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# An Entropic Image of Islam in Paul Bowles' "The Fqih": A Semio-Pragmatic Approach

**Mahdia Abarchah**

Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Laboratory CREDIF, Fes, Morocco

**Email address:**

koudaoud1ma@yahoo.fr

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**Abstract:** The study borrows the term "entropy" from physics—the second law of thermodynamics—to refer to the development of a chaotic concept of Islam in Paul Bowles' short stories, particularly, "The Fqih". To analyze the text and dig out this conceptual entropy, the paper will draw on two analytical strategies: Ferdinand de Saussure's semiological approach, namely, the study of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels of the text in order to trace the meaning and the value of the word *Fqih* both in its cultural context and through its dynamic function along the narrative. Second, the analysis will apply some elements of "Speech Acts" theory, founded by J. L. Austin, and John Searle, basically, the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, so as to clarify how *the Fqih's* words contribute to the development of the main incidents in the story. Moreover, the story itself will be treated as a discourse addressing the readers. The course of the article, then, tends to be a process of applying both structural and discursive tools, underlining their functions and interaction within and without the short story. The focal point behind these procedures is to discuss the following questions: How was a chaotic image of Islam elaborated within the texture of the short story, "The Fqih"? What could be the source of such entropic construct? and what would be the impact of this textual phenomenon on both Moroccan and Western readers? Answering these questions aims at unveiling analytically how cultural differences could contribute to structuring an entropic image of Islam via literary narratives. The final question, then, is how to put constraints on the flow of such misinterpretation of Islam?

**Keywords:** Entropy, *Fqih*, Islam, Semiology, Speech Acts, Constraints

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## 1. Introduction

Etymologically, the word entropy has a Greek origin to mean "transformation": the prefix "en" means "in" or "into" and "trópos" – "a turn" or "a transformation." [1] It has become well-known after its use in scientific research, particularly thermodynamics, to denote the measurement of chaos within a specific system. [2]. Henceforth, the term has moved from science to cultural and literary criticism to describe cases of social unrest. Among the most prominent scholars who used this term in semiotic studies are Yuri Lotman, and Kobus Marais.

In this paper, however, I shall use entropy metaphorically to describe a conceptual phenomenon. The basic similarity between a scientific entropy and conceptual entropy is that entropy in physics occurs within a closed system; likewise, conceptual entropy may develop within the framework of a literary text. However, unlike physical entropy, which is

demonstrated by mathematics, conceptual entropy is justified mainly via deductive and inductive analysis. On this basis, the phrase, "an entropic image of Islam" refers to a chaotic concept of Islam underlying certain Western literary texts. In order to shed light on the cause and effect of this misconception of Islam and open the way towards re-thinking this problematic phenomenon with an objective eye, I shall study the structure and content of the short story, "The Fqih", using basically Semiology and Speech Acts Theory as a twofold analytical methodology.

## 2. Analysis of "The Fqih"

### 2.1. A Semiological Analysis

From a semiological approach, the first thing that could catch one's attention in the story is the word "*fqih*", which is not translated into English, that is, the signifier (sound-pattern)

and the signified (the mental image) as well as their interaction draw on the system of the Arabic *langue*. Accordingly, and based on the paradigmatic axis, other words associated with the term *fqih* could be evoked such as *Al Hakim* (the wise man), *Al khabeer* (the expert in Islam), *Al Aarif* (the Knower of Islam), *Al Aleem* (the Muslim Scholar), and other synonyms. Being connected to such vocabulary orbiting around Islam, its beliefs and the application of its legislation, etiquette and ethics, the word *Fqih* acquires the value of holiness. However, as de Saussure insists, such associative relationship is an activity outside the text, that is, the act of referring to these words which are synonymous to *fqih* is purely a mental activity:

"It is a connection in the brain. Such connections are part of that accumulated store which is the form the language takes in an individual's brain. We shall call these *associative relations*. They hold between terms constituting a mnemonic group" [3].

Here the following question is apt to be asked: Having got the value of holiness through the paradigmatic axis, would the word *fqih* keep such conceptual status along its syntagmatic function?

To answer this question, it is necessary to analyze the narrative line of the text; in other words, to trace the interaction of *the Fqih* with the most important constituents of the story such as characters, time, place, themes, dialogues and other literary and rhetorical devices that weave the texture of the story.

