

The Politics of Imagination in Orhan Pamuk

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Abstract: Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish writer, has been understood for his works which reflect the sustained exposition of the conflict between eastern and western values, tradition and modernity. Turkey is very often described as a bridge between the east and west, as far as individual rights, free will of the people to express themselves, violence and political affairs are concerned. However, there exists the clash between ideologies and western culture and religious fundamentalism. Pamuk, in his writings, spaces out history so that cultural interlacing is made to solve the crisis of identity, or self. Imagination, the intelligent sensibility, makes one interlace the symbolic cultural horizons and brings about dynamic unity.

Keywords: Cultural understanding - Imagination- Intelligent sensibility-Novelist's Politics- Responsibility

I. Introduction

Orhan Pamuk observes that “the history of the novel is the history of human liberation: by putting ourselves in others shoes, by using our imagination to free ourselves from our own identities, we are able to set ourselves free”(Other Colors 957). Imagination can transform and expand given cultural horizons so that in the process of hybridization and mutual transformation, new sensibilities and affections are developed. Imagination can, in the genre of a novelist's politics, make way for a liberal political culture to transform or save a nation from dissolving into fragments and thus enrich the political cultural and democratic capabilities of collectiveness. A culturally awakened political consciousness sensitized to the diversity of the world, to the manifoldness and imperfections of places, events and personalities, can seek the truth and can, instead of escaping from the world, join it in different ways, from different ways and perspectives, empowered by the courage and humility that creative imagination bestows.

Pamuk's imaginative and real world is Turkey, a country, which has been infested with a multitude of issues that can find their roots in religious, historical, political and geographical spheres. A country which has multiple leanings towards East and West and which is spread into two continents of Asia and Europe, naturally, gets distracted and confused from within and outside. These state of affairs divide the soul and spirit of the nation into various spheres and the prominent ones being state and religion. Survival is the instinct that gets people in their race for power and space, and thus the whole place is torn between issues that show epistemological, psychological, philosophical, existential and realistic concerns. Everyone and every machinery of the country is too much engaged and engrossed in unending, indefinite and time consuming tactics to solve the problems, yet disconcertedly getting entangled more and more into them without a way out.

Pamuk underlines that central to the art of the novel, is the question of the ‘other’ the ‘stranger’ the ‘enemy’ resonating within. Patient reading of great novels help us through sharing to expand our cultural and imaginative horizons. Here is where the novelist's symbolic politics wields itself to use imagination in a responsibly creative way, where culture is understood not as some authentic traditions but as redefining inclusiveness. Pamuk says, “A novelist's politics rises from his imagination, from his ability to imagine himself as someone else. This power makes him not just a person who explores the human realities that have never been voiced before – it makes him the spokesman for those who cannot speak for themselves, whose anger is never heard, and whose words are suppressed”(Other Colors 960-61).

Imagination is ‘intelligent sensibility’, which is receptive and form giving and has immense explorative power. It is by nature aesthetic. In the Bakhtinian concept, imagination is a way of anticipating the other and of dialoguing with him. It is a way to get to the meaning of ones own life, because through imagination, one can tell the story of oneself as another, one can reflect and better understand oneself, because one can see ones own life from the outside and as a foreigner. “The novel can”, according to Pamuk, “advance the understanding of humankind by imagining its characters in situations that we know intimately and care about and recognize from our own experience”(Other Colors 951). The hands of a skilled novelist make him present his own stories as stories of someone else in a novel. It can also give a novelist the chance to write of others lives as if they were his own. It is this kind of a chance that Pamuk explores in Snow (2004). The artist in Pamuk, shaped by the historical and postmodern framework has through his Ka in Kars tested the lines that mark off the ‘other’ and in

doing so alters the boundaries of our own identities. ‘Others’ become ‘us’ and we become ‘others’.

