

# Re-Routing Roots: Narrative Trauma of Exile in the Works of Orhan Pamuk

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## Abstract

Orhan Pamuk, one of Turkey's most read and well-known writer has written on various issues such as marginalization, cultural insularity, social differences, racism, ethnicity etc. This type of writing deals with the issues of a fluid community that is neither at home nor outside. The present paper explores diasporic subjectivity, figures of exile, immigrant traumas and displacement in his fiction *My Name is Red*. The paper investigates the issue of identity and marginalization by the new inventive ways of the west. The paper takes into account the diasporic variations of Turkey and Islam's struggle to fit into the new modes of perceiving. The artists in *My Name is Red* are always under threat to be forgotten in this world of changing scenario. They are lamenting the gradual loss of their identity because of the foreign influences brought by Chinese and Mongols on their traditional art of portraiture. They accurately bring to the fore the problem faced by

people who have to follow double standards of living.

## Keywords:

Exile; Displacement; Immigrants; Postmodernism

## I. Introduction

Orhan Pamuk is one of the few internationally recognized authors in the field of Turkish letters. His fiction explores the trauma of exile, and discusses how the experience of displacement complicates the definition of 'home'. The unique position of Turkey, located on the geographical and cultural border between Europe and Asia, provides the context for Pamuk's fictions, which draw from both Eastern and Western cultural and religious traditions and thus portray the crisis felt by the masses at large who oscillate between the new and the old. He takes the case of Turkish diaspora that has had a long rich bygone past and elaborates the conflict faced by masses who

keep on searching for their identity. His novels are often viewed as lyrical allegories that portray a modern Turkey caught between the push to become a secular, Westernized state and the pull of fundamentalist Islamic movements striving to maintain traditional Turkish culture.

Pamuk is a post-modernist writer who achieves a synthesis in both form and content by addressing different issues as east-west problem, the identity issue, the malaise with westernization in Turkey, his conscientious approach to the act of writing and tries to capture the dilemma faced by the Istanbulis who are living among the ruins of the city in the hope of a westernized future. Through this mingling of east and west Pamuk brings cultural ambivalence. He talks about both sides of the problem: the eastern traditional values and the western independent thought and paves path for the people suffering from identity crisis, loneliness and displacement. He creates cultural as well as social diaspora by marrying eastern and western values. He captures these themes through post-modernist techniques. He experiments with different styles and techniques in each of his novels. He has frequently been compared to Borges and Calvino. It is certainly true that he shares Borges love of mazy intricacies,

and he also seems to be beguiled by the glamour of the distant heroic violence in the way that Borges can be. Like Calvino, he delights in multiple perspectives, as well as in the elegant manipulation of stock folktales like characters and tropes – another Calvino specialty.

## II. Review of Literature

Pamuk deals with the problem of identity crisis in his novels as he himself belongs to the city of Istanbul that has a long standing androgynous identity straddling both the Europeans and Asian continents, influences from western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia and Middle East affect Istanbul's outlook on religion, politics, economies, language and culture. It's an ancient city filled with the amenities of modern Europe and the antiquities of the long gone Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Today the minarets share the Istanbul skyline with towering skyscrapers while modern tankers tread the dark and prosaic waters of the Bosphorus, the Marmara and the Black sea– which all converge together to bisect or connect the continents of Europe and Asia. Under the leadership of Ataturk in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century came the advent of Turkish nationalists democratization, and secularization. The

alphabet was updated from an Arabic script to a new Romanesque Turkish one; similarly the Islamic religion took a backburner to secular government; and former modes of fashion were outlawed or heavily discouraged.

Pamuk metanarratively presents this bipolar conflict of Turkish nationalism and Turkish modernization. Pamuk represents both melancholia and cultural ambivalence himself, just as Istanbul is also affected by these two complex emotions. He too straddles between the Western World and Middle Eastern imagination. Pamuk often points to early novels and story collections as inspiration for his experiments with narrative structure and like Calvino and Borges is always aware of the realities of the bygone past and uses these details of life to play postmodernist games in his novels. He specifically collages using elements from illustrations from popular novels, fables and myths and through this mixture of tradition and modern creates something astonishingly new and wonderful. Like Calvino, Pamuk believes in literary experimentation as he in each and every of his novels uses different experimental forms to talk about the love of his city Istanbul.

