



## POSTMODERN IDENTITY CRISIS, INTERTEXTUALITY AND QUESTIONING THE GRAND SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES OF TURKEY IN *THE BLACK BOOK* BY ORHAN PAMUK

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### ABSTRACT:

The postmodernist novels of Orhan Pamuk are overtly Turkish in the context of their exploration of issues that are essentially national like the East-West dichotomy, the interlacing of cultures, cultural hybridity imposed by the modernisation of Turkey, conspiracy and counter-conspiracies, military coups and curfews, Sufism and the rise of political Islam. His novels are interpreted as typical of the Turkish view of the world outside, either the European or the North American, and also of their perception about themselves. In the fruitless, spiritual, and satirical Sufi journey of Galip, whose name itself is a pun on the 18th-century mystic poet of Turkey Sheikh Galip, Galip fails to find out his wife Ruya and his half-brother Celal, the newspaper columnist, and both of them are found murdered in the last. However, the novel does not unveil the identity of the murderer but rather plays with the genre of detective fiction by deliberately violating the traditional conventions by incorporating others: newspaper columns, confessions, and the history and culture of Turkey and myths. The novel exposes and questions the grand cultural and political narratives of Turkey, Islam, and Sufism in its postmodern absurdist misadventure and incorporates intertextuality and identity crisis to the extreme.

**Key words:** - Pamuk, Postmodernism, Turkey, Identity Crisis and Dual Identity, Grand Narratives and Intertextuality.

### INTRODUCTION :

Postmodernism influences the writings of Orhan Pamuk, one of the greatest novelists of Turkey. Born and nurtured in the city of Istanbul, the capital of the great Ottomans, Pamuk roams into the cultural and political past and present of Turkey to explore the melancholic soul of his nation as trapped between the conflicting cultural and political forces. Incorporation of a multitude of postmodern literary devices enables him to produce a postmodern aura in his novels. Interpreted as a reactionary movement, postmodernism aims to capture a late capitalist condition which is unique in its way. It is what they call the postmodern condition. The condition is said to have been inaugurated by late capitalism and the rise of media technology. However, the postmodernism strategies in Pamuk are more Turkish than the Western in the sense of their addressing the internal conflicts

worrying the soul of the great Turkish nation as revealed often in the plots or subject matter of Pamuk's novels.

### An Absurdist Quest for Nothing Resulting in Losing of Identity:

Güneli Gün calls the *Black Book* the most complex postmodernist novel by Orhan Pamuk. The mysterious disappearance of his wife Ruya brings Galip, who, in the disguise of a typical detective in some well-known traditional detective novel, to the dreadful revelation of a similarly mysterious disappearance of his half-brother Celal. Like every conventional detective novel, there is something that connects both the disappearances. It is this hunt to explore the possible connection, between the two disappearances, that makes Galip, the self-styled detective husband, go on investigating the whereabouts of his half-brother.

However, his ways to reach his half-brother and his wife Ruya, whose name means a dream, are weird and eccentric. He dives deep into the political columns of his half-brother to discover pieces of evidence in puns and wordplay by Celal which often have concealed meanings in them. In other words, his columns have surreptitious meaning that Galip wants to figure out to find his wife Ruya. The columns talk about numerous fascinating things and take us deep into the distant cultural past and also into the conflicting present of Turkey. But his quest makes him not only lose his identity but also acquire the identity of his half-brother Celal. He continues to live the life of Celal, mysteriously writing his columns and giving interviews as Celal. However, this self-negation of his own identity does not help Galip at all, who later comes to know about the murder of Celal and Ruya. The novel does not disclose the identity of the murderer but rather points to another similar event in which Shams, the beloved disciple of Rumi, was found dead in a well, possibly murdered by the other jealous disciples of Rumi. But as we do not know who has killed Shams in the same way we will not be able to know who has killed Celal and Ruya. Thus, the absurdist quest of Galip costs him his own identity and his Sufi quest ends in a fiasco resulting in the meaningless pursuit of things that do not exist at all, like the name of Ruya. Almond rightly says, “In the universe of *The Black Book*, there may well be an abundance of signifiers, but they point to no mystical signifieds other than ourselves. There is no secret message to decode-and certainly no hidden treasure to stumble upon-we are the meaning of our own interpretations” (81).

#### **Intertextuality in *the Black Book*:**

According to Ian Almond, in Jale Parla’s view of the novel *Black Book* by Pamuk is that the novel is typically postmodern in its unique accumulation of varied “narratives, columns,

stories, confessions” which also shows the way Pamuk uses intertextuality in it. Understanding of *the Black Book* lies in its relation with the other texts. Galip’s search for Ruya parallels the two classic romances- *Husn-u-Ask* by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mystical poet Sheikh Galip whose name is identical to the name of Galip in *the Black Book* and the 12<sup>th</sup> Century work of Faridud-Din Attar *Mantikut-Tayr*.