Snow could be the isolation from universal truth that the seeming history cuts a land off from the rest of the world. Pamuk, who has spent almost the better part of his life in Istanbul but who is culturally and politically westernized, is shattered to see his beliefs embodied in the dictatorial methods used by the successors of Kemal Ataturk to force a secular code on the Islam bred society. Yet he is a Turk at heart who values the heritage and culture of his homeland and is not willing to decry it.

Here is where the artist writes with the intention of transformation. It is the forming of one’s own experience or identity with the unsettling living or unique other, where one, in a constant anticipation and addressing with the other, changes, hybridizes and transforms. In a novelist’s politics Pamuk uses “story as a way into the subject that I am coming to understand more clearly with each new day, and that is in my view central to the art of the novel: the question of the other, the stranger, the enemy that resides inside each of our heads and how to transform it” (Other Colors 932). The novelist’s imagination thus expands ones capacity to understand ones own world as well as worlds that are alien different and uncanny”. Imagination embraces the moral and living connection with ‘the other’ sharpening its aesthetic awareness to the extent of enhancing the political and cultural realm of human collectiveness.

Pamuk’s characters, the others or he himself is in the writerly pursuit of new imaginative spaces to destabilize fixed identities, as the Hoja and the Slave in *The White Castle* (2001). Their desire to emerge as distinct individuals is made explicit by the question that Hoja voices: ‘Why am I what I am?’(121) Failing to come up with a definite answer to that question they finally decide to take each other’s place; Throughout the narrative the two men’s repeated yet futile attempts to distinguish themselves from the other through the binaries of the East/West, master/slave, and self/other, indicates the impossibility of defining an essential and real ‘self’ from which the ‘other’ could be derived.

The White Castle, which tells the story of a Venetian slave and the Ottoman Hoja, is constructed around the fact that these two men look alike. Their physical resemblance, which becomes dubious at various stages throughout the narrative, leads to an alleged exchange of identities, creating uncertainty regarding their identity. In fact in explaining how he had decided to tell his story, the narrator creates uncertainty regarding the very nature of that story. Many men believe that no life is determined in advance, that all stories are essentially a chain of coincidences. And yet, even those who believe this come to the conclusion, when they look back, that events they once took for chance were really inevitable. I have reached that moment now, as I sit at an old table writing my book, visualizing the colours of the Turkish ships appearing like phantoms in the fog; this seems the best of times to tell a tale. (*The White Castle* 17)

This initial indication of the possibility of fiction not only casts doubt on the ‘factuality’ of the events that the narrator includes in his book but also, by creating uncertainty, draws attention to the problematic line that separates memories and fiction. The recreation of the past in the present is a complex and problematic process where reliability and truthfulness appear to be the major concerns. The exclamation of the narrator ‘The two us were one person!’(177) not only provides clues regarding the plotline of the narrative but also displays Pamuk’s definition of the ‘self’ as always already multiple and fragmented. The two images reflected in the mirror are thus the two distinct representations of the same ‘self’, which will become evident in the final chapter of *The White Castle*. The dissimilarity of the Venetian and Hoja, revealed towards the end of the narrative, and their acknowledgment of their dissimilarity enables the exchange of identities because it is the undermining of the “ideal” image that enables the Venetian and Hoja to be ‘what they are’ by representing their ‘selves’ as ‘an-other’. They are ‘what they are’ by becoming ‘an-other’ Contrary to what people assume, Pamuk says he has no real reason to take an interest in politics. However, it is the only available platform as a novelist to explore into the intricacies stored in the corridors of history to be revealed taking imagination as the aid thus enabling the readers to invent and reinvent themes which lay deep. He exemplifies the phenomenon by discussing Dostoyevsky.

“To understand what is unique about the histories of other nations and other peoples, to share in unique lives that trouble and shake us, terrifying us with their depths, and shocking us with their simplicity-these are truths we can glean only from the careful, patient reading of great novels. Let me add that when Dostoyevsky’s devils begin to whisper into the reader’s ear, telling him of a secret rooted in history, a secret born of pride and defeat, shame and anger, they are illuminating the shadows of his own history too. Behind this recognition is a despairing writer who loves the west and despises it in equal measure, a man who cannot quite see himself as a westerner but is dazzled by the brilliance of western civilization, who feels himself caught between the two worlds”. (*Other Colors* 994) His novel is a medium for Pamuk to know and write the –‘Other’.

