



## Symbolism of Color Words in Orhan Pamuk's Novels

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### Abstract

Orhan Pamuk is a renowned writer in Turkey and worldwide. One of the characteristics of his works is employing the historical facts and color words in his novels. The fundamental purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the symbolism of the color words in the titles of Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, *The White Castle*, and *The Black Book*. Studying and analysis of these novels and referring to some critical reviews were the resources that have been used to reach the conclusions. In *My Name is Red*, the author uses the words of color to make the reader full of imagination. Red color stands for the glory of the Ottoman Empire in terms of painting. The white color, as the author uses it in *The White Castle*, has significance in Orhan Pamuk's writings. The white color refers to the triumph and victory of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century. Through this novel Orhan Pamuk rejects the conflict between civilizations. He exposes emerging the different civilizations to construct a humanitarian vision. The black color reflects the sadness and gloomy in certain period of time in the history of the Ottoman Empire as *The Black Book* reveals.

### A short introduction to the life of Ferit Orhan Pamuk

Orhan Pamuk, the 2006 Noble laureate for literature, was born in 1952 in Istanbul. Pamuk dreamed of becoming an artist during much of his youth, but this was frowned upon by his family as impractical. Instead he studied architecture at Istanbul Technical College, but quit after three years. He told Eber Stadt in the New York Times that he used to lock himself in his bedroom for very long time and enjoyed his reading and writing. That was in his early age, at his twenties.

Once every three years his mother opened Orhan's bedroom door and reminded him that she wished him to apply for medical college but he was not for the idea. He wanted to be a painter then he decided to write. He spent much of that time writing, and reading books from the Western world's most well-known authors. Pamuk eventually earned a degree from the University of Istanbul's Institute of Journalism in 1976, and continued to work on his fiction. It took several years to find a publisher for his first work, *Cevdet Bey ve oğullari* (*Cevdet Bey and His Sons*), which became the first of his books to top Turkey's bestseller list.

## Introduction

In this paper three novels will be dealt with. The title of each novel has a different color word. The first of Pamuk's works to appear in English was *The White Castle*, a 1990 British edition of his 1985 title *Beyaz kale*. A year later, it was issued by Braziller and made it to the New York Times year-end list of the most notable books of 199. *My Name is Red* was published by Knopf in 2001. In its original Turkish-language edition, the work was not only another bestseller, but the fastest-selling title in the history of Turkish literature. Orhan Pamuk's novel *The Black Book* (published as *Kara Kitap* in Turkey in 1990) is a bit of a mystery, a detective story, a history of Turkey, and a philosophical discussion of identity.

Color has added a new taste to human's life. A picture becomes more fascinating and attractive only if it is colored. Color has its own various impacts on almost all our lives' fields, literature is one of them. Orhan Pamuk is keenly aware of this fact while giving titles to his novels. Three novels of Orhan Pamuk carry color words in the titles, *The White House*, *The Black Book*, and *My Name is Red*. In literature the color words have a lot to do with the perceptions of human mind. The world of literature is very deep and it may be second to impossible to explore it completely. The same can be true to the use of colors in literature which may be very interesting for the author. Writing of fiction requires a great deal of effort for an author to create it. Simultaneously, he uses a number of techniques and selection of color words is one of them. Psyche, may be, and racial differences in color visions have high value of significance in writing fiction.

Novelists and poets utilize colors to create images of their characters and incidents. They use techniques such as symbolisms verbally or in the written form. "Try to discover who I am from my choice of words and colors, as attentive people like yourselves might examine footprints to catch a thief."<sup>1</sup>

As a result, the symbolism of colors in literature imparts a profound meaning to the words that transform the written text into a more vigorous tool. Novelists and poets have the ability to use different colors properly in a certain style which produces different meanings in their works.

## Discussion

Pamuk depicts a universal structure for a more thoughtful and deep understanding and also the comprehension of the power of images in this novel, *My Name is Red*. The color red is found as the most frequent in the novel which has a big deal of symbolic references in the text and makes the reader's mind full of imaginations. "I hear the question upon your lips: What is it to be a color? Color is the touch of the eye, music to the deaf, a word out of the darkness. Because

I have listened to souls whispering – like the susurrus of the wind- from book to book and object to object for tens or thousands of years.”<sup>2</sup>

In Turkish mythology, Turks' interest in colors has an important value. These include blue, white / white and red / red colors come first. The name of red color was not seen in Turkish before the 12th century. In other words, red passed to Turkish later from Persian.

