

Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul*

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The paper is based on the autobiographic-essayistic book *Istanbul: Memories of a City* written by Orhan Pamuk. Istanbul as a typical old capital shapes the lives of its citizens by its spirit, culture, and imperial past. On the other hand, it is a city that lives with specific sentiments—the sense of defeat and loss, melancholy and pain because of the lost power and glory. The author analyzes Pamuk's vision of his native city created on the basis of the real scenes and imaginary, the truly lived experiences and fiction. The paper is also concentrated on the deeds of the Turkish and European writers that had made a great contribution in Pamuk's synthesis of the East and the West, the past and the present and authentic permeation of cultures he has achieved writing about Istanbul.

Keywords: Istanbul, Orhan Pamuk, the Ottoman Empire, the old capital

Introduction

Istanbul is a shadow that follows Orhan Pamuk both in life and literature. Its streets, architecture, and marvelous past create a specific background of his novels. It can be said that Istanbul is in a way the main character of Pamuk's prose. Istanbul is a city where he was born, where he has discovered the world, where he has found out the meaning of living in an old capital keeping secrets of the past and facing challenges in the present. Istanbul was a source of inspiration of many distinguished Turkish authors such as Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar, Ahmet Rasim, Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar. But Orhan Pamuk is the author of the unique book *Istanbul: Memories of a City* that reveals the unknown Istanbul. Istanbul that synthesizes his memories from his early childhood and his impressions got from various sources—family conversations, public transportation, football matches, street inscriptions, books written both by Turkish and European writers. Since Pamuk has the eye for colors, he has written his book about Istanbul as a painter too. Thus his book devoted to Istanbul is an original way of looking at this everlasting city that shapes the lives of its citizens.

The Source of Pride of the Empire

Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, a great Turkish novelist and one of the most prominent Turkish authors of the 20th century, has written in his anthological essay about Istanbul published within the book of essays *Five Cities (Beş Şehir)* that this old Ottoman capital was “the source of pride of the Empire and the whole Muslim world” for the generations after its conquest in 1453. Besides that, he has emphasized that “the eyes of the whole East were directed on Istanbul which was a brilliant mirror of the national life and which had completely national character in taste” (Tanpınar, 1995, p. 117, 139). In the middle of the 19th century, a little bit more than a hundred years before Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish writer and Nobel Prize Winner was born, one French

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author named Gustave Flaubert expressed his conviction in one of his letters that Istanbul would be a capital of the world in a hundred years from then. But, the truth was completely different. Istanbul of that time was in a true sense of the word and old, dilapidated, worn out and melancholic capital of once the most powerful empire in the world. Pamuk (2005) writes:

The city into which I was born was poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been in its two-thousand-year history. For me it has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy, or (like all Istanbulites) making it my own. (Pamuk, 2005, p. 6)

Almost all Pamuk's novels plots are settled in Istanbul. But, Pamuk's autobiographical book *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, which is a subject of my analysis, gives us much more about Pamuk's feeling towards his native city. It is devoted both to his memories from his childhood and early young age and to Istanbul as a city and the meaning it has in this writer's life as well. The book is composed of such memories and emotions that have shaped his life forever.

Istanbul Fate is My Fate

Istanbul is not only a city of Pamuk's birth, childhood, and youth, the city in which he has started being "himself", the city of his first love and adulthood. Istanbul with its past, spirit and atmosphere is his unseparable life companion that created his character and world. Istanbul is a destiny, both personal and collective, it is a fate of its inhabitants. In the very beginning of the book Pamuk claims: "Istanbul fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am" (Pamuk, 2006, p. 6).

Istanbul: Memories of a City brings the atmosphere of the ex Ottoman capital from the beginning of fifties until the beginning of seventies of the 20th century. The book consists of several thematic circles:

- Pamuk's memories from his childhood and early young age;
- Pamuk's visual impressions of the city landscapes;
- Turkish writers and their books that have shaped Pamuk's relationship with Istanbul;
- European writers and their experiences which in some extent have determined Pamuk's visions of the city.

