

Parable of Turkishness: Identity Figure in Orhan Pamuk's *The New Life*

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ABSTRACT

The New Life as a pleasing novel of ideas serves as a parable for modern Turkey. This study explores how issues of Turkish identity and social reality set up allegorical events that guide the story. Orhan Pamuk evokes the contemporary problem of national identity in Turkey by managing the main characters to enter the world of the mysterious unnamed book. *The New Life* doubts about all ideological doctrines surrounded Turkey between the tragic absurdities of its own past and present, like the clash between Eastern historical values and Westernization by criticizing of globalization and multinational corporate expansion which characterizes Turkey today. Thus, this paper will attempt to prove the facets that Orhan Pamuk used in his novel to define Turkish national identity.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Turkey, Westernization, Orhan Pamuk, Turkishness.

INTRODUCTION

Like all of Orhan Pamuk's novels, identity is a central theme in *The New Life* (2007). In a dreamlike surrealistic setting, Orhan Pamuk evokes the contemporary problem of national identity in Turkey. The journey taken by male protagonist and his female lover, as gender emblems of society, symbolizes Turkey's search for a new identity. They manage to enter and escape the world of "the book." The transformation produced by the book which calls for the new life and obtaining happiness and achieving personal development. Each reader reads "the book" and rewrites this whole journey through personal viewpoint and it shows Orhan Pamuk's writing strength. "The book" within the book titled *The New Life*, vividly presents nostalgic portraits of Turkey while merging them together into a mysterious and elusive journey to reach identity.

Orhan Pamuk (b.1952) as an author, and as a philosopher, is a writer who is dealing with the difficulties and problems that a Turk has to face in a modern state, trying to discover its place as a cosmopolitan being. Orhan Pamuk is an international figure who compared to Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Paul Auster. All of his work except his first novel and the only Scenario, translated into more than fifty languages, winning major international awards, like the Nobel Prize of Literature in 2006. Local feelings in Turkey are different about Pamuk and his works. Some say that Pamuk is not even that good a writer and what he says is overwhelmingly interesting in other languages when it is dark and boring in Turkish. Others say Pamuk's writing offended Turks and made harms for Turkey. But Pamuk is a historian and his novels, are full of political, cultural, and religious struggles of Westernization and Islamization.

The New Life is a self-referential work that continually underscores itself. The anxiety, charm, and passion activated by the book transports at a frightened speed, often leaving the readers confused with turn of events, leaving the reader with unanswered questions by baffling spaces of truth and imaginary merge, which makes the work complex. *The New Life* lives and moves as the book within the book. It resembles to the Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988) and Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). The story continues in an astonishing literary way, exploring the influences of Dante on the writing of the book whose title is the same as the novel we are reading. As Pamuk announces in his *Other Colours: Writings on Life, Art, Books and Cities* (2008), *The New Life* is a bow to Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (1295): "The New Life caramels I describe in the book are real; they were still producing them when I was a child. There were other companies that produced imitations, and this is one of the details in the book that I enjoy the most, because *The New Life* is also the name of Dante's novel, and the winds from the book may be faintly felt in mine. In other words, *The New Life* refers to a caramel that was popular all over Turkey during the 1950s and also to a book by Dante." (I, p260)

The New Life starts with "I read a book one day and my whole life was changed" (2, p3), and ends with "I knew it was the end of my life. And yet I had only wanted to return home; I absolutely had no wish for death, nor for crossing over into the new life" (2, p296). It seems that the last and the first lines of the book contain a single thought and the rest of the material just protecting the scheme; means the author knows what the end is when the reader keeps every page waiting for the climax to occur. Pamuk says the first sentence had been in his mind for years: "I had long wanted to begin a novel with that sentence. The hero would resemble me too. The reader would learn nothing of "the book" the hero had read, only of what happened to the hero after he finished reading it. The reader would then use this knowledge to figure out what book the young man had read." (I, p259)

