

# Hermeneutics of Identity in Orhan Pamuk's Fiction

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## Abstract

The paper analyses various critics and philosophers like Colin Campbell and Weber deploy their views to understand Pamuk's fiction. Edward Said's hypothesis of Orientalism as an overturn process in terms of Literary Easternization in the West is employed to bridge the two genres and cultures. It looks at the enduring Eastern and Western themes in Pamuk's fictions and interprets his works on broader scale through the lens of literary Easternization. The postmodern features like intertextuality by Kristeva, metafiction and disintegration, are prominent in his works. Pamuk uses Istanbul as a bridge between Asia and Europe, both symbolically and physically to intertwine the East and the West. The paper entreats a distinctive review on Turkish identity across cultures, literatures and languages. The study of the historical background of Turkish culture, values, ethnicities along with its relative learning with respect to the Western values and hermeneutic today is noteworthy subject matter here. The cultural affinities between the two alternative and corresponding cultures through the approaches of postmodernism and cross fertilization are dealt with in detail.

**Keywords:** Easternization; East-West intertwining; Identity; Quest.

Hermeneutics can be defined as an idea of interpretation through language and traditions not just the text but life as whole. It helps the readers know that all understanding is context dependent. We live in age defined by mass migrations and creative immigrants and hermeneutics opens up perspectives on traditional and critical thinking. Hermeneutics of Identity is a dialectical relationship between self and society. This paper intends to interpret hermeneutics of identity on Orhan Pamuk's fictions. It explores and looks at Turkish culture, its place in the world, identity of an individual associated with Istanbul run as parallel and the ever pervading *huzun* affecting the individual and nation as a whole. The clash of two alternative cultures and the larger question of the push and pull

towards the easternization or westernization process leading to a hybrid culture-society and growing generational existentialism or identity crisis is the objective of his works.

Orhan Pamuk is a well known Turkish novelist and his works have been translated into more than sixty languages. He won the prestigious Nobel Prize in literature in 2006. He is read all over the world as a global author and has inspired many authors to follow in his footsteps. The critics quite often compare him to postmodern authors and Paul Auster, Umberto Eco and others. His works have a trace of magic realism in their works. Pamuk refers to Eastern texts like (Persian, Arabic and Ottoman Turkish) that introduce a western reader to the eastern values that give them a meaning of life. The western minds are allured by the traces of Sufism found in his works. He sets most of his works in Istanbul. He discusses about people who have written before him about the city, painted it and photographed it. Flaubert once visited Istanbul and predicted that in a century's time it would be the capital of the world but unfortunately the reverse came true (Pamuk 6). The Ottoman Empire collapsed and the world almost forgot Istanbul existed. Istanbul turned into city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. Pamuk emphasizes "I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy, or (like all Istanbulis) making it my own" (Pamuk 6). Pamuk laments the destruction of the Pashas' Mansions; he mourns the loss of great Ottoman Empire. He also tells us how the tour of the streets by him has become sad and melancholic in the present time.

Pamuk mocks at the tendency of Istanbulis to imitate the West. He shares one of his personal experiences to demonstrate the imitation by calling the "sitting rooms" as "little museums" before the 1970s. "The sitting rooms were little museums designed to demonstrate to a hypothetical visitor that the householders were westernized" (Pamuk 10). He manages to give a string of references from his life to showcase how Istanbulis had started imitating west. The enormous portraits of his grandfather and grandmother hung over the never used fireplace slightly turned towards each other in the manner favored by European kings and queens on stamps was another way of modernizing themselves or imitating the west.

The honest and vivid description tells us about the nostalgic Pamuk and the *huzun* he is holding in his heart. *Huzun* which has not only made him his victim but the entire nation is affected with it. He has dedicated an entire chapter on *huzun* in his memoir. The chapter tells us that *huzun* is a Turkish word for melancholy, it has an Arabic root; when it appears in Koran (as 'huzn' in two verses and 'hazen' in three others) it means much the same thing as the contemporary Turkish word. It also mentions

that Prophet Mohammed referred to the year in which he lost both his wife Hatice and his uncle, Ebu Talip, as 'Senettul huzn', or the year of melancholy. This confirms that the word is meant to convey a feeling of deep spiritual loss. Pamuk sees the emergence of two diverse *huzuns* each evoking a distinct philosophical tradition. According to the first tradition, humans experience the thing called *huzun* when they have invested too much in worldly pleasures and material gain i.e., involving oneself so deeply in this transitory world. The second tradition, which rises out of Sufi mysticism, offers a more positive and compassionate understanding of the world and of the place of loss and grief in life. To the sufis, *huzun* is the spiritual anguish we feel because we cannot be close enough to the almighty.

Most of the western travelers have praised the city for its beauty and charm but in due course westernization began to impact it. Pamuk's love for his native place can be seen clearly again when he admits that "I've accepted the city into which I was born in the same way I've accepted my body..." (Pamuk7). Pamuk has made peace with himself in the sense he has accepted the filth of the side streets, the foul smell from open rubbish bins, the ups and downs, and holes in the pavements, all this disorder and chaos. He further explains his point that when this melancholy begins to seep into "me and from me into the city". He feels helpless like the city and shares belongingness with the "living dead city". Pamuk is reminded of his filth and defeat like the city and its pavements faced after the fall of the great Ottoman Empire.