Red was the symbol of love on one side and on the other side it could symbolize a range of things like rose, passion, etc. Red is associated with power, strength, beauty, and maturity. In *My Name is Red*, red color has been used in more than a hundred places and comes up with different meanings in general, physical power, and motion. Although it is the color of life, it is also considered as the representative of love, passion and sexuality. The red color was used primarily in the novel to describe its appeal:

If I looked at myself in the mirror from a distance, and moved oh so delicately, I could see my whole body. My vest of red broadcloth suited me, but I also wanted to don my mother's purple blouse which had been part of her trousseau. I took out the long pistachio colored robe my grandmother had embroidered with flowers, and tried it on, but it didn't please me. As I was trying it on under the purple blouse, I felt a chill; I shuddered, and the candle flame trembled with me. Over it all, of course, I was going to wear my fox fur-lined street robe, but at the last minute I changed my mind, and silently crossing the hall, I removed the very long and loose azure-colored woolen robe that my mother had given me and put it on. Just then I heard a noise at the door and fell into a panic: Black was leaving! I quickly removed my mother's old robe and put on the fur-lined red one: It was tight around the bustline, but I liked it.<sup>3</sup>

In this novel, mostly, the color red symbolized sturdy emotions or things of strong emotions more willingly than intellectual ideas which could be of philosophical interest. “The beauty and mystery of this world only emerges through affection... open your eyes wide and actually see this world by attending to its color, details and irony.”<sup>4</sup> Red also, for example, symbolized a certain degree of excitement, energy, a kind of speed, strength, passion, threat and even violence. In the course of the reading of novel, we see that the author used this particular word/ image with certain things/ words. In the lines and phrases while reading the book, one can see certain uses of the word red with some specific terms and expressions where it is recognized an imaginative picture of a certain thing which takes us from an existing world to a non-existing or imaginative world.

The red color is considered not only as a charm but also as a color for sexuality; sexuality is not only unique to human beings; animals also communicate differently among themselves. They try to experience these impulses through their ways (emitting odors, making sounds, etc.):

Chinese silks and Chinese pottery adorned with blue flowers, what did the Venetian Doge send to Nurhayat Sultan, the esteemed daughter of our respected Sultan? A soft and cuddly Venetian she-dog with a coat of silk and sable. I heard that this bitch is so spoiled she has a red silk dress as well. One of our friends actually fucked her, that's how I know, and she can't even engage in the act without her dress. In that Frankish land of hers, all dogs wear outfits like that anyway.<sup>5</sup>

Every color word used here creates the feeling of different emotions in people. Here is red color also handled as the color of enthusiasm in the author's emotional world "I'm so fortunate to be red! I'm fiery. I'm strong. I know men take notice of me and that I cannot be resisted"<sup>6</sup>. Red color is a reflection of concrete life in the world of emotion. When a person makes a mistake and realizes this mistake, his face is getting reddish. This color expresses the shame of the work that person has done "Through an open door, I witnessed young students being reprimanded as they leaned forward, their noses almost touching the pages spread before their reddened faces, as they tried to understand the mistakes they'd made."<sup>7</sup>

Colors are handled not only with their positive aspects but also with their negative characteristics and emotions, these colors are being elaborated based on the negative meanings. Red is also in this novel, both positively and negatively explained. Red Color reflects the excitement of the Jewish woman Ester, who brought a letter to Shakura in the novel "Would you deign to buy a silk handkerchief for your secret lover from Esther, Istanbul's premier peddler of fine cloth?"

"Nay."

"A red sash of Atlas silk?"<sup>8</sup>

The liveliness and sincerity of the red color has in fact been indispensable for nature. Especially flowers are the most beautiful indicators of this liveliness. Connotation when saying red, yellow and hite has always been different. For example, the red rose has been the symbol of love and passion.

