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“Why am I what I am?”: Destabilization of Identity in Orhan Pamuk’s

The White Castle

Zofishan Bano, Research Scholar

University of Lucknow, Lucknow

Abstract: *The discourse around the clash of civilization between the East and the West continues to stimulate penetrating discussion. Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish writer in postmodern sense, tries to bridge the fissure between the West and the East in his writings. Though Pamuk generally writes about Turkey but the themes of his writings are universal. Like all his novel, The White Castle deals with the identity crisis and the East-West conflict. Identities are constantly changing phenomenon and people question their identities when they come across the irreplaceable “Other”. In The White Castle, the narrator Hoja, an intelligent Turk, questions his own identity when he meet the Italian slave, and after some time, they assume each other’s identity to live each other’s life.*

Keyword: *clash of civilization, identity crisis, the East-West conflict, other.*

The Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk is a prominent voice in modern Turkish as well as global literary world. In his writings, he tries to bridge the gap between the East and the West because he thinks that in the age of globalization personal and political are intertwined with one another and it is impossible to differentiate what is western and eastern as in his “*The Paris Review Interview*” Pamuk says: “Everyone is sometimes a Westerner and sometimes an Easterner— in fact a constant combination of the two”.

Like Cervantes, Orhan Pamuk’s works are like an appeal for acceptance in a place where prevailing ideologies have almost effectively replaced the ancient belief of religious and ethnic diversity with a humiliating evenness. Like Naguib Mahfouz, Pamuk’s works are not rigorously spiritual and dogmatic in their spirit nevertheless slightly their writings unveil a spectacular composition on their personal lives and the blood feud that surrounds individual understandings in their own countries. Pamuk’s has an extensive exposure to the Western culture and that is why his orientation is more secular and Western than religious and Eastern— in fact he is the representative of old Turkey (Gilman xv as quot. in Mehnaz M. Afridi and David M. Buyze).

Pamuk mostly writes about Turkey and most of his novels are set in Turkey but the themes of his novels are universal. Most of the protagonists of his novels face identity crisis whether it is Black in *My Name is Red*, or Ka in

Snow but *The White Castle* and *The Black Book* together establish Pamuk's most contemplative reflections on identity crisis. Pamuk thinks that it is in these two novel he has finally "found his voice" as a novelist. *The White Castle* was Pamuk's first novel that was translated into English. The novel sets in seventeenth century Istanbul, and it is a startling and overwhelming Borgesian fable which uses a "sodomasochistic and twisted" relationship between the Hoja, an Ottoman scientist and a Venetian slave, his look-alike and by doing so Pamuk suggests that though the East and West are pole apart but they both are interchangeable.

Though Pamuk has taken the idea of the novel from Arthur Koestler's *Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* but *Don Quixote* plays an important role in the origin of the novel. As Jale Parla, a renowned Turkish critic writes, "The Venetian's story from beginning to end makes reference to Cervantes's Eastern story" (Roman ve Kimlik, 94 as quot. in Michael McGaha). In several ways, *The White Castle* looks like a mirror image of *Don Quixote*. *Don Quixote* is a story of the relationship between an idealistic and austere Don Quixote (whose real name is in doubt throughout the book) and his servant, pragmatic and self-indulgent, Sancho Panza. In *The White Castle*, the story teller is an Italian intellectual who, like Cervantes, is caught by the Turkish army and imprisoned. *Don Quixote* is presented as a translation of an Arabic manuscript by a Muslim author whose trustworthiness is questioned by the novel's translator and *The White Castle* is presented as a "seventeenth century manuscript" discovered and stolen by the historian in an archive in Gebze.

The White Castle deals with the East-West conflict, identity crisis and the problem of authorhood. In *The White Castle*, the identity of the author and the protagonist is placed into question in a sequence of substitutions and oversights. Since the beginning of the text, the "preface" does a very crucial part in the complication of novelist's identity through presenting Faruk Darvinoğlu, whose designation is written at the end of the preface as a translator and originator of the following manuscript. Darvinoğlu claims that he has done a deep research to find the identity of the writer and the origin of the manuscript. In the preface, he further claims that the writer of the manuscript loves to read Evliya Chelebi's work, a well-known seventeenth century travel writer of Ottoman Empire as well as the author also "clearly enjoyed reading and fantasizing" but not anything could be determined unambiguously as to the individuality of the writer. Darvinoğlu talks about his efforts to find out the individuality of the writer in archives and graveyards but at the end concludes that only few of the details are accurate as well as some are fabricated. After studying the manuscript, he explains that he loves reciting as well as discoursing about the story, "it's symbolic

value, it's fundamental relevance to our contemporary realities, how through this tale (he) had come to understand our own time, etc" (11).