Snow has been acclaimed as a political novel, however Pamuk had made a statement to the effect that he was not writing a political novel to make propaganda but because he wanted to describe the condition of the peoples soul in a city. Though the city is called Kars, it is the microcosm of Turkey as a whole. He describes that he located the book in poor cold Kars because Kars literally reflects the sadness of being a part of Europe but at the same time of a hard ‘uneuropan’ lifestyle, rampant with the rift between Islam and modernity and the

longing for and at the same time the dread for the West. Pamuk believes that a novel can advance the understanding of humankind by imagining its characters in situations that we know intimately and care about and recognize from our own experience. “But a political novel is a limited genre because politics entails a determination not to understand those who are different from us, while the art of the novelist entails a determination to understand those who are different from us”. (The Naïve and the Sentimentalist Novelist 176). The most political novel is the novel which has no political themes or motives but that tries to see everything and understand everyone, to construct the largest whole.

Snow began as an imagination, with Pamuk painstakingly setting his story in the lonely isolated city northeast of Turkey. Pamuk actually visited the place many a time, making detailed notes on his setting exploring streets, shops and neighborhoods, conversing with the locals, the busy and the Youth. Pamuk did not do this to replicate the city in the novel. He wanted to project onto Kars his own sense of the city’s atmosphere and to situate his original idea of the novel in this city. Kars, once a beautiful city is now covered in Snow. Snow cold bitterness prevails everywhere. During the second half of the 1970, Kars saw a period of extreme violence. Oppressive measures instigated by the State and its intelligence services changed the course of the city’s history. Kurdish Guerilla attacks and political disasters followed. Yet in Pamuk’s narration, the real Kars is very often replaced by the Kars of his imagination. It is the small changes that take the novel out of the realm of reality and make it possible for him to work. I am using this story [Snow] as a way into the subject that I am coming to understand more clearly with each new day, and that is, in my view, central to the art of the novel: the question of the *lother*,¹ —the stranger,² the enemy that resonates inside each of our heads...One could define the novel as a form that allows the skilled practitioner to turn his own stories into stories about someone else, but this is just one aspect of the great and mesmerizing art that has entranced so many readers and inspired writers for almost four hundred years. It was the other aspect that drew me to the streets of Frankfurt and Kars: the chance of write of others’ lives as if they were my own. It is by doing this sort of research that novelists can begin to test the lines that mark off that —other and in so doing alter the boundaries of our own identities. Others become —us and we become —others.(Other Colors 932-33)

Snow’s central character is Ka a blocked exiled poet who returns from Germany to his country professedly with a mission to investigate the rumor of the headscarf girls who killed themselves. Kars is a conflict ground of secular and religious forces and his investigations lead him to encounter all the terrorists and radicals. Ka is torn between his love for his childhood love Ipek, moved to anguish and fury by the fundamentalists and gets involved in matters he would have far been away from. In the novel’s extended climax Ka becomes involved with Sunay, a former leftist who is now instrumental in carrying out the military vision aligned to the Ataturk tradition. Illusion and reality are confoundingly entwined in the crude anti Islamic play organized by Sunay, which ends in a near riot, giving excuse for the army to mount a minicoup and torture and even kill the audience comprising of the Islamists and the Kurds. Snow questions the issue of the suicide girls, the headscarf controversy and contemporary socio political contexts from the different viewpoints of political/ethnic allegiances. The Veil, the Secularists, Islamists, Kurds and the Armenians find space in the novel.

