

Different aspects of melancholy in the museum of innocence

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk's The Museum of Innocence offers prevalent examples of melancholy which is based on the protagonist Kemal's state of mind. Even before losing the object of desire, Kemal mourns about the future separation which signals the beginning of melancholy that increases after the end of the affair with Füsün and turns into a mood of life that lasts as long as he lives. Attached to the lost object (Füsün) and the gesture of its loss, Kemal yearns to be a part of Füsün's life. Therein resides the cause of his attachment to the objects that belong to Füsün which he gathers in Merhamet Apartment that already functions as a museum. This paper analyses object attachment and the idea of museum that developed from this which direct us to the concept of the "aura" and transmissibility of the past to the future.

Keywords: Orhan Pamuk; The Museum of Innocence; Melancholy; Collector; Loss

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The Museum of Innocence can be considered as a novel that offers prevalent examples of melancholy which is a concept that means a sorrow with purpose, an intentional unhappiness or as defined by Jonathan Flatley in *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* an emotional attachment to something or someone lost (Flatley, 2008, p.1) . Orhan Pamuk, however, in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, claims melancholy to be a Western concept which is not appropriate for the selfless people in the east, as a result of which he prefers to refer to the state of affairs in the novel as "sadness" instead of melancholy (Pamuk, 2013). Melancholy is a concept that has been discussed for centuries. In *Problema XXX*, Aristotle defines melancholy as a natural disposition in which there is a preponderance of black bile over the other humours which is also associated with genius in the man (Aristotle, 1984, p.10). Ibn-i Sina improves Aristotle's definition of melancholy in *Canon of Medicine* and defines it as bad judgement, fear without cause, quick anger, delight in solitude, and anxiety (Sina, 1930, p. 77-78). As the interrelated definitions of the term from Aristotle and Ibn-i Sina indicate, melancholy is not simply a Western concept. Therefore, in spite of Pamuk's assertion, this paper scrutinizes the novel in terms of the concepts of melancholy and the collector and discusses the critical role of the museum. To be more specific, the melancholic features of the leading character and the source of the object obsession that developed into the idea of museum will be analyzed by creating a link between 'the aura' and transmissibility of history.

Pamuk's referring to Kemal as a "selfless" character who reflects the prominent problem of the society he lives in which is the idea that it neither belonged to the West nor to the East renders us to understand that there are different aspects of Kemal's melancholy. His melancholy emerges

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as a result of an unexpected affair which changes everything in his life. As a rich man living in Nişantaşı and engaged to a beautiful girl, he starts to have an affair with an old acquaintance, Füsün, that works in a boutique in Nişantaşı. The affair takes place in Kemal's mother's apartment at Merhamet Apartment which already functions as a museum in that it contains old and unused objects of the family. In the course of the affair, although enjoying each other's presence, the idea of the future separation overshadows Kemal and Füsün's relationship. Kemal's concerns about the future separation demonstrate the fact that he mourns about an object he hasn't lost yet. This situation corresponds with Georgio Agamben's idea in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* that melancholy offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object (Agamben, 1993, p. 20). In "Melancholy and the Act", Slavoj Žižek refers to this as the strategem of melancholics: the only way to possess an object that we never had, that was from the very outset lost, is to treat an object that we still fully possess as if this object is already lost (Žižek, 2000, p. 661). In order to clarify this enigma, Žižek refers to Freud who claims that the melancholic is not aware of what he had lost in the lost object (Žižek, 2000, p. 661).

In 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud brings a pathological overlook by revealing the correlation of melancholy and mourning caused by the loss of a beloved person or object that develops a state of grief (Freud, 2000, p. 1). This is equal to the loss of the beloved one and losing one's self. Fundamental changes take place after being abandoned and the process of becoming a melancholic character can be observed. Freud's in-depth analysis demonstrates that:

First there existed an object-choice, the libido had attached itself to a certain person; then, owing to a real injury or disappointment concerned with the loved person, this object-relationship was undermined. The result was not the normal one of withdrawal of the libido from this object and transference of it to a new one, but something different for which various conditions seem to be necessary. The object-cathexis proved to have little power of resistance, and was abandoned; but the free libido was withdrawn into the ego and not directed to another object. It did not find application there, however, in any one of several possible ways, but served simply to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. (Freud, 2000, p. 5).

In light of Freud's assertion that the ego identifies itself with the lost object, in the novel Kemal seems to identify himself with Füsün and his libido seems to be attached to her. Kemal himself articulates this in this way: "In spite of all these tangible qualities, I knew that the pain was related to my mind and spirit, but nevertheless, I could not undertake to clear my head from her" (Pamuk, 2008, p.167). This confession invites the reader to consider that he assigns the reason of his grief to his unconscious and is cognizant that he can get rid of it which is not reliable, in that escaping from this will mean escaping from himself as well.

As Freud argues, the melancholic character who identifies himself with the lost object displays an extraordinary fall in self-esteem, an impoverishment of his ego, incapable of any effort and morally despicable; he vilifies and reproaches himself and expects to be cast out and chastised (Freud, 2000, p. 3). After the affair, although Füsün's family reproaches him, Kemal none the less continues to go their house to be able to spend time with Füsün. He continues to go that house for eight years in spite of the belittling to vilify and reproach himself. However, it is no accident that Pamuk makes him reproach himself and expect to be cast out. This renders Pamuk to show the extent of his melancholy and obsession which is far from merely being an affair and a pathological

situation. This idea can also be supported with the fact that Kemal also belittles Füsün and her kinsfolk from the very beginning because of their financial state which is brought up several times by Füsün's mother's being a tailor, the house they live in and copulating before marriage which is normal for his fiancé but not for Füsün due to being from a lower class and clearly not modern enough.