In *My Name Red*, roses mean not a flower as a concept, but a color or it was used to remind that color. When the author says "rose colored dresses" here it actually refers to the red color. Then wear a red dress implies that it was used as the color of physical power, vitality and fame. "I saw clean-shaven butchers wielding cleavers, wearing rose- and purple-colored uniforms and smiling at the pink carcasses of skinned sheep hanging from hooks."<sup>9</sup>

The red color also shows its effect on the battlefields. 'Keep it from the flags', we see the effects of this color through the war tents. In the novel, Sultan Süleyman While the war tent is depicted, the color dominating this tent is again red. Because war tents and the complementary colors can actually be seen as a continuation of a tradition. The use of red color in the battlefield may give the meaning of the desire and willingness for the war:

These are by Kasim from the Kasim Pasha district!” he said once, pointing out the little purple flowers at the base of the red war tent of Our Sultan’s grandfather Sultan Süleyman. “He was by no means a master, but for forty years he filled the dead space of pictures with these five-leaf, single-lossom flowers, before he unexpectedly died two years ago. I always assigned him to draw this small flower because he could do it better than anyone.”<sup>10</sup>

In the book *Istanbul: Memories and the city*, the author used the red color to express his fascination with girl’s hair “In first grade, there was a girl who kept her red hair in a pony-tail and sat next to me for a time.”<sup>11</sup>. The meaning of violation of the military people is expressed through the color red as well. Soldiers have anonymous attitude against journalists especially in Turkey “when “all of a sudden” the door new open and a tall man in a red fez wearing “some sort of military jacket” with sleeves made from red broadcloth marched into the room”<sup>12</sup>. Red fish and red Wolfe are referred to in this book too.

White represents purity, good, and reverence in general. Ak-Han ["White Khan"] represents the good element in Turkish legends in Siberia and in the Altai region. In fact, Ak-Han is both a king and a demi-god who is responsible for the protection of man.<sup>13</sup>. The Huns, one of the earliest Turkic tribes, associated white with power and justice. Thus, the Hun warriors wore white prior to going into battle. It was said that even Chengiz Khan wore white garments and mounted a white horse in preparation for battle. The Huns also associated the color white with the West, and, according to folk narrative, when Meta (Mortu), the Khan of the Huns, fought the Chinese he placed soldiers mounted on white horses to the west in the battlefield.

. People who love the white color are in search of a different and free world away from conflict. It is considered as a sacred color in almost all societies. According to various cultures white color has different messages. For example, it is the symbol of life in Arabs color, purity and virginity in Western societies. In Eastern societies as the example of Japan, it is used as a symbol of death and mourning. The other novel with a color word of white, for Orhan Pamuk, is *The White Castle*. The events of this story take place in 17th century Istanbul. The story revolves about a young Italian scholar sailing from Venice to Naples who is taken prisoner by the pirates of Ottoman Empire. Soon after, he becomes the slave of a scholar known as Hoja (master), a man who is about his own age, and with whom he shares a strong physical resemblance. “The resemblance of myself and the man who entered the room was incredible! It was me there...”<sup>14</sup>

One might well ask what this castle represents. The white color suggests the purity and beauty. As we know the Ottoman Empire reached its own peaks of conquering in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was a period of triumph and victory for the Turkish nation. The author at the same time exposes the idea of neutrality through the technique of balanced trajectory between the Western and Eastern civilizations. It is not a matter of conflict rather it is emerging and fusing these opposing civilizations. In his view point, Orhan Pamuk has carefully depicted the equal value of both the Western and Eastern men. They are complementary to each other. Hoja and the Western slave argue with each other on some

issues and get together on the other issues. Pamuk fuses the two different life styles and cultures; one stays and survives in the other one's place. Orhan Pamuk portrays a great humanitarian picture. This is the meaning of the white castle.

Utilizing the color words in Turkish literature has its own significance which in turns has its role to earn Orhan Pamuk such popularity. In *Istanbul: Memories and City*, white color along with black color is used to refer to the good and bad picture of the Ottoman Empire “hand-drawn black-and-white pictures portraying Ottoman history: In my school textbooks this history was a long string of wars, victories, defeats, and treaties, a story narrated in a proud nationalist tone,”:

to celebrate the circumcision of Sultan Ahmet III's son, Prince Mustafa, and studied the black-and-white illustration of this feat. And so I discovered that because “our fathers” thought it unseemly to bury ordinary people in the same cemetery as men who killed people for a living, a special cemetery was created just for executioners in Karyağdı Bayırı in Eyüp.<sup>15</sup>

The author uses white along with black color to portray the violence, melancholy, torture, death and horror history of the city Istanbul:

My reaction to the naked criminal was not without a sexual frisson, and there was some pleasure in thinking of the history of Istanbul as a gallery of death, torture, and horror, illustrated in shadowy black and white.<sup>16</sup>

