

**Identity Crisis in Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle***

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**Abstract**

Orhan Pamuk belongs to Turkey. He has been awarded Noble Prize for Literature in 2006. Turkey is declared an independent state in 1923. Modern writers of Turkey have raised the concerns of Turkey in their works. Pamuk is influenced by the rich literary tradition of Turkey and at the same time he is impressed with the writers like Dostoevsky, Arthur Miller and many more. As a postmodern writer Pamuk's fiction echoes the concern for the identity of a person. In this paper Pamuk's novel *The White Castle* is studied for the exploration of the crisis of identity. Pamuk himself has faced the dilemma of identity as he is accused by media of betraying the national sentiment. The protagonists Hoja and the Venetian traveler are not satisfied with their present identity and in the course of their life they assume a new identity.

**Keywords** - Identity Crisis, Dialectical relation and Juxtaposition.

**Introduction**

Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish writer. His work has been translated in more than sixty three languages worldwide. He has contributed in the Turkish literature by depicting the real situation of Turkey

in his fictional world. He is a postmodern writer. His work has the elements of postmodern literature like multiple narrators. He is deeply aware about his Turkish roots and at the same time he wants to imbibe the modern values also. Many of his novels are set in the historical past of Turkey. There is intertextuality in his fiction. Many of his characters present in one novel appear in other works also. Pamuk is concerned about the question of identity in his fiction. He time and again ponders over the question of identity like what is the real identity of a person. What is the role of tradition in shaping the identity? Should religion be practiced as a personal affair or is it a larger question involving the society as a whole? Eastern values are juxtaposed with the modern values of the west. His readers are required to be vigilant to draw the conclusion as the writer himself gives no final conclusion rather a reader is left with the task of answering the riddle of giving a suitable conclusion to the text.

Pamuk himself faced the problem of identity in his life. He wanted to be a painter but ended up as a writer. He himself faced the ire of Turkish people for supporting Kurdish people. He commented on Armenian genocide. He was in the center of controversy as he was opposed vehemently by hard liners. He was put under trial and after a long struggle he was exonerated from the charges. He has faced the dilemma of connecting with his roots and at the same time looking forward to the future. He said that he is a Cultural Muslim. He is seen by media as ErdagGoknar says:

The media often discusses what Pamuk is perceived to represent as a “Turk” and his authenticity as a writer, which revolves around his relationship to orthodoxies of Turkish secularism and national identity. Extreme commentaries accuse Pamuk, a secular Turk, of being a Jewish convert, or dönme, of being an enemy

of Turks or a self-hating Turk, of opposing Kemalism, of being entrepreneurial, apolitical, a comprador, a bourgeoiselitist, a commodifier of literature, of being in the service of foreign lobbies or conspiratorial networks, and of selling out his country for personal gain. (Goknar 16)

Pamuk sees literature as a medium of transcending the boundaries. When a writer writes he has to feel the characters' dilemmas and disposition. He remarks:

The writer who shuts himself up in a room and first goes on a journey inside himself will, over the years, discover literature's eternal rule: he must have the artistry to tell his own stories as if they were other people's stories, and to tell other people's stories as if they were his own, for this is what literature is. But we must first travel through other people's stories and books.(Pamuk, *My Father's Suitcase*7)

Similarly the narrator of *The White castle* is telling the story from his past. He tells the life of Hoja with equal command and depth as if it is the story of his own life.

Pamuk has placed the story of *The White Castle* in 17<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul. As an element of intertextuality FarukDarvinoglu who is a character in one of his earlier novels tells the story of *The White Castle*.Darvinoglu has found this book in old papers. He has not even decided the title of this book as it was already decided by the publisher. The story is about the relation of a master and his servant. The story is place in the 17th century. A young Italian is travelling in a fleet. His fleet is captured by Turkish fleet. He is brought to Istanbul. He is given as a slave and the name of his master is Hoja. Hoja is impressed by this young man because this man has modern

education. Hoja is curious to learn new things and this slave provides him with the opportunity to learn modern education. Pamuk gives a twist to the plot as the slave and his master Hoja are lookalike. So much so that they are like mirror image to each other. In his pursuit of knowledge Hoja learns the art of astronomy. He also learns geography and psychology. Now he is able to secure a new position of Imperial Astrologer by virtue of his newly learned arts.

