
SUFISM CARICATURED IN ORHAN PAMUK'S "THE NEW LIFE"

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Abstract:

The New Life mocks the Sufi experience. Issues essential to Sufism appear to exist in the novel. Osman starts his journey like a Sufi Dervish on the hope of finding both Janan and the angel. In Sufi literature, woman (love) is seen as a symbol of the much sought Being; but in Osman's case, his love for Janan reeks more of libidinal desire rather than spiritual. In the journey process Pamuk mockingly shows us a traveler in pursuit of vengeance rather than in search of God. The mockery of the Sufi tradition becomes further evident in the narrative as the search for the new life turns from a belief to an obsession. Osman's disillusionment at the end of his journeys epitomizes Pamuk's mockery of the Sufi traveler and ushers in the undignified moment where the traveler dies realizing that the sought angel is false.

Keywords: Sufism, Orhan Pamuk, parody

ORHAN PAMUK'UN "YENİ HAYAT" ROMANINDA, KARİKATÜRİZE
EDİLEN TASAVVUF

ÖZET

Yeni Hayat, Sûfi deneyimi ile alay etmektedir. Tasavvufun temel konuları, romanda mevcut olarak görülmektedir. Osman, Canan ve meleği bulmayı umut ettiği yolculuğuna bir Sûfi Dervîşi gibi başlar. Tasavvuf edebiyatında, kadın (aşk) varoluşu ve Tanrıyı simgelemektedir, ancak, Osman'ın Canan'a olan aşkı, ruhani olmaktan çok bedenseldir. Yolculuk ilerledikçe, Pamuk, Tanrıyı aramaktan çok intikam peşinde koşan bir yolcuyla alaycılıkla gösterir. Sûfi geleneğiyle alay etmek, yeni hayatın arayışının bir inançtan, saplantıya dönüşümüyle, öykülemeye daha belirgin hale gelir. Pamuk'un, sufi yolcuyla alay etmesi, Osman'ın, yolculuğun sonunda, aradığı meleğin sahte olduğunu anlayarak, yaşadığı hayal kırıklığı içinde ölmesi ile sonlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, Orhan Pamuk, alaycılık

Contrary to some critics who read in Pamuk's *The New Life* strains of Sufi sentiments and Sufi tendencies, I want to argue that Pamuk, in this narrative, mocks the Sufi experience. Indeed, issues essential to Sufism such as the journey, extreme love or *Ishk*, teacher-disciple relationship, the unity of the Sufi with God (*fenâ* or *Vihdat Vujud*) appear to exist in the novel. As a result, Heyking, among other scholars, maintains that Pamuk experiments "with mysticism" to recapture a "more authentic experience of reality characterized by existential openness." (73) While Zhang asserts that "Pamuk tries to walk on the 'mystical road' as a Sufi monk." (138) Yet, Pamuk denies engagement in Sufism, and asserts his secular orientations and confirms his loyalty to secular values. Ian Almond points out that Pamuk's "appreciation of the Sufi tradition is purely literary" (77) He quotes Pamuk as saying: "I am interested in Sufism as a literary source. I never went into it as a morally educating tool and a self-disciplined code of behavior." (78) A close reading of the text, however, shows that Pamuk's interest in Sufism is merely to parody it

Essential to the Sufi, as known to Sufi scholars, is the spiritual journey; a journey of piety and love; which eventually leads to God Himself. Pamuk implicitly parodies the Sufi's journey through Osman's journeys in search of Janan and the Angel. Whereas the journey of the Sufi entails virtuous acts, virtuous conduct and devotion to the besought, i.e. God, we observe that the journeys Osman took lack these attributes.

In the novel, Osman starts his journey like a Sufi Dervish on the hope of finding both Janan and the angel.

I got on buses, I got off buses; I loitered in bus terminals only to board more buses, sleeping in my seat, turning my days into nights, embarking and disembarking in small towns, traveling for days in the dark, and I said to myself: the young traveler was so determined to find the unknown realm, he let himself be transported without respite on roads that would take him to the threshold. (44)

Osman's journeys are initially motored by his love for a woman. Later in the narrative Osman's journeys are propelled by his desire to locate and terminate his rival and to find the angel. In Sufi literature, woman is seen as a symbol of the soul and the much sought Being; but in Osman's case, his love for Janan reeks more of libidinal desire rather than spiritual. For Osman "if the soul mate is absent there is no need for the soul." And later he tells Janan: "To be is to be embracing you." (173) though the allusion is to Hamlet, Osman offers Janan a world of realities in which both of them exist as opposed to a world of fantasies and Angels where Mehmet and the book exist.

