



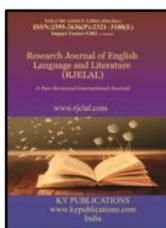
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CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND POST-MODERN NARRATIVE IN ORHAN PAMUK'S *THE BLACK BOOK*

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ABSTRACT

The slippery, equivocal texture of Orhan Pamuk's novel, *The Black Book* (Kara Kitap in Turkish), written between 1985 and 1989, is a reflection both of its literary aesthetic and of modern Istanbul where the story is set. While embroidering the theme of the present novel Pamuk's basic goal was to invent a literary language that would correspond to the texture of life in Istanbul. In an article he has described that he wanted the readers to feel the terrors of living in this city but not to give a realistic description. He wanted to present a sense of two thousand years of history along with Byzantine buildings converted into factories, and to weave such texture Pamuk drew upon obscure stories he unearthed from traditional Sufi literature which is largely known to the Turkish public, from the Arabian Nights, folktales, anecdotes and murders from old newspapers, believe it or not columns and scenes from American and Turkish movies. Pamuk pushes the readers close to the edge of what they are likely to accept, or has already been proved in his native Turkey—the most Westernized country of the East

Key Words: Identity, Desire, Leftist

The Black Book (BB) explores cultural and individual instability on a grand scale. Taking plot of the novel, at first it appears to be the search by a young lawyer of the name Galip for his beloved wife Ruya who is also his paternal cousin. The name Ruya means 'dream' in Turkish. They have known each other since childhood. They spent their childhood together in the apartment building, Sehirikalp in the main streets of Nisantasi, one of the upper-class neighborhoods of Istanbul. But because of some unspecified economic disaster their families have are forced to sell their apartment building and to move to other, more modest flats in back streets in the same neighborhood. The plot is woven in such a style that the reader never gets to know Ruya, as an active character; instead one experiences her

presence in Galip's thoughts only. In the very first chapter he gazes her for one last time and describes her as:

Ruya was lying face down on the bed, lost to the sweet warm darkness beneath the billowing folds of the blue-checked quilt. . . . Languid with sleep, Galip gazed at his wife's head: Ruya's chin was nestling in the down pillow. The wondrous sights playing in her mind gave her an unearthly glow that pulled him toward her even as it suffused him with fear. (Pamuk, *The Black Book* 3)

Another person who is nowhere present in the novel is Celal; he is Galip's paternal cousin and Ruya's stepbrother. Celal is a famous columnist in

the newspaper, Milliyet. In the very beginning of the novel Ruya has mysteriously left him with very little explanation. He wanders around the city looking for his clues for her whereabouts. Galip's search for winter days takes him to the strangest quarters of the city, brings him into contact with the weirdest individuals, and plunges him into the most original ideas. Galip idolizes Celal and cannot do without reading his column every day. In the process of his search Galip tries to find Celal in order to get his advice, but then it turns out that Celal has disappeared too. Nevertheless the newspaper appears with his column every day, but the articles printed are old ones originally published twenty or thirty years earlier. Later, it appears to Galip that Ruya might have returned to either her ex-husband or Celal. Ruya was previously married to a militant leftist. Pamuk's description of this kind of activist, who after a certain age adopts the opposite political views and becomes more and more bourgeois, is quite expert. The character of Ruya's ex-husband had the dream of socialism which has now been taken over by nationalistic fervour. His great idea is that the West has started a conspiracy to brainwash the Turks by the means of the movies—movies that present a reality to the viewers quite different from their own. Describing the details of the whole process he says:

Church organs, pounding out chords of a fearful symmetry, women as beautiful as icons, the hymn like repetition of images, and those arresting scenes sparkling with drinks, weapons, airplanes, designer clothes-put all these together and it was clear that the movie method proved far more radical and effective than anything missionaries had attempted in Africa and Latin America. Why had not a single official in the state bureaucracy noticed that the rise of movie going was in inverse proportion to Istanbul's decline? (127-128)

His notion, which is presented in different shapes and versions throughout the novel, is closely related to the identity motif. Pamuk has tried to bring out the real picture prevailing in the Turkish society. The Turks, because of the movies, were getting accustomed to a reality that is not their own; where

they are not their own selves but have become other persons out of illusion, as with regard to screen, Walter Benjamin holds that "the critical and receptive attitudes of the public coincide" (39). Thus, we may observe that one layer of identity is stressed in certain situations, depending on the identity of the 'other' states or organizations. In this context Alexander Went argues that a "world in which identities and interests are learned and sustained by intersubjectively grounded practice, by what states think and do, is one in which 'anarchy is what states make of it'" (183). In this novel of Pamuk, we come across the fact that, in addition to the self of the Turkish state, there is the self of the Turkish nation which is more dynamic and open to change than the official discourse of the state, as identity "is a matter of our minds picturing the way the world and our social interactions are organized in relation to other social groups" (Esposito and Baker 119).