Pamuk addresses the issues of marginalization and cultural diversity and his writing has sparked controversy in the Muslim world, where both fundamentalists and leftists have taken offence to its depiction of the Islamic religion. However, his novels continue to be best sellers in Turkey and have garnered a growing international readership. Pamuk is known for his epic, multifaceted stories in which the protagonist is often caught between two worlds. Pamuk interweaves elements from the west's pantheon of postmodern prose into his fiction while also blurring the line between realism and fantasy that is a hallmark of the greatest works of Arabic literature. "The polarities of Pamuk's books," noted the New Yorker's David Pennick (2002), "echo the basic polarities of Istanbul : the tension between East and West, the pull of an Islamic past and the lure of modern European manners and materialism."(53)

That Pamuk is a writer from a country we hardly think has much relation to Western Literature, much less to postmodernism, surely does make his work into something of curiosity, perhaps drawing more attention than might the fiction of Western writers employing the same kind of devices. As we know that instead of the

modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest. Pamuk often points to early novels and story collections as inspiration for his experiments with narrative structure so he like Calvino and Borges is always aware of the realities of the bygone past and uses these details of life to play postmodernist games in his novels. He specifically collages using elements from illustrations from popular novels, fables and myths and through this mixture of tradition and modern creates something astonishingly new and wonderful.

So each of Orhan Pamuk's seven novels contain a representation of unstable identity, marginalization, displacement and urge to be like westerners within specific Ottoman or Turkish historical context. Pamuk repeatedly returns to history as a leitmotif in his work, focusing on four major areas; Ottoman history in a European context, the transition from Ottoman Empire to modern Middle East, the early twentieth century Kemalist Cultural Revolution and the legacy of all three on present day Turkey. Within this framework his fiction reveals characters, like the author himself, who are both orientalized and nationalized

subjects with an inclination to question their identities. Such questioning and interrogation lead his protagonists to attempt to manifest other narrative sites of identification. Every Pamuk book is doubled; a major story of lament and failure is balanced by the quiet birth of a narrative of hybrid or multiperspectival authority.

### III. Discussion

In his memoir *Istanbul: Memories and The City* Orhan Pamuk categorizes Conrad, Nabokov and Naipaul as the writers known for having managed to migrate between languages, cultures, continents even civilization. To Pamuk what nourishes the creative powers of these writers is 'rootlessness'. Contrary to the above writers, Pamuk's imagination is fed by the idea of belonging to one single place namely Istanbul. The bond between Pamuk and Istanbul is indispensable, even vital to his literary needs as suggested by the writers own words, "Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am." (6) Pamuk's oeuvre is coloured with his mingling of eastern and western ideas and he captures the longing and desire for becoming westernized in a country where it is a sin to follow the western world. He has been living at one

single place namely Istanbul but he feels marginalized and forgotten by the independent cult of western empire.

Pamuk focuses on the identity crisis and the feeling of displacement felt by the Istanbulis and the pressing question facing both him and his country- how much to define themselves in terms of an Islamic past, how much in terms of a future in the European union have become the question haunting the global village as a whole. Pamuk's writing is under the influence of various binary oppositions, as is the city of Istanbul. Instead of trying to choose one over the other or aiming to combine them into a harmonious whole, Pamuk prefers to present them as they are, as the different traditions that have made him and his city what they are by bringing together his perspective as an inhabitant of the city alongside the foreign gaze of a stranger, Pamuk blurs the boundaries that separate them. In light of various oppositions that dominate the city, the aphoristic space that is created becomes the space of the creativity, allowing for an unprecedented perspective.