Undoubtedly, Kemal's visits to Füsün's house for eight years invites us to contemplate on his time concept also. Kemal feels responsible to make an explanation to the reader about his visits to Füsün's house:

I would like to tell the reader, who is bemused by my visits to Füsün's (I can never say Keskins) for eight years and who is surprised how easily I can talk about this time span, this thousands of days, how misleading can time concept be and show that there is our time on the one hand and an 'official' time that we share with everybody on the other hand (Pamuk, 2008, p. 312).

The time concept considered here shows that time flows different for him and he cannot keep up with other people's and the city's time. Time is essentially successive for him and he considers it as a combination of *nows* which are the essence of time for Aristotle also. Because the now is the temporal instant that is the most immediate experience of time, it is what seems immediately graspable. Instead of thinking it as an obsession of eight years, Kemal regards his visits to Füsün's house as 1593 happy nights which makes it possible to claim that this melancholic situation is not just a pathological, temporary issue for Kemal, but is a lifestyle. However, in the meantime, in that time span both Istanbul and Füsün go on changing and Kemal bemoans about the past and mourns for the old Istanbul and Füsün. Little agreement can exist about the good intentions of Füsün in those years, as after getting married she and her husband try to enmesh Kemal to become an actress and shoot a film which is a detail that functions to show that Füsün is not an innocent girl anymore. Pamuk uses his construction of Füsün and her manipulative character to create the impression that Kemal is aware of all this entanglements which points to the extent and mood of Kemal's melancholy again.

Kemal's time concept stimulates a discussion about the idea of collecting the objects reminiscent of the beloved one as well. Merhamet Apartment is the place where he gathers all the objects which is on a par with Benjamin's ideas on the collector stated in "Unpacking my Library: A Talk About Book Collecting" which is published in the *Illuminations*. According to Benjamin the procedure of collecting is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions. For Benjamin "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories." (Benjamin, 1973, p. 61). Thus, it would be relevant to ask whether Kemal's collecting objects borders on the chaos of memories or not. Kemal, even before starting to collect Füsün's possessions, ascribes meaning to even the most basic objects around him. He explains the objects with not their utilitarian values, but with memories. Kemal's being a person who is between east and west and who cannot identify himself with neither of them again compels us to think that objects help him to locate himself by ordering his memories, controlling the chaos of the memories in other words. According to Benjamin, the period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership – for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopaedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object (Benjamin, 1977, p. 61). Thus, it cannot be wrong to claim that he is trying to locate himself by installing meanings, memories to the objects. After losing Füsün, he has a chance to order his

memories and past which can help him to find a location and his self. Furthermore, the objects make him feel closer to Füsün who is in the orient of his life. However, his habit to ascribe meaning to objects and remember them by their memories reveal that Kemal had melancholic features even before having an affair with Füsün which eliminates a pathological claim about his situation.

Although Kemal puts Füsün in the orient of his life, “indecisiveness” and “disloyalty” are the terms that lay the basis of their relationship. Then, what is the link between being a collector and an indecisive and disloyal person with history and its transmissibility? Although on the one hand Kemal seems to be indecisive and uneasy, on the other hand he is also disloyal to the owner of the objects, though he is loyal to the world of things. Kemal, is disloyal to Füsün as he does not realize the precious earrings; the ones that she forgot in Merhamet Apartment and wore on the day they reunited. Hence, Füsün begins to distrust and understands that objects are more important for him than herself. In light of this, it can be claimed that Kemal is the historian who is only loyal to his objects which are symbols of his melancholy.

It is to be noted that, objects enable past and present interact with one another which is a dialectical image that leads the way to the future. However, this dialectical process deprives the objects from their very essence. Giorgio Agamben explains in *The Man without Content* that the collector takes on the task of transfiguring things, suddenly depriving them both of the ethical-social significance with which tradition had endowed them (Agamben, 1999, s. 105). As mentioned before, Kemal puts the objects that belong to Füsün into a different position by depriving them from their utilitarian values and ethical-social significances and attributes new meanings, memories to them. Thus, he changes the ‘aura’ of the objects and the aura of the apartment which is already full of old objects of his mother and serves as a museum on its own. He represses historical features of the objects and ascribes them his own history that was created in that apartment years ago. The idea of the museum is a means which advances Kemal and his love, his objects to the future, thus provides the transmissibility of the history. It is a dialectical struggle to advance into the future without retreating from the past which resembles a historian who brings the objects and memories together.

As Flatley states in his book, melancholy might not just be a mood state into which one falls, or which descends on one like bad weather. Instead, melancholizing is something one does: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past. It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge (Flatley, 2008, p. 2). In *The Museum of Innocence* melancholy is more than a mood for Kemal. Melancholy becomes his lifestyle and his identification. After Füsün’s death, the idea of founding a museum enables him to survive, as it will enable their love last forever. The days, years that make no sense, gain sense with the objects and the lost object becomes an integral part of the ego. The best way to deal with melancholy for Kemal is to articulate it through objects, to try to express what feels inexpressible. However, in Milano after discovering the pathetic end of his favourite museum, he understands that although it seems possible to transfer his past to the future, as time and people change his story will be understood from a different perspective. He realizes that absence cannot be replaced by anything since no symbolic mediation will ever be sufficient, not even memories. This reminds Lacanian distinction between the object and the cause of the object desire that is highlighted by Žižek in his article “Melancholy and the Act”. According to Lacan, while the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature on account of which we desire the desired object (quoted by Žižek, 2000, p.

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662). From this perspective, the melancholic loses the desire for the object because this object has withdrawn its efficiency which sheds light to the fact that the idea of the museum which is at the heart of the text has lost its efficiency for Kemal because it will not enable his melancholy to last in the modern society.

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