Even at the first glance we notice that Pamuk's *Istanbul* can be read in different ways regarding the fact that Pamuk has been building his relationship with his own city using various material—personal visual impressions, family experiences and memories, both Turkish and European writers' books which helped him in making his own idea of Istanbul. The deed can be read as memories of his childhood and youth and life of his high esteemed and well situated family losing slowly its reputation and wealth but still personifying the new elite of the modern Republic of Turkey. We can read it as a short history of the city especially of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey in search of its new identity. The book titled *Istanbul* is perhaps the most important as a source for the research of the emotional map of the society living with feelings of defeat, loss of power and significance that has been accepted or condemned to live with melancholy as a sentiment that follows its members as a destiny. That is the book arguing that the city that "does not have a center outside ourselves" is not only in the eyes. On the contrary, the idea of the city consists also of read books, newspaper articles, street inscriptions and advertisements, and its sounds as well.

The Pamuk family settled in the elite Istanbul area of Nişantaşı in the thirties of the last century, at the time when "the Republic had done away with the pashas, princes and high officials and so the empty mansions they had left behind were only decrepit anomalies" (Pamuk, 2006, p. 27). Symbolically, the Pamuk family rose

in Istanbul as the old capital between two eras and represents the generation of the builders of the new state that had accepted the European education and culture. The state that was truly eager to modernize and westernize itself made a radical break up with the Ottoman past and the former culture which had been treated as decadent. A number of cultural reforms such as clothing reform, alphabetical revolution, and language purification aimed to reject the old institutions and traditions, to enter a brand new civilization, to create a new Turkish identity and to turkicize the society in general.

In his book *Other colors* Pamuk testifies that the state making efforts to Westernise itself was forbidding originally European critical thought at the same time. While it was emphasizing the Turkish identity it was pushing the traditional culture underground. That was the reason, as Pamuk (1999) says, that:

panic, fear and isolation from the tradition, from the future, from the East and the West, from cultural conflicts and complexities that one culture should bear with itself were the worst practices of the new elite created by the Republic. (p. 258)

Pamuk notices that despite the new architecture and taste

the melancholy of this dying culture was all around us. Great as the desire to Westernise and modernise may have been, the more desperate wish, it seemed, was to be rid of all the bitter memories of the fallen empire [...] But as nothing, Western or local, came to fill the void, the great drive to Westernise amounted mostly to the erasure of the past. (Pamuk, 2005, p. 27)

On the other hand, Orhan Pamuk, in contrast to the most of his co-citizens, is in a constant and uninterrupted dialogue with the past he admires and longs for in some way.

Despite a keen desire to forget the imperial and, for the most of the people, decadent past, its monuments and traces were a part of the Istanbul landscape, its architecture and colors. They have been reminding the citizens of Istanbul about the lost empire in spite of the fact that they were not able to reach and accept its subtle culture. People, unconscious of the beauty and value of a great number of monuments from the Ottoman times, simply have been living next to them. This shows that the Istanbulis of Pamuk's youth were not able to show respect to their antiques. In contrast to other nations who take a good care of their heritage with envy, the historical monuments in Istanbul are something unnoticeable, something to live next to it normally without paying too much attention. In Pamuk's opinion, modern Istanbulis were under their historical heritage, limited in their capacity for understanding the values of the civilization they were not worthy of, educated on the basis of literature that has been significantly decreased by the alphabetical and language revolution. That was the reason why all of the riches of the old culture have stayed unavailable to them. That is why an average Turkish citizen generally has no much experience with the traditional literature and art. He is deprived of understanding his own history that he rejects deeply. But at the same time he is not prepared enough to accept the European thought and tradition. In Pamuk's (2005) words:

The fastest flight from the *hüzün* of the ruins is to ignore all historical monuments and pay no attention to the names of buildings or their architectural particularities [...] by neglecting the past and severing their connection with it, the *hüzün* they feel in their mean and hollow efforts is all the greater. *Hüzün* rises out of the pain they feel for all that which has been lost, but it is also what compels them to invent new defeats and new ways to express their impoverishment. (p. 92)

Istanbul of Orhan Pamuk is a complex of the real and the imaginary, the visible and the fantasy. I have an impression that Pamuk's Istanbul is above all in his head, in his emotions and visions in which there is no strong border between what exists and what is imagined. The authors that Pamuk sees close to him have played

a significant part in that. Their words and ideas have shaped his idea of Istanbul. Sometimes this idea is much stronger than the real city. "And just as we learn about our lives from others, so, too, do we let others shape our understanding of the city in which we live" (Pamuk, 2005, p. 8).