Hoja starts a new and ambitious project of making a war machine which can kill many people very fast. But in the battle of Doppio the new machine proves to be a disaster. As a new twist in the story Hoja disappears and the narrator takes his place. After assuming his master's identity the narrator lives a happy life with his family. These characters swap their places as it is absolutely natural and as there is no fix identity but only the role which can be played by anyone.

In the words of Prakriti Renjen:

The subject in Pamuk's works is thus emptied of its motives, thoughts, feelings, emotions and desires and is instead substituted by potentially infinite subject-positions which can be read as being structurally analogical to hollow moulds which carry the potential to be filled in with absolutely any subject - whether Rumi, Celal, Galip, the color red or a murderer. (Renjen 19)

There is dialectical relationship between Hoja and the slave. This relationship is symbolic. It is like the juxtaposition of the East and the West. It also portrays the relation between fiction and reality. The problem of identity crisis is posed time and again. Once Hoja is not well and he sends the slave to court in place of himself. The narrator says "the resemblance between myself and the man who entered the room was incredible! It was me there ... for the first instant this

was what I thought” (Pamuk, *The White Castle* 22). The narrator tells the readers that he looks exactly like Hoja but in the past he was absolutely different person. His look and personality was different in the past. He says:

In those days I was a different person, even called a different name by mother, fiancée and friends. Once in a while I still see in my dreams that person who used to be me, or who I now believe was me, and wake up drenched in sweat. This person who brings to mind now the faded colours, the dream like shades of those lands that never were, the animals that never existed, the incredible weapons we later invented year after year, was twenty three years old then, had studied ‘science and art’ in Florence and Venice, believed he knew something of astronomy, mathematics, physics, painting. (14-15)

The novel is a search of new identity of both Hoja and his look alike. The Venetian traveler is a symbol of western values. He has scientific knowledge and Hoja on the other hand is a symbol of eastern values. There is a fundamental difference between the behaviors of both the characters. Hoja wants to learn new things and he is impressed by his slave and learns astronomy and modern science from his slave. The Venetian slave on the other hand also learns Turkish language and the way of life of Turkey. When plague breaks out in Istanbul the slave is thoroughly convinced that it can be handled scientifically but Hoja thinks that plague is sent by God and he is reluctant to admit that this problem can be tackled scientifically.

Hoja and the slave share a love hate relationship. Hoja wants to learn everything which the slave knows and the slave also becomes accustomed to the way of life he is living in Istanbul. Hoja is

in search for a way of life that westerners are living. He constantly asks his slave about the slave's country, manners, architecture, and his way of life. They sat on long sessions in the night to write about their past sins. When Hoja thinks that he is infected by plague he sees himself half naked in the mirror and asks his slave to do the same. There he thinks that both of them are same. "We were still standing half-naked in front of the mirror. He was going to take my place, I his, and to accomplish this it would be enough for us to exchange clothes and for him to cut his beard while I left mine to grow" (84). The narrator manages to run from the house of Hoja to an island. Here he lives an easy life as he has some savings which he has saved secretly from Hoja. Here he goes out less in order to save himself and he has plan to escape to his country. But there is guilty feeling also. He says "I could almost blame myself for abandoning a man who looked so much like me. Just as I do now, I longed for him passionately; did he actually resemble me as much as he did in memory or was I fooling myself?" (89). Hoja takes care of his slave and the slave also is comfortable with his master. They share their views about writing books, invent stories for the sultan, making the lethal war machine, making the design of a clock and their personal life also. He is fully aware about the reality that he and his master are lookalike but many times he wants to forget this fact or even he wants to run away from this. The narrator says "I decided that if I were to be free I must convince myself that the uncanny resemblance between us was a blunder of memory, a bitter illusion that should be forgotten, and I must get used to this fact" (89).

