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The Imagined Nation in Orhan Pamuk's Imagination

Abstract: When Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel Laureate writes, his nation emerges as multi representations of the past, the self and the present, so that in the imaginative spaces, nations are better understood. Pamuk approaches the dual stances of the nation from the other's point of view and explores the transcendent space in between the binaries, shifting the very centre he speaks of. Boundaries are transgressed and muted in his nostalgic and ruminative narrations where the author, the narrator and the self occupy the position of the other to take the reader out of the labyrinth, and literary texts become exercises of imaginative pursuits of the author along with the reader.

Keywords: Imagination, nation, self, other, identity.

The nation being an imaginative construct, the shades of representing its contours – political, social, historical, psychological and phenomenological, have always been a central theme in literature. Nations are representations and represents in multitudes its own people as well that of the world, and literature invariably addresses the identity of nations when texts are imagined. Thus when the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk projects his textscapes harnessing the past, present and future in the trials, trauma and tropes of his nation; the identity of the nation which being that of itself and of the other becomes as much imagined as it is real. When Pamuk speaks of understanding the self from the other's point of view, nations are understood better in their own self as well as in the mantle of imagined nations. Pamuk's writings represent his nation from multiple standpoints. Whereas his writings leave no room

for doubt that Turkey/Istanbul is the only place he could call his home, he lays open the varied imaginations of the manner in which Turkey could be interpreted by an insider as well as by an outsider and even by someone who idealises it. He is the native self, the Western other as well as the native other. At the same time his voice is differently imagined from the diasporic writers who have a romantic view of their nation and also from the other native writers of the nation who are nostalgically caught in their past. Pamuk reflects, contemplates and ruminates over the past so that it would re-energise him to move on accepting the nation in its ambivalences like the self which has its many many reflections of itself and the other.

As Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel laureate, narrates his nation into being in his novels, Turkey emerges as lived spaces, enlivened by fragments of memories, dreams, nostalgia, hopes, fears, emotions and relationships. Istanbul becomes his central space and his texts become imagined in the backdrop of real landscape and borders. And yet the extent of how imagined is his imagined nation takes us through his Kars and Istanbul to locate the self and the nation as narratives and fragmented representations of cultural identity. In the novel *Snow* Kars becomes a microcosm of Turkey where the political cultural and social scenario is representative of coups, military attacks and Islamist fundamentalism. The extent of his imagination draws a pretty bleak picture of Kars and Pamuk in his interview with Alexander Star has stated that his intention is “to make the problem of representation a part of fiction too” (“I was not a Political Person”). Perhaps this comment helps to locate Pamuk within the postcolonial framework of writers placing novels as centres of imagining. Pamuk remarks, “This process of imagining is political, in that it is similar to the way we might imagine a group that represents the people in the novel, or a city crowd, or a community, or a nation...” (*The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* 81). Imagined nations or nations of the mind are as significant as real ones and very often public imagination of belonging is spurred by the imagination of the writer merging with that of the reader. Through the theory of Imagination as “imagined nations,” where the literary texts are the centre of imaginings, Anderson, notes that novels represent a kind of imagined community that becomes the nation through imagined spaces and territory. Imagined communities have shaped popular imaginations and the literary text’s layered structures, multiple voices and linguistic polyphony imitates the nation itself. In other words, the collective imagination, which infuses narratives, and myths that are socially constructed and essentially relative, imagines national identities that boast ideologies of homogeneity. The nation “... is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”(Anderson 6). Identities have been drained into our social memories and personal existence and even constructed our past and present.

