

Orientalism In Orhan Pamuk's White Castle*

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Abstract

The two most well-known works of Orhan Pamuk, *The White Castle* and *My Name is Red*, are historical fiction set in the time of the Ottoman Empire. These novels represent some of the most common issues the novelist focuses on, such as the East-West binary, questions of cultural identity and differences, and possibilities of local and global co-existence. In this article, by focusing on the case of *The White Castle*, Pamuk's life, his Nobel prize acceptance and his controversial statements in international press, I examine how a Turkish-born, Muslim novelist portrays Islamic history and the Ottomans predominantly for the European gaze and argue that Pamuk's historical narrative borrows considerably from the legacy of European Orientalist writings.

Key Words

Pamuk, Orientalism, postcolonial studies, comparative literature, Nobel, image of Islam, contemporary fiction

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Introduction

Translated into more than fifty languages, the work of the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk has always been recognized and appreciated in the international arena.¹ After winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006, Pamuk's recognition became comparable to figures such as Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul. The two most well-known works of Pamuk, *The White Castle* and *My Name is Red*,² are historical fiction set in the time of the Ottoman Empire. These novels represent some of the most common issues the novelist focuses on, such as the East-West³ binary, questions of cultural identity and differences, and possibilities of local and global co-existence.⁴ Analyzing these works⁵ gives us the opportunity to see how a Turkish-born, Muslim novelist portrays Islamic history predominantly for the European gaze.

It could be fairly stated that Pamuk's international fame started in 1990 with the publication of *The White Castle* when *New York Times* welcomed Pamuk to the global arena by announcing, "a new star [who] has risen in the east—Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish writer." (Parini 1991: par. 1). Therefore, any discussion of how Pamuk portrays Turks and Islam to the Western audience should start with this short yet very telling novel. In this article, I focus solely on *The White Castle*,⁶ Pamuk's life, his Nobel prize and his controversial statements in international press. Encouraged by Gayatri Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?"⁷ I examine how Pamuk represents the history of the Ottomans that has intrigued Europeans for centuries. Situating Pamuk's historical fiction in the centuries-old tradition of Orientalist (mis) representations, I argue that Pamuk's historical narrative borrows considerably from the legacy of European colonialist writings that debase native culture and traditions. Looking at the representation of the Ottoman culture in Pamuk's work also disrupts and complicate the one-way dynamics of representation (that is, analyses of European texts with regard to European portrayals of the Middle Eastern cultures) and thus play a critical role in the overall context of postcolonial studies. This will also make it possible to question the role of the Turk in the evolution of the image of Islam in contemporary literary discourse.

Before a close reading of *The White Castle*, I would like start by discussing a brief yet telling article Pamuk wrote on the conquest of the then Constantinople. In an article written on the occasion of the 550th anniversary of the

“Conquest/Fall,” Pamuk discusses whether what happened on May 29, 1453 was a “conquest” or “fall” (2003). Pamuk states his verdict at the beginning: “It is the ‘Fall of Constantinople’ for the Westerners and the ‘Conquest of Istanbul’ for the Easterners.”⁸ Pamuk further describes how a close friend of his was once accused of being an “ultranationalist” by an American professor at Columbia University for using the term “conquest” in an assignment, even though his friend saw the event neither as a “fall” nor as a “conquest.” To the professor, either the friend’s “heart felt closer toward the Christians” or, worse, he was in the middle, “like one of those unfortunate war slaves caught up between the two worlds” (2003). Later, Pamuk historicizes this dilemma of nomenclature with references to the repression of minorities in Istanbul and suppression of human rights in Turkey where “churches were destroyed” and “priests were murdered” (2003). Even in the second half of the twentieth century, “the Conquest was still in progress” (2003). The novelist concludes the discussion with an allusion to Orhan Beg (writer’s namesake), Mehmed the Conqueror’s uncle, who was fighting among the Romans against the Ottomans. Realizing he has a place neither in the West nor in the East since “the West and the East were at a violent and merciless war with one another,” Orhan Beg jumps from atop the castle walls and falls dead to the ground (2003).

Not only does this brief article encapsulate Pamuk’s recurrent themes, such as the East-West divide, the clash of Muslim and Judeo-Christian traditions, and cross-national animosities, but it also demonstrates how and why his work can be critiqued within post-colonial scholarship. Despite the novelist’s increasing sensitivity toward politics of representation and the cultural dynamics of hierarchies among “civilized Western” and “underdeveloped Eastern” cultures in his later works, Pamuk has nonetheless grounded his work within the problematic binaries and oppositions of “West vs. East,” “Christian West vs. Islamic East,” and moreover, “sophisticated, democratic, humanistic, and civilized West vs. barbaric, vulgar, despotic, and uncivilized East,” dichotomies that post-colonial scholarship, Orientalism⁹ studies and multicultural studies have long fought to deconstruct. In his article on the “capture” of Constantinople, Pamuk leaves these binaries intact. The ultrasensitive American professor’s attention to objective-liberal historiography¹⁰ is one such instance. Others would include the despotic and proselytizing Muslim Turks toward the victimized Christian residents of Istanbul, the so-called lack of human rights in the East, and of course Pamuk’s conscious and conspicuous

attempt to situate himself neither in the East nor in the West. Pamuk easily, and without reservations, cuts East from West and defines each of these terms as unadulterated. These features point glaringly toward an Orientalist framework. The claim that the “conquest” has been going on in Istanbul for the last five hundred years reinforces this perspective and thus problematizes the writer’s attempt at being neither a Westerner, nor an Easterner, nor both. As Nilgun Anadolu-Okur notes, Pamuk distances himself from the claim of ownership of the “conquest” discourse to which most Turkish writers who follow Yahya Kemal have adhered strongly (2009: 16)¹¹.

