

# Journey to the Loss and Fixation of Western Identity in Bernardo Bertolucci's Movie Adaptation of *Sheltering Sky*

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**Abstract**—Bertolucci in his film adaptation of *Sheltering Sky* portrays Kit, Port, and Tunner who make a journey to Morocco to escape dehumanizing ambience of post war America. In this movie, Port and Kit's identities undergo drastic change while the Tunner does not. As a professional writer and the devotee of travel himself, Port immerses himself in traditional Oriental space and gradually melts in it, and his death is the culmination of this process. His wife, Kit who is initially unable to understand the depth of his relation the Orient, later succumbs to it, and this finds its full expression in her love of the young Belquassim, her psychosis, and her final decline of returning to American Embassy. By contrast, Tunner's identity remains unchanged because his main object of travel has been winning Kit's heart rather than seeking philosophical solutions for his soul in the traversed world. Accordingly the current article argues that travel is interconnected to the concept of identity, depending on the characters' participation and response to the source culture and its environment. Thus, Port and Kit's identities experience metamorphosis albeit violently for their receptiveness and deep involvement with the alien culture while Tunner's disengagement and obsession to retrieve Kit from the Orient does not lead to his identity transition.

**Index Terms**—identity, travel, orient, culture, and receptiveness

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **Brief History of Travel and Travel in The Sheltering Sky**

Carol Thompson (2011) in his book, *Travel Writing*, defines travel as “as the negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in the space” (as cited in Gholi, 2015, p.183). There has been two different reaction to travel; some condemned it, while some others praised it,

Thomas Nugent lauds it for its power to enrich the mind with knowledge, to rectify the judgment, to remove the prejudices of education, [and] to compose the outward manners... Conversely in stark contrast, Pascal views it as the main cause of all mankind's misfortune (as cited in Gholi, 2016, p.86).

As a multi-cultural practice, travel has been viewed from variety of perspectives (ibid0. In the Middle Ages, Christian priests looked at travel as God's punishment on humans for their abuse of their eyes (Gholi. et al, 2015). Rejecting the religious understanding of travel, humanists assumed that the main motive for humans to travel rested in curiosity (ibid.). Unlike humanists, Freud interpreted it as an act of defiance on the part of the son against his father's authority (Ibid.). In each period, one of form of travel was common. In the medieval times, traveling to holy places were common and popular (Korte, 2000). In fact, “in their holy destinations, pilgrims cherished the hope of miraculous cures, the remission of their sins, and the satisfaction of their wanderlust” Gholi, 2016, p.86). In sharp contrast, in the Renaissance era when the West began colonialism, traveling to the New World became paramount (Abrams, 2009; Gholi, 2016). In fact, “European explorers were hopeful to find there the fabled Earthly paradise containing a cure for all diseases [and] rivers filled with gold and the Fountain of Youth” (Gholi, 2016, p.87). In the eighteenth century, Grand Tour took on importance; this type of the travel was the privilege of rich people' children which was executed for enriching their cultural understanding by attending not only cultural and historical sites Italy but also museums and galleries in other European countries (Gholi, 2016). In the Romantic period, the scenic tourism became trendy and its object was the aesthetic perception of natural world (ibid.). In the Victorian era, package tour emerged as new and popular form of travel due to technological advances. In the twentieth century, democratized and globalized form of travel emerged on the strength of motorcar and airplane technologies (ibid.). With regard to the reason of travel in *The Sheltering Sky*, one should seek an answer for it in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* in which he believes that “our civilization is largely responsible for ... misery, and that we should be much happier if we give it up and returned

to primitive conditions” (cited in Pinsker, 1985, p.5). Accordingly, to flee from the psychological and social maladies which is everyday reality in the post-war West, Port plans his travel to Sahara desert, an Oriental primitive place (ibid.) where, he thinks, can shelter him and his wife from Western civilization (ibid.). To show this discontent, the director at the beginning of the movie through short and hazy scenes of large number of pieces of paper descending from tall buildings or people engaged in consumerism, briefly illuminates the unhappy state of Americans; however, when the American ship reaches into Tangier, by using Koran recitation as background music in which the word *‘Moflehoon’* which in Arabic means *‘the redeemed’*, the director attempts to convey the redemption American passengers in particular Port and Kit are hopeful to attain in a zone free from Western materialism.

