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## Subverting the Metanarratives of Kemalism: Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* as a Postmodern Narrative Revolt

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Postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his renowned work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* points out the general attitude of the postmodern age as scepticism towards metanarratives or grand stories which structure the discourses of modern science, philosophy, religion and politics. He says: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *Postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). Most of the postmodern thinkers and theoreticians explicitly present this mistrust towards master narratives because even this mistrust is a form of intellectual resistance against those with power who disseminate the master narratives. By resisting the master narratives the postmodern intellectuals indirectly attempt to support the subordinated and the marginalized, who were always excluded from the scope of grand narratives. This basic postmodern sceptical attitude towards metanarratives provoked intellectuals to question the hitherto trusted autonomous intellectual disciplines, especially history. They argued that an objective reconstruction of the past is impossible and asserted that history is another narrative just like literature. They believed that history is not much better than fiction in conveying "reality". Hans Kellner shares his mistrust towards history:

. . . I do not believe that there are "stories" out there in the archives or monuments of the past, waiting to be resurrected and told. Neither human activity nor the existing records of such activity take the form of narrative, which is the product of complex cultural forms and deep-seated linguistic conventions deriving from choices that have traditionally been called rhetorical; there is no "straight" way to invent a history, regardless of the honesty and professionalism of the historian. Indeed, the standards of honesty and professionalism are to be found in precisely those conventions, both in what they permit or mandate and in what they exclude from consideration. All history, even the most long-term, quantified, synchronic description, is understood by competent readers as part of a story, an explicit or implicit narrative. (127)

Postmodern intellectuals such as Hayden White, Michel De Certeau, Roland Barthes, Paul Veyne, Louis O. Mink and Lionel Grossman attacked history's superior status as a truth telling discourse.

The postmodern sense of history influenced not only thinkers and theoreticians but also fiction writers. Postmodern fiction writers abandoned the traditional historical novel to re-imagine the past/history from the hitherto repressed subject positions and to expose the politics of narrative construction in the writing of history. Ferit Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize winner of 2006, is a postmodern fiction writer par-excellence. He is often extolled as

the most gifted Turkish writer. His novels are set in different historical and cultural contexts of Turkey and most of them are superb examples of historiographic metafiction.

Carrying an uncertain and ambiguous identity, Turkey exists in the geographical and cultural border between Asia and Europe and shows an ambivalent attitude towards the extreme fundamentalism of the East and the blasphemous radicalism of the West. Because of this disputable identity, Turkey has always remained the centre of the East-West conflict. Moreover the nation is torn between its Ottoman past and secular republican present. The inhabitants of Turkey share the predicament of their nation, and, through his novels, Orhan Pamuk explores the dilemmas of the Turks.

The Republic of Turkey was established on October 29, 1923 and the Assembly elected Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as the first president of the Turkish Republic. He was a military man and a war hero who formed the Republic of Turkey from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire and he can aptly be called the creator of the Turkish republic. Andrew Mango Says: "Mustafa Kemal Atatürk personifies the Republic that he founded and shaped in the second decade of the twentieth century. He is the Republic's symbol"(147). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk preferred and advocated western ways of living and thinking and therefore soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, Kemalist Cultural Revolution started. The revolution denigrated and suppressed Turkey's Ottoman history to fulfil its ideals of westernization. The state attempted to make its subjects ahistorical through various reforms, out of which the language and alphabet reforms were very significant. As a result of these ideological reforms the Ottoman language and scripts are unfamiliar to modern Turks and this ignorance kept them away from Ottoman culture. The state tries to separate its citizens from the Ottoman past by deliberately nourishing cultural amnesia. After the establishment of the Republic, the state spread master narratives of nationalism, secularism and modernity. Along with venerating Turkishness the state negated and obfuscated the Ottoman legacy. Until his death in 1938 Atatürk was the president of the Republic of Turkey and still his policies are the leading principles of the Republic. Davison says:

Atatürk died in 1938. Modern Turkey is peopled by a generation and more who know him only through education and tradition. Yet Turkey still lives in the long shadow he cast. His picture is everywhere. Although Turkey has come a long way since his death, the guiding policies which he laid down have fundamentally been followed: the creation and preservation of a territorially limited national state for the Turks; the inculcation of a Turkish national consciousness; the breaking of the hold of Islam over state, law and education; the westernization not only of material life but of institutions, minds and customs; the rapid development of the economy; an avoidance of class divisions and growth of a sense of solidarity; a devotion to the republican form of government; and finally, the pursuit of peaceful foreign relations. (1)

Under the watchful eyes of the powerful Military, the government still follows Atatürk's ideals of total westernization and the Republic is secular. It is easy to secularize a government, but it is not so easy to secularize and westernize minds. Therefore after 1950 Turkey witnessed the resurgence of Islam and from 1960s onward the country beheld the birth and death of many political parties based on religion and most of the time such parties garnered support from people and won the elections. But the Military was in constant vigil to protect the secular nature of the Republic. Therefore whenever secularism was in threat, the junta intervened with coups and banned a lot of religious parties in Turkey. But later such

parties reincarnated in other forms with other names and hence Turkey had witnessed several military interventions after 1960.