Apparently, *the Fqih* acted as a responsible person, spending most of his time "sitting in the shade under the fig tree in the courtyard of the mosque," where he could receive people who seek his advice before "he began to teach the pupils at the msid". [4]. This implies that he is a Muslim scholar, and thus all his attitudes and deeds must be derived from Islamic teachings. But this revered image of *the Fqih* would soon be deconstructed as it would be clear in the course of events.

The first motivating incident in the story was a dog bite: While a young man, named Muhammad, was standing on the main road, a dog stopped running and bit his leg.

As soon as the villagers saw the incident, though the injured man did not bother at all, they quickly called his brother, warning him to take Muhammad to the village doctor; yet the brother preferred to consult *the Fqih* instead. Being entrusted with the task of a doctor, the personality *the Fqih* turned problematic. This would be clear if one notices how the man reacted in that situation. As soon as he heard what had happened and without even seeing the condition of the young man, *the Fqih*, addressing the brother in a stern tone, said:

"That's very bad, have you got a stable you can lock him into? Put him there, but tie his hands behind him. No one must go near him, you understand?" [4].

It sounds that *the Fqih* took it for granted that Muhammad caught rabies. But, why didn't he advise the brother to take him to the village doctor to diagnose his condition? Is it plausible that an injured person would be imprisoned in an animal corral? These questions do not call for an answer, but

rather hint to the ironic situation in which a Muslim scholar was put.

## 2.2. *Speech Acts Analysis*

To further illustrate the impact of *the Fqih's* words on the characters, it is necessary to apply some analytical tools, namely, "speech acts" as founded by John Langshaw Austin, [5], and developed by John Searle. [6]. From this technical approach, it becomes clear that *the Fqih's* answer was characterized basically by three acts; first, his words, being uttered clearly and meaningfully, are "Locutionary Acts". At the same time, they function as "Illocutionary Acts, for the utterances include imperative verbs such as "put him there, tie his hands." These commands are, then, the driving force affecting the whole course of the story; that is to say, they perform "perlocutionary acts". Consequently, as soon as *the Fqih* finished his talk, and with no sign of hesitation, or questioning, the boy returned home to carry out the instructions. In order to manage successfully the duty assigned to him, he stroke Mohammad's head with a hammer. With this behavior, irony becomes explicitly weaving its threads within the structure of the text, ridiculing the stupidity and randomness of *the Fqih's* orders as well as the brother's blind obedience.

Moreover, these acts had a psychological impact on the mother, who as soon as she saw her son in that miserable state, that is, handcuffed in the animals' corral, burst into a hysterical anger; however, she, in turn, did not allow herself to release the young man without consulting *the Fqih*. After all, surmounting the trouble of a long trip, she finally managed to reach his place. When the man saw the mother, he consoled her, saying:

--"It was Allah's will that your son should die as he did"

The mother cried out:

--"But he's not dead! And he shouldn't stay in there any longer." [4].

Stunned, he replies:

--"But let him out! Let him out! Allah has been merciful." [4].

In this context, the triviality of *the Fqih* reached its peak; the act of condolences is a sign of his indifference and irresponsibility: It implies that he was expecting the young man to die. This sense of cruelty fueled the mother's anger that she immediately shouted at him and insisted that her son should be removed from the stable. One could also notice how *the Fqih* was so astonished by her bold reaction and how he straightaway retracted his previous instructions: "Let him out!" This quick turn in his decisions unveiled his paradoxical personality. This can be clearer if we view the story from the paradigm of the "Actantial Model" whose function, as suggested by A. J. Greimas, is to illustrate different relationships between actants (such as characters and their roles) in a narrative." [7].

*The Fqih*, as an actant, performs contradictory roles; for instance, he is both the "helper" and "opponent". He is supposed to rescue Mohammad as he was taken to be the sage man in the village that could help the young man with his wisdom and

religious experience. But these expectations were in vain as *the Fqih*'s instructions harmed not only the victim but the family as a whole, causing a sequence of chaos, beginning with the separation of the elder brother from the family while being imprisoned for a period of time in the animal corral, a fact which resulted in the mother's strenuous and random movements from place to place in search of *the Fqih*, and finally the brother's escape from the village to Casablanca for fear that Mohammad would take vengeance or could even bite him. This entropy, within the family frame is indeed the outcome and embodiment of *the Fqih*'s entropic thinking. Therefore, the horizontal movement of the text gradually deconstructs the concept of holiness associated via the "associative relations". In fact, this chaotic image of *the Fqih* is just a sample of similar images associated with other characters representing Islam in many of Paul Bowles' stories, such as *Al Imam*, (prayer leader), who acted angrily and violently in "The Garden", and *El Wali*, (Muslim Saint), who pretended to be endowed with spiritual powers in "The Waters of Izli"

