



Histories of the Self: A Critical Analysis of Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and The City*

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ABSTRACT

Orhan Pamuk is one of the most celebrated novelists in World Literature today. Winner of 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature, he is a master of his craft and the most engaging narrative voice. After writing a number of critical acclaimed novels, in the years 2005 he came up with his autobiographical memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City* which added another feather to his cap. In this book, he skillfully juxtaposes details of his personal life, writings, dreams, imagination and impressions with the history of Istanbul. The present paper will try to show how Pamuk, through his struggle to reconcile various inner conflicts, gains a deep understand of his self as well as of his city. And how his personal descriptions of places and events open up a space for a broader literary discourse including the questions of identity, social change and marginality?

KEYWORDS

Pamuk, Istanbul, East-West encounter, Westernization, modernization.

Istanbul: Memories and the City (2005) is a tale of an artist's struggle not only against the conventional codes of the society but also against his own dilemmas and doubts. Eminent English novelist David Mitchell (b.1969) calls the book "an additive childhood memoir, a museum-in-prose of a city with West in its head but East in its soul, and a study of the alchemy between place and self". In this thirty seven chapter long memoir, Pamuk writes about his childhood, his once rich and famous family's decline into obscurity, his early interest in painting, his spiritual affinity with the place of his birth and its melancholy and finally his decision to pursue a career in writing. He uses both his self and the city of Istanbul as a text and explores different dimension of being "in between" the margins and the centre, tradition and modernity, East and West. Pamuk wrote this memoir at the age of fifty two, compiling all those spots of time, memories, and feelings which he believes shaped his persona. Pamuk, as he is known for being an experimental, innovative and versatile writer instead of writing a linear, coherent life story, reinvents himself as Orhan, his alter ego and the narrator of this memoir. This narrator reveals his inner self, distressed with the feelings of detachment and loss and fascinatingly connects it with melancholy soul of his native city. And that is how it works here, when we read Pamuk's story, we are actually reading story of a nation, of a city, of an era and of a whole generation. At the heart of this memoir is his spiritual identification and relation with his city, he writes "Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am" (Pamuk, 2005, p.6). He intermingle his personal experiences and emotions with the national history so masterfully that the city becomes the metaphor for the self and the self becomes the metaphor for the city. In this book he presents his personal and national history as inseparable and sees his city as the most important part of his self. And what creates this inseparable bond is the melancholy which he uses to represent the collective disillusionment of his nation. The memoir begins with the chapter "Another Orhan" in which Pamuk writes about his childhood belief that somewhere in Istanbul resides his twin. He writes that as a child and, even, during his adolescence he could never do away with the thought of this another Orhan and would imagine that his twin, unlike him, is a cheerful person living a happy life in the same city. And as he grew up he began to feel that his city also has a twin, that there exists another Istanbul within Istanbul which is very different from the post card image of the city. Thus, the book could be read as a tale of two cities, of two world, two positions and also two Orhans.

Pamuk, as he writes in his memoir, was born into a wealthy,

westernized family and lived all his life in the posh area of Nisantasi. His grew up in a five storey house full of imported furniture, unplayed pianos, Chinese porcelains, crystal glasses and family photographs among "positivist men who loved mathematics" but loathed religion and discarded Turkish culture. The family's sitting-room with its snuff boxes and glass cupboards, according to him, was the best example of western influence found in every rich household in Turkey. As a child he felt that these rooms were designed "not for the living but for the dead" (Pamuk, 2005, p.10). Most of his relatives supported the father founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk's westernization project but no one was certain of its benefits. He writes that like his family, most of the other people were not actually interested in the East or the West, they supported the modernization or westernization process because they viewed it as freedom from the religious laws. No one except the servants prayed in the house, in fact how a person sat in the silver threaded chair was a considered a much more serious topic of discussion than fasting during the month of Ramadan. In such an environment, any encounter with religion or the traditional Islamic literature was out of question but he had access to large collection of books written by Sigmund Freud, Jean Paul Sartre, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and others which he read voraciously. At a very early age he developed a keen interest in arts and, even, aspired to become a painter. But in a family of engineers and investors his ambition of pursuing a career in painting was just not welcomed. His mother would tell him that in Europe:

When they say someone is a great artist, even the water stops running. Here, on the other hand... you'll become one of those poor, neurotic Turkish artists who have no choice but to depend on the mercy of the rich and the powerful ...you'll be miserable, people will look down on you, you'll be plagued by complexes, anxieties and resentments till the day you die.

(Pamuk, 2005, p.329).

In order to avoid arguments, which mostly turned ugly, with his mother Pamuk would often escape to the consoling streets of his beloved city. He writes those lonely walks through the dark, gloomy back streets helped him discovery and explore the soul of his city. Far from the grand and luxurious places, he found the real beauty of his city in the crumbling mansions, ruined walls, broken fountains, old mosques and semi-dark lanes where he pondered over the question of his identity as an individual and as an artist.

The Istanbul that he depicts, in his memoir, is a city brimmed

with melancholy, it is a black and white world, sad and silent, caught between the past and the present. This sadness according to him is caused by the feeling of being peripheral and by a deep sense of loss. Pamuk belongs to a generation who witnessed firsthand the damage done by the Turkish secularists in their "frenzy to turn Istanbul into a pale, poor, second-class imitation of a western city" (Pamuk, retrieved). A generation who grew up oscillating between a dignified pride and an inferiority complex, internalizing the spiritual emptiness and Post- Empire melancholy.

Depressed by the destruction caused by fire as he sees one after the other wooden mansion going up in flames only to be replaced by a modern apartment block, he mourns the irreparable loss of a great civilization and culture. He sees his personal melancholy as an outcome of the strong sense of alienation that he always felt in his own city and at home among his own people. He writes that he felt like an outsider in the poor and old neighborhood of Istanbul as well as in the affluent quarter of Nisantasi. On surface the book gives an account of Pamuk's childhood, his upbringing, his love affairs, his reading interests, his parents, their issues, his late night walks around the city and finally ends with his decision to become a writer. But on a deeper level his each and every description of personal experiences offers the readers an insight into a world that is trying to reconcile two different selves. Whether it is the haunting silence of his family's sitting room or the decaying old wooden mansions near the Bosphorus, Pamuk uses these as symbols to convey the sadness of a city fallen from heights of glory into depths of gloom. But the city, Pamuk writes, treats its melancholy not like an illness but as an honour by accepting it as a part of its present identity, by embracing it instead of pushing it away. An artist, he tells his readers, grows up in a society, in a city, in a culture and his social environment plays a vital role in shaping his imagination. At the age of twenty two, walking through the narrow lanes of Istanbul, with his mind jammed with questions and doubts, it is this attitude of his city that inspires him. It is from his city that he learns the art of carrying sadness with dignity and to derive inspiration from it rather than being haunted by it.

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