

A Post-Oriental Reading Of Orhan Pamuk's The White Castle

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk, winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, is a Turkish writer with a formidable international reputation. He has written ten novels, which include many successful novels, in terms of the number of copies sold internationally, like *The White Castle*, *My Name is Red* and *The Museum of Innocence*. He is a novelist whose aesthetic sensibility is rooted in his beloved Istanbul, but draws from the tradition of great western novelists.

Introduction

In spite of the wide range of themes and narrative techniques, the theme of East-West is one of the most important themes in the novels of Orhan Pamuk. Most of Pamuk's novels reveal the tension between the East and the West and reveal how modernity, represented by Western art, culture, science, and technology, challenges the tradition, culture, art, and identity of Turkey.

The unique position of Turkey, located on the geographical and cultural border between Europe and Asia, provides the context for Pamuk's novels. The East-West conflict is quite common picture in the real life of a

transcontinental like Turkey. So, one can see such representations in Pamuk's novels as well. His novels are often viewed as lyrical allegories, portraying a modern Turkey, caught between the push to become secular westernized state and the pull from fundamentalist Islamic movements, striving to maintain traditional Turkish culture.

Under western influence, Turkey's or Istanbul's Western-looking started to condemn and accuse anything that has the history of Ottomanism. Pamuk too, in his novels, portrays the image of Istanbul and Turkey, inspired by the West. On the other side, the rioters in Turkey destroyed the property of the Greeks violently and tortured the Christians and the rich. This suggests that there was tension prevailing between the East and the West. This tension or conflict is also experienced by the characters of Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle*.

This conflict can be studied with the aid of the theories developed by Edward Said and Homi K Bhabha. In general, Pamuk sees the conflict resulting from the dispute between the traditional, represented by the East and the new, represented by the West as a powerful force in his work. This argument is endorsed by Edward Said, who claims that the Western political and intellectual dominance over the East has established potentially the nature of the East as weak and the West as strong. The Italian slave in *The White Castle* feels that he is responsible for guiding and teaching his Turkish master for the Orient is always stereotyped as the weak, so he needs help from the West. Edward Said is of the view that the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power and domination and Europe is always in a position of strength. At the same time Said says that the Orient is the cultural contestant of Europe. The East is not only a seduction for Europe but it has also helped to define the West as its contrasting image and idea.

As a major authorial theme, the East-West dichotomy, a concept of geopolitical, sociological and cultural signification, was treated by Pamuk in a deconstructivist manner. Although the Turkish novelist does not write political novels, he questions the explanatory power of current theories in political science or in cultural

studies, and offers answers to the global politics of interculturalism and transculturation.

Turkey is one of the countries that has never been colonized by other nations or Western powers. But by feeling inferior to the West, the Turks have orientalised themselves – in other words, orientalised by the oriental – because they believe that the West can bring them to modernity. Pamuk reflects the Turkish psyche in his novels. He often portrays living in Turkey in terms of feeling peripheral, as a feeling that swings between dignified pride and inferiority complex. The novelist deals with his country's contemporary tensions and attempts to make synthesis between the East and the West. Pamuk synthesizes the two cultures and civilizations in his novels. Pamuk deals with the problems he encountered as a child and a young man in his works.

In an interview, Pamuk was asked whether he believed the constant confrontation between Turkey's Eastern and Western impulses would ever be peacefully resolved. Pamuk thus answered and his answer is given in his *Other Colors*:

I'm an optimist. Turkey should not worry about having two spirits, belonging to two different cultures, having two souls. Schizophrenia makes you intelligent. You may lose your relation with reality – I'm a fiction writer, so I don't think that's such a bad thing – but you shouldn't worry about your schizophrenia. If you worry too much about one part of you killing the other, you'll be left with a single spirit. That is worse than having the sickness. This is my theory. I try to propagate it in Turkish politics, among Turkish politicians who demand that the country should have one consistent soul—that it should belong to either the East or the West or be nationalistic. I'm critical of that monistic outlook. (OC 555-556)

Instead of choosing between those Turks who show too much passion for the West and look with disdain at their heritage, and those who shut themselves off in the dream of a lost Turkish authenticity, Pamuk prefers to stay between

the East and the West, taking advantage from both cultural worlds.