The protagonist narrator, Osman, is a 22-year-old Turkish student of engineering in Istanbul, reads a book that changes his life. One day, he sees a strange book in the hands of a pretty girl in the university canteen. On his way home that evening, he spots the same book at a cab stand. He reads that book and feels he is on the lip of a richer, fuller, and more joyful life, and decides to seek that new life out. The readers of "the book" are in danger, because mysterious persons are hunting them down and killing them; but Osman starts a strange journey, riding buses all over Turkey in search of the new life. The time of *The New Life* is vaguely the 1970s or '80s, and the travelling takes place mainly on the most vivid landscapes of the Anatolian pampas, with its wide atmospheres and thin poplars, cold nights, flaying sun, dusty towns and deserts in a scene likeworld, where images of love and death, play endlessly on self-pitying songs and horrible road accidents.

Osman continues to read "the book" and copies it "sentence by sentence" (2, p37). The contents of that mysterious book are unclear, and Pamuk consciously lets us know that it is neither a religious fundamentalist regime's, nor a left-wing's political manifesto: "A good book is something that reminds us of the whole world....Perhaps that's how every book is, or what each and every book ought to be...The book is part of something the presence and duration of which I sense through what the book says, without it actually existing in the book...Perhaps it is something that has been distilled from the stillness or the noise of the world, but it's not the stillness or the noise itself...A good book is piece of writing that implies things that don't exist, a kind of absence, or death....But it is futile to look outside the book for a realm that is located beyond the words" (2, p222).

Struggling between fascinating and anxiety, doubtful about his complete submission to "the book," Osman questions his understanding with other reading experiences where the text was almost took on. He mentions having read about someone who read the *Fundamental Principles of Philosophy* in one night and suspicions how "in total agreement with the book...he joined the Revolutionary Proletarian Advance Guard the very next day, only to be nabbed three days later robbing a bank" (2,p13). He expresses his feeling of people who, after reading books like *Betrayal of Westernization* and, *Islam and New Ethos* had "immediately abandoned the tavern for the mosque, sat themselves on those ice-cold rugs doused with rosewater, and began preparing patiently for the next life which was not due for another fifty years" (ibid.). He blames people who read books like *Know Yourself* and *Love Sets You Free* and can still claim that those books could change their lives (ibid.). Osman's anxiety is not just restricted to the isolation he thinks he might face because of "the book." He feels the need to experiment the emotionally overwhelming caused by "the book" against his rational, scientific training as a student of engineering. The romantic effect of reading, the visceral effect of the book continues throughout the Pamuk's novel, sometimes in the book's presence at other times in proxy.

"The book" in *The New Life* is undertaking the life of the new generation and reminds us of ourselves. For western readers, the unnamed book might be any off-the-shelf genre, an airport novel or romance. But, "the book" has enemies. For eastern readers, it might be a fundamentalist derivative of a religious book. *The New Life* doubts about all doctrines and beliefs of the Communists, the Islamists, and the Kemalists; and during the questing for identity, it presents nostalgic pictures of Turkey and unfolds the invisible forces that shape people's lives, like Coca-Cola and Marlboros originated in the West and bent on destroying the authentic Turkish culture.

Pamuk's novel is about spiritual desire in ideology controlled times which manages to serve arranged shares from the first to the last page. *The New Life* is a book about a book. "The book", whose subject we never learn, reminds "the book" of Orwell's *1984*, infuses the protagonist with light, possesses his thoughts, occupies his every moment and propels him, finally, on a search for the book's meaning for him and for the new life that it has promised. We witness people turning their lives overturned, pursuing after an unknown aim, traveling to distant settings, traveling in circles, just moving until they find the thing they are sure they will be familiar with when they reach it. It is also an advisory tale about reading. Pamuk is known as a stylist, but the enigmatic book within the book invokes world's three major Abrahamic religious books, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Communist Manifesto*, Orwell's *1984*, and the likes. By so many peculiar motives, double-entendres, irregularities, and convergences, *The New Life* measures out its surprises carefully by making one come about several What-ifs and various questions about Life. "The book" itself is extraordinarily unclear that makes Pamuk's prose amusing. The reader is never given any grasps of "the book" and is only capable of understanding of its power through the reactions of the characters. At the end of the book, we are implying that "the book" young Osman reads is the one we are reading.