Pamuk’s success in European and American intellectual circles started with *The White Castle* in 1990. Being the shortest and most accessible novel of Orhan Pamuk, the novel is translated into dozens of languages and read widely in the international arena. It is a historical novel situated in the classical age of the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing interactions among the Ottoman Turks and Europe. It reveals how Pamuk, one of the most prominent figures of the liberal Turkish intelligentsia for the last quarter of a century, who is thus an “insider” to Turkish-Islamic culture, reflects the image of the Turk for both national and international audiences. *The White Castle* suggests a takeover of Orientalist heritage from the Western European colonial discourse and are case studies in the nature of this dynamics. After a close reading of the text, my next question will be why a Turkish and Muslim-born novelist would choose to continue this colonial tradition.

Orientalist clichés are apparent on the first page of *The White Castle*¹² when a young Italian scholar protagonist (the first-person narrator), en route from Venice to Naples, is captured by Turkish pirates during the early seventeenth century. In an effort to save his life from the Muslim pirates who “were gathering everyone together on deck and stripping them naked” to be brought to tiny, damp cells where “hundreds of captives rotted away in filth,” the Venetian lies that he is a doctor (Pamuk 1990: 15-7). Although he at first simply tells the truth that he has knowledge of astronomy and nocturnal navigation, this makes no impression on the vulgar and ignorant Turkish sailors, who are pillaging books and ransacking the Venetians’ possessions in search of gold. However, counting on the anatomy book he is left with and realizing that his life might be spared if he can give guidance on health matters, he tells the lie about his profession. The Turks are obviously ignorant about even the general

peculiarities of this job. “When I was showed a man who’d lost an arm,” the Venetian narrator tells, “I protested that I was not a surgeon” (1990: 16). This angers the Turks once more and the Venetian victim is, again, about to be put to the oars just like the rest of his fellow countrymen, when, finally, the captain thinks he can make use of the Venetian’s knowledge of “urine and pulses” (1990: 16). Despite the fact that other Christians despise him during the rest of the voyage to Istanbul since most of them are either killed at the stake or their noses and ears are cut off, the young scholar, who studied “science and art in Florence and Venice,” is happy to have his life with his body intact (1990: 14). During the voyage, the Venetian treats a few Turks “using [his] common sense rather than knowledge of anatomy” and when their wounds heal by themselves everyone believes that he is indeed a doctor (1990: 16). The discovery of the Venetian doctor by a group of Turkish thugs reminds readers of Homi Bhabha’s observation of the “sudden fortuitous discovery of the English book” in the “wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa and the Caribbean” (1994: 38). Likewise, wild Turks seem euphoric to have found a doctor.

Before judging Pamuk’s text as misrepresentative of Turkish-Islamic medicinal practices and of the high level of advancement in the understanding of the human anatomy, it could very well be argued that the above opening cannot be used, on its own, to demonstrate the novel’s distortion of the scientific advancement of the Ottoman world; pirates are pirates, and regardless of the cultural status of the Ottomans, the pirate ship in question could be populated by ignorant and uneducated thieves. However, the rest of the narrative shows that the first chapter is not an unusual case in terms of the depiction of Turkish ignorance in the sciences, which reminds readers of the eighteenth-century British historian William Eton’s observations regarding the “barren” nature of Turkish scientific and artistic endeavors (1799: 210). When the Venetian narrator arrives at Istanbul, he faces the same kind of ridicule by the Turks in regard to his identification as a doctor: “When I protested that I was a doctor, with knowledge of medicine and science, they just laughed: there were walls to be built around the pasha’s¹³ garden, men were needed” (1990: 17). Yet, once again, his fortunes turn around while he is chained and carrying stones, when a wealthy pasha, upon hearing that he understands human anatomy, asks for his help for “a problem with his health which none of the other doctors had been able to cure” (1990: 18). Continuing his “com-

mon sense approach,” the Venetian questions his patient at length, listens to his cough and then makes “mint-flavored green troches with what [he] found there. [He] prepared a cough syrup as well” (1990: 18). Having to make sure that the mix is not poisonous, he drinks it first and offers it to the pasha. Next day, the pasha is in great health and the Venetian is indeed “a good doctor,” he indicates, deserving the pasha’s praise and grace (1990: 19).