## II. METHODOLOGY

According to Caponi, *The Sheltering Sky* “is a travel book about an inner journey through states of consciousness” (cited in Mossner, 2013, p.220), and travelogues are placed “in the domain of the literature of contact zone” (Sedighi & Atashi, 2014, p.4) in which the encounter between ‘self’ (the Western travelers: Port, Kit, and Tunner) with ‘Other’ (Morocco, Sahara Desert) is inevitable, and this encounter can lead either to strengthen their former Western identity of them or metamorphose it into new one. Syed Islam (1996) in his book *The Ethics of Travel* calls the former travelers as ‘sedentary’ or ‘commercial’ (p.56), and he believes that they despite moving in time and space do not travel because they are “bound by pre-set goals, [thus] they never leave the point of departure: they move folded in folded inside” (ibid.). But the latter travelers are cosmopolitan since their attitudes are flexible, appreciative, and receptive towards their travelees, their culture, and traversed lands. In addition to that, they are sometimes not satisfied merely by adopting a positive outlook towards the alien culture, and as a result they make deliberate effort to go beyond their well-protected and strongly-constructed identities to slough their Western identity off and adopt new ones. In the movie under scrutiny, travel and identity is interlaced due to the fact that in *The Sheltering Sky* characters move “away from physically from civilization, usually into the North African desert...who fight for some new identity” (Whitfield, 2011, p.278). It is safe to maintain that the metamorphosis of identity does not take place promptly, instead it takes place gradually and in contact with the ‘Other’ including travelees and their places,

Things and places are active agents of identity rather than pale reflections of pre-existing ideas and sociopolitical relations. Having real material and ideological effects on persons and social relations, things and places can then be regarded as much subjects as objects of identity. It is through a detailed examination of the effects that landscapes and places have on the way we think and the way we act that we may come to better reflect on how we understand ourselves and how we relate to others (cited in Mossner, 2013, p.223).

In this regard, the current article argues that Port Moresby and his wife, Kit undergo drastic identity thanks to their strong desire to escape their Western shells and merge into Oriental culture and its natural environment: Sahara desert, while their traveling companion Tunner like a sedentary traveler firmly sticks to his Western identity and unlike the couple he goes back to America, and at the end of the movie, he visits North Africa once more only to find and bring back Kit, his sole object of voyage.

## III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### Port

In *The Sheltering Sky*, Port demonstrates his predilection for full experience of his traveled region, its culture, and its people in its real context and this explains why he labels himself as traveler rather than a mere tourist since the tourist,

Represents the very worst aspects of modern travel and, indeed, of modernity generally. He or she is assumed to practice a lazy, timid, and superficial version of travel, in which everything is safely pre-arranged by the supervisory apparatus of the tourism industry. A genuine encounter with an alien culture or environment is thus replaced by a commodified, staged and inauthentic simulacrum of such encounters, with the result that tourists do not gain any significant insight into either the Other or themselves. And whilst tourism is generally assumed in this way to be an intrinsically pointless form of travel, it is also usually presented as being far from harmless” (Thompson, 2011, pp 122-123).

As a traveler, he does not like to just stay in the hotel, be a mere consumer, and lose the opportunities of seeing his destination by himself without any mediation. Thus, it is he who always in the movie plans their trips to the different cities in his Oriental destination, and throughout these journeys, he gradually abandons his Western identity and gains a new one; one can observe the effects of the new identity in sex, food, music, and the loss of his passport.

At the beginning of the film, it is obvious that Port cannot sexually connect with his wife who is yearning for orgasmic gratification as well as psychological warmth through life-giving power of sex. Instead, he prefers to satisfy her carnal urges by sleeping with prostitutes living in poor section of his traveled destination. Their cold relationship belies their loveless and arid marriage which is emblematic of psychological and social malaise which is byproduct of Western post-war civilization. Nonetheless, when they retreat into true Oriental natural world (Sahara desert) and make love far from hotels, which are Western cultural signs, they attain genuine, healthy, long-lost, romantic pleasures of sex which is not unlike sexual nirvana in their life. This life-giving affair is the direct and positive effect of warm Oriental Nature on them; and the following extract from the movie/novel copiously shed light on it,

“As they approached [the ridge], already they could see the endless flat desert beyond, broken here and there by sharp crests of rock that rose above the surface like the dorsal fins of so many monstrous fish, all moving in the same direction...The sun was at the flat horizon; the air was suffused with redness ... Kit took Port’s hand. They climbed in silence, *happy to be together*” (cited in Mossner, 2013, pp. 96-97).

This new happiness enables Kit to love Port more, and she proves it through looking after and nursing him when she suffered from a high fever. In addition to that, this new intimacy is indicative of Port’s movement towards his new identity.