In this book the white color is used to express the purity in terms of rightness. We see this while the imaginary woman who was wearing a white scarf and covering her body entirely with the white color “I had a very clear image of God; ravaged with age and draped in white scarves, God had the featureless guise of a highly respectable woman.”<sup>17</sup>

In *My Name Is Red* white color is beautifully employed. The use of white in clothing is actually the cleanness and purity of that person, and it can be considered as a reflection of a well-groomed personality. A white dress of Şeküre wearing it may be an indication that she is purely connected to the other person. Because a woman who loves white, whether she is aware or not, her humility reveals nobility:

I closed the courtyard gate tightly behind him. I placed the old ceramic water basin that I used as a basil planter behind the gate as I did each night. Before I reduced the stove to smoldering ashes and went to bed, I glanced up to see Shekure in a white gown looking like a ghost in the blackness.<sup>18</sup>

Every color has positive properties. The positive properties of black color can be considered as seriousness, power and authority. *The Black Book* is a novel by Orhan Pamuk as well. It was published in Turkish in 1990 and first translated by Güneli Gün and published in English in 1994. In 2006, it was translated into English again by Maureen Freely. The

main theme of the novel is identity. Galib dislikes his life as a lawyer, and has envied Celal for years. Wearing his clothes, living in his flat, and even writing his columns, Galib gradually becomes Calal.

Ruya is not much happier but enigmatic than Celal and Galib. She sleeps in the day and spends a lot of time reading detective novels in the evening. She is leading a black life in terms of her dissatisfaction with her personality and daily routine. The setting of this novel is Istanbul where the melancholy is being felt and reflected on the lives of the Istanbulites. Some sort of damage in the historical and cultural heritage exists in the landmarks of Istanbul. Blackness of the novel has clearly been painted in the end of the story. We watch the demise of two important characters. Celal and Ruya are murdered. Celal is shot in the street and Ruya found murdered in a shop.

The black color is skillfully employed in this narrative. First of all, the black color is in the title to draw our attention as readers to the psyche of the author. "I felt all alone, like Galib- perhaps I felt like this so I could carry the emotion into the book-but he was subsumed by melancholy, while my isolation was in anger."<sup>19</sup> Then some adversarial events and incidents reflect the sadness and gloomy in certain period of time in the history of the Ottoman Empire. "I was mournfully a lone, just like Galip."<sup>20</sup>

Orhan Pamuk has employed black color in *My Name is Red* as well. He links this color with the beauty of a lady. As we know a lady with black eyes has always been found attractive by her lovers and many folk songs were written for the the charm of these eyes. Both in folk literature and divan literature of Turkey, black-eyed beauties have always been the object of charm and beauty. In Arabic culture and literature, the beauty of black eyes are the subject matters of the many poems "she asked, opening wide her beautiful black eyes."<sup>21</sup> "The black love of a person is considered equivalent to death. Because the end of the black love usually results in death "If you truly loved me, passionately and obsessively," she said as if trying to excuse herself, "you'd try to control yourself like a gentleman. You wouldn't try to offend the honor of the woman toward whom you entertained serious intentions. You're not the only man who's making motions to marry me. Did anyone see you on your way here?"<sup>22</sup>

In his book *Other Color* Pamuk describes the literary work of a novelist is hollow if his work does not include the black spots in one's country, this work is hollow. "A Turkish novelist who failed to imagine the Kurds and other minorities, and who neglected the black spots in his country's unspoken history, would have, in my view, produced something hollow."<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The most used color in these three novels is red. It is almost used in all Pamuk's literary works. The fact that the novel, *My Name Is Red*, is presented to the reader with this name also gives the author this color great importance. Red, black, and white colors, besides their positive meanings in these three novels have been literary analyzed. In *My Name is Red*, the author is determining personality traits and feelings with the aim of expressing the cultural background. He skillfully adds beauty to the narration. This is can be achieved by using one narrative technique that is the color words throughout the novel and in the title in particular.

One conspicuous feature of Orhan Pamuk's writings is utilizing the color words in some of his novel's titles. Red color stands for the glory of the Ottoman Empire which Orhan Pamuk intends to project in *My Name is Red*. It also expresses the murdering of the most famous Turkish miniaturists at that time. In the *White Castle*, the white color refers to the triumph and victory of the Ottoman Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A sort of optimism the author is trying to construct when using the color white in this novel.

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