Hence to challenge and deconstruct them demands a potential that is rooted in understanding history and nationalism critically.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie, transferring his imagination on to paper, writing about India while looking out of his window to a totally different city like London, speaks of the pain of an exile in having to imagine his nation after having to reclaim it through “fallible” memory while he recreates it as a text (Rushdie 10). Pamuk, who reclaims the past in his writings—reclaiming it as part of his mission as a writer to make a postmodern representation that would enable his readers to dwell with equal intensity on the other side of the story, writes of Istanbul looking at it across the Bosphorus, and of Kars after actually visiting it and being a part of it. Pamuk portrays his nation as a lost city— Kars, forgotten even by God, and revisits become nostalgic, leaving behind only frightful hope. Rushdie picturing his India from London remarks: “I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect, and I knew that my India may only have been one to which I . . . was willing to admit I belonged” (Rushdie 10). Pamuk while visiting Kars to make it the location of his novel *Snow*, says, “for me to believe in my own story, I was well aware that I would need from time to time, to narrate not the real Kars but the Kars of my imagination ...” (*Other Colors* 414). The nation thus becomes imagined physically and creatively when Pamuk echoing the pain and the trauma of the exilic and diasporic writers, extends his novelistic politics of imagination which enables him to “imagine himself as someone else” (OC 229).

To write a novel says Pamuk is “to create a centre ...and to hide it within the landscape –playing an imaginary game of chess with our audience. To read a novel is to perform the same gesture in reverse”(NSN 171-72). In this context while his texts always have more than one centre, his one fixed geographical centre is always Istanbul/Turkey, the representations, the margins, the hues, of which vary. As Pamuk details in NSN, “the hope of finding a centre encourages us to be mentally and sensually receptive, to employ our imagination with hope and optimism to enter the novel quickly and to locate ourselves within the story,” the shades of imagination in his one fixed centre, gives it equally imaginative tones (*The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* 173).

It is with the intent of writing a political novel, *Snow* that he actually went to Kars to recreate the centre of his novel. The central action in *Snow* narrates three days in Ka’s life where the geography of the place took the phenomenology of his life to unimagined extents even claiming it. Ostensibly Ka after a twelve year exile had come to Istanbul to attend his mother’s funeral and from there was journeying to Kars to report the forthcoming municipal

elections. He hoped to take inspiration from the beauty of the snow to write a few poems and to meet his childhood sweetheart Ipek, whom he wished to marry. Even as he surrendered himself to romantic thoughts and to the bliss of the snow, stark reality awaited for him out there in the form of coups and political drama in which he found himself to be the main negotiator. He found himself the centre of every political move there and even though he was able to meet his love, the snow filled city of Kars, offered him nothing but deceit, denial and death cold.

Turkey being a torn country, torn in its politics, identity and culture, in clash with its glorious but lost Ottoman tradition and the modernizing Westernized movements of the radical reformists, writers of the nation like Pamuk are but inspired to writing novels “as a way of thinking, understanding and imagining” (OC 233). Pamuk states that the intent of the novel is to make the reader aware of “world[s] he has never visited, never seen and never known” (OC 232). Hence when he wishes to portray the anguish of Turkey, he conjures up the minutest detail and that includes not just pride but also shame. When he describes Kars, he portrays with unstinting realism and clarity the stake of the country caught between fundamentalism and secularism and between the state and the military. The exaggeration, parody and pastiche employed in the novel, *Snow* and in the description of a poverty-stricken, cold, Kars is the author’s statement of the excess which he hopes to remove.

Pamuk confesses that though the real city of Kars echoed loneliness and isolation, it was a much different city from the imagined nation in his text *Snow*. He says that in the novel, he did not want to replicate the city but wanted to project on to Kars his own sense of the city’s atmosphere and the questions it posed in him. He wanted to place his story there and not to portray the tales of woe or happiness of the actual people of Kars. The Kars in *Snow* represents the conflict filled nation at the mercy of coups and suicides and the patriarchal attitude of the society worsened by acute poverty, insecurity and hardships. The picture of Kars is bleak and pessimistic while Pamuk says that the actual Kars is not as bad as his depiction.

