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# The Ottoman Istanbul Culture of Ambivalence in Orhan Pamuk's Novel, *The White Castle*

*Abstract:*

This paper focuses on Orhan Pamuk's novel, *The White Castle*, exploring the tropes of 'ambivalence' in the East-West discourse in Turkish culture. The paper analyses the novel against the backdrop of the East-West discourse drawing on Bhabha's concept of mimicry, liminality and ambivalence. The novel, which is in the form of a centuries old manuscript of Ottoman Turkey proves helpful in understanding the clash of European and Ottoman culture and the result emanating therefrom. The novel also sheds light on the how Pamuk draws a contrast and comparison of the late Twentieth Century Istanbul with that of the Seventeenth Century Anatolia tracking the roots of the East-West relationship through centuries. The paper therefore discusses in detail the effect of the complex relationship between the Anatolian and the European cultures. It discusses the love and hatred between Turkish and the Western cultures that has been prevalent in the region since ages, the resultant of which is deducted in this paper as "ambivalence" in the Turkish culture and identity.

*1*

Orhan Pamuk, a renowned author and recipient of 2006 Nobel Prize takes so many social and cultural concerns of Anatolyan region into consideration in his fiction. His thematic concerns range from culture, memory, modernization, ethnic conflicts and violence, political Islam to East-West discourse that is the age old topic of debate in Turkey. His *Snow* deals with

the headscarf controversy and political Islam of 1980's Turkey; *The Silent House* showcases a family divided into as many different characters as there are concerns in the novel like nostalgia of lost Ottoman history and culture; fascination towards West and modernization; conflicting and violent ideas of Left Wing Nationalism as against the Right Wing religious nationalism of 1980's Turkey. His *My Name Is Red* deals with the beginning of encounter between Turkish-Persian miniature art with Italian realistic art form and the political conspiracies as well as conflicts within the Ottoman culture ensuing therefrom. These are some of his many novels which encompass varied themes. The one under analysis this paper is *The White Castle* which is a postmodern rendering of the saga of an Italian slave and an Ottoman master who turn to be lookalikes. The whole plot of the novel is an ambivalent rendering of an ambivalent relationship between the two lookalikes who imagine each other's culture with equal love and hatred. The phrase 'ambivalent rendering of an ambivalent relationship' intends to mean that the rendering of plot and events in the novel is in itself ambiguous and ambivalent in that: 1) it uses meta-fictitious elements, as one wonders if the story that the fictional author is translating is what he really reads in Turkish or is he just appropriating the story according to his own memory and ability to 'translate.' 1) It remains doubtful if the Venetian slave who narrates his odyssey is actually a distinct character or is it his Ottoam master, the *hoja*, who creates this Venetian character out of his own imagination. 3) Whether the Ottoman *hoja* and his slave are just fictional characters or the creation of historiographic metafiction who transcend both space and time and even the linearity in their lives as well as their relationship with the royal court of the Sultan. 4) Whether the *hoja* envies or dislikes the Venetian and his "infidel" country regarding their advancement in science as the *hoja* mimics the slave and vice versa to the extent that they exchange their places after a decade of living under the same roof when hoja travels back to Venice in place of his slave and the slave in turn becomes 'hoja' without the Sultan

and his courtiers having a slightest doubt about the identity exchange—the incidents which Pamuk juxtaposes with their lives as well as with the post Kemalist Turkey.

*2*

The above features of the novel must be analysed through the touchstone term of "ambivalence" explained by Homi Bhabha in his seminal book, *Location of Culture*. Although ambivalence, as will be discussed below, is the result of mimicry which is always, according to Homi Bhabha, imperfect, yet Pamuk tries in his novel to make the mimicry not a one sided emulation by a Turk of the Westerner, but a mutual phenomenon which dissolves the identities of both to become either one or "liminal," yet the ambivalence runs throughout the plot in spite of this effort on the Part of Pamuk. (Bhabha 123, Turner 94)

*Miriam Webster Dictionary* defines ambivalence as "simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings: a continual fluctuation (as between one thing and its opposite)." According to Bhabha, interaction and encounter between two opposite cultures gives rise to ambivalence through 'mimicry' for mimicry produces "excess and slippage" that "does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty" (Bhabha, *Location* 123). When one culture mimics the other, the product is not pure, it is rather "fluctuating between one thing and its opposite" (*Miriam Webster Dictionary* def.). According to Homi Bhabha, ambivalence is the result of mimicry which gives rise to the "difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha, *Location* 123). Bhabha's concept of ambivalence derives from the structure of representations that emphasizes nonidentity between signifier and the signified; it is the "partial representation/recognition" which results in "the double vision" (126) producing an effect which is "almost the same but not quite" (128).