Not only Pamuk’s pirate Turks, but also the grand physicians of the Ottoman court, are incapable of a basic understanding of human health. This depiction indicates textual practices that are the legacies of imperial colonial writings about the Other, which had mostly depicted the East as unscientific and vulgar, dating every medicinal and scientific enterprise back to central Europe. However, it has been demonstrated time and again that at the foundation of European medicinal practices lie the works of Avicenna, Galen, and Hippocrates, who were translated from Arabic to Latin and Greek via the translation movements in Western Europe, particularly in Spain where the scientific heritage of Muslim cultures accumulated in pivotal locations, such as the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, and then were transferred to the West.¹⁴ The works of Avicenna¹⁵ were also studied until the early nineteenth century in Europe as the basic guidebooks on general surgery and for the education of physicians.¹⁶ Avicenna, along with many of his predecessors in the Middle East and his successors in the Ottoman world, wrote in Arabic, and there were numerous copies of his books and those of other physicians in wide circulation among Turkish scientists. Readers of the novel are led to assume that not a single court physician in Istanbul, the scientific center of the known world at the time, could cure a simple cough. If Pamuk is aware of this history, why does he misrepresent his subject matter to the level that it can easily be parodied?

The novel’s dismissive attitude regarding Ottoman sciences is not limited to the history of medicine. One by one (in the narrative of *WC*), every branch of science in the Ottoman world is refuted and ridiculed as meritless and inferior to Western advancements. Astronomy is one field in which the Venetian’s knowledge surpasses many in Istanbul. When the young scholar draws the attention of a Turkish Hoja,¹⁷ he finds himself captured in another sort of slavery. Hoja orders the Venetian to teach him everything he knows about sciences and about the West; “all the astronomy, medicine, engineering” that

he learned “in *primary and secondary school*” (emphasis mine), a task to which Hoja ties the condition of the Venetian’s freedom, and one that is going to take decades to finish, therefore forming the entire plot of the novel (1990: 32). Sometimes fulfilling tasks ordered by either the Pasha or the “child” sultan, other times following the obsessional eccentric inquiries of the Hoja himself, the two study, discuss, experiment and theorize on many topics, ranging from building fireworks for the sultan’s amusement to exploring stars and planets. As thought-provoking a scientific inquiry as it may sound, the enterprise is doomed at the onset because of the unscientific attitudes of the Turkish scholar. For example, Hoja’s knowledge of astronomy, just like many other topics, is superficial at best, ridiculous and superstitious at worst. Unlike the Venetian’s sound knowledge of the basics of the universe, the Turkish scholar seems to be at odds with even the well-established truths of the time:

Two days later, at midnight, he took up the question again: how could I be so sure that the moon was the closest planet? Perhaps we were letting ourselves be taken in an optical illusion. It was then I spoke to him for the first time about my studies in astronomy and explained briefly the basic principles of Ptolemaic cosmography. . . . But this did not change his suspicion that there might be a planet nearer than the moon. Towards morning he was talking about that planet as if he had already obtained proofs of its existence. (1990: 25)

Here Hoja is not questioning whether the world is round or whether the heliocentric cosmology is really true, which were both being questioned among many circles both in Europe and the Near East at the time. Rather, he is having problems coming to terms with a well-established fact in astronomy—that there really is no other object between the Moon and the Earth—which was proven based on sound data and judgment centuries before his time. His theory, on the other hand, emerges from a mere selfish and infantile obsession and a grudge against the Venetian. This Hoja, we need to keep in mind, is not any hoja, but one of the best at the court, being only second to the Pasha and having exclusive access to the Sultan, a privilege only a select few were able to attain in the Ottoman Empire. In a world governed by meritocracy, a court scientist meant a lot of things, one of which included being well-read on more than the basics of astronomy.

Hoja develops this notion without any scientific basis by inserting a small round shape into Latin diagrams of star maps, not unlike a small child who

draws moustaches and beards on well-crafted paintings by professionals. “Examining it a little more carefully,” the Venetian notes, “I could tell from the relative freshness of the ink that it had been added to the manuscript later. I went over the entire manuscript and gave it back to Hoja. He told me he was going to find that planet: he did not seem at all to be joking” (1990: 26). It is a well-documented and unanimously accepted fact that had it not been for Islamic advances in astronomy starting from the ninth century through the sixteenth century, Ptolemy would not have made its way to Europe nor would the revolutionary heliocentric theories have been possible.¹⁸ The suggestion, in the novel, that the Venetian scholar is more familiar with Ptolemy, who was introduced to Europe via Muslims and via the Arabic language, than the Muslim scholar is a reversal of history. Moreover, the Ottoman-Turkish contributions to astronomy have long been credited in the history of sciences partly because both Takiyuddin's studies (1526-1585) and his exceptionally prolific observatory in Istanbul have been accessible to scholars, and therefore known and analyzed excessively.¹⁹