Osman in essence is more than willing to terminate his journeys in search of the new life and the angel had Janan conceded to his libidinal desires. In Dr. Fine's mansion, Osman attempts to copulate with Janan. She rebuffs him. He walks out of the room into the garden full of frustration and apparently with a big erection signified by the loaded pistol he carries. His immediate firing of the pistol in the dark becomes a metaphor for what Shakespeare in sonnet 79 calls the "expense of spirit". On another occasion, somewhere in a seedy hotel room while contemplating proposing to Janan, Osman is engrossed by "dauntless mosquito that was working the room" (176). Pamuk might be alluding to "the Flea", a famous metaphysical poem by Dryden, in which a lover stops his coy virgin mistress from killing a flea because he cynically claims that he and she are sexually united inside that insect as the latter sucked their blood and had it mixed inside its system. The mosquito in this respect becomes a signifier for Osman's horniness rather than holiness. Sometime later in the narrative Osman kills another mosquito in the room after returning from Viranbag, the town where he shot Mehmet. Killing the mosquito foreshadows Osman's loss of hope in fulfilling his sexual desire upon Janan as they no longer share the same space. Critics who saw Sufi spirituality in the narrative failed to notice the significations of such allusions and signifiers. The mockery of the whole affair lies in Janan's claim to Osman that "Love points the way, empties you of the stuff of life, carries you at last to the mystery of creation." (72) Had this assertion not been a mockery of the Sufi tradition, then Osman by virtue of his Sufi love should have found the desired new life, the desired angel and the desired way. His failure to do so in the light of the above dictum accentuates Osman's departure off the true Sufi path and implies his indulgence in the sensualities of the libido. In this view, Janan's claim becomes more of an erotic statement than spiritual. The novel is replete with such scenes and dialogues that point explicitly and implicitly to the lover's occupation with sexuality rather than spirituality. As a result Osman fails to reach the state of the *sufi fenâ* or unity with God.

Osman's arrival at Dr. Fine's town in the guise of Ali Kara and his encounter with Dr. Fine become a turning point in his life as he concludes that the "coming bus journeys will not be the same as the previous ones." (114) From this moment on the Sufi-like traveler turns his attention from finding the angel to locating his rival and terminating him. Early in the novel, Osman talks about a benign sacred gaze that enthralled him and initiated him into the subsequent journeys he undertook in search of the beloved:

I beheld a gaze that followed me on the journey, one that seemed to appear in the least expected places only to disappear, making itself sought all the more because it was so illusive, a tender gaze that had long been free of guilt and blame...I longed to become that gaze. I longed to exist in a world beheld by that gaze. I wanted it so much that I almost believed in my existence in that world. (5-6)

Ironically, the gaze that was focused on Osman transpires to be nothing more than Dr. Fine's vigilant and ruthless spies who were tracking down the readers of the Book. Pamuk's ridicule of the Sufi Path reached its zenith when Osman's desire to become part of the gaze is realized, as he concedes to become an agent and assassin for Dr. Fine.

In the journey process Pamuk mockingly shows us a traveler in pursuit of vengeance rather than in search of God. Osman's eventual shooting of his rival and his return to Dr. Fine's house to take Janan back brings him no comfort as he realizes that Janan has disappeared. At this junction the traveler puts an end to his journeys and interrupts his project of searching for the new life.

The mockery of the Sufi tradition becomes further evident in the narrative as the search for the new life turns from a belief to an obsession. Whereas the Sufi Dervish's journey takes him to truth that ushers in comfort, serendipity, and a deepened belief, Osman's journeys originate in some obsession and lead to disillusionment. Osman's final realization that the angel he loved and sought for so long is an image based on an image of a Hollywood vamp brought him great discomfort. Towards the end of the book, Osman tells us that he reached the end of his journey in Son Pazar with no satisfaction and with loss of faith:

I had learned what was necessary –as well as what was unnecessary—and I had arrived at the end of the adventures, voyages, and mysteries I could possibly invent for myself. The slice of life I might call my future was cloaked in darkness just like the town of Son Pazar...was in oblivion, existing cut off from sparkling nightlife, effervescent crowds, and well-lit streets. (286)

Osman's disillusionment at the end of his journeys epitomizes Pamuk's mockery of the Sufi traveler and ushers in the undignified moment where the traveler dies realizing that the sought angel is "as pitiless as it was distant and wondrous." (295)

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