Turkey faced repeated ordeals at the hands of the European armies and later in the hands of the young Turks. In an ultimate aim to create a country that is richer, happier and more powerful, old culture and tradition were torn aside to make way for westernized reforms. The logic that lies at the heart of the westernizing reforms is the conviction that Turkey’s weakness and poverty stem from its age-old traditions and culture. In such awareness a sense of worthlessness engulfs which in turn gives rise to another deep and confused emotion-shame. Pamuk feels that shame has to be linked to its opposite which is pride. Whenever there is someone who feels deeply humiliated, we can expect to see a proud nationalism rising to the surface. “My novels are made from this dark material, from this shame this pride this anger and this sense of defeat. Because I come from a nation that is knocking on Europe’s door, I am only too aware of how easily these fragile emotions can from time to time take flame and rage unchecked (...) and it is by sharing our secret shames that we bring about our liberation; that is what the art of the novel has taught me” (Other Colors 951).

But keeping this reality a secret will only shame one to further silence. But a novelist can use his imagination to transform the very same reality and fashion it into a second world that demands recognition. Thus “novels are neither wholly real nor wholly imaginary. To read a novel is to confront both its author’s imagination and the real world whose surface we have been scratching with such fretful curiosity” (954-55). Thus when Pamuk narrates, history precipitates and his characters and plots take a travel beneath and into the skies almost simultaneously to create a ‘hyper and virtual’ history which gets compared with the happenings in the given period of time. Instances like the head scarf issue at Kars and Ka’s entry to report it followed by the coup attack all seem historical and political but the progression of the character Ka as the one who gets engaged in pursuing his ‘love’, his confrontation with the Islamists, his creative expression in the form of a poem, the entry of Orhan as the narrator after the death of Ka—all show Pamuk’s perception of the world. He employed history, politics and culture as imaginations for his characters to pursue. These imaginations are served as the

form, technique and content for his creative writings. "Taken together, Pamuk's "Ottoman" theme has little to do with Ottoman history or historical problem but rather, creates a liberating or triangulating discourse with respect to nationalist and Orientalist representations. The "Ottoman" theme, in short, is a space of opportunity, a meeting place of the real and the imaginary, self and other, a space of negotiation, transgression, and even "the sublime". (Göknar, Erdağ 2006)

Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, states that in the modern world, identities are shaped in "the interstices [where] the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha Homi, Interview 1998). Orhan Pamuk also tries to transgress the cultural boundaries between the East and the West by using in-betweenness as a bridge through the medium of literature. Pamuk, in one of the epigraphs to his novel *My Name is Red*, quotes from Koran: "To God belongs the East and the West", (MNR 287) which suggests the unifying aspects of the eastern and western cultures. Pamuk's answer to the east west question is that of a consensus born out of mutual respect caused by dialoguing with a self, which is culturally awakened. The focus is on the expression of an inner, original, authentic self, which recognizes the dialogue with the other as constitutive to it. In an imaginative novelistic journey we dialogically penetrate into the unfinished core of our and the others personality spearheaded by imagination which presents itself in the form of reflection communication and dialogue.

Imagination provides the much-needed space within each finite creature to start relating to something in the world, well in advance. The need for creating such a space is innate in every finite creature. Imaginative spaces thus created, forms the temporal syntheses of present past and future, which ground any further syntheses, both sensible and conceptual. In this sense time is more primordial than mind. To the power to represent, imagination makes visible, it gives a look to the horizon, to the world in which one dwells. It provides the space where one can appear and present oneself to others.

One also needs imagination both in order to familiarize oneself with the others symbolic space and in order to envisage alternatives, new possibilities. The explorative power of imagination simultaneously penetrates the others universe while it reflectively distracts oneself from ones own familiar symbolic horizons, for defrosting identities and memories. Imagination creates an essential space where one can effectively make opinions significant and portray actions. The imaginative world is dynamically connected to yet unexpressed possibilities and meanings and is never self sufficient or closed. Its role is to keep meanings emerging by giving expression to yet unexpressed possibilities and meanings.

Pamuk declares in a recent interview that politics has a deeper cultural meaning. This refers to the fact that Pamuk, as many others in Turkey nowadays, aims to achieve political change through cultural criticism and through narratives. This proves to be important especially when politics can be dangerous because not enough freedom of speech is granted to the citizens of a country. In these situations culture and cultural criticism can provide the medium for achieving political reform and for staging and enacting, for performing non-existent rights and liberties.