The imagination of the artist projects onto Kars what he wants to narrate and he justifies it by saying that he owes that much to the people of Turkey. Pamuk’s stance is that only when the artist is able to put himself in another’s shoes is he able to see the other as himself. He speaks of the third space or the virtual lack of boundaries where the self is but the extension of the other. Pamuk’s imagined nation in *Snow* also approaches the question of the identity of the female other. He aims to deconstruct the myth of the Turkish nation which professed of freedom while it contradictorily exhibited a patriarchal nature and subjugated its

womenfolk to slavery under the guise of religion and politics.. In *Snow*, the female, torn between the religious beliefs she is bred with, and the strange practices she is at a later stage in life forced to adopt, revolts with her body, to produce death. The death and the stages leading to the death are politicized in the name of the state and religion where the individual is neglected and freedom becomes an ironic term for imprisonment and silence. Hence he problematizes in *Snow* the issue of the suicide girls and the conflict between the fundamentalists and the secularists, so that his readers making the journey with the author through his characters, are able to understand them better before being judgmental. Rushdie has made an argument in this fashion while problematizing India's freedom and India as a nation: "After all, in all the thousands of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly 'free'. But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it stand?" (Rushdie 27).

In Turkey the notion of freedom of the self and the nation had been given dramatic dimensions by Ataturk, with his modernisation and Westernisation reforms which brutally separated the nation and its people from the cultural roots of religion, language and even dress code. Pamuk, the author, the native and the humanist laments the subsequent self - imposed colonization of Turkey which forced so much of shame upon itself. Even as Istanbul becomes a looming force in Pamuk's works, one senses a feeling of longing, loneliness and lament of a loss, the loss of being; what he hates is not the Westernization but the manner in which it was done without respecting its culture. The writings of Orhan Pamuk are but to be placed in the background of Turkey to genuinely understand the intent of the great humanist. Turkey once a great country with the glorious Ottoman past had a cosmopolitan culture where multi-nationalities lived together sharing secular broader concepts. Yet when Ataturk brought about the Westernization Reforms where everything related to the past was literally wiped out, it strangely brought about an alienation, a narrower outlook and most importantly it took a heavy toll on the cultural identity of the people who suddenly did not know whether they belonged to the East or the West. The conflict within led to serious identity issues where the West became a dominant "master" figure, and infused in the native's psyche, a strong sense of inferiority. Tanpinar, the Turkish writer and Pamuk's predecessor outlines that there is a duality rampant in the Ottoman Turkish culture which beginning with the public life, spread to the society and in a final process settled on the self which makes him a "divided self" between the old and the new. The internal turmoil in the nation and the self had far-reaching consequences to the extent that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the sense

of insecurity created by recurrent coups and ethnic strifes, triggered by the aftermath of the modernization reforms, made the people to cling on rigidly to the lost religious values and blindly to the past, retracing Turkey away from its Ottoman yesteryears which spoke of cultural richness, exchanges and wholehearted humanism.

Pamuk's cultural synthesis is the opening of spaces to literary innovations. Even with his Westernized background, where Pamuk himself states that he is Westernized and wants Turkey to be part of the EU, the innate soul of the artist gazes back at the ruins and remnants of the Ottoman empire, its art, its identity to relate to the ambivalences in the identity of the self which remains elusive and enigmatic; representative of a nation that had such revisitations. He does not crave for a frozen time of the past but revisits the past, which represents all that went into its making, to gather impetus for a better future. He projects the lost city and the self lost in the city and virtually all his books, especially *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, reflect the game, the self and the other play of the true and the untrue as Pamuk resorts to "Orhan" or the other in him to talk about his beloved city. In fact he even talks of the multiple "Orhans" within him...as in the game he played with mirrors which he describes in *Istanbul*: "... I would push the two wings of the mirror inward or outward until the two side mirrors were reflecting each other and I could see thousands of Orhans shimmering in the deep, cold, glass-coloured infinity. . . .each new succession was different from all the others" (94). It was a game in which by losing himself he speaks of the imagined context of detachment, timelessness and spatial delineation of the self.

Orhan Pamuk writes, establishing himself firmly in the city where he was born, but his imagination is fed by the thoughts of the other as his glance is directed at the other who tries to understand the self from the "foreign" position it holds. Commenting on the other diasporic writers like Conrad, Nabokov, Naipul – from whom he differs he says, "Their imaginations were fed by the exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness; mine, however, requires that I stay in the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view. Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am . . . This book is about fate . . ." (*Istanbul* 6).