### 3. The Story as a Discourse

In order to expand the scope of this study as well as the problematics raised through a conceptual entropy of Islam, we shall move from tracing the role of speech acts within the structure of the text to their role outside the text. The basic question that can be asked in this respect is what impact this conceptual entropy of Islam could have on readers?

In fact, the answer to the question remains relative, because the extent to which a literary discourse affects its readers varies from one recipient to another. Therefore, we shall focus only on two models of readers: the Moroccan and the Western receivers:

#### 3.1. The Moroccan Reader

According to the Moroccan reader, the text may be taken as a comic irony, for he/she could be aware that the personality of *the fqih* in the story is not that of a Muslim Scholar but of a *fake Fqih* or *charlatan*. This interpretation is based on Moroccan oral tradition such as folktales, proverbs and jokes in which the word *fqih*, most of the time, refers to a fake fqih, a charlatan who claims to have spiritual powers. The idea of a fake *fqih* could be deduced from the text if we analyze its basic binary oppositions as schematized in the following Semiotic Square:

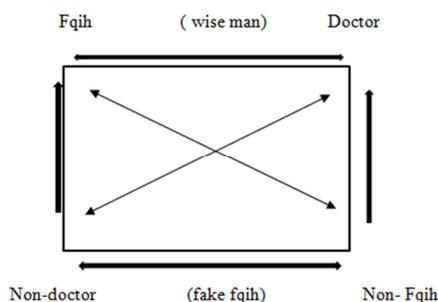


Figure 1. Semiotic square.

The first binary opposition that the square derives from the text is *fqih* versus doctor. While the former is associated with religion, the latter is connected with science. However, the text presents *the fqih* as a person who exceeded his religious role to play the role of a doctor, when he was asked to help a young man bitten by a dog. Based on this event, the horizontal and surface arrow of the square could move from the angle of *fqih* to that of the doctor. Yet, this movement remains relative, because the man's expectations and suggestions concerning the young man were indeed neither medical nor religious, a fact which could drive the arrows of contradictions from *fqih* to non-*fqih* and from doctor to non-doctor. At this deep level of the square—where the tension between the opposites (the non-doctor / the non-*fqih*) could be activated—we could deduce the idea of the fake *fqih*. Yet, would the Western reader be aware of these shifts and interpretations?

#### 3.2. The Western Reader

The Western reader who does not know Arabic relies on the English text to unfold the significance of the word *fqih*. The story, as we have seen, presented the man as a Muslim scholar, yet who proves to be irrational, irresponsible, and indifferent. In fact, a religious man, appearing with such negative qualities, implicitly and ironically, associates his characteristics with the image of Islam. Moreover, *the Fqih* usually ends his unreasonable speech saying: "It is the will of God." Worse still, the Western reader may even take this chaotic image as a factor that props up the negative image of Islam raised by certain ideologies; the chaotic image of Islam in the text becomes then an extension of the conceptual entropy of Islam raised by some Western ideologies. This referential web that relates the connotation derived from the text to the ideas stored in one's memory exemplifies what Umberto Eco calls "unlimited semiosis." [8].

Here, one may wonder: Why did Bowles, a writer who had spent fifty-two years in Morocco, imaginatively builds up such a conceptual entropy of Islam?

Indeed, though Paul Bowles moved from America to Morocco, he was not detached from his culture as his language is the reservoir that could have embraced the thoughts and attitudes of the Western society in which he grew up, and however long he had been living in Morocco, he could not have absorbed the entire pattern of Arabo-Muslim culture; there must remain a liminal space that separates the two cultures. It is true that he himself had collected and translated Moroccan oral narratives as confirmed by many researchers:

"In the 1960s Bowles began translating and collecting stories from the oral tradition of native Moroccan storytellers. His most noteworthy collaborators included Mohammed Mrabet, Driss Ben Hamed Charhadi (Larbi Layachi), Mohammed Choukri, Abdeslam Boulaich, and Ahmed Yacoubi." [9]