In *WC*, readers witness fiction as the reversal of history and, further, as the reinforcement of historical European narratives about the East. Astronomy is only one of many fields misrepresented in the novel. While the Hoja and the Italian slave are debating their theories of astronomy, they are also assigned by either the child sultan or the Pasha specific missions regarding technology. It seems that in Ottoman lands the inquiry into technology is only cherished either to wage a more effective war against the enemy or to entertain the ruling class headed by the child sultan that represents the so-called infantile East in the face of sophisticated and mature West. Their first mission is to create fireworks no one has ever seen before for a royal wedding: “It seemed that the pasha remembered I'd told him I had knowledge of science, astronomy, engineering—well then, did I know anything of those fireworks hurled at the sky, of gunpowder?” (1990: 23). Another mission ordered by the pasha is to fashion a weapon, “A weapon to make the world a prison for our enemies” (1990: 39). When the Italian and the Turk are not working on either of these “scientific” endeavors, they are called by the sultan to help him rid himself of boredom. They design toys or simply show him the planetary models he can touch freely. The dialogue between this “sweet, red-cheeked child sovereign” and the scholars reveals the character of the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire:

How did the stars stay in the air? They hung from the transparent spheres! What were the spheres made of? Of an invisible material, so they were invisible too! Didn't they pump into one another? No, each had its own zone, layered as in the model! There were so many stars, why weren't there as many spheres? Because they were very far away! How far? Very, very! (1990: 41)

However, the sultan is bored easily and starts questioning, this time, his pet lion, who has been ailing. In addition to an army of dwarfs and eunuchs whose sole mission is to entertain the sultan, the child sovereign indeed has a personal "lion-house" consisting of many kinds of violent animals: lions, leopards, and panthers among others (1990: 43). It is usual for Orientalist narratives to lump radically different Middle Eastern races into one category as "Arab" or "Turk" and, here, Pamuk places African animals in Istanbul together to create a bizarre constellation of exotic creatures, human and animal. Curiously, most of these animals are "chained to the columns of an ancient church" (1990: 43).

We know from historical records that mosques and synagogues in Western Europe, particularly in Spain and France, were used as stables, mostly for pigs, during the expulsion of all non-Catholic communities by the established Church and the Inquisition.²⁰ Records do not exist, however, that depict the corruption or abuse of Christian or Jewish temples in Istanbul. It is true that many churches in Istanbul were turned into mosques after the conquest/fall of the city by/to the Ottomans, including Hagia Sophia, the biggest church of medieval Christendom, but many other churches were not only kept intact but were repaired by state funding. New synagogues were built when tens of thousands of Jews migrated from Europe to Ottoman ports.²¹ However, this kind of tolerance toward non-Muslims within the Ottoman lands is nowhere to be found in *WC*. Even before the Italian scholar sets foot on Turkish soil, he is forced to convert on the ship (by the pirates.) Later, every character he meets sometimes implies, other times orders explicitly, that he must become a Muslim sooner or later; his pragmatic knowledge of the sciences the people around him are so fond of can only postpone the inevitable. First the pasha and then the Hoja prominently try to change this "infidel's" religion. Yet, the Venetian never gives up; his daring confidence is a testament to his unshakable character. "In a sudden moment of courage," he says in one instance under the pressure to convert, "I said I would not change my religion, and

the pasha, surprised, called me a fool.” He further adds, “After all, there was no one around me whom I would be ashamed to tell I had become a Muslim” (1990: 29). Later, the verbal pressure turns into physical torture when, finally, two men show up in his cell, one of them holding an axe: “They said the pasha had commanded that I should be beheaded at once if I would not become a Muslim” (1990: 30). He once again finds the courage to resist and the guardians leave him saying, he is “the enemy of God and Muhammad” (1990: 31). In instances like this one wonders most if Pamuk is writing for Christian readers or Muslim ones, a question I will return to later in this article.

When the Venetian moves to Hoja's house, the latter's Eastern “hospitality” does not help. Among several disturbing scenes in the novel, Hoja strips the Venetian naked to observe his body closely, ties him to the chair, and beats the Venetian with his fists. When the Venetian resists going outside because there is plague in the city, Hoja, after going outside and touching sick people, force his hands on the Venetian's face to prove that one cannot go against one's fate; if it is Allah's will, people will die no matter (1990: 66, 72, 74-76). Muslim scholars in Pamuk's fiction are not only completely fatalistic in their perception of life and death, but they are also unaware of the quarantine practices that had been practiced for centuries in the Middle East. However, similar to other aspects of *WC*, the novel is not faithful historically. In an excruciatingly researched article on the interactions between the Ottoman astronomers and European scientists, Avner Ben-Zaken states:

We must call into question any historical construction that describes a firm dichotomy between ‘disenchanted’ European humanist-scientists, who often used mysticism for the sake of scientific work, and the ‘enchanted’ Islamic world, which could not overcome its mystical impediments nor even use it for scientific progress. Paris of the seventeenth century was not radically different from Istanbul in its habits of scientific thought and its agendas, or in their contexts. In both places the ‘emblematic world view’ had a strong hold and reinforced the urge to explore nature. (2004: 27)

Moreover, the homoerotic desire suggested by the narrator through Hoja's obsession with the Italian's body, reinforced by his envy of the Italian's “Western” knowledge and identity, becomes more significant as an “Eastern anomaly” since the Italian is always disgusted by the other's obnoxious moves. In the Turkish-Islamic culture of *WC*, Christian crucifixes and icons of Virgin