Pamuk elaborates that the other Orhan and his connection to the city are the very sources that have made him who he is because it is the foreign gaze of the other

Orhan that enables him to appreciate this city without trying to reduce it into a homogenous unity. Pamuk is of view that, unlike other writers who have used the lack of stable roots as the source of their writing, he has thrived on the fact that he has always lived in the city where he was born. The presence of another Orhan evoked early on in the narrative draws attention to the fact that just like the city of Istanbul with its multiple facets, there are other Orhans with different voices which appear throughout the narrative. *Istanbul : Memories and The City* is in many ways the celebration of those different Orhans. By drawing attention to the presence of another Orhan as his twin, Pamuk echoes a recurring theme of his writings that of the presence of twins and doubles who take each other's place. Pamuk uses this key motif in order to challenge different concepts that are defined within binary oppositions while questioning the definition of 'I' as a pure and singular notion. In *Istanbul: Memories and The City*. The presence of another Orhan affirms the impossibility of a fixed and defined 'I' marking the experience of Istanbul for Orhan who can never feel he belongs to the city.

Pamuk talks about his loneliness in *Istanbul: Memories and The City* that how he never felt at home in Istanbul. He

describes how he started to feel like a stranger among his friends and family during high school years. He felt like he did not belong to those circles, feeling out of place all the time. Pamuk could not be really himself among his friends, despite coming from a similar social and cultural background. He found that kind of life hypocritical and superficial, and began to look for something different from this. The state of being out of place in Istanbul cannot be explained only with the different neighbourhoods of the city as he believes that he never totally belonged to this city. In both Nisantasi, where he has lived all his life and in the other parts of the city, Pamuk feels like a stranger, not being able to feel at home. Despite having spent all his life among the same people and in the same neighbourhood, he cannot associate with them and is thus always searching for something different. Pamuk observes that it is the failure of the people who constitute his social circle to understand his confusions or desires that has motivated his journeys on the streets of Istanbul, where he hopes to find company for his sorrows and loneliness. The modern, conventional and predetermined lives of Nisantasi people are not appealing for Pamuk; being submerged into confusion and sorrow, he feels alone

among the group of people that belong to the city. The conflict between Orhan, the distant observer and the Orhan who personally experiences the city with his memories is mirrored in the city which is stuck between the east and the west without ever being able to choose one over the other. Just like the city and the people of Istanbul he, too, cannot decide whether he is part of the westernized circle that his family, school and friends belong to or the other side of the city, that which still resonates with remnants of the empire, and which allows him to be a stranger.

Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red*, a murder mystery, through the concept of art and portraiture evokes the fear of loss and melancholia at being forgotten in the vast run of western ways of seeing and painting. Pamuk himself remarks, "My book is about the sorrow and tragedy of this loss, this erasure. It is about the sorrow and pain of lost history."

Though *My Name is Red* focuses on the art of Islamic portraiture and the conflict between the old ways of representation and the new ones but the deep thought underlying this concept is again the question of east and west and the problem of identity and being marginalized by the new inventive



ways of the west. Pamuk once again takes into account the diasporic variations of Turkey and Islam's struggle to fit into the new modes of perceiving. The artists in *My Name is Red* are always under threat to be forgotten in this world of changing scenario. They are lamenting the gradual loss of their identity because of the foreign influences brought by Chinese and Mongols on their traditional art of portraiture. They accurately bring to the fore the problem faced by people who have to follow double standards of living.

*My Name is Red* takes place in Istanbul at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of Ottoman power, which was also a time when the trends that would lead to Europe's future dominance were beginning to become apparent. The Ottoman period is, for most Europeans and Americans and perhaps for most of the Turks as well is a rarely understood time, very much coloured by European perceptions of the historical context and, ironically feelings of inferiority. The Ottoman Turks were the last of the great Eastern invaders, a group including the Huns, the Arabs and the Mongols, to sweep into Europe. The background is Istanbul in 1591 – a year before the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary (by the Islamic calendar) of the Hegira, Mohammed's