The good example for this complicated game in which the reality is equally strong both in seen and imagined is Pamuk's text about the paintings of Antoine-Ignace Melling. Pamuk is excited because he recognizes some scenes of everyday life that have not changed a lot and the same places of Istanbul that he knows in a different way. Looking at Bosphorus hills and cypresses on Melling's paintings, Pamuk says that the paintings have come from heaven and re-entered his present life (Pamuk, 2005, p. 61). Melling's beautiful tableaux conjure up Istanbul at the beginning of the 19th century. They are the result of Melling's close ties with the spirit of the city, its geography and architecture.

At this point Pamuk is close to Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar, a writer who has made "the Bosphorus civilization" everlasting. He has been depicting the Bosphorus villas and moonlights with love and some kind of poetic nostalgia. Hisar writes that "deeply lived life and time have such a power for the spirit that has experienced them so that they never stop existing" (Hisar, 1968, p. 44).

The City of Melancholy

The grief or *hüzün* that Pamuk feels in himself is the emotion accepted by the city. Almost there is no Turkish writer that does not share this sentiment specific to Istanbul. Hisar is sad spectating the Bosphorus landscapes. Ahmet Rasim claims that "the beauty of a landscape is in its grief". Grief is immanent in the Eastern way of looking at the world that has spread the ethics of modesty and content with little. The mystical poetry has always been praising worthlessness and weakness of the human being to come close to God, the only true object of love. But "Istanbul does not carry its *hüzün* as 'an illness for which there is a cure' or 'an unbidden pain from which we need to be delivered': it carries its *hüzün* by choice" (Pamuk, 2005, p. 93).

This sentiment was shared by "four lonely melancholic writers". Their deeds have made a frame through which Pamuk has been looking at his city and its life. These four writers are Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar, Reşat Ekrem Koçu, Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar. These writers, wounded by *hüzün*, in Pamuk's words, were aware of the fact that the Ottoman civilization has been irretrievably gone, but in contrast to the general oblivion and neglecting the past, they have been opening their eyes towards its remnants, beauty and harmony of its buildings, melancholy of Istanbul landscapes and dilapidated and isolated neighbourhoods. They have been searching for a shelter of banality and misfortune and at the same time for a source of an authentic literary voice. *Hüzün* of ruins had something poetic for these writers, and Pamuk has adopted it with style.

Numerous similarities and even coincidences between Pamuk's *Istanbul* and the texts and verses of Yahya Kemal and Tanpınar can be found. In my opinion they are writers that had exerted the greatest influence on Pamuk while he has been creating his own vision of Istanbul. In intertextual analysis of Pamuk's *Istanbul* we figure out in what extent the voices and views of these authors, with whom he has been discussing in the book, were woven in his city view. It is obvious that Pamuk's Istanbul is in a certain extent Istanbul in the heart of Yahya Kemal and Istanbul in the eyes of Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar. In other words, Pamuk's Istanbul is Istanbul preserved in the poetic tableaux and writings of these authors.

Yahya Kemal Beyatlı was a poet in love with Istanbul. The book of his essays and lectures has a symbolic title *Dear Istanbul (Aziz Istanbul)*. In the first years of the Republic of Turkey, Yahya Kemal was a neoclassical

poet, fond of the old metric system in poetry and a great admirer of the Ottoman past and civilization. From the other side, he was a real patriot praising the “Turkish” character of that civilization, especially the “Turkish” character of Istanbul. He was among the first Turkish authors eager to synthesize the two worlds—the old Ottoman and the new Republican Turkish, accomplished by Orhan Pamuk after a couple of decades.

In an intertextual analysis of Pamuk's book *Istanbul* and Yahya Kemal's poetry, I would like to call your attention to the poem *Koca Mustapaşa*. Indeed, what Yahya Kemal has expressed in verses, Pamuk has conjured up in prose and photography.

Koca Mustâpaşa! Ücrâ ve fakîr İstanbul!
Tâ fetihden beri mûm'in, mütevekkil, yoksul,
Hüznü bir zevk edinenler yaşıyorlar burada.
Kaldım onlarla bütün gün bu güzel rû'yada. (Kemal, 1969, p. 42)

Koca Mustâpaşa! Remote and poor Istanbul!
From the conquest believer, resigned and poor,
Here live those who turned hüzn to pleasure.
I have stayed with them all day long in this beautiful dream.

