

REJECTION OF FINALITY AND INDIVIDUALISM: ORHAN PAMUK'S

MY NAME IS RED AS A DISCUSSION ON OTTOMAN ART

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ABSTRACT

Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, the provocative and yet whimsical exploration of the nature and role of art in Islamic Turkey, has the themes of individual crisis arising from the sense of doubles and conflicts of the eternal East-West enigma of Turkish life. As John Updike writes, "Pamuk's ingenuity is yoked to a profound sense of enigma and doubleness. The doubleness, he has said, derives from that of Turkey itself." (New Yorker). Though similar to *The White Castle*, *My Name is Red*, published in 1998 in Turkey is different from its previous novel, *The New Life*, which was published four years earlier. *The New Life* is full of pessimism and melancholy, but in contrast, *My Name is Red* has the beauty and joy and colorful world of the miniature paintings of the Ottoman era. Orhan Pamuk himself says that he enjoyed writing this novel that was fun. At the same time, the intellectual and postmodernist elements dominate the narrative. *The New Life* is supposedly the least successful novel by Orhan Pamuk in terms of public reception and reviews, whereas *My Name is Red* is his most popular and successful one. It is as if Pamuk had perfected the art of the novel with this book. Compared to the previous five novels, *My Name is Red* can easily be termed as a classic for its full exploration of artistic techniques, its narrative strategies, and its beautifully poetic use of language and the display of a wide range of characters, even unusual and strange ones which readers normally do not see in a novel. As in *The Silent House*. Pamuk uses multiple narrative voices here. The eleven narrators are presented sequentially, unlike in *The Silent House*. So the readers are not confused here, as each chapter's heading tells who the narrator is. As in *The White Castle*, Pamuk also explores the questions of the East-West dilemma and its tensions, this time in relation to artistic techniques and conceptualizations of artistic realities from the point of view of Ottoman miniature painters. The poetic evocation of the historic Istanbul is also presented in a beautiful way. As noted by many critics, the architectural quality that is aesthetically distributed throughout the chapters is quite visible in this novel, more than in any other previous novels. The influence of Pamuk's initial years of engineering education is obviously evident in the construction of this novel.

KEYWORDS: Turkish Life, Relation to Artistic, Techniques and Conceptualizations

INTRODUCTION

Structurally, this novel resembles *The Black Book* a lot. The incidents of *The Black Book* are unfolded during the ten days of January in 1980 in Istanbul. *My Name is Red* presents nine days of Istanbul in the winter of 1591, it begins on a Tuesday and ends on the following Wednesday. As in *The Black Book*, *My Name is Red* also makes use of an epilogue which happens after thirty years of the incidents described in the story. Celal's newspaper columns come in between the narrative of *The Black Book*, where as *My Name is Red* presents nine parts, a story teller tells each evening in a coffee

shop. This novel also uses the style of a detective novel, as this is a murder mystery too. Pamuk himself has said that he used the structure of the detective novel to hang his stories on it, like a clothesline. As in *The Black Book*, in *My Name is Red* too Pamuk uses a lot of traditional Ottoman Turkish fables and stories. As Mc Gaha has pointed out, the colours in their titles indicate the mood of these novels; the first novel presents the darker, complex and chaotic side of human life while the second one gives a nostalgic world of beauty, refinement and passion. Everything speaks in the novel, including the colour red, and the whole book is about colours, the pleasure of seeing.

In *Other Colours*, Pamuk writes:

My Name is Red was a huge labour, undertaken with childish enthusiasm and heartfelt seriousness, drawing many things from my own life and designed as a classic that would speak to the whole country. If I now proudly claim to be sure I will succeed in this aim, am I being too sure of myself? My fragility, my filth, my depravity, and my shortcomings – they are not in the fabric of the book, in its language or its structure, but they can be made out in the characters' lives and stories. (272)

It is a historical novel in the sense that it captures a particular time of the Ottoman era, the age of Sultan Murat III of sixteenth century. But unlike an ordinary historical novel, the story is narrated through multiple narrators and perspectives. So what matters in this novel is not just history, but how the situations formulated by history are viewed by different characters, including inanimate ones.