Galip admires his cousin Celal so much that he would like to resemble him, to become him, to take his place. During different stages of self-reflection and search in his own mind, he thanks to his great love for Celal and Ruya perceives both of them within himself, and eventually he becomes Celal. In the first half of the novel, however, Galip's thoughts are generally occupied with different aspects of identity. In one such episode illustrating identity problematic is the chapter entitled "Look Who's here," where Galip, in the course of his peregrinations in the city, suddenly finds himself in a brothel. The woman whom he meets there is dressed as a famous Turkish actress, Turkan Soray. This was actually role of a bar girl in a film called 'Licensed to love'. This brings in light an extremely complex identity shift, how people even in their normal course of their life were aping the characters from movies to hide their real self, as "[i]dentity is a matter of our minds picturing the way the world and our social interactions are organized in relation to other social groups . . . [and thus] "identity becomes an instrument for the pursuit of interests. At the same time, the causal arrow between interests to identity could also run from identity to interest" (Esposito, Voll and Baker 120).

The human desire either to be oneself or to become somebody else is also the subject of another chapter—where Galip visits a nightclub. Where everyone presents around the table tells a story. The subject of all the stories is a love relation where the woman disappears for some reason or another; at the same time, the construction of a different identity is also indirectly illustrated in these stories:

Towards the end of the novel, while interpreting the signs, Galip observes around the city, and is convinced that Ruya and Celal are hiding in an apartment building 'city of hearts'. From the wife of the janitor he learns that Celal has bought back the apartment years ago but does not want anyone to know that he is living there. He lives a secluded life there completely cut off from the world. Galip steals the keys to the apartment, and the first half of the novel concludes with his opening the door of the apartment, and thus, in a way going through the looking glass. Later, Galip does not find either Ruya or Celal in the apartment, instead finds an enormous cupboard where Celal has filed everything he has written during his life as a journalist, and also an important part of what he has read. In order to find clues to where Celal and Ruya may have hidden, he stands to go through and read the contents of the cupboard. Thus, he gradually takes over Celal's memory, without, however, being aware of it. Unknowingly he starts writing articles for the newspaper in Celal's name. In this way he realizes his own potential as a writer. He, in his obscure literary and historical byways, quests for his inner self. Yet, in order to succeed in his inner journey, he has to explore his self and his other potential selves. When Galip is going through Celal's articles, an individual, who naturally takes him for Celal, repeatedly calls him up and insists on meeting him. In order to explain to Celal how much he loves him and appreciates his column, this individual (whom Galip calls as Mehramet, an imaginary name) constantly refers to articles written by Celal. In spite of his persistence Galip refuses to give him his address. Later on, Mehramet's wife calls Galip (also, of course, believing that he is Celal). She, as it turns out, was Celal's mistress many years ago. She now tells him how one of Celal's article appeared to her

as if he was summoning her, as a result she ran away from home, leaving a short note, just as Ruya had done to Galip. In order to meet Celal her husband forced her to call him. This also reveals why Mehramet insists on meeting Celal (He wants to kill Celal). The reason for such intention is not because Celal was his wife's lover many years ago, but because he realizes that this journalist has been deceiving his readers through all the years as a columnist, and that the literary tricks he has been using and the stories he has been telling have nothing to do with reality. At the end of their telephonic conversation, Galip successfully convinces Mehramet to give up his plan to kill him, that is, Celal and they make an appointment to meet at a certain corner at nine o'clock the same evening. In an eerie twist, it turns out that this man Mehramet who is a jealous husband had been following Galip around Istanbul in an attempt to find Celal through him, accounting for Galip's frequent apprehension that he is being watched. Afterwards, soon Celal is shot to death in the same corner, and Ruya is also found murdered in Alladin's store. The mystery of the murderer is never discovered for certain.

The novel ends with a postmodern twist of the author revealing his presence in the narrative. The mystery plot of *The Black Book* is more concerned with exploring the nature of storytelling as a means of constructing identity than with a straight-forward plot. The complexity of the tale comes from the writer's vocation as a creator of clues, and the retrospective adoption of his role by Galip (and by the author-voice of the novel). A close look at the characters reveal how Ruya remains elusive throughout the novel, she was fond of reading murder mysteries with a sole ambition to write a detective novel even the author of which never discovers the culprit. This is something exactly what Pamuk has experimented with this novel. The genre employed by Pamuk other than murder mystery is journalism. He uses the two in alternate chapters. As Esim Erdim points out in her doctoral thesis on *The Black Book*.

However, the main theme of the novel remains construction of identity and it returns on many levels. For instance, the protagonist Galip is

not happy with who he is. He dislikes his life of a lawyer and envies the successful columnist Celal for years. In *The Black Book*, the contrastive relationship can be considered regarding the identity issue. Celal is the writer and Galip discovers his true self when he becomes Celal. Therefore, Galip is an imitation of Celal. However, the reality of Celal is debatable also. He never appears in the novel except at the death scene at the end. He is present only through his columns, which are never explicitly attributed to him. So far, for Galip, Celal is no stranger. It is clearly described in the novel that Galip finds his identity only when he becomes Celal, and this proves that none of the two persons are initiations of anyone, instead Galip explores the potential writer in himself and solves his identity problem by becoming a synthesis of Galip and Celal. All the main characters of this novel suffer from identity crisis. They are all in the process of exploration of self or of potential selves. This search for the self shows itself as the paradox of being one's self and, at the same time, being the other. Characters experience the difficulty of knowing the other and feel strange when they come face to face with this otherness.

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