

Textual Hybridity in Orhan Pamuk' s

The Black Book

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to explore the way memory and identity intertwine and are reflected by textual hybridity in one of Orhan Pamuk's most acclaimed writings, The Black Book. As an admirer of great writers such as Borges or Calvino, who redefined and innovated traditional narrative discourses and styles, Pamuk also chooses to experiment, break fictional confinements and go beyond established patterns. The Nobel winner succeeds in creating a well-crafted intertextual network that teems with all sorts of playful allusions, rewritings, references to and evocations of Islamic texts, Turkish literature, Oriental allegories and Western literature. Configuring one's identity and coming to terms with memory both find a unique and intriguing expression in a labyrinthine universe.

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What exactly sets the novel apart from other genres? The 2006 Nobel prize winner for literature, Orhan Pamuk, trusts that one could include anything into it: lists, radio soap operas (a reference to Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*), poems, sequences from other novels (thus embracing intertextuality), essays on different subjects such as history and science, philosophical texts, encyclopaedic information, anecdotes and all sorts of things we could come up with. (2012: 142) This is, in brief, Pamuk's belief about the art of the novel, which he chooses to express in his volume of literary essays, *The Naive and Sentimental Novelist*.

There is no denying that Pamuk has built many of his fictional discourses in a postmodern manner, but our aim is to take a closer look at some of these postmodernist techniques and the way they lead to the fascinating textual hybridity that defines the author's famous *Black Book*. Pamuk himself suggested that as he followed in the footsteps of Borges and

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Calvino, his approach to traditional Islamic literature was based on a reinterpretation that let go of the reactionary and political views:

I never thought I could do anything with that material. But once I was in the United States, I realized I could go back to that material with a Calvinoesque or Borgesian mind frame. I had to begin by making a strong distinction between the religious and literary connotations of Islamic literature, so that I could easily appropriate its wealth of games, gimmicks, and parables (Pamuk 2007).

Without venturing to offer a precise definition of a long-disputed concept that has pervaded many cultural fields a long time ago, Ihab Hassan singularizes postmodernism (1987) referring to irony, indeterminacy, Anti-Narrative/*Petite Histoire*, dispersal, deconstruction, play, intertext, a stand against interpretation, misreading etcetera. Indeterminacy, for instance, would relate, in Hassan's opinion, to uncertainty or to Bakhtin's dialogic imagination (and intertextuality as well). Fragmentation, a possible cause for indeterminacy, is the sole basis of trust for a postmodernist and explains the choice for collage, metonymy, paradox and the propensity for brokenness. Irony stands for play, allegory, even self-reflection, as they are the only means to elucidate truth, or at least getting somehow closer to it. Assurances are left aside in favour of ambiguity. Hybridity takes part in this game, as well.

With regard to hybridization, Ihab Hassan points out that the mutant replication of genres (parody, travesty, pastiche) may be as reasonable as the original source. The point of hybridization is not mere imitation, but an expansion of the past into the present, augmentation: "In that plural present, all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Now and the Not Now, the Same and the Other" (1986).

As opposed to centring, determinacy, hierarchy and even purpose, the constant interrogation concerning identity easily turns into a matter of pluralism and ambivalence, digressing to a dilemma of copy and original. As Hassan put it, "postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a white ideology of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences" (Hassan 1987).

Milan Kundera indirectly mentioned the “hybrid” novel (in his novel *Immortality*), underlining that giving up the traditional discourse patterns, such as the rule of unity of action, is actually taking the composition of the novel one step forward. Kundera compared the “traditional novel” to bicycle racing, where the only thing that mattered was the outcome, the end of the story. The writer argues in favour of a novel written as a “treat” which consists of many “dishes”... just as Pamuk detailed.

A partisan of polyphony and including short meditations in the novel, Kundera sees an enrichment of the novel not only through the combination of literary genres, but also of discourses and styles that can break formal confinements. Thus ensues textual hybridity: “Outside of the novel, one is in the realm of assertions: everyone’s a philosopher, politician, concierge—is sure of what he says. The novel, however, is a territory where one does not make assertions; it is a territory of play and of hypotheses.” (Salmon 1984) Very much like the Czech writer, Pamuk has a self-questioning aesthetic conscience and relies on relativity and ambiguity, a rejection of fixity: “It’s fun, and a challenge, to experiment with form and style, and language and mood and persona, and to think about each book differently (Pamuk 2007).”