The New Life reminds yeşilçam or Indianmovies. The protagonist departs on a journey to find his imagined lover, and the new life. The characters do not have happy lives and looking for something that they cannot surely hope to find. Osman is on a trip to discover the mystery of "the book" and when he backs home, the book ends. Osman believes at first that the book written for him: "Someone had already imagined my ideas and put them down" (2, p6). Soon he understands that "the words and their meanings were, of necessity, dissimilar" (ibid.). The first reading collapses a distinction between "the world that existed within the book from the book that existed within the world," by the time Osman reaches the last pages he registers the claim that "I too had come up with the same ideas" (ibid.). Osman's early interaction with "the book" gets translated into a search for a congregation of readers. He feels the determination to identify readers who share his literary experience and new territory where readership defines citizenry: "Where was the country in which I'd find the dream that spoke

to my heart? Where were those who had also read the book? Where?" (2,p11). The book appears to Osman sometimes as a sin and other times as a scripture that links him to the congregation of readers to whom he can bare his soul. On one of his walks in town after reading the book, Osman realizes that he is incapable of relating with anyone but the readers of the book (2, p10).

Readers will ask themselves that what is the aim of hero and what is this "new life" which wrecks his easygoing existence and why does "the new life" led to collisions, intrigues and homicide? Pamuk does not answer these questions and steps up multiple confusions and make you ask yourself that with all this confusion, obscurity, and outright fancy, is *The New Life* a novel or not? Actually *The New Life* is not a novel, but a parable. The hero is Turkey itself, caught between the tragic absurdity of his own past and the tragic absurdity of his own present. The clash between East and West which characterizes Turkey pervades this entire book. By the end, we filled with Turkey's restless, one-sided, and unflinching love for the progress which Osman thinks will not happen without fluctuate between self-destructiveness and Spiritual enlightenment.

The New Life is full of philosophical puzzles make us ponder about the hidden meaning of what we had just read, which comes across with a landscape transformed by a filmy receptivity with endless variations on the theme, sometimes with an almost fascinating effect that ends of the extreme, and the obvious tragedy at the end. *The New Life* spreads a fundamentalist political literature. Turkey positioned between Christian and Muslim, or European and Middle Eastern cultures. *The New Life* is a critique of the changes occurring in society and has the theme of the western world's present-day search for meaning and purpose in life. When a country confronts radical changes, its cultural endures the same changes. Pamuk sees present Turkish culture showing an animosity against foreign cultures that triumphed over the past. It is the battle of Westernization against Islamization. Pamuk tries to show that Turkey was state of happiness and innocence, but has lost its sense of life and collective memory.

The novel is less about finding the object than it is about the journey and what articulates is a search for intangible things that everyone seeks or expects to find from life, and why they feel bitter disappointment, when they believe that their lives are worthless and invalid. Bus-travel described in *The New Life*, changes enormously and although the one who would reflexively consider the changes positive: better self-consciousness, better illumination, better society, greater safety and the likes. At a more general level, similar observations and a similar sensation are deliberating about the change in Turkish society over the past several decades. Usually the main characters of *The New Life* were watching replays of Western movies on buses. It shows that Middle Eastern people spend most of their lives in transportation controlled by others, while passively watch the West develops and creates for itself an identity. The identity theme has shown in other ways too. Different references to products and brands that change from being local to mass-products known as the issue of East and West. The narrator travels from dark towns to the lands of billboards, Coca-Cola, and burgers. Pamuk is trying to tell that Turkey is so lost in Westernization and modernization. This society committed suicide despite all the attempts of maintaining its old things and earliest identity.