The theoretical and artistic formulations of sixteenth century Islamic miniature painters are placed in contrast with the European theories, particularly the Italian Renaissance theories of art during those times in detail. Many pages of the novel are devoted to these lengthy artistic discussions and the philosophy which form the conceptual body of the paintings of those days. The strict Islamic interpretations of art maintained that no animate objects are to be portrayed fearing idolatry, Ottoman miniature artists used to illustrate texts with drawings of characters and animals. They were essentially visualizations of the text and were true to the text in every respect, the artist did not have any freedom to deviate from the text, whatever be the imaginative possibilities. ("...a miniaturist who took up the brush without the care and diligence to read the text he was illustrating was motivated by nothing more than greed"-Pamuk: 2001). This kind of painting originated in Persia and was highly stylized and traditional and had elaborate laws and conventions for portraying each characters represented in the text. The personality of the artist was of no importance, it was the object in the painting that was given supreme importance, and painters did not even sign their works. Ottoman paintings were narrative, they just presented scenes from story. Renaissance paintings on the other hand, were highly descriptive; the paintings had an existence apart from the literary text. On the contrary, Islamic miniature painting placed the eye over the mind negating any possibility of imposing a man made hierarchy over the natural display of things in nature. The idea was that human beings have no right to alter the images provided by God. But, after the renaissance art came to Turkey, many Ottoman miniaturists feared that their art and its style would be forgotten and would perish. Pamuk himself has expressed this fear of being lost in his Nobel acceptance speech, titled as "My Father's Suitcase", "I write because I am afraid of being forgotten. I write because I have a childish belief in the immortality of libraries, and in the way my books sit on the shelf"

The incidents of the novel take place during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Murat III (1574 - 1595), the grandson of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent. Because of the influence of his first wife, who was a Venetian named Safiye Sultan,

Murat had developed a taste for Venetian art. Sultan Murat was great patron of miniature paintings and he wanted his miniaturists to work for him according to the European styles. Orhan Pamuk did a lot of research in this and *My Name is Red* is the most historical of novels he wrote. But he does not follow historical details exactly, for he distorts historical realities for the sake of artistic effects. He himself has said that writing a historical fiction was a "sort of camouflage" for him, he wanted to indirectly comment on the problems existing in the contemporary times by writing about the similar situations which existed in another remote period of time. And Pamuk's storyteller in the evening coffee shop in this novel becomes a powerful alternative who can boldly talk about the corruption and hypocrisy of the society. Since most of Pamuk's writings are about his own life and family and city, this camouflage cleverly helped him to openly discuss such issues without hurting the feelings of people near him. It was also noted that one couldn't write about such issues in Turkey without offending the government, the army, the Islamists or the nationalists.

My Name is Red moves around two plots: one, the broader and philosophic plot which covers the discussions on whether it is acceptable to adopt a European style in miniature painting, by replacing the role of the eyes with role of the mind, by distorting the visual hierarchy in depicting scenes, by altering the perspectives, known as the "Frankish" style; two, the more personal story of Shekure and her two children, Orhan and Sevket, and the hero, Black ("Kara" in Turkish), who is Shekure's lover. Obviously, the first plot is coming from the novelist's wide knowledge of Ottoman history, its art, its great miniature painters and their artistic philosophy. The second story is entirely based on the novelist's childhood memories and experiences, in which his own mother and brother come as characters.