Pamuk also relates this *huzun* with Istanbul's culture, poetry, music and everyday life and says that it has affected the city and its people for over the past two centuries. Pamuk here does not fail to mention that it has affected its people for this long only because they see it as an honour. His references in *Istanbul* are self reflexive. He, on one hand, laments the imitation of western culture and at the same time makes clear that "we only acquire our own identity by imitating others". Pamuk concludes that what we see with these eyes is colored by a subjective position; hence 'no real city can ever be grasped in its present or past totality by any single person'.

Pamuk's fictions like his memoir gives us a deep insight on how the western culture, studies and art challenge Turkey's tradition and culture. The author as an individual finds himself in a dilemma and can't decide whether to hold on the Turkish self or embrace the modern western tradition. He mourns the lost identity of a nation and individual self, he declares Turkey merely an imitation of a western city. It laments the lost glory of

the great Ottoman Empire but over time has learnt to accept the city as it is and we see him celebrating the present. This study helps us understand the oscillation of the East and the West and its effect on an individual and nation as a whole.

The reflection of clash of civilization is portrayed in his works as a "Dialogue Among Civilizations". Istanbul and the Bosphorus bridge links Asia and Europe not only regionally but also culturally. This connection is depicted in Pamuk's novels as chief subject as protagonists keep shifting their identities and being accustomed to new roles. The *Huzun* of Istanbul and Turk makes them reminiscent of the great past and give birth to a yearning to be close to God and one's own self in this chaotic cosmopolitan world today.

Orhan Pamuk's heroes are on a quest like him and the melancholic soul of his native city Istanbul. He is considered a postmodern global Turkish author. The journey helps him discover key symbols, signs and aspects of his identity. He is a great narrator and helps the readers understand the "new" Turkey and like the new Turkey his world is a mixture of the local, the national and the west. He is a fine analyst of politics and society and cultures as well. He had to go back to his roots to invent the modern literature he has created. His novels reflect Turkey's history and culture but he portrays a global view of humanity for all nations alike. Like Turkey he also acts as a bridge between the two cultures through his writing.

The identity crisis brought upon by the clash of Eastern and Western values is a chief subject of the chaos today. Most of his works are set in Istanbul city. The city was considered no less than world capital during the reign of the great Ottoman Empire. Today it is a multicultural and multilingual nation. Pamuk belongs to an affluent family from Turkey, his education had been European but he had close association with Turkish culture because of his Islamic roots. He abhors the idea of advocating supremacy of any one culture over the other; hence, he condemns the Europeans biased denunciation of Asian culture and vice versa. He discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the situation in terms of alienation, seclusion, industrialization because of the effect of Eastern values systems on the west and vice versa.

Pamuk's writing style is compared to western authors and others like Kafka, G.G Marquez and Paul Auster. He is criticized for his writing in Turkey but is celebrated all over the world in various languages because the readers relate with the problems of a modern Turk portrayed by him in his works. The loss of identity or discovering one's cultural roots in an era of westernization makes him a central figure in literary world. Turkish

literature comprises both oral and written texts. He uses folk literature of Republic and tales from Arabic and Persian language and literature from the Ottoman era. He used not only mythological aspects of languages and cultures but linguistic aspects as well. *My Name is Red* and *The Black Book* are two books that treat the Turkish identity question. These books have several allusions from Turkish poets, fantasies and tales of early western travelers. *My Name is Red* is about the western influence on Ottoman miniature art of painting during sixteenth century. *The Black Book* analyses the identity of Turks and Istanbul city torn between the East-and-West clash. It is also a war between antiquity and modern times. It is a fight for secularity but not at the cost of Islam. The collective identity as cultural identity is the result of loss and gain over generations and it tries to define the individual identity through moral and ethics therefore they are also in a tug of war with each other.

The reflection of Mystic Sufi tradition and Eastern poets like Ferdowsi, Nizami and Saadi in Pamuk's works clearly pictures the east dwelling in his heart. *The Black Book* quite often talks about Rumi. Sham-al-Din influenced Rumi and they both lived together, when he left Rumi, Rumi transformed into an all together different person. Galip takes on into Celal's identity on his quest and even starts writing. *My Name is Red* makes allusions from *Laila Majnun*, *Yusuf Zulaika* and *Khusrau Shirin*. It refers to *The Epic of Kings* a tale of fight against injustice. Pamuk uses these eastern influences to preserve the east in his works.