After reading the book, Osman's life changes forever. He gives up his studies and begins to search of the meanings of "the book", identity and experience. So He finds peace in the popular films he watches while travelling on buses across Turkey. He observes the influence of the West, the response of the Turks, the Turkish identity, and the way Turks take care of the past as are continuing into the future. They all lie behind the definition of American Otherness. *The New Life* is chaotic, upsetting, and unsettling. As Osman himself indices, "The pleasure of reading, which natty old gentlemen complain is lacking in our culture, must be in the musical harmony I heard reading the documents and murder reports" (2, p85).

Pamuk writes in a unique style that addresses particular concerns of contemporary Turkish culture. Pamuk tells us that Middle Eastern people live in countries manages by others. They passively watch how the West develops and creates a core identity. Pamuk exclaims that despite all the attempts of preserving ancient identity, Turkey is lost in the modernization and Westernization. *The New Life* is an allegorical novel of culture which evokes the contemporary problem of Turkey's national identity in it's "the new life." The characters show the facets of today Turkey. Osman painfully realizes that his world is depending on mistaken signs and haphazard habits while life located somewhere in another facet. It seems he is seeking Turkey's future. He wants to meet the starting point of life and when he is able to reach this stage of transition, discovers restlessly and somnolent, somnambulist and awake, in eternity and in time, is both in peace and fighting a war.

The New Life is a poetic story of searching for identity in a lost world. The opening paragraph defines "the book" that changed the narrator's life. "The book" has influence not only on his soul but on every aspect of his identity. The protagonist is on a quest of self-discovery; physically he is searching for a book of answers. "The book" is the journey to find things that everyone expects to find in life, and why people feel disappointment. Some people believe it poses a dangerous threat to the Turkish way of life that it is part of some grand Western conspiracy to impose Coca-Cola and burgers on a Sherbet and Borek loving nation who find them as their cultural logos. These people, in turn, have organized their own diffident pawn plan against the Great Conspiracy.

Pamuk introduces the theme of identity in both personal and national scales. The novel is a search for personal identity: "As in secret societies, the creation of an identity—a Sense of "us"—is of the utmost importance, so you will see the name of the company emblazoned on key chains, fancy notebooks, envelopes, pencils, and lighters they give out as gifts to the rank and file. Those gifts also bear the symbols and logos that create the identity, that sense of 'us.'" (2, p260) In Pamuk's conception, conversations and the sharing of dreams and memories is identity. Osman follows his own dreams and memories. Also *The New Life* may have been a reaction to the universal question of identity: "But today what unifies Turkey is not language, history, or culture. It is the Arçelik and Aygaz distributors, the football pools, the post offices, and the Butterfly furniture stores. These centralized concerns have networks that spread all across the country, and the unity it struggles is far stronger" (2, p259). It is the psychological exploration of the West and how it differs from the East consists of something deeper than scientific or technical facts, probably a different sense of identity and self-knowledge of the Eastern type.

Reproduction of Turkish political developments conveys the nationwide cultural conflict that Pamuk captures in *The New Life*. The artistic modes of expression of a nation are in an endless dialogue with those of other nations. Historical experiences and a shared cultural memory undoubtedly appear in artistic production within the geographical boundaries of a nation, thus amplifying the idea of national identity. *The New Life* forms and informs the narrator's relationship to the author, the co-readers, and the non-reading enemies of the book. Pamuk uses this way to parody his reader's relationship to the text before he can create a geographical and cultural divide between the East and the West, only to disintegrate it slowly by the end of the novel. *The New Life* desires its readers to examine their existing relationship with texts in general and, through a complicated parallel move, upsets the reified binary of the East and West. Pamuk mocks the culturally sanctioned ignorance of the readers as they read a novel from the other side of Europe.