Pamuk exploring the possibilities of imagination says that it is important to see from the other's point of view. He does not contest between the East and West but rather explores the transcendent space of in-betweenness thus shifting the very centre he speaks of. Boundaries are transgressed and muted in his nostalgic and ruminative narrations where the author, the narrator and the self occupy the position of the other to take the reader out of the labyrinth. Pamuk in *Other Colors* states: "writing the novel is a play of imagination for the

writer as well as the reader.” The writer conjures up “one by one, a multitude of readers hidden away in corners”. The readers, as they read, imagine the author’s dreams, his heroes into being, and see his world. Until he realises that it is not just “a society or a group of people but an entire nation . . . imagining itself into being” (OC 232). Thus the author’s imagined world brings forth deepest thoughts that give voice to the victories and the “vulnerabilities” of the nation (OC 233). Pamuk says that it is may be the hurt, the shame which also surfaces, that causes intolerance towards novelists, hinting at the personal trauma he faced of being tried for “insulting the Turkish identity” (McGaha 3).

Pamuk’s *Istanbul: Memories and the city* is his classic example of a text that permeates all the borders of geography, autobiography and territory to provide a non linear journey of texts being written and rewritten by the author as well as the reader to aporic spaces of representation which art chooses to celebrate its visual and verbal extensions of imaginations. In *Istanbul* even monochrome picture shots convey hues that his verbal tones are none the less adept in conveying, especially the feeling of *hüzün*. *Hüzün* though a Turkish word for melancholy has imaginative shades of creative, cultural and geographical togetherness when Pamuk speaks of it. Pamuk employs the word *hüzün* in all its beauty of the Sufi philosophy which connotes *hüzün* as a yearning, perhaps a poetic longing or an ache that the winter skies and its bleakness transfer onto the people of Istanbul, but leaving behind in its wake a strange spiritual or mystical sort of awakening. Pamuk writes: “As I trace out words and figures on the steamy window, the *hüzün* inside me dissipates, and I can relax after I have done all my writing and drawing, I can erase it all with the back of my hand and look outside. But the view itself can bring its own *hüzün*” (*Istanbul* 110). The *hüzün*, as expressed in his black and white photos spreads as loneliness which is transferred from the bleak tones of his writings to settle on the reader, to take him to a romantic lost longing of delusion where even the narrator gets lost, to be taken over by the other in his place, to fill in the gaps, to complete the story as Orhan in *Snow* and Orhan in *Istanbul*. Just as Orhan understands Ka as a soul lost, confused wanting to feel the peace of the snow and the presence of God; whereas the internal conflict within him denies the very same things he yearns, Orhan is also like Istanbul – lost, torn but getting reinvented in every manner. Representations and perspectives merge in their multiplicity and Orhan Pamuk makes his imagination a presence felt. Even as the self is constantly a changing presence so is identity which represents the cultural self which in turn is shaped by the many visitation and revisitations of the memories, dreams, experiences and struggles the self and the other as in his nations and imagined nations have gone through.

In *Istanbul* for example Pamuk traces the writing of the early Turkish authors, like Tanpinar and Yahya Kemal, who have sketched a picture of Istanbul. Having lived there and been through what Istanbul had been through, their accounts are touching and nostalgic but Pamuk feels that the charm lies in seeing the same from the stranger's or the other's point of view so that instead of trying to recreate a national imagery that is filled with feelings of world weariness, the perspective of the other enables a foreign gaze which infuses the charm back to the lost, old and the ruined. The ruins speak of moments and are monuments for him but he wishes to let them be and form the rock solid foundations for the future rather than let them be hampering thoughts of past glory. The perspective of the other puts the charm back and in the detachment, the self can cross the borders of transcendence so that there is a deterritorialisation taking place, to facilitate cultural exchanges and tolerance.