When he was asked by *The Paris Review* magazine if he had taken a model in order to be more modern and experimental, Pamuk confessed that he had moved on from Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, or Thomas Mann to writers such as Woolf, Faulkner and Proust. (2007: 436) *The Black Book* echoes, for instance, Albertine’s departure by reinventing it as a central theme that puts the main character, a lawyer, in a constant state of anguish after he is left by his wife. He begins to question everything he had ever known about himself, his wife, his big, annoying family, the anarchic city he lives in and Turkey.

Pamuk’s prose in general involves postmodernist gimmicks (like the intrusion of the author in the text, very frequent) and all sorts of digressions that build textual hybridity. In fact, hybridity favours the recounting of Galip’s and Celâl’s wayward movement towards a blurred, unreliable memory especially through common Islamic stories, both from the Ottoman culture and from contemporary Turkey. The plot is built in

and of itself on intertextuality, paratextuality and hybridity. They are not limited to Islamic allegories or parables, but include Western literary works as well (besides *In Search of Lost Time*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Dostoyevsky could be mentioned, although he does not really fit the Western categorization). Moreover, all the epigraphs in the novel succeed in carrying on a subtle dialogue with world literature, actually showing how both storytelling and identity concerns are very much the same anywhere in the world. Reaching out to cultural memory, either in the East or the West, shows how identity cannot skip relating to fundamental, universal values.

The innovation behind the fictional discourse in *The Black Book* is this bold combination of a traditional narrative structure, journalistic style, historical topics from Ottoman culture (the Hurufis, the eighteenth-century sheikh named Galip etc.), short meditations and Oriental allegories and parables (some of them made up), that is sustained by the dispersal and fragmentation of meaning. The novel thus reflects a great concern for the split Turkish identity, caught between a fascination for the West, the tradition of the East and a tendency towards the radical, falsely secure national ideology. Set in the late seventies, *The Black Book* talks about memory, the magic of writing, the purpose of storytelling, the struggle of being oneself, the suffering of loss, and loneliness.

Galip starts searching for his wife, Rüya, by turning his attention to the strangest signs and hints around him, very much like in a detective novel (for instance, her ex-husband's political past reflected in leftist magazines or the detective novels which Rüya used to read), also getting distracted by people who knew or are looking for Celâl, but this search is actually one of his own self. Which makes him recall happy memories of his childhood with Rüya, her cousin. Galip is somehow torn apart by the wish to be someone else, more precisely, to be like his journalist cousin, Celâl. *The Black Book* might in fact be regarded as a metaphysical detective story because it is life in general that requires elucidation, more than Rüya's disappearance, which is only a pretence for finally dealing with identity issues. Furthermore, if we take into account the fact that Galip prefers to be a naive detective, lying to himself, trying to delay facing the truth, that Rüya has simply gone to her stepbrother, Celâl, thus attempting

to mislead the readers, the novel might also be an anti-detective novel - if not an utter parody of searching one's identity, then an ironic approach of it, with a teasing twist:

When he looks at these clues, this man sees his own past, the past he shared with his beautiful wife. He doesn't know who she's run off with, or else he doesn't want to know, because wherever he goes, whenever he stumbles onto another clue that talks to him of the past he shared with his wife, he can't help thinking that the man she's run off with, and the place she's hiding resides somewhere in his past. (2015: 101)

Galip seems to enjoy his new detective role so much that he even considers himself the hero of a detective novel, rigorously listing places where he might find Rüya and Celâl.

I must be myself, one of Celâl's column titles, becomes the main issue that haunts Galip's conscience and carries him in a dreamlike labyrinth. His walk through Istanbul, portrayed as a dark, chaotic and mysterious city, is marked by Rüya's and Celâl's absence, as well as by the latter's articles, so much so that Galip wishes he lived in the obscure world conceived and interpreted by Celâl. Grasping one's true *self* and one's identity here becomes a process that implies pluralism, faces indeterminacy and highlights the displacement of the real through simulacrum, replica, and imitation. This shift makes the characters wonder what the original source of a story is after all and makes it impossible for them to distinguish who copied whom. But that is not necessarily a bad or abnormal thing in shaping an identity: "Please don't misunderstand me: Imitation is a formative art. Unless we were always trying to be like others (...) life, I think, would quickly become impossible." (2015: 116) The displacement generates a valid replication, as the stories it carries only lead to other stories. In other words, enlargement and augmentation, forms of hybridization: "It was not long before this world - "where everything was a copy of something else, where people were at once themselves and their own imitations, and all stories opened out into other stories - grew to look so real"(2015: 165).