migration from Mecca to Medina. Inflation is draining the Sultan's coffers and the long Ottoman decline has begun. A decadence that is fiscal and political finds its objective correlative in art, for the Sultan will commemorate the Hegira by a series of paintings which blaspheme. These illustrations, secretly commissioned from a group of miniaturists are to depict the empire as it seems to the individual eye. Frankish power has achieved the most insidious of victories. It has changed right at the top – the way a culture thinks of itself. It has coloured the wind, and therefore dislocated the truth of another world. In such atmosphere the sultan has commissioned an illustrated book to demonstrate his power to the Venetian Doge. Because it will employ controversial aspects of the Frankish style, head illustrator Osman has been bypassed and the project given to Enishte, who coordinates miniaturists nick named Elegant, Stork, Olive and Butterfly. But when Elegant suspects the orthodoxy of the final page and threatens to denounce the project to the fellowmen of the preacher Nusret Hoja, he is murdered by one of his colleagues Enishte's nephew Black, newly returned to Istanbul after twelve years absence is asked to investigate. Nothing could be more fundamental to an

understanding of Western art than the concept of style, for style is, after all, the true expression of an artist's 'point of view' and 'perspective.' The quintessentially Western idea that everyone is a unique individual with their own outlook or perhaps even 'vision' calls for a style. The illustrators Black consults, however scoff at style, calling it a defect. For them the perfect illustrator is not one who tries to express his unique vision of the world. Indeed the perfect illustrator does not even see the world but, having long ago gone blind as a result of his labors, draws it without any contaminating random input from his individuality, rendering it as it truly is 'in the memory of Allah.' Unfortunately for him however, the killer who is an illustrator himself does have a style and he is eventually unmasked through some drawings he has inadvertently left behind. And his misfortune is the misfortune of Turkey as well – all Turks now want to see the world with Western eyes, something that they will never truly master. Meanwhile the traditional culture they have abandoned is also out of reach, and the book ends with the spectacle of a civilization that has nowhere to go. The anguish of a nation that has lost its identity is expressed most notably through the figure of the killer, who is not a

cardboard villain but a man in torment, infinitely more aware of the darkness of things than those around him.

The most notable thing about *My Name is Red* is the extent to which it is a novel about art, indeed almost a study of Islamic illustration. It contains description of paintings, some of which are like prose poems. It is full of several stories about the great miniaturists and their history going back to Bihzad and the Chinese influences brought by the Mongols. It is also riddled by discussion and debates about form and style, the relationship of art to morality and religion and society, the effect of western ideas, the future of Ottoman illumination, and the significance of blindness. Pamuk charts the perennial mingling of old and new 'east and west.' His novels do not just interrogate Istanbul, or even Turkey, but Islam and its struggle with 'Modernity' and by extension the very process of 'cultural interaction' between the west and the rest. Pamuk shows the struggle between east and west not on the field of battle, but in the world of art.

#### IV. Conclusion

Pamuk through the various characters of his novels reveals the ultimate dilemma of the people of Turkish diaspora.



He belongs to Istanbul and is aware of the indecision of the masses who want to be like westerners but also want to cling to their original roots. In such a condition they are neither welcomed by the western union and nor by their age old tradition of Islam. Pamuk becomes the spokesperson of such people who see Europe as a dream but are also aware that this dream can turn to be a nightmare and can ruin them by leaving them homeless and lonely. The experience of displacement complicates the lives of Turkish people for they like Pamuk have a fixed home but in the changing world scenario 'home' does not mean rootedness to one single place rather because of the mingling of different culture and civilization the concept of home has changed. This displacement and unrootedness is felt at the utmost by the characters of Pamuk's novels that are a clear-cut representation of Turkish identity. By living in Turkey they are always in a position of indecision and doubt as how to be a part of western world and how at the same time preserve their cultural and traditional heritage. Pamuk metanarratively presents this disorientation and dilemma of Turkish diaspora in his writings and through this mingling of old and new he has been able to bring to the fore the problem of

Turkish identity and the sense of displacement felt by the minority.

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