

ORHAN PAMUK: THE NOVELIST OF TURKISH IDENTITY AND HISTORY

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Received: 20 Dec 2017

Accepted: 29 Dec 2017

Published: 19 Jan 2018

ABSTRACT

*Constantly a focus of media polemics in Turkey and one of the most prolific and widely discussed writers of the century and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature for 2006, Ferit Orhan Pamuk has established himself as the most prominent and distinguished literary figure of Turkey since the 1980s. Apart from being avant-garde, he is also the most widely translated author in Turkey right from the early 2000s. He is also often found in a paradoxical position of being both “an icon of serious literature as well as a spectacle of popular culture”. (Goknar 2013: 1). As the first work which made Pamuk’s writing accessible to English-language readers, *The White Castle*, which appeared in Turkish in 1985 and was translated to English in 1990 evoked considerable interest among readers and critics and was widely reviewed in prestigious literary magazines. In *The New York Times Book Review*, Jay Parini wrote that “a new star has risen in the east.” (Parini)*

KEYWORDS: *English-Language Readers, Prestigious Literary Magazines*

INTRODUCTION

Juxtaposing in his works, history with post modernity and magic realism with socio- cultural realism and multi- narrative voices, as an all- in- one mixture with a complex multiple narrative paradigm, Pamuk creates a vast and kaleidoscopic aesthetic experience that overwhelms his readers. Paul Berman in *The New Republic* called Orhan Pamuk as “extravagantly talented”. Pamuk’s debut in English was thus more ostentatious than that in Turkish. Though he started writing as early as in 1974, his first work appeared in English only in 1990. And with the other works which came out in the decade, Pamuk evoked an unprecedented critical response in the Turkish literary system, as well as outside Turkey, sparking many literary debates and polemics. This becomes surprisingly interesting when one sees that most of the writings of Pamuk moves around his own personal experiences, family life or acutely private reflections about his own innermost feelings. But the way he incorporates these private emotions into the social and political as well as cultural paradigms of Turkey gives the multiple viewpoints to his oeuvre, which is constantly being praised by critics, even after almost a decade of the Nobel Prize now. This could also be the aesthetic framework which substantiates the reception of the writings of Orhan Pamuk. Focusing on this aspect of the personal perspective that Pamuk employs in many of his novels, Michael Mc Gaha observes that more than most novelists, Orhan Pamuk writes mainly about himself and his family and, rather than trying to conceal that fact, actually enjoys calling attention to it. His novels combine revealing, usually self- deprecating details about the life of real Orhan with Walter Mitty-esque-or Quixotic-day dreams about the organs that might have been, such as the famous newspaper columnist, the painter, and the poet. (2008: xi)

Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul in 1952 into an already established and prosperous family of engineers. He and

his family lived in the district of Nisantasi, which belonged to the Westernized section of Turkey. He finished his high school studies from Robert College of Istanbul and then enrolled in the Architecture Department of Istanbul Technical University. But after three years Pamuk became disillusioned with his technical curriculum and discontinued his studies in order to 'build apartment houses' because to Pamuk the latter implied a kind of lifestyle and architectural approach which destroyed the old texture and historical image of Istanbul (Turkish Daily News. 10-12-2006). Obviously, he has been interested in the aesthetics of Ottoman architectural beauty and the old buildings of Istanbul, which he later used in many of his writings. He then entered the Institute of Journalism at Istanbul University, but that was not to become a journalist, but just to delay his military service and obtain a university degree.

In contrast to most Turkish literary figures, Pamuk continued to write full time, dedicating his career to literature completely. In his foreword to *Other Colors: Selected Essays and a Story* Pamuk points out that he writes about ten hours a day at a table in his room. Writing thus, on a ten-hour-a-day schedule, he finished his first novel, *Darkness and Light* (in Turkish: *Cavdet Bey and His Sons*) in 1978. Though it was not widely received by the Turkish readers of that time, Pamuk became the co-winner of the Milliyet Publishing Novel Award for 1979.

As Michael Mc Gaha says in *Autobiographies of Orhan Pamuk*, more than many other contemporary novelists, Orhan Pamuk writes a lot about himself and his family. Gaha also points out that, Pamuk is never trying to conceal this fact; he enjoys calling attention to this too. In fact, his family and his city are often described as his two greatest loves, and he likes to experiment with placing his own self in various contexts of Istanbul, various historical junctures and situations.

Orhan Pamuk belongs to a wealthy, secular middle-class family of the city of Nisantasi. He was born into a family of engineers and as he himself says, the wealth of the family came from his grandfather who built rail-roads and factories. Pamuk was the son of a businessman whose investments plundered the fortune. Pamuk was always surrounded by relatives and servants, but frequent arguments and tussles between his mother and father and the sense of losing the family's happiness and togetherness cast his youth into uncertainty and periodic sadness. Pamuk had a natural bent of mind and penchant for art and so, he was set on becoming a painter. After studying architecture for three years at Istanbul Technical University, Pamuk left the course aspiring to pursue his passion - art and painting. He spent the years 1985-1988 in the United States where he was a visiting researcher at Columbia University in New York and for a short period attached to the University of Iowa. Currently, he lives in Istanbul (Turkey) where he dedicates most of his time writing books.