Weber's idea of subcultures and ethnicities within a culture explains worldview or a reflection of global concept of cultures to make mankind a meaningful cosmos to the readers. Colin Campbell (a neo Weberian critic) published "*Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of cultural Change in the Modern Era* (2008). Easternization or Westernization is subjective world views for both alternative cultures. The concept can be understood from the *Age of Enlightenment* when the West opened itself to spiritual so called preaching of the East. Campbell believes there has always been "East in the West" and vice versa. Byran Turner talks about the process of globalization and understanding it from the perspective of different cultures. Pamuk considers the Islamic and rationalist modernist problematic relationship, it can be understood in terms of Occidentalism and Orientalism. Postmodern world complicates the relationship between individual identity and national identity.

Globalization challenges traditional dominant cultures of nations and cosmopolitanism takes the local traditions as skeptical. Campbell's view is in sync with this; he defines Easternization which is more realistic than

cosmopolitan view. Europe has been lucky because it was the locus of all ideas and thus a receptacle of all the philosophies meaning an intersection of all the sentiments. Gadamer also propounds the concept of “unity in diversity” in a global world that is humanity appreciating pluralities, multiplicities and cultural differences. He believes Hegemony as dangerous or against human freedom. Campbell suggests Globalization as another name for Westernization. He clearly demonstrates that the two discourses have a thin line of difference which cannot be explained in their own boundary that is European borders. Therefore, Istanbul is an ideal site to consider the bridge between the East and West; Bosphorus bridges the two continents. It is a place where the cultures fuse, however Pamuk talks about Turkish identity issues through his works.

Easternization takes on the accountability to employ Hermeneutics to unravel the problem whether populace can actually appreciate foreign culture or not. The philosophical stance is diverse, the East rejects the idea of dualism furthermore understanding is subjective also there is truly no universal criterion of truth and rationality or morality. The convictions emerge from artifacts. Easternization is evidence based notion supported by cultural exempla. Human race’s inherent culture is a set of constructed values. Said understands culture as a sense of identity in respect with nation, this results in Xenophobia which ultimately returns to hybridity. Easternization is a reverse of Said’s Orientalism and both the alternatives give way to single world culture. For instance, in *The White Castle*, Hoja says, “You’re frightened because you believe in me more than I believe in you”. Pamuk conveys that anyone can be a Easterner or westerner or a hybrid. Turkey was never colonized hence he doesn’t lay much emphasis on the concept of Orientalism furthermore Turks were not humiliated by West as the rest of Asian colonies were treated. They were denounced by Europeans which Pamuk has strictly condemned. Pamuk clarifies that the suffering of Turks is self inflicted in a way, because they romanticize the past and it has affected the spirit of Turkey and its natives. The decline of Ottoman implored them to transform as a western and that not so complete transformation and its consequences are portrayed in his works and can be understood in respect with literary easternization theory.

The reflection of both eastern and western outlooks intertwining in Pamuk’s writing is the reason for his popularity as a global author. The two world views sharing a literary platform and showcasing abounding examples through intertextuality is the biggest achievement. Istanbul is the symbolic backdrop wherein he displays Turkish lifestyle of an urban society having both the components of Eastern and Western values. His works are an uncritical reflection of social facts of the two different cul-

tural regions. For instance, *The Museum of Innocence* talks about the perspective of Western and conservative families on sex before marriage. Consequently, it summarizes the assimilation of two cultural values in the novel. *The White Castle* tells about the Eastern and Western encounter of Hoja and Italian scientist in Istanbul. It talks about identity exchange and perpetual fight for self discovery through a master-slave relationship. Pamuk's naturalizes both the cultures by locating his novels in both Eastern and western region with a social perspective.

Pamuk appears to take a neutral view at the East-West cultural distribution because of the life experience plus his position in the strata of society gives him a better view of the world. On one hand he talks about the monism Sufism where as on the other hand he considers the western dualistic standpoint too. For instance, the heroes of *The Black Book*, *The New Life*, *The Museum of Innocence* are wealthy people of Istanbul yet towards other characters they take a neutral viewpoint and Huntington understands it as a result of the world becoming more modern and less Western or Eastern. His description of Shams and Rumi Sufis is a conscious cultural representation of East and the new era perspective of emergence of a "new" modern woman and her emancipation by Pamuk articulate his neutral perspective at the alternative cultures. The roundabout Eastern perspective that gives a new meaning to western life is appreciated by the readers.

Maureen Freely and Goknar share Pamuk's success by translating his works in English thereby making it available to readers all over the globe. This makes the source culture more valuable. Pamuk's works hold an excellent position in world literary works. Such texts are open to all thoughts and ideas. The intertextual literary texts play a great role in familiarizing the readers all rounds the world but they cannot be studied in denial with the history. For instance colonization and decolonization have played an essential role in world literature to understand the development and its consequential effects on various part of the world.

Pamuk's readers meet on a common ground through his works that are the East-West oriented and a part of Comparative literature. Pamuk is a well known author who has a deep influence of western authors and also grew up in Turkey that gave him an excess to eastern cultural background. The larger discoveries about the recent Turkish history, identity, modernity and cultural memories evidently don't advocate one view and rather emphasizes a balanced hybrid authority that is of secular nature and shows co-existence of both the alternative cultural values. The greatest virtue is Istanbul's ability to see the city through both Eastern and Western eyes.

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