Joseph A. Camilleri asserts that "Ambivalence has at least two important connotations. On the one hand, it connotes perceptions and attitudes which, though held concurrently, point in quite *different directions*, and on the other, it may imply perceptions and attitudes that *fluctuate* over time" (Camilleri par. 2). Although sociologists and psychologists have treated ambivalence as "property of individual mind, the use of ambivalence as an explanatory concept should be replaced by analysis in terms of the conflicting norms and values the concept purports to cover" (Room 1047). Thus ambivalence may be defined as simultaneous presence of two opposite attitudes or meanings. In other words, Ambivalence is a situation that hangs between two extreme poles of choice: for example, uncertainty in whether to love or to hate somebody/something; whether to follow, say, some idea or reject it on the whole; whether to be European or to be Oriental [as in the case of Turkey]. Ambivalence can also be described as a simultaneous existence of dual ideas or situations which are equivalent and opposite.

*3*

Ambivalence in Pamuk's works arises from the fact that Pamuk does not confine to either of the poles—East or West; he looks at both cultures from a 'liminal' space. A British cultural anthropologist Victor W. Turner in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*[1] defines "liminal space" as a space that is "detached either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both" (94). Turner defines individuals suffering from liminality as beings who are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). Pamuk, it can be therefore argued, holds a position that lies neither 'here' nor 'there' but which at the same time belongs to everywhere. In his books, Pamuk deals with the liminal transition from the Ottoman state to the Westernised republic. However, Homi K. Bhabha celebrates liminality in its hybrid nature of meanings and identities. He also sees liminality as a negotiation and mediation of cultures:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 1-2)

Pamuk, it may be argued, deliberately weaves the waft and warp of the novel in ambivalence in order to search for the synthesis between the extreme paradoxical ends to the point of liminal space that does not lament its in-betweenness but rather imagines a cosmopolitan identity that blurs the lines of distinctions. Like his native city, Istanbul, Pamuk is torn between allegiance to his Turkish roots and his European upbringing. Pamuk, therefore, embodies the typical Turkish paradox—of European ambition and its Ottoman culture, its scientific aspiration and its religious conservatism, its secular institution and its Islamic law, its old morality and its new economy. The East-West polarity, which is predominant in the Turkish consciousness, is deftly delineated in his major novels such as *The White Castle, Snow* and *My Name is Read.*[2]

In *The White Castle,* Pamuk very skillfully presents the cross-cultural interaction between the East and the West. The cultural differences and similarities between the two civilizations is narrated in the form of the story of two lookalikes, an Ottoman scholar, Hoja, and a Venetian sailor—set in the Seventeenth century Ottoman Empire. The Venetian is a slave is taken as prisoner en route Naples by the Turkish pirates and is sold in the slave market of Istanbul. He is bought by an Ottoman scholar. Both the slave and the master are not given names. However, the Venetian is treated preferentially because he pretends to be a doctor and administers treatment to the ailing Turks and even the Pasha who suffers from short breath and

cough. He earns money in the prison also by treating Turks and other slaves. The hoja is a scholar who has a deep thirst for knowledge of astronomy, mechanics, animal behaviour and fireworks. He is always occupied with finding new knowledge and making strange machines. He takes up a grand project of making a huge war machine for the Sultan but the machine proves a big failure. Hoja, the master, requires his Venetian slave to teach him all he knows about Western science and technology, medicine, astronomy and fireworks. But his curiosity is not satisfied with that only ; he wants to know more from him, even the intimate details about the latter—his life in Venice, his family, customs, his relationships back in Italy. He even contemplated whether, having knowledge of each other's secrets, they could exchange their identities. They resemble with each other so much so that, after decades of living together, they actually exchange their identities: the hoja goes to Italy to live the life of the Venetian, and the latter takes up the position and property of the hoja and serves the Sultan as Imperial Astrologer. He gets happily married and bears four children, while the hoja become the Venetian after fleeing to Italy and starts lecturing on the Ottoman culture in various universities there.