Mary are hung upside down; smuggling and corruption dominates Ottoman bureaucracy; the slave trade supports Ottoman-ruled Mediterranean commerce; a man's freedom is valued by the number of visits to whorehouses that abound in Istanbul; houses are filthy and depressing; astronomy is mixed with sophistry; observatories are in ruins; Muslim scholars are superstitious; culture does not value science, and infidels are put under the sword rather easily (1990: 16, 20, 23, 25, 49, 43, 51, 103, 142). This is the work the *New York Times*, twenty years ago, introduced to American audiences as the work of a "new star [who] has risen in the east—Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish writer," therefore opening the doors of international fame (Parini 1991: par. 1). The praise of the *NY Times*, that has long been used on the back covers of almost all subsequent works of a writer encapsulates the amazement of the European/Western public when reading Pamuk's novels.

The Turkish literary elite also seemed to welcome Pamuk unreservedly. More difficult than understanding the *NY Times* comment on what grounds the prominent Turkish literary critic, Jale Parla, defines *WC* as "the only instance in the post-colonial novel where the Western and the Eastern selves achieve an equality" (2009: viii). Nilgun Anadolu-Okur also takes the story of *WC* at face value and characterizes the work as one of those novels based in reality: "In Ottoman Istanbul there may have lived a Hodja [*sic.*], a spiritual teacher, who had once enrolled a foreign apprentice to his service and trusted his loyalty as the two were busily engaged in scientific inventions, experimenting with the technical aspects of firework production for the pleasure of their Sultan" (2009: 6). Anadolu-Okur misreads even the basic elements of the story; the Hoja in *WC* is not a spiritual teacher, and he does not enroll an apprentice, he enslaves him. The Venetian scholar is not Hoja's apprentice; it is the other way around. Second, and more significantly, I question the ease with which the critic assumes a farcical story to be an excerpt from Ottoman history. Even Pamuk himself is aware of the risks of situating his story as historical reality: henceforth his postmodern, meta-fictional safeguarding technique at the beginning of the novel. Claiming that he found the entire manuscript of this story on the dusty shelves of the Ottoman archives in Istanbul, the pseudo-writer "Faruk Darvinoglu" says that he is not sure if the manuscript is authentic (Pamuk 1990: 9-12). Pamuk also admits applying this technique in the "Afterword" written years later to "safeguard against certain technical problems," although he never specifies what kind of problems these might

have been (2007e: 250). It is not only Pamuk, it seems, who assumes the role of the colonized voluntarily but also a generation of scholars who have been trained at private European institutions in Istanbul. Parla attended the same Robert College in Istanbul as Pamuk. I will talk more about the effects of this Westernized education in the final part of this study.²²

Pamuk's biography provides useful context for his representations of Ottoman culture via European lenses. Coming from the prosperous Pamuk family of engineers, who have long taken care of the state's ever-expanding railway contracts, the writer grew up in the upper-class, elite and wealthy circles of Nisiantasi, Istanbul, that can easily be defined as the *crème de la crème* of city and national social structures. Living together through two generations, Pamuk's family has even owned their house complex, consisting of a dozen apartments that still bear the writer's surname.²³ The family is so self-sufficient that, as Pamuk noted on many occasions, he did not have to finish university and had the luxury of sitting in his room for years spending his time reading books. The passion for such an artistic enterprise could only be appreciated. However, such families in Istanbul usually define themselves as "modern" and "secular" as opposed to -their understanding goes- the "traditionalist" and "religious" "Anatolian" people, those who do not live on the "European"—literally and culturally— side of the city. Most of the members of the family are either educated abroad in some major metropolis in Europe or the United States such as Paris or London or New York (in order of chronological popularity up-to-date) or they go to European schools established in Istanbul and other cosmopolitan cities of Turkey in the last century of the nation's history. What is really meant by "modern," then, is actually "Westernized"; Turkish families who have been culturally immersed with so-called European values that are highly critical of Islamic tradition, and exhibit animosity toward Islamic doctrines and dismissal of national-historical-traditional values and lifestyles that are shared by millions of people. Accepting the six-hundred year history of Ottoman Empire as the enemy, as a heritage to disavow, as a culture to strip oneself of, and seeing its arts and literature as either simplistic (i.e. Ottoman miniature) or lavish (i.e. Ottoman *divan* poetry) and inferior when compared to the West are major trademarks of this new, Europe-oriented identity of at least some of the elite of the society.²⁴

Pamuk, for the majority of his life, has taken part in all of the above, sometimes consciously, other times as an unavoidable outcome of both his immediate cultural environment. Exposed to the cultural hegemony²⁵ around him, he not only has spent his entire childhood and youth in the same neighborhood in Istanbul, but also attended Robert College, an institution in the city, which only the richest and the wealthiest of both the city and the nation could afford. He spent a considerable amount of time in New York, which he once defined as “the capital of the world” and “the source of all his dreams” (2007g: 334). (He also wrote one of his most successful novels, *The Black Book*, a postmodern epic about Istanbul on a par with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, at the New York Public Library).²⁶ Pamuk’s earlier encounters with Islam happened via a house maid, a poor Muslim woman who regularly came to the Pamuk Apartment to clean, since no immediate family member or neighbor around him would be an observable figure.²⁷ It was also this lady who took Pamuk inside a mosque when he was a child, the memory of which he includes details such as having to take off his shoes and smelling feet on the carpets.

