Tekin, Kuğu (2017). "Patients and Healers in "Zaabalawi" by Naguib Mahfouz and *A Strangeness In My Mind* by Orhan Pamuk". *Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 18, Iss. 33, p. 619-630.

DOI: 10.21550/sosbilder.297751

PATIENTS and HEALERS in "ZAABALAWI" by NAGUIB MAHFOUZ and *A STRANGENESS IN MY MIND* by ORHAN PAMUK

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Sending Date: March 2017

Acceptance Date: May 2017

ABSTRACT

The article dwells on the theme of journey towards spiritual healing by comparing the works of Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk. Mahfouz's allegorical short story is based on the protagonist's search for a remedy for his incurable disease. In fact, the unknown disease, which modern medicine fails to cure, is a metaphor representing the erosion of spiritual values and corruption in the Egyptian social strata in the twentieth century.

Likewise, in Pamuk's novel, the protagonist's father takes his young son to a Sheikh to cure him of his fear of Istanbul's stray dogs. The Sheikh's prayer helps him to forget his fear not to be revived until adulthood. It is seen that both protagonists' spiritual ailment stems from a metaphorical "communal disease," and both try to heal their wounds through non-scientific ways. The article handles the parallels and differences between the two cultures' approach to the issue of spiritual healing.

Keywords: *Mahfouz, Pamuk, spiritual healing, religion, science*

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Naguib Mahfouz'un "Zaabalawi" Başlıklı Öyküsünde ve Orhan Pamuk'un *Kafamda Bir Tuhaflık* Başlıklı Romanında Hastalar ve Şifacılar

ÖZET

Makale Necib Mahfuz ve Orhan Pamuk'un eserlerinde anlatılan manevi şifa arayışını karşılaştırmalı olarak incelemektedir. Mahfouz'un alegorik öyküsü anlatıcı-başkahramanın onulmaz hastalığına bir çare bulabilmek için çırpınışını anlatmaktadır. Modern tıbbın iyileştiremediği bu hastalık aslında yirminci yüzyıl Mısır toplumunun sosyal dokusundaki yozlaşmayı izleyen süreçte, manevi değerlerin yıpranıp yokoluşunu simgeleyen bir metafordur.

Pamuk'un romanında da başkahramanın babası küçük oğlunu İstanbul sokak köpeklerine karşı duyduğu korkuyu yenebilmesi için bir "hoca"ya götürür. Hoca'nın duası genç kahramanın köpek korkusunu unutmasını sağlar, ancak bu korku olgunluk döneminde tekrar ortaya çıkar. Her iki kahramanın da manevi rahatsızlıklarının toplumsal bir hastalığın metaforu olduğu ve her ikisinin de bilimsel olmayan yöntemlerle şifa aradıkları açıktır. Bu bağlamda makale Türk ve Mısır kültürlerini manevi şifa bulma yöntemleri açısından karşılaştırmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Mahfuz, Pamuk, manevi şifa, din, bilim*

The article dwells on the theme of journey towards spiritual healing by comparing the works of two Nobel winning authors, namely Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk. Both authors have made the distinct voice of their countries-Egypt and Turkey- heard in the international arena with their literary output. The first work to be explored in this article is Mahfouz's short story entitled "Zaabalawi". It is an allegorical story which is based on the unnamed protagonist's search for a remedy for his incurable disease. Since modern medicine fails to cure the non-diagnosed disease, the protagonist starts seeking a mysterious healer whose corporeal existence is no more than a faint childhood memory at the beginning of the story. The unknown disease, in fact, is a metaphor representing the erosion of spiritual values, loss of belief in sincere human contact, rising materialism, and corruption in the Egyptian social strata in the twentieth century.