Doesn't Pamuk say the same? I remind you that he has written that *hüzün* is a conscious choice of the Istanbulites. Melancholy or *hüzün* is mentioned 35 times in *Istanbul: Memories of a City* (Seçkin, 2008, p. 276).

These verses from the same poem of Yahya Kemal has almost the same echo and even a visualisation in Pamuk's text:

Gece, şi'riyle sararken Koca Mustâpaşa'yı
Seyredenler görür Allâha yakın dünyâyı.
Yolda tek tük görünenler çekilir evlerine;
Gece sessizliği semtin yayılır her yerine. (Kemal, 1969, p. 44)

While the night's embracing Koca Mustapaşa
Spectators see the world next to God.
Rare people are seen on the street going home
The silence of the night's spreading on everything.

This scene we can see on the Ara Güler's photo that Pamuk has put into his book (Pamuk, 2005). He writes:

What draws me to this photograph is not just the cobblestone streets of my childhood, or the cobblestone pavements, the iron grilles on the windows or the empty, ramshackle wooden houses—rather it is the suggestion that with evening having just fallen, these two people who are dragging long shadows behind them on their way home are actually pulling the blanket of night over the entire city. (p. 32)

Some remarks of Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar in the essay *Istanbul* are also very close and even equal to Pamuk's words. For example, Tanpınar claims that the art and the architecture do not mix with everyday life in many places as it is the case in Istanbul and that those sights make a real core of Istanbul mahalles (Tanpınar, 1995, p. 147). The cypresses on Melling's paintings admired by Pamuk, together with plane-trees are trees that

have left their traces in the Turkish imagination according to Tanpınar. He writes that “we owe the noble melancholy in Istanbul landscape to cypress, plane-trees and conifers”. Both Tanpınar and Pamuk were sad to see old buildings ruined and modern Istanbul's indifference. Tanpınar has been writing that they will be happy when they realize that the real rebuilding starts with the preserving the heritage (Tanpınar, 1995, p. 156). Writing about famous Istanbul fires, both Tanpınar and Pamuk emphasize that the citizen of Istanbul used to feel a certain pleasure in spectating old wooden mansions in flame. Just like Tanpınar has been writing that sometimes he had a vision of Nerval or Gautier sitting with the poet Seyrani in some of Istanbul cafés, Pamuk says that he might have met “four lonely melancholic writers”—Hisar, Koçu, Beyatlı, and Tanpınar while they were walking in his neighbourhood (Pamuk, 2005, pp. 97-98; Tanpınar, 1995, p. 166). Tanpınar has also paid attention to Melling's paintings saying, just like Pamuk, that the beauty of his tableaux comes from the fact that he has been living in Istanbul and that he had “an insider's point of view” (Tanpınar, 1995, p. 193; Pamuk, 2005, p. 67).

Colors take a significant place in Pamuk's life and literature. Parla has noticed that “Orhan Pamuk's colors are the colors of twilight—from grey to black” (Parla, 2008, p. 67). These are the prevailing colors of Pamuk's Istanbul too. He thinks that Istanbul is black and white because beautiful things could not be seen, because Istanbul was neglected and rejected. Pamuk (2005) writes:

I love the overwhelming melancholy when I look at the walls of old apartment buildings and the dark surfaces of neglected, unpainted, fallen-down wooden mansions: only in Istanbul have I seen this texture, this shading. When I watch the black-and-white crowds rushing through the darkening street on a winter's evening, I feel a deep sense of fellowship, almost as if the night has cloaked our lives, our streets, our every belonging in a blanket of darkness, as if once we're safe in our houses, our bedrooms, our beds, we can return to dreams of our long-gone riches, our legendary past. And likewise, as I watch dusk descend like a poem in the pale light of the street-lamps to engulf the city's poor neighbourhoods, it comforts me to know that for the night at least we are safe from Western eyes, that the shameful poverty of our city is cloaked from foreign view. (pp. 31-32)