Looked at from this perspective, Pamuk’s life was not unlike that of an outsider to the city; he was not much different than a European traveler to Turkey, who has only heard about the Ottomans either as a threat to Christendom or about Islamic, Near Eastern cultures from *Arabian Nights*, which Pamuk has defined many times as the favorite book of his childhood.²⁸ The characters that Pamuk mostly associates himself with are outsiders who do not really belong to the cultural context in which they are situated: the Venetian scholar in *WC*, who is no more than a slave among Muslims, Black of *My Name is Red*, who has been out of Istanbul for about two decades, and Ka of *Snow*, who is an Istanbulli who has lived many years in Europe but who is now in the midst of religious conservatives and secularists. “In every novel—no matter how much I resist it,” the writer admits, “there is a character whose thoughts, constitution, and temperament are close to my own and who carries a number of my sorrows and uncertainties,” and he considers Black of *My Name is Red* and Galip of *The Black Book* to be these characters (2007a: 268). Pamuk explains, “It is a character’s silences, uncertainties, and sorrows that bring me close to him, not his victories or acts of courage” (2007a: 268).

Thus the writer not only defines his sense of the novel as a product of nineteenth-century realism²⁹ (although this definition would be incomplete without

the serious playfulness of the postmodern structures in his novels³⁰), but also reveals clues regarding his personal and national identity. These “uncertainties” and “sorrows,” after all, seem to define for him the identity crisis of modern Turkey as well. Caged between that imaginary line between East and West, between Europe and the Middle East, the Turkish identity of the last century is, no doubt, considered by some as a history of “uncertainties” and “sorrows.” To his credit, Pamuk captures and records this identity crisis masterfully in most of his work. As Margaret Atwood rightfully commented once, “Pamuk is narrating his country into being” (2011). However, as much as Pamuk’s narration captures this seminal East-West issue in Turkey, it is also a narration that has mostly been situated and told from Europe’s perspective. This perspective leaves out the glories and beauties of national history, a certain element needed for national self-confidence and development of identity based on shared cultural-historical values.³¹ Pamuk therefore questions and maybe even resents the “conquest” of Constantinople like Greek and Latin writers; he ignores the rich history of the sciences of astronomy, medicine, engineering, physics, philosophy and many other disciplines of the Turkish-Islamic culture as well as the ensuing contributions to the development of sciences across histories and cultures by building on a Eurocentric grand narrative that sees Europe as the cradle of civilization and the Middle East as caged in a primitive and ahistoric space.³²

All the same, when he gives interviews to foreign newspapers, Pamuk still focuses on the so-called “uncertainties” and “sorrows” of national history, questioning the “conquest.” In February 2005, one year before he was awarded the Nobel prize, the writer made the controversial comment that, for many, opened the way to the Nobel: “Thirty thousand Kurds have been killed here, and a million Armenians. And almost nobody dares to mention that. So I do.” Right after the comment was publicized extensively in Turkey, a national outrage ensued. Turkish authorities charged the author with “insulting Turkishness” based on the legislation code 301/1, and the author was tried with the penalty being three months to six years. The ensuing national and international support for the writer regarding freedom of expression, the ever-increasing pressure from the E.U. regarding human rights, and the sensitivities of some of the Turkish authorities caused the accusations to be dismissed and dropped immediately. In addition, the law regarding “insulting Turkishness” was also questioned.

Although the case did not turn into a second Rushdie affair, the international intelligentsia was outraged by the event and the international community for a long time focused on Pamuk, the so-called “oppressed Turkish writer.” The small committee of the Nobel in Sweden was not immune to this attention to the writer, and the following year Pamuk not only became the first Turkish writer to receive the prize but also the second Muslim author (after Egyptian Nagib Mahfouz) and one of the youngest to receive a Nobel. Although it could fairly be argued that Pamuk got his Nobel prize because of his success in literature, it should also be stated that his controversial comment about Turks facilitated the process of him getting the most-sought award. What is sad and striking, however, is the fact that Pamuk’s comments before the Nobel about his national-cultural history are not isolated instances as can be seen in this analysis; he has a history of looking at his culture with a European gaze and thus often satisfying the European intellectual.³³

While reflecting on this instance in an article for the *New Yorker*, to which he frequently contributes, Pamuk notes, “Flaubert and Nerval, the two god-fathers of Orientalism, would call these incidents *bizarreries*, and rightly so” (2011b). He further adds that such events propagate the image of the “Terrible Turk” worldwide. Yet, Pamuk indeed knows and talks about Orientalism articulately. In an interview given after he received the Nobel, he indicates:

I like Edward Said’s idea of Orientalism, but since Turkey was never a colony, the romanticizing of Turkey was never a problem for Turks. Western man did not humiliate the Turk in the same way he humiliated the Arab or Indian. Istanbul was invaded only for two years and the enemy boats left as they came, so this did not leave a deep scar in the spirit of the nation. What left a deep scar was the loss of the Ottoman Empire, so I don’t have that anxiety, that feeling that Westerners look down on me. (2011a)

Pamuk is right when indicating that Turkey was never a colony: therefore, the interactions of the colonizers with Turks were indeed different from what they were with the colonized. However, Pamuk’s conception of colonization as a simple matter of physical invasion is naïve at best and consciously misleading (in terms of the rationalization of his textual discursive practices) at worst. He himself has pointed out on many occasions the problematic nature of the Westernization movement in Turkey, and how this phenomenon aimed

at erasing cultural roots in the creation of a nation working for Europe's best interests.