In addition to erotic intimacy, food is influential in Port’s new identity. As one of important cultural signs, food has received sufficient critical attention from travel writing scholars. For example, Kostova (2003) assumes that “food plays a major role in/within identity formation as a vehicle for (self-) definition along the lines of gender, class, place, history/memory, ethnicity and/or nationality” (cited in Gholi & Ahmadi, 2015, p.187). Similarly Anderson (2005) notes that “food marks social class, ethnicity, and so. Food transactions define families, networks, friendship groups, religious, and virtually every other socially institutionalized group” (p.125). The movie director like the novelist, highlights two different reactions towards Oriental food in a very simple hotel. In the scene, when Port, Kit, and Tunner were eating their soup, Tunner suddenly stopped eating it and looked at it and exclaimed that “They’ve weevils [beetles]. They must have been in the noodles” (Bowles, 1949, p.75). In stark contrast to Tunner, Port and Kit did not care and keep on eating their soup and chatting. Tunner’s attitude towards Oriental food is commensurate with the nineteenth century travel writers and travelers. They linked the food of the Oriental Other with dirt and disgust and they rejected it wholly (Gholi & Ahmadi, 2015, p.187), and thus Tunner’s response foregrounds his Western identity and reveals the inflexibility of his identity, whereas Port’s receptiveness towards the Oriental food is the harbinger of his new identity and taking distance with his Western one which he is critical of it.

Furthermore, one cannot ignore the significance of music in transforming Port’s identity in the movie. Music is unalienable part of every culture, and like food, music is important in defining and demarcating cultures because every culture has its own distinctive music which reflects its dreams, joy, pains, and aspirations, and history. In *The Sheltering Sky* the role of music is salient and the director utilized indigenous music to express an Oriental atmosphere; nonetheless views towards Oriental music differ. Port and Kit are case in the point. When Kit and Port reach El Gaa, Port became desperately sick, and thus Kit left him in a stable. Then she with young Arab looked for a hotel, but much to her frustration, the only hotel in the town was closed due to contagious meningitis. When she came back, she saw Port lying on the floor while native Arab women and men surrounded him and one of them playing is flute and the other beating his drum. One can safely conjecture that Port himself hired them to alleviate the pain of his typhoid. When Kit found her husband among the native clapping and moving his hands slowly like dancer, was shocked and screamed and asked the drummer and the flutist to stop their music, whereas Port wanted them to resume their music and started clapping with the other audience as if Kit’s presence was not important for him. In this part film, one can realize that Kit is operating on the basis of her Western cultural baggage or her Western lens and strongly dismisses Oriental music and refutes its positive power on her husband. She regards it as harsh sound which may have pernicious effect on her husband’s health or worsens it. Conversely, Port delights in the music and orders the musicians to keep on. Given Port’s reaction, one can assume that Oriental music imports him pleasure, peace, and healing, but his wife fails to understand it. Therefore, his predilection for Oriental music in his critical moment of his life alludes to the fact that he is getting out of his Western identity and taking new one.

Port’s loss of passport is another noteworthy incident in *The Sheltering Sky* which related to his change of identity. In a superficial glance, it may seem that it is not an important occurrence, in a deeper level; however, it is a symbolic act. According encyclopedia of Encarta, a passport is, “[A] document of nationality and identity usually granted only to a person who is a national of the issuing country for identification and protection when traveling abroad. It is also a formal permit authorizing the holder to leave and return to the nation of which he or she is a subject”. The loss of his passport symbolizes the demise of his Western identity. Similarly, according to Mossner (2013) Port without his American passport “is no longer able to construct himself separate from the North African world” (p.229). In addition, it is not a mere coincidence that after the loss of his passport, Port’s illness gets worse and dies in his death. In fact, his disease and death symbolically fortifies the loss of his identity and ironically it is the manifestation of his new identity.

### **Kit**

At the outset of the movie, it is not difficult to perceive that Kit is attached to her Western culture baggage and looks at her Oriental territory on the basis of it. Additionally, for her, Port’s desire for the authentic experience of Orient is difficult to digest, and this is the reason why she “feels entrapped and endangered in the vastness of the desert, regardless of the fact that there are not actually any walls or other material boundaries that keep her in a certain place” (Mossner, 2013, p. 228) . In addition to that, in the film she is always busy with managing and arranging luggage and bags packed with Western goods. This act bespeaks her obsession with their baggage and indicates that she is still clinging to her Western identity and the opportunity for her cultural metamorphosis has not arisen. Nonetheless, her chance for the identity change emerged after her husband’s death. Port’s death left her with two possible options. The first alternative was going back to American embassy and travels to her America, and the second one was continuing Port’s path: embracing the Orient and its identity. She chooses the second one, “she kicked off her sandals and stood naked in shadows. She felt a strange intensity being born within her” (p.230). By joining an Arab caravan in the outskirts

