

**The Bosphorus Incarnate:  
Postmodern Fiction and Identity Representation in the Novels of Orhan Pamuk and a  
Comparison with Hungarian Literature**

Bariş Yılmaz

Doctoral Dissertation

Supervisors

Prof. dr. Katalin Kürtösi

Assoc. Prof. dr. Zoltán Kelemen

Szeged, 2021

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies  
Department of Comparative Literature and Culture  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Szeged

## **Contents**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. A Survey on Turkish Literature and History**
- 3. Orhan Pamuk and His Fiction**
- 4. Postmodern Understanding of Reality and Fictionality**
- 5. Cultural Identity and Narratives**
- 6. Postmodern Narratives and Historiographic Metafiction**
- 7. Postmodern Narrative Strategies in the Western and Eastern Canons**
- 8. Conclusion**

## Summary of Dissertation

### 1. Aim of the Dissertation

Orhan Pamuk, as one of the world's leading contemporary writers, has a significant influence on world literature due to his work's part of the global book market, as well as the scholarly attention he receives. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Pamuk is the most well-known and widely read Turkish author of our century—perhaps of all time, considering that his books have been translated into nearly 60 languages and are consistently included on best-seller lists. Meanwhile, scholars and literary critics all over the world have been paying attention to Pamuk's novels due to their diverse outstanding characteristics.

First and foremost, Orhan Pamuk's fictional and nonfictional writings articulate the peculiar experience of living in a borderland between East and West, in Istanbul, where the Bosphorus separates the Asian continent from Europe and the remnants of an Islamic civilization and an aspiring Western lifestyle coexist to some extent. Pamuk's novels thus raise a number of crucial concerns concerning Turkey's cultural dichotomy and worldview change on the outskirts of Europe and Asia. These questions surrounding the interactions of opposite poles in the country are not only limited to political or sociological grounds, but also frame and fashion the literary interplay between the two sides of the cultural divide in Turkey and their cultural positioning against Europe. Like the bridge over the Bosphorus, which links not only the two continents but also the world-views, Pamuk combines the narrative techniques of postmodern fiction fostered in the West with themes and styles from Turkish and Eastern literary traditions. In this regard, he can be called The Bosphorus Incarnate, for he writes and acts as the strait itself, the singularity of which stems from this peculiar experience of lying between two vying civilizations and not belonging entirely to either of them. That is why his works are often seen as part of both world literature and Turkish literature, which raises new concerns about which literary canon Pamuk should be included in. This may be another explanation for the scholarly curiosity in Pamuk's writing.

These issues about the interactions of opposing poles in the country are not just restricted to political or sociological grounds, but also shape and fashion the literary interplay between the two sides of Turkey's cultural split and their cultural standing in relation to Europe. Pamuk mixes

narrative methods of postmodern fiction cultivated in the West with themes and forms from Turkish and Eastern literary traditions, much like the bridge over the Bosphorus, which connects not just two continents but also two worldviews.

There is, however, a provincialist inclination that reduces Pamuk to a ‘3rd world author’ who creates exotic stories to fascinate Western readers. Pamuk’s and his novels’ growing popularity in the Western world in recent decades has aided this propensity to outgrow the real substance and quality of Pamuk’s works. While he has been regarded as an elusive storyteller from the ‘mystical East’, his loyalty and authenticity have been called into question in Turkey, where his political beliefs are frequently regarded as ‘unpatriotic’ and Western-oriented since winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006. There is even debate about whether he writes in English or Turkish. My objective with this research is to find proof of his origins in classical Turkish literature and the Eastern aesthetic canon, since I believe he struck a wonderful balance in postmodern writing by combining them with contemporary Western literary models. This, I argue, also demonstrates that his attempt to combine East and West in Istanbul, where they truly meet, coincides with the political and cultural aspects of the same combination, reinvigorating Pamuk as the Bosphorus Incarnate.