As Stuart Hall notes while effectively critiquing Englishness, colonizer identity permeates by “marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing, and forgetting other ethnicities” (2006: 202). Similarly, the wholesale Westernization created long-lasting problems that still cause social unease. Pamuk himself emphasized many times how his works tried to re-discover the lost heritage of the Ottomans, and create a fusion between the East and the West. “Everyone is sometimes a Westerner and sometimes an Easterner—in fact a constant combination of the two” (2011a).

It is true that Pamuk's other historical novel, *My Name is Red*, which is also historical fiction set in the time of the Ottoman empire is a more complex and ambiguous case study than *WC* in terms its coverage of the East-West binary. And all other Pamuk's novels should be studied and analyzed on their own terms, on a case by case basis. However, looking at the rich textual evidence in *The White Castle*, its perception in both local and global intellectual circles in a way that it promotes age-old Orientalist attitudes towards Ottomans and Islamic cultures in general, as I have tried to show in this article, and looking at telling details in Pamuk's personal life, it wouldn't be too far-fetched, either, to add Pamuk's name next to Nerval and Flaubert as the godfathers of Orientalism.

Endnotes

- 1 Listed in “TIME 100: The People Who Shape Our World” in 2006.
- 2 Winner of the prestigious 2003 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and 2002 French *Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger*, *My Name is Red* was also put on *The Guardian's* list of must-read books. It was also listed in “100 novels everyone should read: A Telegraph selection of the essential fiction library”. *The Telegraph*. 16 Jan. 2009 and “1000 Novels Everyone Must Read”. *The Guardian*. 23 Jan. 2009
- 3 Although the primary motive behind this study is to expose the misleading nature of binaries caused by terms such as the “East” and the “West,” I will use these terms productively but cautiously in this article since in both Pamuk's work and their reception, the terms have a high value of exchange. My usage is limited to the epistemological distinctions that

have been created over the centuries between these seemingly two distinct entities rather than any ontological basis.

4 A problem similar to the “East-West” binary indeed exists regarding terms such as “Europe,” “Ottoman” and “Islam,” and again I will focus on the epistemological currency of these terms. I do not equate “East” with “Islam” or dissociate “Europe” from “Islam”; the Ottomans have ruled in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean for several centuries, therefore they are “European” as well.

5 Elsewhere I continue my discussion with an analysis of *My Name is Red*. For matters of length, I focus on only one work in an article.

6 See note 5.

7 My intention is not to superimpose post-colonial criticism in a seemingly non-colonial setting. It is true that neither the Ottomans nor the Turkish Republic has been colonized in the way that India was colonized by England, and I do not aim to equate these different contexts. However, it is also an equal disillusionment to think of modern Turkish culture as free from the colonial effects of Western European powers, as I will prove in my analysis of Pamuk's work.

8 Many scholars of Ottoman history would rightly argue against the phrase, “Conquest of *Istanbul*,” since, it would be indicated, it was Constantinople that was conquered, not Istanbul—the Turkified version that particularly means “Istanbul *after* the conquest.”

9 See Edward Said (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage.

10 For history and post-colonialism see Chakrabarty.

11 One could even argue that Pamuk's reference to “1453” as the year of the conquest and fall demonstrates his reliance upon these binaries: 1453 is the year based on a Christian calendar, while most Muslim nations cite the year as 857 (the Hicri calendar) just as the Ottomans did.

12 I will reference *The White Castle* as *WC*.

13 A recurrent term in *WC*, “pasha” means an official of higher order in the court.

14 For more on the history of both medicine in particular and sciences in general see Masood, Lyons, and Morgan.

15 Abū Alī al-Husayn ibn Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā Balkhi, usually known in Middle Eastern countries as Ibn-i Sina. In the English tradition, his Latinized name is used; Avicenna. He was a famous eleventh-century

polymath of Turkic origin. He wrote prolifically on almost every branch of science; astronomy, chemistry, philosophy, geology, mathematics, logic, physics, medicine, education, and pedagogy. He is mostly known by his physician identity both in the Middle East and Europe. He wrote hundreds of works, of which *The Canon of Medicine* has been translated into many European languages and used in the West for centuries as a guidebook in surgery and medicine, among his other works.

For more on Islamic medicine in general see Porman and Savage-Smith.

For a source particularly on Ottoman medicine, see Shefer-Mossensohn.