Thus to "read a novel is to confront both its authors imagination and the real world". (Other Colors 956) It is to travel back and forth in ones imagination 'between the world in that novel and the world in which we still live". (Other Colors 955) It is an imaginative journey through which by putting ourselves in another's shoes and our imaginations to shed our identities, we are able to set ourselves free. Through the novelists exercise of imagination others become us and we become others. Such an act is political because it helps one to reflect on ones memories; hopes and dreams in ways that reveal the centrality of the other in ones own culture and history. Such an act is political because it dialogizes ideas and memories, identities and vision, thus creating a situation where they can change and transform.

As a result the novelistic exercise gives us the power to begin to test the lines that mark off that other and thus to alter the boundaries of our own identities' the geography of our daily lives, as summoned by "the collectivity, the nation, the society to which we belong". (Other Colors 936) The novel thus becomes an exercise of thinking, understanding, and imagining identities in worlds where borders, histories and national distinctions are in constant change. It becomes an exercise in transcending the either/or thinking of nationalism and westernization, as well as the obsession with identity. It becomes an exercise in transcending the clear cut distinctions between us and them, which underlines the ideology of nationalism. It becomes an exercise in denationalizing myths in ways that make them more inclusive. It becomes an exercise into democratic cosmopolitanism, thus facilitating intercultural understanding.

Pamuk's politics as a novelist thus constructs culture as an open-ended dialogue of different voices and centrifugal forces. However one should have a manifold and variable sensibility and an imaginative capacity to hold these voices from becoming oppositions and antagonisms. Ones imaginative capacity should be able to look at ones own familiar and given symbolic horizons from the nowhere of utopia or from the unhomey and the unfamiliar to which poetic thinking transports one and the ability to comprehend this manifoldness into a whole.

One should be capable to generate new meanings to establish relations, and create new realities through the inventive application of what is present and familiar to unfamiliar uncanny and incomprehensible situations. It would also make one capable of seeing ones own culture encompassing in its broad purview, meanings and possibilities yet spoken, its unfinalised and inexhaustible core and its dynamic relational and open unity. A novelists politics proves to be an imaginative exercise that is conducive to intercultural understanding especially when it is practiced in places that uncertainly waver between East and the West, places on the edge of Europe and on its periphery. In such situations a novelist's politics has the merit of not allowing distances to become antagonisms. Pamuk states that people living in such places admire Europe and the West and emulate them. At the same time they are driven by the proud desire to find their own voice against them. Thus they experience against those who in their own countries transform the West into a path of easy pleasure, success or power. They are also haunted by the potential shame for not being able to live up to the dream and the vision, to the ideal that Europe or the West represents for them- "an apparition at times desired and at times feared-a future but never a memory"(Other Colors 777).

Thus Pamuk observes that someone who would practice a novelists politics from such places would come to understand that he can only criticize his own culture and can only move from a conservative nationalism to a creative modernity to the extent that he clings to a fairy tale image of an ideal Europe or the West. Thus he needs the Utopian power of his imagination. At the same time he has to recreate his imaginative escapes in his own world by connecting them to the memories and traditions of his people to their ideology- namely to the image that a group has of itself. Novels become the voice of the collectivity, the nation, the society, expressing the author's dream whose imagination of pride, joy, anger, vulnerabilities and even shame of his reader, finds expression.

The past, for Pamuk, is not an objective source from which an ultimate and genuine definition of identity can be obtained, but rather is a narrative that is constantly being re-written. He uses the past in order to give meaning to the present and to find answers for the schism of the present. To search within, to think so long and hard about our own selves, would only make us unhappy... If we did, little by little, by writing those kinds of tales, by searching for the strange within our selves, we, too, would become someone else, and God forbid, our readers would too... But I wanted to! (The White Castle 344)

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