The story of the novel initiates through the arrest of an educated young Venetian, who is arrested by the Turkish army, and he has been sold as a slave to a Turk basically called the Hoja (master). The slave finds his master identical to him: "The resemblance between myself and the man who entered the room was incredible! It was *me* there... It was as if someone wanted to play a trick on me and had brought me in again by a door directly opposite the one I had first come through..." (22), but the master never finds any resemblance between them. He helps him in display of firework, astronomy, physics and medicine. They both learn each other's language in order to know about each other. The novel mostly talks about the ups and downs of their long relationship. Nothing much happens in the novel. Though there are some hints of homoerotic attraction but nothing blatantly carnal ever happens. While reading the novel closely, we find the effects of the alterations of identity. During the long time when they are together, neither of them is married but they sometimes visit brothel together. They play painful games with each other; sometimes one is dominant and sometimes another one.

Though the Hoja's knowledge is greater than the slave's but the Hoja's encounter with the Venetian slave causes him to question his own identity, questioning, "Why am I what I am?" (58). After his encounter with the slave the Hoja depends on him more than he needs, and for his every task, he needs the others' (the West/ the slave) opinions because in his opinion the other/the West is superior to him/ the East. The slave replies that he does not know the answer because "this question was often asked by 'them', and asked more and more everyday" (58). After few days, the slave states to Hoja that 'they' (the West/the Other) do "look in the mirror", indeed too much than the general public do in the East. He further tells him that in the West, every home has a mirror "carefully framed and hung upon the walls; it wasn't only because of this but because 'they' constantly thought about themselves that 'they' had progressed in this respect" (59-60). Michael McGaha writes that historians have argued that development of a confident sense of individual identity, centered on self-awareness and self-examination, was associated with the upsurge of individualism, which happened in West during the Renaissance but in the East it was very late (in the mid-nineteenth century) (McGaha 95).

After listening the slave, Hoja orders him to write down “why he is what he is”, and the slave write down good and bad experiences of his life. Here the question arises “Is a person’s identity is the sum total of his/her life experiences?” Though in the beginning Hoja does not find his writings of his life experiences satisfactory but later he uses these facts when he assumes his identity. The slave tricks him to write down the answer of that question but instead of writing anything particular, Hoja reasons “why ‘they’ were so inferior and stupid” (64). The act of writing all-night facing each other serves as a duplication in the indistinguishable search for identity. After some times the slave imprudently suggest him that a person’s identity may lie in his/her mistake then Hoja orders him to write down about his own sins and faults, which Hoja reads with “queer pleasure” and “greedy curiosity” (66). During their time of togetherness, they struggle to define their distinct individuality. This process of writing about oneself and talking about each other’s dream and comparing each other’s understanding of the other and the self fallouts in conflation and destabilization of identities, and this confusion and conflation of identity further looks like to proclaim the irreconcilability of such matters as the “Self” and the “Other”. After an unsuccessful attack on the White Castle, both of them decide to assume each other’s identities: the Hoja goes to Italy as a Venetian slave, and the Venetian slave returns to Turkey in the place of the Hoja. Till now we understand that the Italian slave is the narrator of the novel who is writing his own memoir but as the story progresses the narrator discloses the fact that the Italian slave is not a narrator but rather the Hoja is the narrator, and also he is the writer of the story. Once again the identities of the slave and the Hoja slip away from certainty and the readers are thrust into ambiguity and confusion. At this point we cannot be sure that whether the Italian slave ever exist or the Hoja has fabricated his story.

In the last chapter, an Italian traveler who has read about the Hoja, who is now a famous writer, visits him and the Hoja offers him his book to read, and after reading the book, the Italian notes that his description of the Italy is not accurate and it seems that he must not have any “real” ties to Italy. The Hoja’s depiction of the country in his book is discovered as a site from his home’s window in Gebze (the East of Istanbul). In fact the Hoja has reimagined Gebze as Italy in his story. Again the reader cannot draw any conclusion regarding the whole story because at this moment the reader can distrust the individuality of the Italian tourist, who is giving this information, as he may be a just another character in Hoja’s story.