"Mahfouz was born in Cairo in 1911 and he grew up in the heart of the old city, the crowded district that lies beyond the ancient university of Al-Azhar and the mausoleum of the Prophet's grandson, Sayidna Hussein" (Ghosh 2005: 266). The author sets his short story, which is taken from the collection entitled *God's World* (1963) in the same neighbourhood of his childhood. The short story, "Zaabalawi" sheds light on the later phase of the author's style where his objective and realistic approach to art and life is replaced by a subjective and mystic awareness. Obviously, the story is inspired by an Islamic mystical tradition whose comprehensive tolerance appears to be in direct contrast with the rigid beliefs of contemporary Muslim fundamentalists. The couplet in the opening of the story emphasises that the protagonist-narrator is in urgent need to find Sheikh Zaabalawi so as to restore the world to its past state of order and harmony:

> Oh what's become of the world, Zaabalawi?
> They've turned it upside down and taken away its taste. (Mahfouz 1999: 1963)

As the couplet implies the dissension between modernity and a nostalgia for a non-existing past where intimate human contact prevailed is a recurrent theme in the author's work. Amitav Ghosh defines Mahfouz's fictional world, which is tainted by material interests, as an "underworld,... a region of pure fantasy, dank with the odor of putrefaction, whose inhabitants always drink themselves into stupors, smoke hashish, ... and traffic vaguely in drugs. [Thus] Mahfouz invites his reader to marvel at the decay of the world as it should be". (Ghosh 2005: 268) Much of Mahfouz's work, including Zaabalawi, is marked by an aspiration for a genial past as well as an "indignation at the corruption that allows the unscrupulous to grow rich while decent people labor to earn an honest wage" (Ghosh 2005: 269). In other words, the author is very much concerned with displaying social injustice in the Egyptian society. The story, which might be read as a "quasi-mystical parable" (Ghosh 2005: 269), focuses on the social and spiritual dilemmas of the middle-class Cairene world, and, despite the

limits of a short story, draws a realistic and detailed panaroma of an urban society representing modern Egypt. The twentieth century process of transformation from a traditional society to a modern industrial one has been traumatic on the part of the Egyptians. Indeed, the Syrian born poet Adünis' ideas about the impact of progress in Western science and technology on the Arabs epitomise the protagonist's state of in-betweenness in the story. In Adünis' words:

> Scientific awareness created anxiety and insecurity in us, whereas our unconscious gave us certainty and reassurance. We considered science as a gain at the level of external progress, but a loss in terms of progress in the internal world of intimate human affairs; our consciousness of science therefore thrust us forcefully towards the future, while in our hearts we followed an ill-defined path back to some notion of the past where human warmth was more in evidence. (*An Introduction to Arab Poetics* Adünis 2010: 1645)

Since Mahfouz's protagonist believes that his remedy depends only on a genuine contact with the mysterious healer, Zaabalawi, he plunges into the Cairo streets to investigate the whereabouts of the Sheikh. In his journey towards spiritual salvation, the protagonist encounters a number of representative Egyptians. Among them are a lawyer, a book-seller, a group of shopkeepers, a district officer, a calligrapher, and a composer. Unfortunately, the first four of the protagonist's interlocutors provide him with unreliable information based on either vague memories or rumours; particularly, his inquiry of the shopkeepers disappoints him deeply for they made him realise the improbability of finding Zaabalawi easily:

> While I found that a large number of [shopkeepers] had never even heard of Zaabalawi, some, though recalling nostalgically the pleasant times they had spent with him, were ignorant of his present whereabouts, while others openly made fun of him, labelled him a charlatan, and advised me to put myself in the hands of a doctor-as though I had not already done so. (Mahfouz 1999: 1964)

Despite these failed attempts, the protagonist obstinately keeps searching for the healer in Cairo streets. As he meets the calligrapher

and the composer successively, he experiences a kind of enlightenment for he understands that the two artists are the only ones who have established a genuine contact with Zaabalawi during the process of artistic creation. After offering him a warm welcome, both artists confess that they would not have created their magnum opus, if Zaabalawi had not inspired them with his very existence. Indeed, it is the composer who tells the protagonist to go to the Negma Bar in Alfi Street and find a regular of the bar, named Hagg Wanas. Mr. Wanas, the composer says, is the only person who might be in touch with the long-vanished mysterious healer. In the bar the protagonist finds Mr. Wanas sitting alone at a table with two bottles of wine in front of him, one empty, the other two-thirds empty. Mr. Wanas refuses to listen to even one single word uttered by the protagonist unless he gets drunk. Since the protagonist understands that his objection to drink is of no avail, he gets drunk fully. As the protagonist enters an ecstatic state, he cuts off all his ties with the external world. On a metaphorical level the idea of drunkenness might be interpreted as getting drunk not with wine but with the love of God. The dream allegory starts to operate when the protagonist falls asleep. In his dream the protagonist sees himself in an Edenic landscape where he finally attains absolute peace, harmony, and relief to his suffering soul:

> I was in a state of deep contentedness, of ecstatic serenity. ...There was an extraordinary sense of harmony between me and my innerself, and between the two of us and the world, everything being in its rightful place, without discord or distortion. In the whole world there was no single reason for speech or movement, for the universe moved in a rapture of ecstasy. (Mahfouz 1999: 1969)

When the dreamer wakes up, Wanas informs him that Zaabalawi was with the protagonist throughout his sleep but left, without a trace, just before he comes to his senses again. In a final attempt the protagonist asks Wanas whether he can arrange another meeting with the Sheikh if he pays for the cure he desperately needs. Wanas' reply, in a sense, elucidates the mysticism hidden in the figure of Zaabalawi:

> ‘The strange thing is that he is not open to such temptations, yet he will cure you if you meet him.’
> ‘Without charge?’
> ‘Merely on sensing that you love him.’(Mahfouz 1999: 1970)

One possible interpretation of the author’s dream allegory might be that a mystic union with God could only be achieved through a total negation of mundane affairs, passions, ambitions, and pleasures. It is also possible to read the dream allegory as an expression of Mahfouz’s disappointment, even more accurately disbelief in institutions, including religion. Yet at the end of the story the protagonist declares that he would never give up seeking Zaabalawi although he now knows that a second encounter seems to be improbable.

According to John C. Hawley, “[i]n the progression of his many books, Mahfouz’s faith in rationalism gradually softens, and he portrays the everlasting hunger for God (lying beneath the tendency toward grasping false gods)” (Hawley 1998:13). Likewise, the unnamed protagonist’s desperate quest for Sheikh Zaabalawi is an allegory of modern man’s futile search for God within a corrupt world where humanity has surrendered to materialism long ago. Rasheed El-Enany’s definition of Mahfouz’s attitude towards religion and God reads as follows: “... the totality of [Mahfouz’s] work appears to communicate [...] a rejection of all forms of institutionalised religion while retaining belief in the abstract idea of God-a version of deism” (El- Enany 1998: 81). Indeed, the scene depicting the protagonist’s inquiry of the book-seller in front of the Birgawi Residence where Zaabalawi once lived confirmed El-Enany’s idea in that the deserted building now looks like a wasteland, occupied only by heaps of rubbish. In Mahfuzian terms the ruined residence stands for the present plight of modern man left without shelter, forsaken by God. As El-Enany states: “In Mahfouz’s world picture, the tug-of-war between man and God is an ongoing game. God is gladly fled from, but no sooner this is done than He is again madly sought after. It is a love-hate relationship,” (El-Enany 1998: 82) where neither party could give up on the other.

The second work dwelling on the theme of spiritual healing in this paper is Orhan Pamuk's *A Strangeness In My Mind*. It is an urban novel chronicling the life and love story of an Istanbul street vendor named Mevlut Karataş. The underlying theme in the novel, that is the process of Istanbul's transformation from a stagnated city into a booming metropolis, unfolds parallel to the changes taking place in the protagonist's life. The novel's time span covers the years between 1969 and 2012. Within this period the protagonist, his relatives, and acquaintances witness and narrate the socio-political, cultural, economic, and environmental changes Istanbul undergoes from multiple perspectives. Mevlut comes to Istanbul at the age of twelve to accompany his father who has already migrated to the metropolis from a Central Anatolian village. Turkish people's general motive for internal migration at those times was to attain various job opportunities available in the city and earn money that would provide the rest of the family with a decent living either in a rural town or in a poor quarter of the city. The objectives initially include obtaining a well-paid job or investing in a promisingly profitable city commerce that would lead to property ownership, and quick access to all the social facilities like education for the children. Thus, following the same path of his fellow immigrant workers, Mevlut's father settles in a desolate slum which is located quite far from the city centre. Until Mevlut drops out of high school education, his daily routine consists of going to the school during day time and helping his father selling boza-a traditional Turkish drink-at nights. After the dream of climbing the social ladder through getting a proper education ends, Mevlut falls in love with a girl with stunning dark eyes at a wedding, and spends three years writing love letters to the girl who is living in a neighbouring village close to his. Yet, his later elopement with her turns out to be a failure due to his relatives' interference. Unknowingly, Mevlut elopes not with Samiha, the owner of the impressive eyes, but her elder sister Rayiha. Mevlut's naive, shy, and compassionate nature prevents him from rejecting his wife and thus he accepts the fate imposed on him.