Even as Pamuk states that a character's lifelikeness is an illusion produced by a character's perfect consistency with the world of that particular novel, not the real world, Pamuk creates his world and his characters with utmost care to the finest details. Even though Kars in his *Snow* is much imagined as its geography is real, he actually spent years in Kars, interviewing people, getting photographs to set the story of *Snow* there. Even though the political climate, the coups, the suicides did not happen in the real Kars, he meant Kars as a representation of the past in Turkey, which could at any moment be its present too, and perhaps an extended, almost aggravated version of the future. The details awakened mixed responses, even negative ones among the people of Kars who were even angry that the author gave a deliberate, poor picture of Kars. But Pamuk in the novel seems to have anticipated it for he says: "If you write a book set in Kars and put me in it, I'd like to tell your readers not to believe anything you say about me, anything you say about any of us. No one could understand us from so far away" (*Snow* 435). The nation as an extension of the self, a representation of the unfinalisability of the human being, finds its imaginative expression in Pamuk's portrayal of his city, Istanbul in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. The author like the character Orhan, reviews, rewrites and recreates the charm of his city which is like his self, his imagination, his texts.

The author in Istanbul not just narrates his nation, he becomes the nation which in turn becomes the many facets of a representation, where Pamuk explores on the theme of binaries which need not be placed in conflict but in spaces of ambivalence. The book *Istanbul* traces the life of the first twenty two years of its narrator, Orhan and as Pamuk says Orhan is not necessarily the Orhan Pamuk, the writer of the book, as even at a young age he "suspected there was more to my world than I could see." He believed that "somewhere in

the streets of Istanbul, in a house resembling ours, there lived another Orhan so much like me that he could pass for my twin, even my double..." (3). His imagination of the other Orhan was so vivid that: "Whenever I was unhappy, I imagined going to the other house, the other life, the place where the other Orhan lived, and in spite of everything, I'd half convince myself that I was he and took pleasure in imagining how happy he was . . . I felt no need to go to seek out the other house in that other imagined part of the city." (*Istanbul* 6)

Hence the other for him is as much himself, which like the nation is redefined and reinvented in his novels. In *Snow* Orhan is as much Ka, as he comes back to Kars to recreate the scenes that led to Ka's murder. The other, like the mirrored self, is as much an internal presence as the outward and *Istanbul: Memories and the City* reflects it in mirrors, in dreams, in photographs and in the deliberate feeling Orhan created of the other. Istanbul's divided geographical position between Asia and Europe, between the East and the West is similar. Far from being a bridge he sees Istanbul as the centre from where the cultural ambivalences, the multiple representations that give varied and complex hues to the beautiful stream of life, flow. Every time he views his city he sees a different angle, a different perspective: "I remember how troubled I was the first time I looked at this same view from the same angle, and notice how different the view looks now. It's not my memory that's false – the view looked troubled then because I myself was troubled, I poured my soul in the city's streets and there it still resides." (*Istanbul* 313). It is the other's view, the stranger's view that he prefers and in many instances he himself becomes the stranger to take the complementary view as his imagination leads him to that guise. "For people like me, Istanbul with one foot in this culture and one in the other, the 'Western traveler' is often not a real person – he can be my own creation, my fantasy, even my own reflection"(349).

Just as the human self is a continued process of thinking and rethinking, forming "nodes" and "lines of flights" in the rhizomatic schemata of the cultural embryo he is in, imagination renders the perspective to emerge from the confines- to spaces that has "multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flights" – strangely speaking, of possibilities which he has already imagined (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21). It is with a bold certainty enabled by the gaze of the imaginative artist that Pamuk fixes his sites on the ambivalence of the imagined nations- its boundaries though premeditated are but never the centre. In the in-between spaces of the East and the West, the bridge across the Bosphorus, the intangible distance from the snowflake to snow, lies his perception of fixities. Pamuk draws his life and soul from the "old stones" and "the ruins of Istanbul", and even as he chose writing as a career over his passion

as a painter, he finds his roots, his home and homelessness in the lost city of Istanbul, where he discovers the very many Orhans in himself and the other. He accepts the city in all its glory and huzun and celebrates its fate as well as his, in writings that resemble, represent and resurrect his nation. Pamuk with the unending representations of the insider and the outsider, the self and the other and nation and imagination is best understood in his imaginative space, where writings dialogues and exchanges reach out to multivalent articulations of transcendence, identity and space.

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