Though Pamuk writes in his novels about East-West disputes, he always tries to resolve peacefully the East-West impulses. He attempts to synthesize the East and the West as a fiction writer. He wants Turkey to join the European Union for its betterment. Personally, Pamuk calls himself a Westernized person, who is pleased with Turkey's westernization process. According to him, politicians and elites are supposed to create an organic combination of the East and the West. He wants a combination and not a slavish imitation of the West. He wants the combination of "the Eastern past and the Western present" (OC 370). Turkish heritage will not be lost by joining the European Union, but it will flourish and give Turkey a Turkish culture. The solution is not the Slavic imitation of the West or the old dead Ottoman culture.

In order to transcend the modern dichotomies, Pamuk dramatizes the eastness of the East and the westness of the West; he says thus in one of his interviews with Farnsworth: "let me point out, that I don't believe in this clash, although it's happening. And in my novels I try to say: all generalizations about East and West are generalizations. Don't believe them, don't buy them" (7).

Emergence of hybrid or multi-perspective power provides a balance to Pamuk's stories of lamentation and disappointment. This characterizes the work of Pamuk in a way that can be called post-orientalism. Erdag Goknar, Turkish-American scholar and the translator of Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, says thus in his article, titled "Orhan Pamuk and the Ottoman Theme":

This multilayered aestheticization characterizes Pamuk's work in a way that I theorize elsewhere as "Post-Orientalism." Associated with the conditions, paradoxes, and dilemmas of postcolonialism, "Post-Orientalism" is a critique of the historical function of orientalism (and nationalism) in the construction of identities. Furthermore, postorientalism foregrounds political and cultural representations that are not delimited by the forces of

colonialism per se. Thus, as the late Ottoman state fell into the position of being semi-colonized, the legacy of this semi-colonization, or colonial encounter with Europe, informed the breadth, scope, and severity of the Kemalist cultural revolution that gave shape to the Republic of Turkey. (37-38)

By subverting the national binary orientalist through new narrative and intertextuality practices, Pamuk establishes what is called a post-orientalist aesthetic. For example, the motif of the incomplete, failed or absent text of Pamuk's novels is explained by the very text that Pamuk has written. Such narratives identify denounce, and subvert over determination processes expressed by discourses of orientalism and nationalism.

Orientalism analyses and reports how Western writers had represented the East. According to Patricia Almarcegui, a writer and lecturer on Comparative Literature says thus in her work *Orientalism and Post-Orientalism: Ten Years Without Edward Said*:

The status quo of academics such as Said and Spivak also needs to be dismantled. To this end, we must completely decentralize the West, which cannot be set up as the main interlocutor. . . Orientalism must be re-read, reformulated and inserted into the latest political, social and cultural events, and above all into the context of the Arab uprisings. (140)

Her call for re-reading Orientalism needs to be treated as a monumental development in understanding the East and the West. To Patricia Almarcegui, the amount of focus given to the conflict between the East and the West is a bit too much. Looking ahead of this much talked about conflict is recommended by her for progress in future. She further says in the same work:

The world can no longer be divided into the imaginary categories of East and West, or between West and the rest. The public space has expanded, and it is being loaded and redefined to accommodate the new events. (141)

As Hamid Dabashi, who has written a book titled, *Post-Orientalism*, asserted in his conversation with Nandy on the website “Humanities and Social Sciences” that a new discourse for a new relationship between our ideas of the human subject and our idea of human communities is necessary. According to Patricia Almarcegui in *Orientalism and Post-Orientalism: Ten Years Without Edward Said*:

East and West have not been dissociated. They have had to separate, above all since the era of colonial dissolution, to study the East in more detail and, perhaps for the first time, to not have its appropriation as an objective. Once separated, the logic of knowledge shows that they maintained a history of crossings, meetings and coexistences. (141)

Pamuk claims that man can live with equality and enjoy freedom from discrimination and narrow mindedness of all sorts. He also wants everyone to follow the ideal of internationalism and universal fraternity. He has worked for removing evils in all the spheres of life. He has strongly condemned injustice and tyranny meted out to a common man. Pamuk is of the view that the world can no longer be divided into the imaginary categories of East and West.

This paper tries to show that, as a writer, Pamuk clearly shows his partiality neither to the East nor to the West. Instead, he wants to be a bridge connecting the East and the West just like the Bosphorus Bridge linking Istanbul’s Asian and European sides. Though the conflict between the East and the West is one of Pamuk’s predominant themes, he prefers to take up the in-between position. Hence Pamuk can perfectly be fit into the school of Post-Orientalism for he recommends bridging. He is also of the opinion that the categories of East and the West are only imaginary. To him, good literature helps readers to perceive otherness as identity.

Works Cited

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