

SUMMING UP ORHAN PAMUK

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Abstract:

The greatness of Orhan Pamuk lies in his deft handling of the novel form that has been exploited towards a realistic portrayal of life as witnessed by the novelist. As all of his works, until recently, were written in his native Turkish, no full-length critical work about him and his art could be produced for an English-speaking audience. It became possible to evaluate his literary art in the West only when his works were translated into English. Most of these critical responses have come in piece meals and confined contexts, leaving ample scope for large-scale interpretation. In this perspective, the current paper is written to make a humble contribution to the existing body of criticism. Moreover, it is expected that this essay shall provide a sensitizing introduction to the readers of English Literature in India, for most of them are not encouraged to study-cum-research on modernist non-English writers.

Keywords: Marginalized, Realism, Context, Perspective, Ottoman, Identity, Self, Modernist, Ethnicity.

Introduction:

Ferit Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952; Istanbul) is a Turkish Nobel-Laureate novelist who has received international acclaim for his novels and non-fiction. He is the first Turkish citizen to have been awarded the Nobel Prize. He authorizes ten novels, a screenplay, and several non-fiction works. Orhan Pamuk refuses to allow his first novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons* (1982), to be translated into English. However, all other works of Orhan Pamuk are available in English translation, including nine novels that were initially written in Turkish.

Orhan Pamuk is innovative in more ways than one. He writes in his native language, i.e., Turkish, with a purpose. When he felt that English enjoyed a central position. At the same time, other languages of the world, including his native language, were marginalized, he decided to react strategically against this stance by writing in a 'marginal' language. In *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist* (2010), he is forthright when he says that he is 57 years old and has been writing novels for some thirty years now but has never been able to identify in himself the kind of character as he encounters in novels, rather European novels. This kind of attack

partly springs from his post-colonial stance. His mistrust of outsized literary characters is a reaction against how earlier Turkish writers slavishly imitated the heroes they found in the English, French, and Russian classics. In this backdrop, he did not title/name any of his novels after their hero/protagonist.

Each of Orhan Pamuk's ten novels represents an unstable identity within a specific Ottoman or Turkish historical context. Pamuk repeatedly returns to history as a recurring theme in his work, focusing on four primary areas: Ottoman history in a European context, the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the modern Middle East, the early twentieth-century Kemalist Cultural Revolution, and the legacy of all the three on present-day Turkey. Within this framework, his fiction reveals characters, like the author himself, who are orientalized and nationalized subjects inclined to question their (often imposed) identities. Such questioning and interrogation lead his protagonists to attempt to manifest (by writing or painting, for example) other narrative sites of identification.

Not only does Orhan Pamuk question the meta-narrative of Turkish secular nationalism (Turkism) in its various manifestations, but he thoroughly interrogates the possibility of national transformations. This is most evident in his representation of Ottoman history, which broadly contains any number of secular national "taboos," including multi-ethnicity, multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, religion, and homosexuality, among others.

Pamuk's books are characterized by a confusion of loss of identity brought on in part by the conflict between Western and Eastern values. They are often disturbing or unsettling but include complex, intriguing plots and characters of great depth. His works are also redolent with discussion of and fascination with the creative arts, such as literature and painting. Pamuk's work often touches on the deep-rooted tensions between East and West and tradition and modernism.

At the age of 30, Pamuk began to earn a formidable reputation in Turkey by publishing his first novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons* (1982), which traced the lives of a wealthy Istanbul family over three generations. As experienced by Pamuk in his youth, the novel portrays a shift in the lifestyle of the people from the traditional Ottoman family environment to a more Western-oriented one. His second novel, *Silent House* (1983), is a modernist novel about three unhappy siblings living with their dying grandmother after the 1980 military coup. The story is sifted through the consciousness of five narrators and has been compared by critics to the multiple-perspective works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. It has been translated for French, Greek, and Italian readers.

Pamuk's international breakthrough came with his third novel, *The White Castle* (1985). It is structured as a historical novel set in 17th-century Istanbul, but its content is primarily about how our ego builds on stories and fiction of different sorts. Personality is shown to be a variable construction. The story revolves around the protagonist, a Venetian who is sold as an enslaved person to the young scholar Hodja, who finds in Hodja his reflection. As the two men recount their life stories to each other, an identity exchange occurs. *The White Castle* may have reacted to the omnipresent question of identity. The novelist's primary goal was to invent a literary

language corresponding to the texture of life in Istanbul. Pamuk observes: "I wanted to make you feel the terrors of living in this city, but not to describe it realistically. The book takes place just before the 1980 coup when people were dying in the streets. I wanted to convey the idea of hopelessness and despair."

