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A Cultural Retrospection of Istanbul in Orhan Pamuk's Memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to deal with the analysis of Orhan Pamuk's autobiographical memoir *Istanbul: Memories and The City* in the light of the cultural history of this multicultural city along with its postmodern implications. Pamuk herein illustrates the major cultural, social, religious, spatial, literary, and historical events that transformed Turkey. Through the repletion of black and white photographs from his family album he voices the very *hüzün* (melancholy) of Istanbul; the nostalgia for the glorious past and the present tussle between two cultures i.e., eastern and western polarities respectively, and various cultural shifts which are interwoven with his personal tales by the use of his memory and imagination, fact and fiction. He reconstructs the cultural ambiguity of Istanbul from various perspectives by depicting his childhood memories through newspaper articles and paintings.

Keywords: *Hüzün*, Istanbul, Ottoman Empire, Turkification, Photographs.

Introduction

This research paper deals with *hüzün* (a kind of melancholy) in Pamuk along with how he coalescences the past and present based on a feeling of nostalgia for a glamorous past. Pamuk is quite contemplative here and embodies the very Istanbul which he describes and analyses in its predominant mood of melancholy in a state of emotional and psychological decrepitude: "For me, it has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy, or (like all Istanbullus) making it my own" (6). The very epigraph of this memoir sets forth the theme which is taken from Ahmet Rasim' "the beauty of a landscape resides in its melancholy" (*Istanbul*). Pamuk here cogitates that he can re-invent a beautiful present from the nostalgia of the lost grandeur of the past of the Ottoman Empire rather than lamentation and sadness. Being experimental, innovative and versatile he can reinvent himself as Orhan. He is, as Jean Francois Lyotard observes, "a witness to the unpresentable" (82). He narrates the story through twin perspectives as an insider and an outsider as well through the use of memory, telling the readers at every step about it by making personal comments and thereby makes it a self-conscious piece of work.

Pamuk's family's gradual decline is similar to the decline of Istanbul since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the melancholy permeates both the city and its residents. Pamuk

also traces the history of his love for painting and his desire to forge a career as an artist, the effect of gaining and losing his first love, the connection he and others feel to the Bosphorus River and its importance to the city, and memories of his school experiences. According to Esra Akcan, "In his recent book *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, Orhan Pamuk juxtaposes his autobiography as a child with the biography of Istanbul in the 1970s" (39). The chronological order has been preserved to a little extent here by juxtaposing the biography of the city with an autobiography of an artist as a child which highlights the representation of Istanbul in various forms of art, and its recent history. His unvarnished propensity for engaging in fantasy even into adulthood, and even his frequent daydreams about killing someone, preference for indoors to the outdoors, darkness to light, collate and contrast the Bosphorus River to the city of Istanbul have been depicted. The parallel narratives blend to reveal Pamuk's subjectivity both as a typical *Istanbullu* and as an artist: "Istanbul's fate is my fate. I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am" (Pamuk 6).

Written from a deeply personal perspective, he shows his fascination with the city by humanizing where he grew up, and continues to live by saying, "If I see my city as beautiful and bewitching, then my life must be so, too" (50). He depicts that this resilient city has been embracing people from various milieus and inspiring him to closely observe the cityscapes and their inhabitants for long. Pamuk's visual impressions of the city landscapes, Turkish writers and their books, European writers, and their experiences to some extents have determined Pamuk's visions of the city. He pays homage to the authors who shaped Pamuk's melancholic perceptions.

Covering the long periods, he illustrates certain unchanging habits of the inhabitants of Istanbul. According to Pamuk, the greatest wealth of Istanbul is its grocery stores and its coffee houses; the greatest poet of Istanbul in the 20th century is Yahya Kemal; its greatest author is Tanpınar. Great earthquakes and fires are mentioned as well. Pamuk does not forget to mention the unfair treatment to minorities or generally "the Turkification of Constantinople" (*Istanbul, 155*) either. He does not favour "good forms" (Lyotard 81) for the sake of unity but he draws attention to the unattainable in any presentation. He has depicted the best of the times and also the worst of the times. Istanbul has been mentioned with its reality and dark sides. Pamuk mentions French writers such as Gerard de Nerval and Theophile Gautier and Turkish authors such as Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar, Re§ad Ekrem Kogu, and Yahya Kemal; who also created an Istanbul discourse did not represent the dark sides of its history but merely the beautiful aspects associated with it.

Istanbul holds a very commanding position in his works as well as in his personal life. The streets, architecture and the glorious past of Istanbul; a city where he has found himself as a person with renowned volition and where he has explored the various shades of world, culture, heritage and people: are the main props for the background of his works. There will be no exaggeration to mention Istanbul as a main character or muse in his works. Black and white photographs trigger the higher emotions of melancholy in this memoir. Black and white colours are associated with the pain, sadness and melancholy herein.