The narrator tells his story in a way that it seems as a mixture of reality and fantasy. There are constant flashbacks as well as flash forwards. Many times he confesses or confuses his readers that he is telling a real story or a concocted story. He says "Now, as I recollect my memories and

try to invent a past for myself, I find this a portrait of happiness fit for the fables I heard as a child, exactly as the painters of the pictures of those fairy-tale books would have it” (41).

There is another aspect of finding the true identity of a person. When narrator is there with sultan discussing different things with him like sultan is aware that it was the narrator who is guiding Hoja in his pursuits. The sultan is well aware that the ambitious plans of Hoja are backed by the knowledge of the Venetian slave. The sultan is critical of Hoja for thinking all the time about how they will behave and the difference between them and us. He says “must one be sultan to understand that men, in the four corners and seven climes of the world, all resembled one another? ... was it not the best proof that men everywhere were identical with one another that they could take each other’s place?” (151). The narrator watches the view about himself from a distance as he is now playing the role of Hoja. He can analyse the things from this distance. In the words of Tony Myers:

A subject exists only in so far as it maintains a distance towards the world. You cannot see the world if you are a part of it . . . A subject for Zizek is, therefore, a piece of the world which has detached itself from the world to a place where that world can now be seen. This is what makes a subject subjective as opposed to objective. (Myers 12)

Pamuk’s life has been shaped by his native culture as well as the influence of the west. He wants to adopt the logical way of west in the culture of Turkey. He is convinced that men are same everywhere in the world. He says:

For me, to be a writer is to acknowledge the secret wounds that we carry inside us, the wounds so secret that we ourselves are barely aware of them, and to patiently explore them, know them, illuminate them, to own these pains and wounds, and to make them a conscious part of our spirits and our writing. (...)My confidence comes from the belief that all human beings resemble each other, that others carry wounds like mine – that they will therefore understand. All true literature rises from this childish, hopeful certainty that all people resemble each other. When a writer shuts himself up in a room for years on end, with this gesture he suggests a single humanity, a world without a centre. (Pamuk, *My Father's Suitcase* 14-15)

There is a continuous search for meaning of life in this novel. The narrator and Hoja are not satisfied with their present life. They want to become somebody else and they want to live the life of somebody else. In this pursuit of new identity they are ready to risk their life and they are ready to go to any limit to achieve their goal. In the words of Renjen Prakriti:

Pamuk's characters function as transit points for the passage of relations of power and resistance. There is an underlying sub-textual angst that runs through his fiction and is felt by his characters which makes his discursive constructs behave like tormented humans who are constantly escaping from something and searching for something. This sub-textual angst experienced by the characters can be grasped by the discerning reader with the aid of various tactics opted for by them like: an obsessive urge to shed one's self and become someone else, a sense of despondency which prevails amongst almost all his characters, constant efforts

made by them to induce meaning into their lives by narrating stories, and by their life-long searches, journeys and forays made for that ultimate meaning. (Renjen 5)

## **Conclusion**

The novel revolves around a person's perception about himself and how the society perceives him. The reader swings on the see saw of shifting identities between Hoja and the narrator. Hoja belongs to east but he wants to explore life logically, scientifically and he works hard to achieve his goal. The narrator on the other hand is pleasure loving so he is comfortable in easy going life. In the end when the narrator assumes the role or mask of Hoja and Hoja goes to Venice to assume the role of the narrator they change their identities according to their disposition. We are told in the end that Hoja is settled in Venice and he has become a very good writer and the narrator also has left the position of Imperial astrologer and has settled in Gezbe. The White Castle is a symbol which is beyond the reach of these characters but this symbol enables them to find a new life and identity suitable for them.

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