Moreover, He collected the material of his writing mainly from one category of Moroccan people: the illiterate as John Maier confirms:

"Bowles, who has never claimed to have mastered Modern Standard Arabic, the dialect used for writing throughout

the Arab world, deliberately sought out nonliteral storytellers." [10]

Listening attentively to such narratives, he could have heard some negative comments on *the fqih*. Yet he couldn't be aware that those remarks most of the time refer to a fake *fqih* and his mischiefs. In this context, I must refer to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept: "language game", a term used to compare language to a game. The similarities between them are as follows; the game includes rules and traditions just like language, and language is made up of words just as a game consists of parts and colors. This means that Paul Bowles entered Morocco with a mind programmed with rules of a linguistic game: American language, whose culture and structure are different from those that constitute the Moroccan-Arabic *langue*. On this line of argument, Iabdounane Yassine and Lassri Sara confirm that "Bowles description of Moroccans actually represents the Americans more than it does the Moroccans." [11] There may be some similarities between the two games, which Wittgenstein names as "family resemblances." [12]. Yet they remain like the similarity of the members of a family; there are still points of difference at which the norms of the two cultures may overlap and lead to meaning slippage. To illustrate this idea, I will refer to two words in a story entitled "*Mejdoub*" (a Sophist while being uplifted in trance). In this story, Paul Bowles used the word "madman" as a synonym to *Mejdoub*, which indicates that he could not understand the abnormal state of a *Mejdoub*, and thus interpreted the man's actions from the perspective of a psychological game and not from the perspective of a Sufism game; consequently, he failed to grasp his mystical dimension and the depth of his transcendental experience, and was, therefore, satisfied with the significance of the madman that he deduced from the person's movements, clothing and sayings. This confirms that a plausible interpretation of the verbal and non-verbal signs should not be derived just from their manifestations, but from their programmed functions within a particular culture. Illustrating Wittgenstein's approach, Searles confirms that the power of words lies in their connotation within a linguistic game rather than outside it (1987). [13]. Said Bengrad, too, asserts that we cannot talk of a semiotic behavior unless we look at the act beyond its outward manifestation, as it is structured within a cultural code. [14].

#### 4. Towards Deconstructing the Entropic Image of Islam

The second law of thermodynamics states that entropy within a given system follows the arrow of time; it would not regress, [15]. The same with a literary text, we cannot change its denotative meaning. However, since meaning, as Saussure's approach shows, is arbitrary and thus relies on a mental activity, the act of criticism, too, lies in the reader's mind. Since the writer (Bowles) and the subject of writing (*Fqih*) belong to two different cultures, as shown in our study, the themes and concepts derived from the text must be viewed

with a suspicious eye. Didn't Descartes take doubt a starting point to prove existence? Didn't Husserl insist on the idea of "bracketing" (époque) to realize the essence of a phenomenon? So, any negative idea of Islam floating on the surface of a literary work should be re-considered with objective critical approaches, which will enable the recipient to dig into the deep structure of the text, namely, the backgrounds or misinterpretations of Islamic culture, that gave rise to an entropic concept of Islam.

#### 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the word *fqih*, around which most of the discussion revolves, is the point of intersection of two linguistic activities: the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic movements; on the one hand, it is the word that acquires the value of holiness due to its connection to words outside the text and governed by the Arabic *langue*. On the other hand, through its linear activity, the value of *the Fqih* shifted from the notion of holiness to chaotic concepts such as irrationality, irresponsibility and indifference. A Moroccan recipient could take these negative concepts as a comic irony similar to that which he may have derived from his/her oral tradition where *the fqih* most of the time refers not to a Muslim Scholar but to a fake *fqih* who pretends to be endowed with Islamic baraka or holiness in order to deceive emotionally and materially the villagers. Yet, the Western reader who is not acquainted with Moroccan oral tradition nor with the idea of a fake *fqih*, risks to regard "Fqih" in the story, including his thoughts and decisions, as a representative image or a model of Islamic teachings. Worse still, such misinterpretation is apt to be an extension of the conceptual entropy of Islam that has been raised by some ideological trends. To put limits and boundaries to this chaotic flow, it is crucially important to re-examine such conceptual entropies. That is to doubt or bracket these biased interpretations and re-think the concept of Islam via objective approaches and studies.

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