

CRITICAL INSIGHTS

A Compendium of Creative Chapters on
English Literature and Language



EDITOR

SUDHIR P MATHPATI

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8. Quest for Identity in Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*

Dr. Meghraj N. Pawar and Dr. Vasant D. Satpute



Ferit Orhan Pamuk, known as Orhan Pamuk, has been writing in Turkish language for a long time. He is world-wide known as a novelist who won Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. His novels are translated into all the major languages of the world. Today, he is one of the most prominent contemporary literary figures in the world literature. He poses some of the major relevant universal issues in his novels. He has number of novels on his credit marking a significant contribution in the world literature, particularly Turkish literature. He focuses on the issues such as identity crisis, love and its failure, conflict in the present society with its perfect Turkish background. He handles the most sensitive binary contradictory issues like east-west, fundamentalism-secularism, traditionalism-modernism, and fanaticism-liberalism. Islamic population and ideology is prominent in Turkey, Pamuk faced severe criticism for his revolutionary views. His novels make the readers familiar to Turkish society, culture, people and the cities of The Republic of Turkey.

In the present research paper, Pamuk's novel *The Black Book* written in 1990 has been selected for the study of a major theme recurring in his novels i.e. identity crisis in human life. The term identity can be defined as 'having certain characteristics which are not found in others'. When the person forgets these characteristics and falls into a conflict trying to search for a new self, he suffers from identity crisis. Identity issue can be studied from numerous of angles. Orhan Pamuk in his novel, *The Black Book* presents different angles of identity-individual, social, religious and national. The major characters in the novel are in quest of their desired identities because they are not happy with their selves. Apart from this, the novelist also highlights the identity of Istanbul as a city as he does in many of his novels, the Turkish identity of people, and national identity of the Republic of Turkey.

Galip's Quest of Identity:

The central character in the novel Galip, an Istanbul lawyer, one day returns home and finds that his beautiful wife Ruya ('dream' in Turkish), also his cousin, has left home leaving no particular details. Galip starts his mission in search of his wife through the city. He visits

her ex-husband's home having suspicion that she might have returned to him, but in vain. He becomes nostalgic of his childhood memories in Ruya's company. Meanwhile, he comes to know that his cousin and Ruya's step-brother Celal Bey, who is a famous columnist and regularly contributes to *Milliyet*, is also missing. Galip is suspicious that Ruya and Celal are living together away from him. In their search, he forgets his own identity and struggles to possess Celal's. He occupies the flat of Celal and tries to hold the latter's identity as a columnist. Galip wears Celal's clothes and eventually writes columns on his name. It clearly shows that Galip is not happy with his own identity and wants to change it. At Celal's home, Galip receives calls from a person named Mehmet who threatens him to kill Celal. Mehmet's wife also calls Celal and tries to remind him their love affair before many years. Galip answers the calls saying that he has forgotten his past and remembers nothing. Galip also gives an interview to the English News Channels holding the identity of Celal. To convince his friend about his role as Celal, Galip says:

No one is ever himself" Galip whispered, as if divulging a secret. None of us can ever be ourselves. Don't you wonder if other people see you as someone other than the person you really are? Are you so very sure you are your own person? If you are, are you sure that the persons you are you are sure you are really you?..... (Pamuk, *TBB*, 413)

All these events show, Galip is unhappy with his present identity as a lawyer and tries to hold the identity of the successful columnist, Celal Bey who writes since last thirty years. He feels that Ruya is closer to him than her husband. Perhaps Galip is jealous of Celal's success as a column writer and wants to enjoy it by holding his identity. He carefully reads all the past columns written by Celal and writes his own thoughts on the latter's name. He perfectly holds Celal's identity and answers to the telephone calls from his reader, Mehmet who wants to kill Celal for misleading the society and also alleges to have an affair with his wife. Since his childhood, Galip loves Ruya but as they grow up and get married he thinks that she is not enough close to his heart. So he chooses Celal's home for seven days in his absence. He wants to forget his individual identity and hold Celal's only to win Ruya's love. In a column on the name of Celal, he writes:

I gazed into the mirror and read my face... I dreamed that I had at last become the person

I've always longed to become. (Pamuk, *TBB*, 326).

Throughout the novel, Galip assiduously tries to become Celal and possess his identity. Galip fails on both fronts; to find out Ruya and Celal and to quest his own identity. Finally, he comes to know that they are shot dead by some unidentified killer before the famous Alaadin's shop. He lives his remaining life in memory of his beloved wife Ruya who was perhaps never close to his heart.

Ruya's Quest of Identity:

Ruya never appears directly before the readers but she is presented through Galip's descriptions and memories. It is her second marriage with Galip since she failed to keep her first. She has got a strange habit of reading the detective novels during night while chain smoking and she is asleep during the whole day. It is obvious that she too is not happy with her own existing individual identity, and more importantly as Galip's wife. She lives a life of neurotic reading only detective novels perhaps in search of a new identity in the novels. One day, she disappears leaving her husband's home leaving no clues behind. She lives with her step-brother Celal, a famous columnist, in his new apartment unknown to anyone. She is found dead in Alaadin's shop a day after Celal's murder. It is clear that she too is shot and tries to save her life entering the shop but ignorant of this, the shopkeeper shuts the doors only to find her dead the next day.