## **2. Methods and Findings**

The dissertation focuses on the postmodern narratology techniques and strategies used by Orhan Pamuk in his fictional works. It also addresses the issue of identity representation, an important component of Pamuk’s work, which is often described as a meeting point between the East and the West. Pamuk’s artistic persona, which he carefully crafted for himself, further promotes this assumption, making him appear to be a “Bosphorus incarnate” whose ultimate goal is to connect Asia to Europe, or vice versa. My aim in this study, therefore, was to uncover the basis of this often repeated premise. To that end, I analyzed certain Pamuk novels, especially those written before he gained worldwide fame and publicity, in terms of postmodern narrative techniques employed in his novels and the resources that nurtured them, both from the East and the West. As a result of my research, I have discovered that the narratology elements in Pamuk’s novels can be aligned with the literary postmodernism that has developed in the Western literary canon, while still having some roots in classical Turkish/Middle Eastern literature. Furthermore, I observed that the themes Pamuk selects to narrate have a character that blends Eastern and Western

cultures in the way they overlap with the techniques he adopts. Another finding of the research was that Pamuk's key emphasis has always been on the value of storytelling, that is, creating new stories and reproducing old ones in newer contexts, rather than building 'grand narratives' on specific issues or coming up with solutions to the world's major problems.

Historiographic metafiction, which inevitably included parody and textual transformation, seemed to be a major determinant of his ironic response to historical representation, which played a significant role in defining national identities. I compared Pamuk's novels to two examples of historiographic metafiction from Hungarian literature, namely *A könnymutatványosok legendája* by László Darvasi and *Török tükkör* by Viktor Horváth, in order to crystallize the distinctive mechanics of Pamuk's fictional universe. The comparison aided my research in identifying the various purposes of utilizing postmodern fiction strategies, allowing work to avoid the trap of pigeonholing certain authors associated with certain literary trends in the absence of a teleological framework. As a conclusion to my dissertation, I argued that, because he believes that everything, including identities, are narratives that are and can be (re)constructed, Pamuk's main concern was with rewriting the stories he heard, which was the usual *modus operandi* in classical Turkish literature for more than 600 years and became fashionable again through its reinvention by postmodernists. Thus, the East-West connection in his writing was not a political or historical subject, but rather a literary one. To understand the intent and historical significance of these writing practices, particularly their involvement in representing the notion of 'real', I used postmodern and poststructuralist theories, ranging from Bakhtin's ideas on the dialogic structure of the novel to Baudrillard's remarks on simulacra. Aside from that, I attempted to explore the non-Western underpinnings of practices such as intertextuality and parody, as I noticed the researchers working on his subject have largely neglected them. Finally, when discussing Pamuk's novels, I provided the necessary historical and literary context to inform the reader who was unfamiliar with Turkish literature and politics.

### **3. Conclusion**

Pamuk's identity as a writer who represents his nation split between East and West caused him to be misunderstood both in the Western world and in his own country, despite being one of our generation's most renowned authors. Pamuk, although effectively following and adapting trends in global literature to his writing, stayed faithful to the tradition in which he grew up and

created works that combine East and West on a narrative level. Pamuk's work, however, bore skepticism of his integrity as a result of his global success and some of his readers' evaluation of him in an orientalist and pigeonholing pattern, which finally led to a shift in his character as an author. The most visible evidence of Pamuk's concerns may be found in the fruitless arguments over the intended audience for his works. No surprise that Pamuk is concerned with Turkey's cultural divide between East and West, as well as the identity crisis that it has caused in the minds of the Turkish people, which has been the most prominent motif of modern Turkish literature. The reason it is difficult to fit Pamuk into a specific pattern, or too simple to fit Pamuk into well-known patterns, is that he, like many other Turkish authors, was obsessed with this subject. His use of postmodern techniques in juxtaposition with Eastern elements in his oeuvre has prompted criticism that he has an internal orientalist perspective to his own country, employing motifs such as Sufism to transmit an exotic picture to Western audiences. However, closer examination of the synthesis of these notions reveals that Pamuk identifies in Eastern art the beginnings of storytelling approaches that have risen to the fore in the West with postmodern literature. In this sense, the East-West duality that Pamuk continually conjures up in his prose is really a diversion designed to keep academics and critics occupied while they search for subtle political extrapolations in his stories. What Pamuk truly seeks is to be transformed into a hyperlink between the myths and legends of the East and the novels and epics of the West. The identity he attempts to create for himself stems from his ambition to be the progeny of both Scheherazade and Sterne.