In the novel the dedication to Wordsworth's *Prelude* reads as follows:

> I had melancholy thoughts...
> a strangeness in my mind,
> A feeling that I was not for that hour,
> Nor for that place

While it is evident that Wordsworth's lines have inspired Pamuk's choice of a title for his novel, they also reflect the protagonist's overall mood. Throughout the novel the slum-dwelling flaneur wanders in Istanbul streets day and night trying to decipher his strange thoughts and feelings concerning love, life, and the amorphous yet paradoxically beautiful city. Similar to Wordsworth's speaker, the idea of fitting neither the time nor the place frequently haunts Pamuk's protagonist as he walks around the city centre for almost forty-three years. During his Istanbul excursions, Mevlut consistently doubts whether he belongs to the city whose streets he has learnt inch by inch. Would the city accept and adopt him like a true inhabitant? Or would she discard him like trash? It is seen that Mevlut's desire to develop a sense of belonging and thus become an inseparable part of the city is threatened twice by his fear of Istanbul's stray dogs-or as Pamuk calls "street dogs." While the first instance coincides with Mevlut's childhood, the latter occurs twenty-seven years later. When the mature protagonist is attacked by a gang of stray dogs, he shares his anxiety with "The Holy Guide," the highly respected spiritual leader of a circle which Mevlut has joined as an accidental member. While conversing with the Holy Guide, Mevlut recalls his late father taking him not to a doctor but to another holy man to cure his fear of dogs:

> ...his father had taken him to see a holy man [...] in order to address this fear. He had given Mevlut some [...] candy and told him that dogs were deaf, dumb, and blind creatures. Then he'd opened his palms up as if to pray, instructing Mevlut to do the same, [...] and made Mevlut repeat the following words nine times:
> 'SUMMOON, BUKMOON, OOMYOON. FE HOOM LAH YARJOON.' (Pamuk 2015: 456)

Turkish people-not exclusively the poor and illiterate-were and are still in the habit of sorting out their problems through white or black magic, spell, amulets, various elixirs, or potions, or some odd food whose unknown ingredients are prepared by the so-called holy men who are believed to have magical healing powers. Their connection with religion adds to their credibility, undoubtedly. The sufferers' problems might range from love, betrayal, hostility, and fortune to a physical or psychological disability of any sort like infertility, or fear of dogs as in the case of the protagonist. Generally, a prayer like incantation or the reverse, whose meaning is indecipherable to the practitioner, accompanies the recipe to be repeated several times. Prior to the repetition, the first thing to do is to forget about the affliction. For instance, Mevlut was supposed to forget his fear and repeat the verse three times in case of stray attack:

> That was the first thing that people had to do when they became afraid of dogs, demons, and the devil; they had to banish the thought from their minds. 'Don't be scared, just pretend you haven't seen them,' [...] 'say the verse, quick, son!' [his father] would whisper. But even when he concentrated as hard as he could, Mevlut would never remember the verse. (Pamuk 2015: 457)

As Mevlut finishes recounting his memory, the Holy Guide, whom Mevlut thinks is a much more modern and sophisticated version of his childhood healer, says that the ability to forget unwanted thoughts requires a pure heart, sincere intentions, and a strong will. What matters is neither prayers nor verses but the "heart's intent." When the Holy Guide asks whether he has recently done something wrong that might have disturbed people's lives, Mevlut hides the fact that he has been working as a sort of electricity inspector's assistant, chasing after past-due bills. Though unwillingly, he might have evidently caused a lot of trouble in the lives of the needy inhabitants of Istanbul. Unlike the first holy man, who said that dogs are "deaf, dumb, and blind creatures," the Holy Guide expresses a strong belief in their acute senses and distinct ability to distinguish those who belong and who do not, implying that Mevlut must have done something wrong to draw the hostility of