In *The White Castle*, Pamuk has transformed the genre of novel by dramatizing the conflict of East and West, and by making Istanbul as a center of this conflict which is historically and traditionally a crossroad of this conflict. Most of the novel is about the twenty five year long relationship of ups and down between Hoja and the Venetian slave and this relationship replicates the attempt to know what time and again seems inconceivable about the Other, to know about the Other and have power over the Other. To serve his purpose, Pamuk has used a doppelganger motif in the story: Hoja desires to be like the educated Venetian slave, to live like him and to interchange his life with him. In the novel they are designated as brothers by themselves and the people around them. Throughout the novel Hoja does a constant comparison with the Venetian slave and “the others”, and by the slave with the Hoja. Hoja is shown as being preoccupied and approximately fanatical with distinguishing and comparing himself with “Others”; “Others” who can never be like him and with whom he finds faults (the fools). Throughout the story this “Other” has a perpetual existence and it is dangerous for the “self”. However, he struggles to assume his identity, and delineate himself contrary to his persona. During the course of the novel, Hoja talks about “those fools”, whom Hoja dislikes, and “those fools” are not perfect like him. He always criticizes the sultan, the vizier, and the slave and the “others”, and writes about them in a paper he typically titled, “Fools I Have Known Well”.

Throughout the novel whenever Hoja as a narrator addresses the slave, he speaks about “Him” with a capital “H”; so this question of otherness is initiated by none other than the Hoja himself. This “Him” with capital “H” symbolizes the Other, even if an Occidental other, and the authority which the West has. The White Castle which appears in the concluding pages of the novel turn out to be the emblem of the supremacy (the West), and it is the basis of “Him”. The unaccomplished ambitions as to be identical to the West are echoed in the portrayal of the “White Castle” that is attacked by an army of the sultan in order to outshine the castle:

I didn't know why I thought that one could see such a beautiful and unattainable thing only in a dream. In that dream you would run along a road twisting through a dark forest, straining to reach the bright day of that hilltop, that ivory edifice; as if there were a grand ball going on which you wanted to join in, a chance for happiness you did not want to miss, but although you expected to reach the end of the road at any moment, it would never end (143).

Though Hoja is intelligent and interested in the knowledge and power of the West but it is impossible for the Hoja to attain the knowledge and simultaneous power because like the White Castle, the aim of attaining the knowledge and power of the West is fictional.

When after some time Hoja goes to war he does “Nazi-like experiments” (for instance, he interrogates and tortures an equivalent number of Christians and Janissaries and compares the results), and he also tries to find out the secrets from the people who are dying in war. He thinks that people who are dying will tell him the secret before they will draw the “mask of death” (140) over their faces: “Hoja was prepared to interrogate them so they might divulge it; from them he would learn that deep truth which would change everything in an instant, but I saw that he immediately identified the despair on those faces so very close to death as his own despair, and when he came close to them he couldn’t speak” (140).

One main dissimilarity amid the West and the East lay in the statistic that the Easterners are philosophical/fatalistic, reconciled to what they see as “God’s will,” while the Westerners fight persistently to fend off the predictability of death. Henceforth when an epidemic of plague occurs in Turkey and reaches Istanbul, Hoja respects the slave’s propositions that they take precautionary methods as cowardice. In the final chapter of the book, it is the sultan who reveals the eventual ineffectiveness of all such generalization by asking the narrator, “Must one be a sultan to understand that men, in four corners and seven climes of the world, all resembled one another? Afraid, I would say nothing; as if to break my last effort at resistance he would ask once again: was it not the best proof that men everywhere were identical with one another that they could take each other’s place?” (151).

While growing up Pamuk was deeply aware of the East-West distinction and was acutely annoyed whenever he or his country (Turkey) was branded “Oriental” (in negative sense), as he writes in his book *Öteki Renkler*. So while writing *The White Castle*, he desired to go out of such detrimental clichés and wanted to free himself from the emotional scars left by such concern as he writes “May be my book was written to escape from a conventional attitude. There is a desire in this book for East not to be East and West not to be West” (135). By handling the East-West problem in such playful manner, Pamuk has tried to bridge the gap between the two.

The White Castle is that Neverland where thing is fair, a man or a nation would be really free and happy only if one could reach there but it is impossible or beyond our access. The “whiteness of the castle” symbolizes false and idealistic pureness, and it is also the symbol of power and capitalism that is unattainable and for that reason remains an absolute and incompatible difference. Like the sovereignty of the dialogue of the West, the purity of the castle is fictional. Though by assuming his slave’s identity and running away to Italy can save Hoja’s life but it never bring happiness in his life.

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