Textual hybridity is also obvious in the characters themselves: Galip's obsession for his cousin's columns could be his wish to bring an

undetermined, unclear past into the present, to decode the history of another whom he tries to copy in order to paradoxically be himself. Celâl's restlessness regarding personal and cultural identity and the need of magnifying his sense of self is reflected by Mevlevî's story (known as Jalal Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet): "Rumi had been searching for his other, the double who might move him and light up his heart, the mirror who might reflect his face and his very soul. (...) Rumi needed to be able to draw from a storehouse of alternative identities." (2015: 255-256) As a matter of fact, Celâl might well be a travesty attempt of Jalal (the homonymity is obvious), a contemporary, charlatanic version of him, preoccupied by Istanbul's unexplored, peculiar and forgotten stories, such as the debris one could find in Bosphorus.

The columns, which are written playfully, with a melancholic erudition by the mysterious and sullen Celâl, an individual who would rather avoid his relatives by shutting himself off or roaming around strange places in Istanbul, alternate with narrative sequences that follow Galip's wandering in the city. This alternation succeeds in both disrupting the story and enhancing it, especially through self-reflection on the act of storytelling (for example, the dialogue between Galip and three famous journalists on how to write). Not centring the plot is in fact a significant mechanism that supports one of the ideas behind the story – "the loss of mysticism in Oriental and Turkish mindsets: "F. M. Üçüncü offered a detailed analysis of the loss of mystery. In his view, there existed in both Eastern and Western traditions the idea of a centre hidden from the world (...) a civilization that lost its notion of such a centre could not help but go out of kilter" (2015: 304).

Physically absent, yet very present through his writing, Celâl has an insane obsession with memory loss (comparing memory to a garden), causing a similar disquiet in Galip. They are both affected by Istanbul's melancholy, the decay in spirit and thinking in Turkish society and they feel the weight of this general wish to be like the Europeans in the West, illustrated by the story of the useless, disembodied mannequins.

The playfulness and openness in structure mentioned by Hassan, in relation to Bakhtin's dialogism, are indisputable due to the combination of different voices and points of view: besides Galip's and Celâl's perspectives, and the heterodiegetic narrator, a communicative, yet coy

author turns up towards the end of the story. The author's intrusion into the text, in the most natural postmodern way, may partly be explained by a need to point out the intentions regarding polyphony. His concern, though it ruins the whole fictional pact, is a stand against fixity, as he asks the reader not to be completely influenced by what he had just read, but instead resort to his own wit and playfulness. The author rejects his authority as the mastering mind and empowers the reader:

Reader, dear reader, throughout the writing of this book I have tried – if not always successfully – to keep its narrator separate from its hero (...) but please allow me to intervene just once.(...) I would prefer to leave you alone on this page – alone, that is, with your memories. It would be best, I think, if I asked the printer to submerge all the words on the pages that follow with a blanket of printer's ink. This would allow you to use your own imaginations to create that which my prose can never hope to achieve. (2015: 442-443)

Commenting upon his own work, Pamuk concisely described textual hybridity and the fusion of styles when he mentioned that some Oriental cultures (China, India, Persia) contain common allegories that survive through oral storytelling, such as the mystical poem *Beauty and Love* (*Hüsn ü Aşk*), which plays a part in Rüya's and Galip falling in love and crosses Galip's path frequently. The novelty here is that they were treated in a unique manner and put into a space imbued with possibilities, contemporary Istanbul: "It's an experiment – put everything together, like a Dadaist collage; *The Black Book* has this quality. Sometimes all these sources are fused together and something new emerges. So I set all these rewritten stories in Istanbul, added a detective plot, and out came *The Black Book* (Pamuk 2007)." Textual hybridity is therefore an innovative view on storytelling, benefiting from intertextuality, the intertwining of history and fiction and different types of discourses.

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