Istanbul's stray dogs twenty-seven years later. The Holy Guide's philosophical comments on the nature and history of Istanbul's stray dogs shed light on not only the truth concerning the revival of Mevlut's fear but also the ongoing dissension between the Turkish conservatives and the proponents of western modernity:

> Dogs can sense when a person doesn't belong among us. This is their God-given gift. That is why people who want to copy the Europeans are always afraid of dogs. Mahmud II butchered the Janissaries, the backbone of the Ottoman Empire, and thus allowed the West to trample upon us; he also slaughtered the street dogs of Istanbul and exiled all those he couldn't kill to [...a] wretched island. The people of Istanbul organized a petition to bring the dogs back. During the armistice following World War I, when the city was under foreign occupation, the street dogs were massacred once more for the comfort of the English and the French. But again, the good people of Istanbul asked for their dogs to be returned. With this wealth of experience in their blood, all our dogs now have a very keen sense of who is their friend, and who is their foe. (Pamuk 2015: 458)

Though the Holy Guide's method of healing does not produce an instant miraculous cure for Mevlut's fear, it helps the protagonist regain his spiritual equilibrium that he has lost after his wife's death.

Just like Mahfouz's short story, Pamuk's chapter entitled "Dogs Will Bark at Anyone Who Doesn't Belong Among Us" might be regarded as an allegory of the perennial struggle between western modernity based on rationality, science, and technology and eastern spirituality stemming from Islamic mystic tradition. Being two non-Western countries, both Turkey and Egypt have frequently witnessed severe splits of the secularists and the Muslim fundamentalists. Obviously, both the unnamed protagonist in "Zaabalawi" and the Holy Guide in Pamuk's novel are speaking against the blind imitation of western modernity that has seriously eroded spiritual values, human contact, and tolerance among Muslim communities. Yet this does not mean that the two authors are against science and progress; what they denounce in their works is corruption sneaking into the Turkish and Egyptian societies in the name of either modernity or religion. Indeed,

in Mona Takieddine Amyuni's words "[Mahfouz] constantly attacks and breaks deeply-ingrained beliefs and traditions that have grown hollow, and he exposes with great courage double standards, unjust behaviour, and corruption of all sorts" (Amyuni 1999: 205). According to Amyuni, Mahfouz, who states that "' [s]cience is, no doubt, the basis of modern life [...] grows skeptical about science itself in [some of his] works, if it is not allied with qualities of the heart" (Amyuni 1999: 206). Considering the entirety of their works, it is seen that both Mahfouz and Pamuk are writing against the institutional exploitation of science and religion. Amitav Ghosh, in the book entitled *Incendiary Circumstances*, underlines the parallels between Turkey and Egypt in terms of the twentieth century secular attempts to create a genuine national culture, an indigenous one which excludes all religious interventions particularly in the socio-political, artistic and intellectual spheres:

> In Mahfouz's youth, Islam had been largely sidelined as a political ideology. In Turkey, Ataturk, with the power of the army behind him, appeared intent on pushing everything religious into the wings. [...] in the late twenties and early thirties, the principal influence on [Mahfouz] was a group of nationalists who had set themselves the task of creating a national culture for Egypt that would be distinctively Egyptian. [They emphasised] Egypt's pharaonic and Hellenistic roots, to the point of disavowing all connections with the Arab and Islamic world. (Ghosh 2005: 273)

Apparently, while Pamuk has always retained distant, mutually hostile links with the Turkish nationalists, the rising tide of Egyptian nationalism that sought to create an Arab and Islam-free culture in the first half of the twentieth century has been influential on Mahfouz's early works.

To conclude, both authors draw attention to the traumatic modernisation process experienced in Egypt and Turkey in the twentieth century. In both works the protagonists' spiritual ailment stems from what might be deemed a metaphorical "communal disease," and both characters try to heal their individual wounds through non-scientific ways. It is seen that the two protagonists' struggle to exist in

the modernisation process of the two ancient metropolises is dependent on preserving their mental integrity supported by a strengthened spirituality; and the cure the two protagonists search for throughout is found in the hands of not practitioners of modern medicine but of healers.

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