Orhan Pamuk is not very far from “four lonely melancholic writers” who did not succeed to find themselves the appropriate place and who were condemned to the creative loneliness in the atmosphere of the early Republic of Turkey. Pamuk is also skeptical about the Westernization of the society since in practice it was a naive and simply imitating West. His specific and unique Istanbul view comes from the fact that he used to look at his own city sometimes with the eyes of a native Istanbulite but sometimes with the eyes of a Westerner. Turkish writers and poets have been writing a very little about Istanbul, its past, culture and life style. Classical Turkish poetry has seen the city as an abstraction, while the chronicles and histories were occupied mostly by political history. That is why Pamuk has been passionately reading Nerval's and Gautier's observations and live and convincing testimonies in order to find out something new about the past and everyday life of his city. He was happy because in their words he could find his own emotions and views. He admits that “there is something foreign in his way of looking at the city” (Pamuk, 2005, p. 218). In addition to that, he claims that Western writers have told him much more than the writers from Istanbul who have paid no attention to the city. There is no doubt that impressions of those Western passengers and authors about Istanbul, their notes and comments have contributed in shaping Pamuk's vision of Istanbul.

“Something foreign in his way of looking at the city” has created some distance between Pamuk and the other natives of the city. He simply has not shared the psychology of masses, nationalism or Republican patriotism that imposed feelings of community, belonging to the same collective spirit. Paradoxically, he does

not feel at home in the city he is not able to live without, that is his fate.

Pamuk complains about the fact that Istanbul has lost its victorious, multilingual and glorious days and “became a monotonous, monolingual town in black and white” (Pamuk, 2005, p. 215). In the middle of the 19th century, Flobert was slightly ashamed of hearing various languages, just like in “tower of Babel”—you could hear Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Italian, French, and English—and he could speak only French! But, a century after that, there were tables with the inscription “Citizens, please speak Turkish” (Pamuk, 2005, p. 216)!

Istanbul has been evoking its old days with a specific feeling of collective melancholy that Pamuk defines with the word *hüzün*. But it was not a feeling of nostalgia—the word that cannot be found in Pamuk’s *Istanbul*. Citizens of Istanbul cannot feel nostalgia because they have not been longing for the Ottoman times. That is why they enjoyed watching old mansions and villas in fire during fifties and sixties, because they were symbols of the past they wanted to get rid of. “This is the guilt, loss and jealousy we feel”, says Pamuk, “at the sudden destruction of the last traces of a great culture and a great civilization that we were unfit or unprepared to inherit in our frenzy to turn Istanbul into a pale, poor, second-class imitation of a Western city” (Pamuk, 2005, p. 191). Pamuk has been asking himself if the mystery of Istanbul is hidden in its poverty besides the glorious history, or in its limited everyday life besides natural beauties. Keeping eyes closed in front of the tradition has turned Istanbul, once cosmopolitan city, and its citizens to a provincial town. This is what Pamuk has made unhappy and forced him to a certain voluntary exile.

Pamuk’s success in depicting Istanbul as the old capital lays in a poetic permeation of cultures in his spirit. He looks at the city with the eyes of its natives, its visitors from the West, its writers, poets and painters. According to him, the poetic texture of Istanbul consists of every kind of bizarreness, empyreal glory and a bit of history. But Pamuk is right when he says that this poetry of the city opens itself only to him.

Pamuk’s Istanbul is in fact the old capital. Almost on every page of his book he seeks for a link with the past. I think that he has given the answer to the question of his favorite Turkish writer Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar who had written that the main question was “when and in what way will we connect to the past” (Tanpınar, 1995, p. 207).

Conclusion

Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul consists of the author’s intimate life story and his various impressions, visual sensations, and personal experiences got from different sources—from paintings and old books to European travelogues. His vision of his native city is hard to define. It is based both on the real and the imaginary. He is capable to look at the city both as its citizen and a Westerner. Pamuk is especially successful researching the city’s spirit, its unique melancholy that is a key emotion produced by old, ruined and neglected buildings, poverty and marginality, feelings of defeat and loss of the imperial glory. Pamuk feels this spirit that determines his life in almost everything he does. Although he owes a lot to the famous Turkish writer Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, the most significant part of his book *Istanbul: Memories of a City* lays in his ability to connect past and present and to see the city’s forgotten history, its landscapes and colors that no one has ever seen.

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