Pamuk uses the word, *hüzün*, denoting a mélange of melancholy, sadness, and *tristesse(sadness)*, to unite the city, its past and its present within a lasting as well as transnational feeling. Pamuk's Istanbul is "the very essence, of *hüzün"* (84) which infiltrates

the city itself as its mark of distinction, its collective emotion and part of everyday reality, uniting the city and its inhabitants, binding the people together (83). He asserts that "Istanbul does not carry its *hüzün* as 'an illness for which there is a cure' or 'an unbidden pain from which we need to be delivered': it carries its hüzün by choice" (93). Davide Deriu mentions in an article, "The City of Collective Melancholy: Revisiting Pamuk's *Istanbul"* that it is here Pamuk who pursues most overtly "the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city" which won him the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature (69). Pamuk says that *hüzün* is "a sought-after state", a Turkish word whose Arabic root (it appears five times in the Koran) denotes a feeling of deep spiritual loss but also a hopeful way of looking at life, "a state of mind that is ultimately as life-affirming as it is negating" (81). Pamuk's concept of *hüzün* has proximity with the postmodern aesthetics explained by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), who makes it clear that "it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (81). Lyotard's sheds light on the conception of the past as the sublime position:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (81)

The sublime, according to Lyotard, is indeterminate. The Lyotardian notion of indeterminacy is connected to the idea of the presence of the past; in other words, the fact that the past is perpetually present and that it cannot be controlled.

He constructs an imaginative present by reimagined past and calls himself a "Western traveller" (*Istanbul* 260). He talks about the vast cultural shifts and a new outlook that Turkey comes across by his politics of nostalgia and delineates an eagerness to adopt westernization and a radical break up with the Ottoman Empire and cultural values. Several cultural reforms such as clothing reform, alphabetical revolution, and language purification aimed to reject the old institutions and traditions, to enter into an exclusive new civilization, to create a new Turkish identity, and to Turkification of the society in general. Pamuk here by attaining liminal position seems to "wage a war on totality" (82) by putting forward the unpresentable in the presentation itself, makes an effort to perceive and conceive the otherness of the past which cannot be retrieved. The Ottoman past is, literally, a foreign country for the Turks. Pamuk highlights the replacement of the Ottoman Empire with the newly established Republic of Turkey and the descent of the grand polyglot multicultural Istanbul into a monotonous monolingual town (*Other Colours*).

The deployment of black and white pictures has little connection with the narrative, which is based on the author's account of his childhood as well as his meditations on the city's past. Pamuk's retrospective gaze moves between old photographs not only of his family but of his neighbourhood, district, and city as a whole. The old Istanbul photographs are taken by Ara Güler as after the completion of the memoir Pamuk acknowledges to choosing these images from Güler's private archive implying that the images are not necessarily exegesis or corresponds with the autobiographical and biographical narratives. There are 210 photographs illustrated in total and 24 of these photographs belong to the

objects that are not photographs themselves like gravure, oil painting, and encyclopaedia. There is a disjuncture between the images and the narratives because the photographs themselves are interpreted symbolically and personalized meaning has been attributed to them which he perceived by his ruminations of the city.

In his book *Other Colours* Pamuk testifies that, the state, in order to Westernise itself was pushing the traditional culture underground. Owing to this reason he says, "panic, fear and isolation from the tradition, from the future, from the East and the West, from cultural conflicts and complexities that one culture should bear with itself were the worst practices of the new elite created by the Republic" (258). Pamuk notices *ýis-a- ýis* the desire to westernise and modernise itself, despite the advanced architecture and new taste, the melancholy of this fading culture was all around us.

The tradition of Turkey that shaped Istanbul since the fifteenth century and Turkish literature and language for nearly seven centuries started diminishing slowly due to the influence of the west as in the Western cinema, and the artifacts of popular culture imported from the west changed the concept of former culture. Personages from the Ottoman Empire called pashas, built wooden mansions in Istanbul, many of them along the banks of the Bosphorus. Most of the mansions have since been burnt or destroyed to make way for apartment buildings. But as nothing, Western or local, came to fill the void, the great drive to Westernise amounted mostly to the erasure of the past (*Other Colours*, 27). Reconstructing and fictionalizing the past could be a way of accepting the present and celebrating the fragmentation unconditionally. Pamuk confesses: "To lock myself up in a room to write a new history—a new story with allegories, obscurities, silences, and never-heard sounds—is, of course, better than to write another history of defects that seeks to explain our defects by means of other defects" (*Other Colours*, 297).

Conclusion

At the end Pamuk accepts the fact that it is *hüzün* only which enhances the "beauty" (318) and creates the "fate" of Istanbul (318). He has blended his memories with the history of the city in the thirty-seven chapters and concludes that Istanbul can be perspectivised from eastern as well as western viewpoint.

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