The novel is in the form of a seventeenth century manuscript written in old Turkish with Arabic and Persian script. Faruk Darvinoglu, the fictional author of the preface of the novel, finds the manuscript in 1980's in an official archive and takes up the task of translating the manuscript in as better a way as he can understand it. The whole narrative is handled form the Venetian's viewpoint. In this novel, the East West interaction and clash is the major theme with a shift from present to past and vice versa. Ottoman past is peeped into, tracing the East-West relation and conflict in the novel. Faruk Darvinoglu in *The White Castle* steals the historical manuscript from the governor's official archive and tries to translate his nation's history in order to make sense of the present. Faruk tirelessly tries to find the "author of my story" (2). This search for author and Faruk's inability to track down the author suggests the

dilemma of the Turkey's lost "self". He talks about ". . . its symbolic value, its fundamental relevance to our contemporary realities, how through this tale I had come to understand our own times . . ." (3). Here it is pertinent to note that although Pamuk is critical of Kemalist nationalism[3], and supports the cosmopolitan identity that belongs to both East and West, to both local and universal; yet he sticks to his Turkish identity by going back to Ottoman history. This fact is evident in the novel in that it is a "manuscript" found in the "archives" of Gezbe, and this archive is as old as of 17th Century Ottoman period. The fictional translator although lives in the twentieth century but the whole plot is set in the 17th Century Ottoman Istanbul. Pamuk's characters are also the product of their national identity and history. The retroactive nature of the characters in his novels attests their historical belongingness to the nation. By digging out history and presenting the Ottoman Turkey in juxtaposition with Europe, and juxtaposing the traditional history with the contemporary time, Pamuk tries to delineate the map of Turkish identity as both similar to and different from the West, like the fluidity of the waters of Bosporus strait which divides Europe and Asia but is also a fluid link between the two. To this effect Pamuk engages with the art of "fictional cartography"[4] that encompasses vast geographical and cultural topologies and obliterates the lines and borders. But at the same time, he highlights the contours of Turkish identity that projects itself with different shades and colors and asserting a place that bridges the East and the West—a place that asserts both its similarities and difference both from Europe and Asia.

The novel reflects the dilemma of the Turkey-Europe affinity and friction. The novel deals with the exchange of knowledge and culture between Turkey and Venice represented by the hoja and the Venetian slave. The slave however is treated as superior to the master who is fascinated by the knowledge which the slave possesses. The hoja feels wanting and asks the Venetian to teach him whatever knowledge he has learned back in Italy. It is important to note that there underlies an ambivalence in the relationship between the Venetian and his Turkish

master that suggests the uncertain relation between the two civilizations. Even though he is a slave, the preferential treatment is given to the Venetian only because he has knowledge of science and other fields. The difference between the two lies in the fault line of knowledge; and the more the hoja learns, the narrower this fringe becomes. The two characters then work together like two friends: The Venetian tells his readers, "I couldn't help but notice the unnerving likeness between us as Hoja gradually ceased to use the word 'teach': we were going to search together, discover together, progress together" (23). In spite of this affinity and alikeness, Pamuk sees an opposite force as well that lies between the two: The hoja stops looking at his slave with envy and following his knowledge. "And perhaps too seeing such baseness, he no longer wanted to imitate me but was content to remain himself till the very end" (57). The gap or the difference is filled up by language and knowledge—that serves a powerful tool to assert one's identity as reflected in the novel. The Venetian feels the shift of power and self-importance between himself and the hoja thus:

> According to him [the hoja], the gap between his knowledge and mine was no greater than the number of volumes he'd had brought from my cell . . . With his phenomenal diligence and quickness of mind, in six months he [hoja] had acquired a basic grasp of Italian which he'd improve upon later, read all my books and by the time he'd made me repeat to him everything I remembered, there was no longer any way in which I was superior to him. . .. At the end of six months we were no longer companions who studied together, progressed together. It was he who came up with ideas. (23-24)

What transpires from the relationship between the *hoja* and the Venetian is that both the characters who play the central role in the plot of the novel are chosen by the author as the representatives of Western culture and the so called Orient. Like the in-between geography of the Turkish landscape where the two continents meet and part, the novel *The White Castle*

serves to be a museum of the artefacts of two disparate culture which submerge and repel simultaneously; which are lookalikes yet distinct from each other.

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*Notes*

[1] Also see Turner. "Betwixt and Between"
[2] See Ayengar pp. 1.

[3] See Erdag Goknar's 'Orhan Pamuk and the Ottoman Theme', pp. 37

[4] See Robert T Tally's *Spatiality: The New Critical Idiom.* Tally scrutinizes literature and critical theory and discovers the importance of space in all literature. He admits that spatiality challenges and disrupts the discourse of temporality in literature and criticism; and that Geocriticism has come into action in the modern and postmodern literature, art, aesthetics and other social sciences.