of Sahara and sitting with Belquassim in the white camel, “she stops being an American and becomes something else [a non-Westerner]” (p.231). Ironically, Kit amid barren Sahara finds the fertility of her soul after her husband’s demise with accepting Belquassim’s romantic initiation and sporting love with him. The director externalizes her blissful moments with a beautiful background Arabic song and music when in the sky the crescent moon is shining. The romantic liaison does not end in Sahara because her Oriental lover takes her to his house when their caravan reaches to their journey destination. He disguises her as a man, and she becomes his secret beloved/partner. On the surface, it may be hastily interpreted that Belquassim is treating her as his sexual slave despite her wishes, but beneath the surface it is not difficult to read her happiness in particular when with scissors she cuts her diary symbolizing Western background owing to finding orgasmic joy with Belquassim far from the eyes of his jealous wives. Mossner notes that the main reason for Kit’s escape from Belquassim’s house was his wives because she was not unhappy there (ibid.). The final stage of Kit’s loss of Western identity took place when she lost her sanity due to the harassment she got from some people in the street of Oran. Finally, a female official from the American embassy found her and hospitalized. The official with Tunner’s assistance did their best to bring back Kit to the fold of Western/ American civilization to no avail. In fact, they were unaware that Kit was no longer an American, but an American in appearance, Oriental in soul and this explains why she escaped from them and chose an Oriental path for her life.

#### **Tunner**

Unlike Port and Kit, Tunner is a sedentary traveler and he perceives his surrounding from his Western cultural lens, and he is Port’s foil. In contrast to Port, he is insensitive towards to Oriental natural world like Sahara desert and its culture. In addition, he does not find anything stimulating and worthwhile to explore in his traversed area. His negative attitude towards Oriental food and people along with his obsession with champagnes illustrate the point. In opposite to the couple, what Tunner finds in Sahara is only endless tortures for his soul. The only thing which he craves for there is wresting Kit from Port’s grasp and starting a romantic relationship with her, believing that Port has failed in gratifying the sexual urges of Kit especially when he at the beginning of film discovers that Kit sleeps by herself. In fact, he is caught in a love triangle and thus, winning her heart is the only reason he is accompanying the couple and going through the hardship of venturous trip. He tries every possible means at his disposal to reach his objective, but he fails because Kit is reluctant to remain American, and keen to explore new experiences and forgo her former identity. The director at the end of movie portrays Tunner’s last desperate attempt to extricate Kit from her newly found identity and brings back to his cold and soulless American civilization but all proved useless because Kit without informing him and an American embassy official flees into unknown destiny. On the first glance it may seem that Tunner is acting in humanistic way, but in reality, he is behaving egotistically and does not esteem Kit’s right to be free and choose her own way. As a traveler, Tunner remains in his cocoon of American identity from the beginning to end and he does not experience any drastic change in his identity, and his final alliance with American embassy official illustrates the point.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*The Sheltering Sky* dramatizes the life of an American couple and their family friend in the contact zone of Tangier during the post war hoping to find warmth, authentic experience, and healing to their broken conjugal relationship in the case of Port and Kit. Travel and identity is intermingled resting on travelers’ willingness to be receptive towards their travelers’ culture and natural world. In the movie, Port and Kit undergo identity transformation thanks to their openness to the Orient, its culture, and its natural world, but Tunner’s identity remains without any change due to operating on the basis of his Western cultural baggage. As receptive and appreciative traveler, he takes pride on not being an insensitive tourist. He demonstrates through his gradual identity change when he accepts Oriental music as his possible cure for his typhoid despite strong protest of protest of his wife, along with eating Algerian food without dismissing it as dirty and unhealthy like Tunner, as well as through the loss of his passport which is metaphor for his Western identity. In fact, the loss of his passport brings about the culmination of his identity metamorphosis. Given Kit, initially Kit was indifferent to the Oriental culture and natural setting. For her Port’s attraction to the Orient was absurd, but when he dies, she also like her husband experiences an identity change which finds flesh is her love affair with an Oriental man and in her rejection of American embassy official and Tunner’s request to return to America/her Western identity. With regard to Tunner, he, to borrow Syed Islam’s term, is a sedentary travel whose identity does not undergo any transformation since his goal of travel was not Orient per se but conquering Kit from the beginning of the film until the end.

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