After the last major military coup in 1980, Turkish writers began to portray their bygone glorious Ottoman days because, amidst the chaos created by the rapid political transformations, there was nothing else for them to embrace and console themselves. Erdağ Göknaar, in his essay entitled “Orhan Pamuk and the “Ottoman” Theme”, says:

WRITERS OF THE GENERATION after the last major military coup (September 12, 1980)—which affected all aspects of Turkish politics, society and culture and broadly represented the transition between leftist-socialist and neoliberal worldviews—have been increasingly free to resurrect Ottoman history and “Ottomanesque” language. In literature, this led to drastic changes as writers responded to the political transformations by moving away from social issues and realism in a manner that questioned grand narratives of nationalism/Kemalism and socialism through aesthetic experimentation with content and form. Though these trends could be more generally labeled part of international postmodernism, their manifestation in the Turkish context can be further described and specified as expressions of post-Kemalism, postsocialism, and most importantly, neo-Ottomanism. (35)

Neo-Ottomanism denotes the resurgence of the disregarded Ottoman cultural history and identity including manifestations of Islam. Thus after the 1980 military coup, Turkey witnessed a lot of historical novels dipped in Ottoman culture.

Even though the major action of the novel *The White Castle* takes place in the second half of the seventeenth century in the Ottoman Istanbul, its fictional and metafictional “Preface” links it to the twentieth century Republican Istanbul. This false preface is written by a Republican secular intellectual and historian, Faruk Darvinoglu. The novel gives no information about Darvinoglu. However, those who have read Orhan Pamuk’s another novel, *The Silent House* know him as a character in that novel. The 1980 military coup banished left-leaning professors from the universities and Darvinoglu is one of them. After the expulsion from the university, Darvinoglu spends a lot of time in a forgotten Ottoman archive at Gebze. From the archive he discovers a seventeenth century manuscript entitled “The Quiltmaker’s Stepson,” an autobiographical account of a Venetian captive who lived in Istanbul during the latter half of the seventeenth century. He gets excited by the manuscript and he feels that the story it relates has a lot of symbolic significance and is quite relevant with reference to the contemporary Turkish realities. His attitude towards history was quite postmodern in spirit and the distrust of history prevents him from concentrating on the manuscript’s scientific, cultural, anthropological or historical value. However his attempts to gather more information about the author of the text force him to consult available sources of history and then he proceeds to distinguish the “facts” and fiction in the manuscript. But he fails to gather any information about the author of the manuscript. Nevertheless, he decides to publish the manuscript. The original manuscript was in Ottoman script. Because of the language and alphabet reforms of the Republican state, the modern citizens of Turkey don’t know Ottoman script. Therefore he translates the Ottoman manuscript into contemporary Turkish. But while translating, he never attempts to ensure hundred percentage of accuracy in his translation. He describes his process of translation/transliteration:

My readers will see that I nourished no pretensions to style while revising the book into contemporary Turkish: after reading a couple of sentences from the

manuscript I kept on one table, I'd go to another table in the other room where I kept my papers and try to narrate in today's idiom the sense of what remained in my mind. (*The White Castle* 3)

Thus his translation is not meticulous. The historian deliberately abandons the false pretensions of his discipline and embraces a fictional narrative of the past. As Darvinoglu lives amidst the ideologically constructed metanarratives of Turkish secular nationalism, it is not a surprise that even after being a historian, he has lost his faith in history.

The little narrative that Pamuk ties at the beginning of *The White Castle* as preface is highly political. In *The White Castle*, in 1982, after the 1980 military coup, the secular intellectual, Darvinoglu translates an Ottoman manuscript into contemporary Turkish. Erdağ Gökner says in his critical study *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel*: "We would have to know some context—not much to understand that a Republican historian in an Ottoman archive involved in a loose translation is a symbolic complex that represents a greater crisis of Republican modernity" (92). The Republican intellectual's attempt to dig out the Islamic past that the state wants to repress is politically subversive and it is an open challenge to Republican modernization. Erdağ Gökner says in the same study:

From the Republican Perspective, the Ottoman Islamic past is one of unreconciled trauma that must be repressed. The very nature of a core Turkish identity is challenged and transformed by Darvinoglu's knowledge of languages, which in the archive becomes an intervention against the coup, itself a legacy of the cultural revolution. Set against the effects of Republican alphabet and language reforms that made the Ottoman script illegible to modern Turks and purged the language of Persian and Arabic vocabulary, Darvinoglu's work in the archive becomes subversive in a number of ways: it is a critical commentary on the excesses of the cultural revolution, it makes the Ottoman context legible again and it unearths a buried Ottoman Islamic cosmopolitan culture centered in Istanbul (wherein the figure of the Ottoman is again "master" vis-a-vis a European "slave"). (101)

Thus, Darvinoglu's attempt to resurrect the Ottoman history is an intervention against the secular state. This intellectual protest is born out of his dissatisfaction of Republican modernity as he witnessed three coups in his life. The preface in the novel written by Darvinoglu is metahistorical too and it problematizes the grand narratives of Turkish Republicanism.

Thus, just like Turkey, the text, *The White Castle* bears an ambiguous identity. The manuscript that functions as the source of the novel is Ottoman, but a secular Republican intellectual revised and published it. Therefore the text is torn between two worlds—the Ottoman and the Republican, the traditional and the modern, and the Eastern and the Western. The image of the secular historian within the Ottoman archive—that the preface highlights—eloquently narrates Turkish cultural ambivalence. Thus Darvinoglu is also torn between two worlds—the Ottoman Islamic, which is essentially Eastern, and the secular Republican, which mimics the West. Thus the preface powerfully dramatizes the cultural ambivalence of a Turkey that witnessed the major military coup of 1980.

The central story of *The White Castle* begins when a Venetian scholar who has knowledge in various disciplines of science and technology gets seized at sea along with his

fellow travellers in the fleet by Turkish pirates. Then the pirates bring them to Istanbul to sell them in a slave market. A pasha buys the Venetian and later gives him to a minor Turkish courtier and scholar called Hoja. Unlike his contemporaries, Hoja is keen to learn Western knowledge and to follow the Western ways of thinking because he was intelligent enough to recognize that the decline of the Empire was due to its indifference towards new forms of knowledge emerging in the Western world. Thus the Venetian becomes the slave of a Turkish aspirant of Western knowledge. There starts a complex master-slave relationship that goes much beyond the boundaries of conventional imagination as the Eastern master and the Western slave are surprisingly similar in appearance. Their dialogues and dialectics become allegorical cultural exchanges as they represent two entirely different traditions. Their rough and egotistical relation slowly becomes warmer as they start living under the same roof. They recognize that they are not diametrically opposite but perfectly complementary. Towards the end of the novel, thwarting the traditional notions about the incompatibility of the East and the West, the Easterner and the Westerner interchange their identity and the Turk leaves his native city in search of the identity that his slave left behind in Venice. The narrator who speaks from the perspective of the Venetian says: "We exchanged clothes without haste and without speaking. I gave him my ring and the medallion I'd managed to keep from him all these years . . . . I believe he liked it, he put it around his neck. Then he left the tent and was gone. I watched him slowly disappear in the silent fog" (*The White Castle* 130). Through these two characters the implied author of the novel tries to convey the fact that imaginary mental borders separate and differentiate an Easterner and a Westerner.

Thus, Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* is a nostalgic re(-)presentation of the Ottoman Islamic past that the secular state wants to efface. Therefore this dissident novel is an open challenge against the Republican grand narratives of secular modernity. Even though Orhan Pamuk is a westernized atheist, he doesn't want to deny the rights of the theists in Turkey and therefore he is against the rigid secularization processes of the state. Pamuk always wants to be a bridge between the East and the West. In an interview with Elizabeth Fransworth he says: "I want to be a bridge in the sense that a bridge doesn't belong to any continent, doesn't belong to any civilization, and a bridge has the unique opportunity to see both civilizations and be outside of it. That's a good, wonderful privilege" (Pamuk, "Bridging Two Worlds"). He considers all generalizations about the East and West mere generalizations and tries to integrate these two civilizations. Padgaonkar says:

He is sceptical of the secular westernized elite for, in his view, its relentless hostility to religion has steadily deprived it of a spiritual core, a vacuum that Islamists have sought to fill with increasing success. But he has no patience for the latter either since they seek to cast a spell on ordinary people with their anti-modern, indeed reactionary, religious rigidity. (13)

Thus, Pamuk prefers an integration of both cultures and dislikes the blind following or prejudiced rejection of any one culture. Therefore in *The White Castle* he uses the possibilities of postmodernism to subvert the metanarratives of Kemalism that attempt to obliterate and negate Turkey's Ottoman Islamic past.

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