that the old man was uttering. He started to remember what had happened to him before. Some voices, recognizable sounds came up in his mind. “He turned over panting on the sand and forgot about it. But the pain had begun. It operated in a kind of delirium, because he had begun to enter into consciousness again. When the man opened the door and prodded him with his cane, he cried out in a rage, and everyone laughed” (Bowles,1998:11). He is no longer a puppet now that he regains his consciousness in such a painful way. In order to obtain his Being, he refuses to dance as he did before.

The sense of sound, through listening to words, remind the Professor of his self-Being. However, at the beginning of the story, Bowles uses the sense of smell to show the reader that a person who lives in an olfactory world may remember his subconscious. Each smell takes the Professor to a place or points in his past. Also, nature plays a significant role in reminding the Professor of his forgotten old times.

Now facing the flaming sky in the west and now facing the sharp mountains, the car (bus) followed the dusty trail down the canyons into the air which began to smell of other things besides the endless ozone of the heights: orange blossoms, pepper, sunbaked excrement, burning olive oil, rotten fruit. He closed his eyes happily and lived for an instant in a purely olfactory world. The distant past returned---what part of it, he could not decide (Bowles,1998:1).

In fact, the Professor was ready to travel into another world. He was just not courageous enough to prove his existence to his culture. That is why he experienced the smug façade of humanity and life.

3. CONCLUSION

The September sunset symbolizes the end of life and the beginning of a new life in a conscious and unconscious manner. The story starts with the image of a sunset and ends with one as well. Both imply that the Professor’s life (first his intellectual unconscious life, second his primitive conscious life) is about to end. Although the story seems to have an Orientalist view towards Morocco, it only aims at revealing a culture’s good and ugly sides and what Being and non-Being are. For Tharaud, ‘Being’ means a state in which an individual’s perception is not unduly blocked, perverted, or denied through the cultural conditioning provided by institutions such as family, school, government, religion, and so forth. Conversely, ‘non-Being’ means a state in which an individual’s perception is blocked or perverted by cultural conditioning, which would be ‘normal’ for most individuals (Tharaud,2009:96). The Professor, who uses his intellectualism to protect his fallacious Being from the brutal face of life, becomes a victim of his own escape. He uses his career to stay safe in his culture by avoiding gaining a real self, in the end, in the name of searching for a new dialect; life gives him a harsh experience to obtain his own Being. This war between existing or disappearing is similar to Sartre’s existential view. As Tharaud points out,

The conclusion of ‘A Distant Episode’ has some of the characteristics of Sartre’s formulated existential view that life is bleak and absurd as well as terrifying, but in the general sense in which we have been using the term ‘existential,’ the significance is that the Professor has been ‘dispossessed of [the] parasitic pseudo-consciousness that lurk in the unguarded recesses of [his] mind (Tharaud,2009:103).

Emerson uses positive language about nature and its symbolism in his writing, while Bowles, on the other hand, uses negative and forceful language. Combining the approaches of these two writers towards nature and Being, both sides of the coin can easily be seen. From an existentialist perspective, life is like the Taoist *yin yang* – that is, there are darkness and light that refer to a human’s transitions in life. In “A Distant Episode”, like in Sartre’s “No Exit”, there is no ultimate happy ending in real life. Either you choose to understand your life and who you are, or you dance and jump for someone else to entertain them.

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