16 See Turner, and Graham.

17 Unlike the definition of the narrator in Pamuk's fiction, "Hoja" means a "learned, wise man;" not "master." It has religious connotations but similar to medieval Europe, most religious scholars would be well-learned polymaths who study many different branches of humanities and physical sciences. Defining "hoja" as "master" could only support Pamuk's rhetoric of the master-slave relationship he establishes between his Ottoman character and the Italian scholar in his novel. Furthermore, the Anglicization of "hoca" (in Turkish) into "hoja" adds to the exotic effect created by this term.

18 For both a definitive introduction to and a more in-depth study on the history of Arabic astronomy, see Saliba.

19 For more on Ottoman astronomy, see Sezgin, and Saliba.

20 For more on the history of Sephardic Jews that escaped from Spain to the Ottoman Empire see Levy, and Kohen. For one of the most up-to-date studies on the events around the seminal date of 1492; on the Catholic Inquisition and the status of Jews in Europe see Reston Jr.

21 See Levy, and Kohen.

22 In a similar context, see Achebe for a more eloquent insight on the "colonialist critic" based on the author's uncanny experiences with "Europeanized" literary scholars.

23 See Pamuk, *Other Colors* and *Istanbul*.

24 It would be impossible within the limits of this study to aim for a more extensive discussion of the problematic history of Westernization in Turkey. For more on this and related issues, see Mardin and Berkes the two authorities on Westernization movements and its problems in Turkey.

25 See Gramsci.

- 26 The comparison of *The Black Book* to Joyce's *Ulysses* belongs to Pamuk himself. See *Other Colors*.
- 27 See Pamuk, *Other Colors*.
- 28 See Pamuk, *Other Colors*.
- 29 Pamuk has noted many times that his favorite writers are Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Stendhal.
- 30 Both Pamuk and his reviewers have compared his style to Jorge L. Borges, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, and William Faulkner. Pamuk's relation to postmodernism, however, is not as intense as the later generation of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie or William S. Burroughs. Rather, his experiments with narrative structure bring to mind Borges's labyrinthine stories or Calvino's narrators, who often disturb the illusion of reality and address readers directly at unexpected moments. Pamuk is still deeply situated in the realistic tradition of nineteenth-century British, French and Russian novels.
- 31 I do not mean to ignore Benedict Anderson's effective critique in *Imagined Communities*. An important part of the current study shows the fragility and fantastical nature of concepts such as East and West, and more particularly, values that come with "Europe" or "Westernization. When I say, "national" identity, I mostly mean the national lifestyles that are overwritten with the so-called higher European values that, in turn, create a destructive form of self-loathing (personally and culturally). For more on the economic ways of destructing "national culture" see Fanon. For how linguistic issues play a role in the discussion of nationalism see Chatterjee.
- 32 See Stam and Shohat (1994: 482).
- 33 For more on the analysis of the representation of Orhan Pamuk and other writers in the Western media see Filiz Barin-Akman (2017). *15 Temmuz Darbe Girişimi, Batı Medyası Söylem Analizi: Neo-Emperyalizm, İslamofobi ve Orientalizm*. Ankara: Kadim Yay. 183-210.

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Orhan Pamuk'un Beyaz Kale Eserinde Oryantalizm*

Beyazıt H. Akman**

Öz

Orhan Pamuk'un en çok bilinen eserlerinden olan *Beyaz Kale* ve *Benim Adım Kırmızı*, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu döneminde geçen tarihi romanlardır. Bu romanlar Doğu-Batı ikilemi, kültürel kimlik ve farklılıklar, ve kültürel çatışma gibi yazarın en yaygın temaları üzerine kurulmuştur. Bu makalede (yer sınırından ötürü) sadece *Beyaz Kale*'ye yoğunlaşarak, Pamuk'un hayatı, Nobel ödülü alışı ve yabancı basına verdiği çok tartışmalı demeçler eşliğinde, Türk ve Müslüman bir yazarın İslam'ı ve Osmanlıları Batı dünyası için nasıl resmettiği irdelenmekte ve Pamuk'un tarihi anlatımının Avrupalı Oryentalist yazım geleneğini fazlasıyla sürdürdüğü öne sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Pamuk, Oryantalizm, sömürgecilik araştırmaları, karşılaştırmalı edebiyat, Nobel, İslam algısı, çağdaş edebiyat

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Ориентализм в «Белой крепости» Орхана Памука*

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Аннотация

Два самых известных произведения Орхана Памука, «Белая крепость» и «Меня зовут Красный» - это исторические романы, действие которых происходит в Османской империи. Эти романы поднимают такие наиболее распространенные проблемы, как противостояние Восток-Запад, вопросы культурной самобытности и различий, а также возможности местного и глобального сосуществования. В этой статье, на материале романа «Белая крепость», жизни Памука, присуждения ему Нобелевской премии и его спорных высказываний в международной прессе, автор рассматривает, как турецкий романист-мусульманский писатель изображает исламскую историю и османов преимущественно для европейского читателя. Автор приходит к выводу, что историческое повествование Памука в значительной степени заимствовано из наследия европейского ориентализма.

Ключевые слова

Орхан Памук, ориентализм, постколониальные исследования, сравнительная литература, Нобелевская премия, образ ислама, современный роман

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