Becoming a writer was not an easy task for Pamuk; his family did not approve of his decision to shift from architectural studies only to become a writer, since future and a means to earn a livelihood was uncertain in the latter case. His father did support him with financial assistance till he was thirty-two. Pamuk says in an interview that at the age of twenty-two, something happened in his head that gave him a realisation that some screw was loose (Lau). It was then that he gave up painting and began working on his maiden novel. This is the reason the book *Istanbul* reads its last lines as "I don't want to be an artist,' I said. 'I'm going to be a writer'" (Pamuk, 2005: 334)

He then ensconced himself in his mother's home in Istanbul for the next eight years and wrote several novels without being able to publish a single line. 'All I did was read and write. I had no friends,' recalls Pamuk. 'For eight years, I didn't get involved in the life around me. In other words, I didn't live. I lived under my mother's roof and didn't earn a penny.' (Qantara)

In a 1994 article, Judy Stone writes, "Pamuk says that when he began writing he felt very unsure of himself. Four

months at the Iowa Writers Workshop, however, convinced him that “being a writer was a very normal thing in America. So, I got rid of some of my tension.” She continues, “As a youngster, he painted, then decided he would apply his artistic skills to architecture. But, he dropped out of engineering school to start writing. Later, he earned a degree in journalism from the University of Istanbul. Living at home with no need for an outside income, he wrote diligently from age 22 to 30” (Iletisim Publishing)

Pamuk calls the penchant to write as a “demon” (Lau) and he asserts the fact that the place where a writer writes should be secluded from the family place claiming that these social and filial bonds “kill the imagination” (Lau). As a result, Pamuk has always opted for a working place away from his house. Pamuk adds,

We were living in an apartment for married students and didn’t have any space, so I had to sleep and write in the same place. Reminders of family life were all around. This upset me. In the mornings, I used to say goodbye to my wife like someone going to work. I’d leave the house, walk around a few blocks, and come back like a person arriving at the office. (Daily Routines)

Pamuk has said that growing up, he experienced a shift from a traditional Ottoman family environment to a more Western-oriented lifestyle. Orhan Pamuk’s books have been translated into 61 languages. In 2005, Pamuk also proved worthy of Germany’s most coveted Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Pamuk has been named among the world’s hundred intellectuals by *Prospect* magazine. *TIME* magazine chose him to be among the hundred most influential persons of the world in 2006. Writing about the way Pamuk is well received around the world, his English translator Guneli Gun observes:

Pamuk, who has deliberately set out to become a world-class writer, has borrowed the attitudes and strategies of Third World authors writing for the consumption of the First World. Not only does he know all the tricks; he never misses one. His work translates like a charm precisely for the same reason Isabel Allende’s work travels easily into English: English is, in fact, the common language *behind* the various languages out of which the new world-voice is being created—like world rock music—the destination of which is also the United States. (World Literature Today, No.1)

Pamuk gives lectures once a year in Columbia University. At the age of 54, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the second youngest person to receive the award in its history. Apart from three years in New York, Orhan Pamuk has spent almost all the time of his life in the same places and areas of Istanbul, and he still lives in the same apartment where he grew up. Pamuk is a full time writer and has been writing novels for more than 30 years. Pamuk is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is also a member of the Chinese Academy for Social Sciences. In 2014, he got three awards, the Mary Lynn Kotz Award(USA) for his book, *The Innocence of Objects*, Tabernakul Prize from Macedonia and the European Museum of the Year Award from Estonia. He also holds honorary doctorate from more than ten universities around the world. Guneli Gun further writes about the achievements of the writer:

Pamuk’s achievement is indeed considerable. At thirty-nine, he has four major novels under his belt. The first, *Cevdet Bey ve Oğlulari* (*Cevdet Bey and His Sons*), is a bildungsroman which tells the three-generation saga of an upper-class Istanbul family. The second, *Sezsiz ev* (*The Silent House*), a modernist novel told from five different perspectives, deals with a week spent by four siblings, who represent four distinct generations, at their dying grandmother’s country house during a dark period in Turkish political history (1981), when the different generations of Turks were

actually at one another's throats. The third, which is enjoying a good run in the West, is the recently translated *Beyaz kale* (Eng. *The White Castle*), an intriguing postmodernist novel ostensibly about a seventeenth-century Venetian slave and his Ottoman master, who resemble each other so much that they end up swapping identities. (World Literature Today, No.1)

Pamuk started writing full time around the end of the 1970s and had to struggle to carve his niche as a writer/novelist for two long decades. It was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that he became a major writer of the world. "He is unusual in achieving both mass market success and critical acclaim for his complex, postmodern novels which tackle big themes - cultural change, identity crises, east v west, tradition v modernity"(Parini). The rest is history and Pamuk is now one of the fastest selling authors outside and inside his home country. A major reason for him to have gained accolades is perhaps the debatable political issues he handles in his novels.

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