Celal's Identity Crisis:

Celal Bey is Galip's cousin and a famous columnist writing for *Milliyet* since long time. The readers create their impressions about Celal through his columns and his account by Celal. He has quite a successful career as a columnist. He is an aged man suffering from amnesia, losing his memory very fast. He forgets his own past identity and tries to search a new one. Perhaps he tries to bear Galip's identity and lives with Galip's wife Ruya in an unknown apartment. As he has won number of admirers, so he has got the enemies. One of the disillusioned readers shots him dead before the Alaadin's shop.

In chapter sixteen entitled *I Must Be Myself*, Celal the columnist elaborately describes how individual identity is manipulated by the society. According to Celal, no individual in the society is self-defined. An individual in the society makes his self-identity as others want him live. The 'self' of the person is not considered as important as the collective selves of the society. Celal tries to find a way he can only become himself, but his loss of memory does not allow him to be. He finds everyone commanding him to immerse his self. In Celal's words:



I must be myself, I said over and over. I must forget these people buzzing inside my head, I must forget their voices, their smells, their demands, their love, their hate, and be myself, *I must be myself* I told myself, as I gazed down at the legs resting so happily on the stools, and I told myself again as I looked up to watch the smoke I'd blown up to the ceiling; I must be myself, because if I failed to be myself, I became the person they wanted me to be, and I can't bear the person they want me to be; if I had to be that insufferable person, I'd rather be nothing at all. (Pamuk, *TBB*, 181).

The above words of Celal signify that a person in the society is not individually made but collectively manipulated. The truth is that people never do what the inner voice tells them to do. This identity given by society is not the perfect truth but only an illusion. Celal's reader, a barber comes to the depth of the topic. When he looks into the mirror and asks himself whether it belongs to him.

Every individual in the society has an identity but absolutely not his own because it is imposed on him by others. His inner self never comes out as his identity, but he behaves as the society decides. Celal Bey's identity in the novel is as a columnist who is either loved or hated by readers, but Celal's self never comes to limelight he says:

It's true. There is no way they'll give people the permission to be themselves; they don't let them be themselves; they don't let them be themselves and they never will! (Pamuk, *TBB*, 181)

Belkis' Quest of Identity:

A minor character in the novel, Belkis is the childhood friend of Galip and Ruya who struggles with her identity. When she meets Galip after a long time, she discloses her feeling for him since her childhood. She is jealous of Ruya for being with Galip's childhood companion and also for being his wife. She wants to take possession of Ruya's identity and win Galip's heart. Even after Galip's marriage, she follows the couple wherever they go.

National Identity:

The novelist uses a story of Prince Osman Celalettin Effendi within story. He had always a question whether to be or not to be oneself.

Throughout his life, the prince tries to understand his own self-identity. If people lose their self identities, the nation becomes weak. In his words:

How to be oneself? Only by solving this mystery can we hope to save our people from destruction, enslavement and defeat. In the view of Osman Celalettin Eggendi, It was because they had failed to find away to be themselves those whole peoples had been dragged into slavery, whole races into degeneracy, and entire nations into nothingness, nothingness (Pamuk, *TBB*, 419-21).

According to the prince, people should become 'themselves'. When people lose their identities, they are defeated, enslaved and destroyed. Identity is the honor of nation and its people. If the identity of people and its nation is lost, they become slaves. The nation which do not have its own identity, they are dragged into nothingness. So the identity of nation and its people is the base of any nation. The novelist here focuses on the sovereign status of any country which is unique in itself.

For a sultan or the head of a country, it is of utmost importance to be his 'self'. The Sultan presides over millions of lives and if he doesn't be himself, it's the worst horror in the history of that country. The prince in the story burns all the literary works of great authors, because whenever he reads them, he fails to become himself. The prince burns the literature available with him written by great authors, philosophers and thinkers like Deltour, De Passet, Morelli, Brichot, Shakespeare, Rumi, Shaikh Galip, Bottfolio, Zerhani etc. He destroyed their works of art because he wanted to be himself. After going through the literature, the prince couldn't be himself but someone else. Finally, the prince realized that one should long for another identity but become only himself.

According to the prince the people or civilizations that lose their identities are doomed to die. No civilization or nation should imitate others and seek happiness in others. He does not want his subjects blindly imitate the western ways of life, because Turkey has its own identity that should not be changed into another.

The prince has his typical opinions women's company and their love. He believes that a woman invades man's thoughts and makes him to become someone else. Every woman he was involved in was disrupted his thoughts and took up control of his dreams. The prince exemplifies his love with Leyla Hanım with whom he used to quarrel on some issue,

only because she kept him from being himself, she robbed his thoughts. The prince in her company could never become himself because most of the time he was robbed with his thoughts. After her death, the prince felt liberated from her obsession.

He describes how the nations are enslaved when its people lose their identities and try to imitate other peoples. The national identity is also to be maintained by its people. The prince dictates the stories to the scribe how the kingdoms turned into nothingness only because they failed to be themselves. They ceased to exist because they tried to imitate others. People forgot their original identities and tried to run after others. The consequence was that they were forgotten and disappeared from the scene only because they were unable to be their selves.

Identity is the base of every being. In accordance with the situation, sometimes inborn identity is forgotten or declined and a new quest begins to meet the needs of life. Some people long to become else whom they think superior and their ideal role model. Orhan Pamuk presents the issue in his novel *The Black Book*. The main characters Galip, Ruya, Celal struggle with their identities and try to switch to another self, but finally fail.

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