Pamuk's writing has become known for its play with identities and doubles. The issue appears in his fourth novel, *The Black Book* (1990), in which the protagonist searches the hubbub of Istanbul for his vanished wife and her half-brother, with whom he later exchanges identities. Frequent references to the mystic tradition of the East make it natural to see this from a Sufi perspective. *The Black Book* represented a definite break with the governing social realism in Turkish literature.

The fifth novel, *The New Life* (1994), is about a secret book that can irrevocably change the life of any person who reads it. The search for the book provides the structure of a physical journey but is ordered by literary references, thought experiments in the spirit of mysticism, and reminiscences of older Turkish popular culture, turning the plot into an allegoric course of events correlated with the Romantic myth of original, lost wisdom.

Pamuk's international reputation continued to increase with the publication of his sixth novel, *My Name is Red* (1998), in 2000. The novel blends mystery, romance, and philosophical puzzles in a setting of 16th-century Istanbul. It opens a window into the reign of Ottoman Sultan Murat III in nine snowy winter days of 1591, inviting the reader to experience the tension between East and West from a breathlessly urgent perspective. The novel explores themes central to his fiction: the intricacies of identity in a country that straddles East and West, sibling rivalry, the existence of doubles, the value of beauty and originality, and the anxiety of cultural influence. *My Name is Red* has been translated into 24 languages and won international literature's most lucrative prize, the IMPAC Dublin Award in 2003.

Set in the 1990s in the bleak north-eastern city of Kars, Pamuk's seventh novel, *Snow* (2002), portrays an account of the tensions between Turkey's urban secularist elite and their long-derided (and vastly underestimated) Islamic-minded opponents. It is also a tragic love story, a thriller, and, more broadly, a dark journey into familiar Pamuk territory: faith, identity, betrayal, and solitude. It is Pamuk's first work set in contemporary Turkey and arguably the most insightful fictional commentary on the post-9/11 world that has been written precisely because it does not mention the attacks but contextualizes the underlying issues brilliantly. *Snow* confronted political extremism in contemporary Turkey and confirmed Pamuk's standing abroad even as it divided opinion at home.

Orhan Pamuk's mesmerizing meditation on love and loss in a bygone Istanbul, *The Museum of Innocence* (2008), is a tale of obsessive love interwoven with Pamuk's exploration of Turkish identity. Kemal, the apparent narrator of the story, is thirty and engaged to be married to Sibel when he meets Füsün, a distant cousin, and falls in love with her. The novel is cleverly constructed as a fictive museum of memories. As the reader progresses through the clutter of Kemal's recollections, which kaleidoscopically refract different facets of Füsün, Pamuk's masterly storytelling convincingly portrays how a simple tryst comes to redefine

Kemal's life. "Happiness means being close to the one you love, that is all," muses the narrator. Pamuk chronicles this search for happiness, a search as old as literature itself.

In *A Strangeness in My Mind* (2014), Pamuk documented the changes Istanbul and Mevlut—the main character undergoes around an epic page length 600. Pamuk tracks Mevlut's adolescence and adulthood parallel with Istanbul's transformation into "a noisy, corrupt, and modernized city."

However, an unusually lengthy subtitle—'Being the Adventures and Dreams of Mevlut Karatas, a Seller of Boza, and of His Friends, and Also a Portrait of Life in Istanbul Between 1969 and 2012 From Many Different Points of View'—simplifies and answers many questions a curious reader might have.

Addressing subjects like patricide and paternal filicide, *The Red-Haired Woman* (2016) is relatively more minor (272 pages). However, it is a tale filled with the 'mystery of family and romance, of East and West, tradition and modernity.' Pamuk leaves his readers with a lesson stating that the inescapable moldings of history shape all of us. At the same time, the novel showcases father-son murder as a deceptively simple metaphor for the generation gap causing unrest in Turkish society.

The latest literary expedition has a setting in the latter days of the Ottoman Empire, covering themes like nationalism, pandemics, identity, history, myth, science, and superstition through Pamuk's trademark storytelling flair in *Nights of Plague* (2021). The work has been fashioned as a 'history written in the form of a novel and a historical novel.' Being Pamuk's longest novel mo, more than 700 pages through satire and metaphor, a 'tale of intrigue and disease' is masterly crafted.

Conclusion:

Thus, Orhan Pamuk's works seem to have covered all the major themes and subjects human beings encounter and experience. From emotions to politics to calamities, both natural and man-induced, beliefs to power, corruption, and sacrifice, he has projected them in a wholesome way. Transcending time and space, the body of literature Pamuk delivered justifies why he deserved and earned the much-coveted Nobel Prize.

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