*The Bosphorus incarnate*, as I dubbed him, does not indicate a dull picture of Pamuk as someone who wishes to transmit the East to the West through his 'genuine' writings about his 'beloved' city, Istanbul. Istanbul's unusual position indeed lends him this moniker, since it heightens his desire to decorate the city as her author. It is precisely Istanbul's location that makes it impossible, for me, to think that he is writing to Westerners to describe the East, because he belongs to both the East and the West, just as Istanbul does. For that matter, he was born on Istanbul's European side. But this is precisely the point, because it is the source of the identity crisis that every member of Turkish society experiences to some extent. However, he does not wish to be confined to the limitation of manufactured identities. In this sense, Pamuk was well suited to postmodern fiction, particularly historiographic metafiction, which challenges the legitimate discourse of authority and traditional forms. As someone who believes in the power of (small) narratives, he became able to actualize the persona he desired for himself using the

potential provided by postmodern fiction. It is conceivable to infer that many of his mishaps may be viewed as small road accidents that have occurred to “the naive and sentimental novelist” who enjoys playing games with his readers.

## **Publications Pertaining to the Topic of Dissertation**

- 2021. “Postmodern Functions of the Mirror in Hungarian and Turkish Literatures.” In *Altaic and Chagatay Lectures: Studies in Honour of Éva Kincses-Nagy*, edited by István Zimonyi, 449–61. Szeged: University of Szeged.
- 2021 (in progress). “Posztmodern Török Irodalom.” *Tiszataj*.
- 2020. “Trail in the Blizzard. Interwoven Identities in Orhan Pamuk’s Snow.” In *Literature in a Globalized Context*, edited by Carmen González Menéndez, Daniel Santana Jügler, and Daniel Hofferer, 55–64. Halle-Wittenberg: Martin Luther University Press.
- 2020. “Deconstruction of the Traditional Hero Type in Murathan Mungan’s Cenk Hikayeleri.” In *Ottomans-Crimea-Jochids: Studies in Honour of Mária Ivanics*, edited by István Zimonyi, 339–54. Szeged: University of Szeged.
- 2019. “Resistance of the Postmodern Turkish Novel to the Return of Nationalism.” *Colloquium: New Philologies* 4 (3).

## **Other Publications**

- 2021 (in progress). “Kutsal Geyiğin Öldürülmesi: Murathan Mungan’ın Geyikler Lanetler Oyununda Geyik Motifinin Dönüşümü.” In *Geyik, Biyoloji, Kültür Koruma*. Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi.
- 2020. “A Bookseller on Bab-ı Ali Street: Arakel Tozlian and His Contributions to the Turkish Reading Culture.” *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları (HÜTAD)*, no. 33: 113–26.
- 2018. “Kaçış ve Kimlik: Enis Batur ve Acı Bilgi.” *Roman Kahramanları* 33 (January-March): 156–60.

## **Conference Participations**

- “The Postmodern Turkish Novel’s Resistance to the Return of Nationalism”. Language. Literature. Politics. 1918-2018. (Un)Doing Nationalism and Resistance: The 3<sup>rd</sup> AARC PhD Forum 2018. Alpen-Adria-Universität, Klagenfurt, Austria. 20-22 September, 2018.



- “Trail in the Blizzard: Interwoven Identities in Orhan Pamuk’s Snow”. 11<sup>th</sup> International PhD Students’ Conference on Literature in a “Globalized Context”. Martin-Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. 16-18 March, 2018.
- “Revision of Identity Expression in One Particular Text: Orhan Pamuk’s *The White Castle*”. II. International Conference “The Discourse of Identity”. University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain. June 8-9, 2017.
- “A Turkish Emigration Story in Germany through the Lens of Fatih Akin’s *Gegen Die Wand*”. Interpreting Migration: An International Multidisciplinary Conference. Technical University of Liberec, Liberec, Czechia. 27-29 April, 2017.

### **Workshops and Seminars**

- “Magyar Fordítóház Műfordító Szeminárium”. Balatonfüred, Hungary. 1-8 March, 2020.
- “II. PesText International Literary Festival Translation Workshop”. Budapest, Hungary. 22-25 September, 2020.
- “I. PesText International Literary Festival Translation Workshop”. Budapest, Hungary. 24-28 September, 2019.
- “Véneki Alkotótábor Műfordító Műhely”. 27-30 June, 2019.