Shekure's husband is missing after a war and she is living with her children Orhan and Sevket in her husband's house. Her husband was a cavalryman and was fighting with the Safavids, he has not returned home for four years and is believed to be dead. His brother, Hasan is trying to marry her in her husband's absence. In order to escape Hasan, she decides to move back to her own house, to live with her old father who is a miniature artist. Her mother's elder sister's son Black was in love with her. Enishte Effendi, Shekure's father was against their relationship and Black had to leave Istanbul because of his love for her. He was serving in the army and was travelling through distant and lonely lands like Persia, Baghdad and Arabia, holding various posts of the government. Being a miniature artist he also did illustrations for wealthy Ottomans.

Black comes home, as Enishte Effendi had asked Black to return, to help him to solve the mysterious disappearance of one of his miniature master painters named Elegant Effendi who was engaged in the work of a secret book of paintings for the Sultan Murat III. He had started the work of *The Book of Festivities*, under the supervision of the Head Illuminator, Master Osman. Enishte Effendi had his three assistants to help him; named Butterfly, Olive and Stork. They were known by their workshop names. The Sultan wanted to complete the book for the celebrations during the thousandth year anniversary of the Hegira. The book was meant to be given as a gift to the Venetian Doge. (The Chief Judge). The Sultan also wanted to show the world that he could make use of the style of the Franks as well as the Franks themselves. Since the book was to be made in the Western style, he wanted it to be a secret project. Black sees this as an opportunity to resume his courtship with Shekure, but he has to find out who is the murderer of Elegant Effendi first. The mystery of the brutal murder is unfolded through the views of the characters.

Apart from the wonderful world of miniature paintings and the vibrant and colourful world of the Ottoman history, *My Name is Red* is also important from certain other angles too. Shekure is often described as the most vivid

female character Pamuk has created. She is "elusive, changeable, enigmatic and immensely beguiling" (Eder). John Updike praises her by saying hers is a welcome female voice in the novel. Shekure's ability to understand her children and all the other characters is portrayed in detail. Her children are the centre of her world. She is presented as elegant, beautiful and adorable in her attitudes and behavior.

My Name is Red carefully follows the lives of artists, their relentless and intense efforts for artistic perfection and their lonely and sad lives in pursuit of art. This idea is also explored in *The New Life*. So, apart from all the historical details and detective story line, this novel is also about art and artists. The multiplicity of themes is highlighted through the refreshingly original storytelling method which continuously keeps a constant variety throughout the chapters. The eleven different first person narratives give the novel this artistic ingenuity. Pamuk said that he wanted the story to be narrated in an entertaining, light and amusing way. Impersonating other characters was a favorite technique Pamuk enjoyed.

The title of 'red' also has certain symbolic value in the novel. Nishevita J. Murthy makes certain observations about the identity of the color 'red' here. About the relevance of the color red, *My Name is Red* raises certain questions in the opening chapter itself. It gives the readers the hint that the murderer is the illuminator who has the knowledge of the origins of the usage of the color red among the miniature painters of Ottoman times. She further observes that this assumption is strengthened by Master Osman because he tells that the use of the red color was introduced into Ottoman art world by the influences coming from Mongol and Chinese illustrators. (It is based on these assumptions that they narrow down the murderer to be Olive, after the careful analysis of the rare and old paintings of masters from the Sultan's treasury). Murthy says, "at the simplest level, therefore, associating the murderer with this historical knowledge seems to support the title".

Seen from this angle, the title of this novel rejects any attempts of a finality and individualism and suggests that identity is above particularity. *My Name is Red* is a twentieth century novel that represents a fictional world of the sixteenth century Ottoman era. In his book *Other Colors*, Pamuk says that once he wanted to become a miniature painter, but when he could not materialize his dream, he wanted to write a novel about the glorious miniature painters of Istanbul. He decided to set his novel in the sixteenth century, Sultan Murat III's time, because after the Sultan's reign, miniature painting tradition gradually began to decline. In *My Name is Red* Pamuk explores the reasons for this decline. The novel itself can be compared to Enishte Effendi's book, *Book of Millennium*, because the book was trying to capture the age of Sultan Murat through realism and symbolism, through artistic techniques coming from West and through existing Ottoman miniature traditions.

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