From Chapter 6 on, Pamuk narrates a parodied struggle between East and West. "The book" leaves the promise of the new life behind and surfaces as the subject confused in a national and international conflict of political economy marked by cultural difference. Pamuk mentions a character's "struggle against the book, against foreign cultures that annihilate us, against the newfangled stuff that comes from the West, and his all-out battle against printed matter" (2, p83). Pamuk is decisively against those "that promised us [the Turks] the serenity and enchantment of paradise within the limitations set by the world, those which the pawns of the Great Conspiracy mass-produced and disseminated...in their concerted effort to make us forget the poetry of our lives" (2, p132). He shows them responsible for "the Plague of forgetfulness that blows here on the winds from the West, easing our collective memory" (ibid.). Concluding his theories against foreign goods, a character believes the great day when history gets rewritten "no quarter shall be given to public opinion, to newspapers, or to current ideas, none to petty morality and insignificant consumer products, like their bottled gas and Lux soap, their Coca-Cola and Marlboros with which the West has duped our pitiful compatriots"(2, p138). He ends his rant, "I am a genius" (ibid.).

Pamuk's writings exhibit his thoughtful awareness of the Turkish Islamic heritage combined with his engagement with Western thought, and symptomatic culturally unclear transitional period of these changes. The significance of Turkishness and its conflict with Western identity follows an old discussion about the ideal adoption of Western ideas of democracy, secularism, and political sovereignty in the Turkish cultural identity. Pamuk's works acknowledged Westernization as an essential factor to measure development, but do not turn their back on the Islamic heritage of Turkey. Turkification, Islamization and contemporization identifies Pamuk's questioning a universal human identity and of his privileging of Turkish Islamic and nationalist difference. Pamuk's writings accepted both Islamic and nationalistic views as integral parts of the Turkish cultural heritage, and the anxiety of the loss of the old culture that might occur with their absolutism. Pamuk tries to state Turkish people are interrogate or suggestive at a historical moment of transition. They tend to be rather directive, prescriptive, and authoritative, to the extent of being almost logically radical.

Hülya Yağcıoğlu in *A Lukacsian Reading of Orhan Pamuk's The Black Book and The New Life* describes how Osman goes to discover his identity: "He gets into a bus that functions as a womb and waits to be re-born again....In a state of inertia between sleep and wakefulness throughout his journey, he is in a desperate search for 'salvation without disintegration'. Osman becomes aware of his capabilities and of who he really is towards the end of his so-called 'heroic' quest. Throughout his travels, he becomes a reader, a lover, a wanderer, an exile, a writer, and, finally, both a murderer and victim.... Above all else, because Osman is overcome by the inevitability of reality, this novel is a story of failed maturation, of a degraded quest."(3, p92) Andrew Mango in *Orhan Pamuk at the Heart of Turkish Sadness* argues that *The New Life* "is about the meaning of life, about finding oneself. It is about uncertainly and unconsummated desires. It reflects the material, intellectual, sexual and aesthetic frustrations of young people eager for the good things of life—as shown on the screen, in the first place. Hence its success. By lighting up the shoddiness in which most of its readers move, it responds to the current mood of self-questioning, not to say, downright pessimism in Turkey. It is the novel of depression, of disappointed hopes." (4, p359)

CONCLUSION

"The book" becomes a new reliance, the promise of a new existential plenitude, not momentary and non-fragile as everyday modern life. The symbolism of the work, the search for lost paradise, and the collusion of Western modernity through the traditional values, is *The New Life's* main theme. Orhan Pamuk identifies the words of a homogenizing, unifying, and absolutist text of a nation. He shows original identities in paradoxical critique of globalization and multinational corporate expansion at the end of the twentieth century. The achievement of Pamuk's novel is not a simple portrayal of Turkey's catastrophe of identity between East and West. Pamuk succeeds in seeing a highly sophisticated and harsh but also pleasing and entertaining critique of anti-global economic nationalism.

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