The former narrates a tale of the two twins- Beauty (*Husn*) and Love (*Ask*). To seek union with Beauty, Love has to travel to the Land of the Heart ( *Diyar-iKalp*) to get the “elixir of life”. However, on reaching the Land of the Heart, Love is awoken to the futility of his search for Beauty, as he realizes, resides in himself and thus cannot be separated from him.

The work *Mantikut-Tayr* narrates the story of various birds on their quest to find king *Simorgh*. However, the journey to meet the king is infested with various perils. When they ultimately reach the destination, they discover, to their surprise, that *the Simorgh* is nothing more than their reflection in the mirror.

Both the allegories have symbolic as well as the thematic relationship with *the Black Book*. About *Husn-u-Ask*, Pamuk himself said that Galip falls in love with Ruya after he reads *Husn-u-Ask*. The allegories signify man’s internal discovery that is only valuable while the material world holds little to him.

Galip’s parodied spiritual search for his wife his wife Ruya establishes the relationship of *the Black Book* with both the romances. However, in his search for Ruya, rather than having any self-discovery, Galip loses his own identity, as is common in a Sufi quest for God, by acquiring the identity of someone else-Celal. Galip’s half-brother Celal’s “appellation alludes to the great Sufi mystic teacher Mevlana, whose name was Celal-ed-din Rumi” (Gün 60). The legitimacy of a Sufi quest is parodied indirectly questioning the Sufi tradition and their metanarratives of self-

negation, self-discovery, or self-revelation. In Sooyong Kim's view "In order to become one with Celal, Galip has to assume the persona of Celal--of a writer. This process is diagrammatic of the Sufi mystic conceptions of self-disintegration ( *fana* ) and self-reintegration ( *baqa* ). Galip's efforts to emulate and identify with Celal resemble a disciple's ( *murit* ) path under the guidance of his master ( *pir* )" ( 23). Pamuk's critical interrogation of the Sufi tradition and its metanarratives does not stop at this, but he goes on to question the mystical murder of Shams with whom Rumi falls in love. Sooyong Kim appropriately mentions, "In addition to the theme of the inferior journey, Pamuk draws into the novel the figure of Mevlana, whose own experience shapes the Celal-Galip relationship" (26).

In Shams, Rumi could discover his real self and perfection of himself, and thus the unique companionship flowered between Rumi and Shams. On learning that Shams was in Damascus, Rumi brought him back to himself. However, the other jealous disciples of Rumi murdered Shams and threw him into a well. The murder fetched Rumi the highest degree of veneration to such extent that he became, not like Shams, but Shams himself. Pamuk questions the role of Rumi by asking who would be benefitted from the murder of Shams other than Mevlana. In a parallel way, such a question can also be raised to the mysterious death of Celal and Ruya, and thus Galip himself comes under scanner for he is the only person to be benefitted most from both the murders.

Perhaps most keenly of all, it is the endings of Pamuk's novels that express this modern, post-Romantic version of melancholy, a sadness which seems to combine the pain of unrequited love with the discovery that there are no grand narratives--or rather, that there are only narratives, stories whose only secret is that

there is no secret, no supernatural source, no cosmic meaning beneath them (Almond, 75).

#### **Twisting of the Traditional Conventions:**

However, *the Black Book* is no conventional detective novel. It does not aim what a detective novel is expected to do: leading "us through a maze where the entrance and the exit are preordained, strewn with clues and red herrings along the way, its arbitrary coincidences faked by the clever author to beguile, frustrate, and misguide us through a reality that turns out to have been illusion posing as reality - in other words, the fictive world" ( 59, Gün).

*The Black Book*, however, frustrates us when we see all these traditional conventions are bluntly rejected by Pamuk in the complex structure of the novel in his favour for "a chimerical narrative (polyphonic, polyvalent, allusive, obscurantist, unreliable) in which chapters of the story are interspersed with chapters that are in the form of newspaper columns. No less complex is the content: a labyrinthine quest through Istanbul which encompasses an encyclopaedia of Turkish life, past and present, with its cultural delights as well as its public shames" ( 59, Gün).

The mystery is never unfolded in the novel; neither does Galip succeed in finding the murderer of his wife and his half-brother though he strives hard to discover their traces from all the images, photos, and columns that he has with him traveling through the history of Turkey, its obsession with beauty and mystical philosophy.

#### **CONCLUSION :**

Intertextuality and the identity crisis are the dominating issues in the novel *Black Book* which also jeopardizes faith in the grand books of Sufism and their mystic philosophy which has been holding sway over the Turkish mind and influencing their worldview. Pamuk deconstructs them in the same way his

postmodern Western counterparts deconstruct the grand theories like Christianity, Humanism and Marxism. Apart from that, Pamuk writes a detective novel in the form of newspaper columns and offers us an entire encyclopaedia of the cultural and political history of Turkey. In a sense, it violates the typical conventions of writing a detective novel. Furthermore, this detective novel fails to unveil its secret as the identity of the murderer is not disclosed by the author, but rather a historical resemblance is established with the similar remote incident in the past- the murder of Shams.

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