Are memory and beauty different? Orhan Pamuk interweaves objects and remembrance in his novels

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Nowhere does Orhan Pamuk’s genius as chronicler of Istanbul come through more tenderly than in the city’s Museum of Innocence

Getting off at Şişhane metro station in Istanbul and asking for the Museum of Innocence draws blank looks, even when you call it by its Turkish name Masumiyet Müzesi, and even though this metro station is supposed to be the closest to it. And it is 10 minutes and many people later that I find someone who knows it. I am to take a right turn to a downward slope and go down an endless looking flight of steps.

I soon pass a modest church with a crowd of expectant young women and men outside its closed doors. The path gets narrower, takes a curve on a flat landing, and opens further below. Not narrow any more. I soon cross the Italian Embassy on my right as I climb further down and reach an intersection in an arty neighbourhood. The museum is a few steps to the left, and I have to go around the corner for the entry door.
I am in Istanbul for a day and Masumiyet Müzesi is on top of my list. It’s dedicated to the transgressive and tragic intimacy of Kemal (who was engaged to Sibel) with his distant relative Fusün; and Orhan Pamuk’s largest tome to date, *Museum of Innocence*, is about the pleasure of stringing objects and words together in a desperate bid to hold on to time even as it flees by. It was Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in his study of the *Bildungsroman*, noted how this modern form by Goethe presents the irony of the world like never before.

**Prickly innocence**

To read *Museum of Innocence* was to relive the agonising pleasure of this irony, to watch life pass away, but slowly and with the unwarranted optimism of winning it back. No novel can be summarised, and the *Museum* even less so, especially if the chief pleasure the novel offers you is that of words following words, and you discover the impossibility of blocking the flow for the beauty of its prickly innocence, and you realise with pain that this beauty can exist only in and as a memory.

I read my first Pamuk in 2006. He was then in the news for speaking of the Armenian genocide. The semester before, one of my professors, who had a penchant for predicting Nobel Prize winners, spoke of Pamuk as a certain winner on the strength of his writings (not once mentioning the Pamuk the newspapers presented). Prof. A.V. Ashok’s prediction came true. And I realised that I knew two Pamuks, both of whom could co-exist, but one didn’t speak of the other.

*The White Castle* was my introduction not just to Pamuk’s works, but also to his persistent concerns from one book to another. In the starting paragraph, to foretell the complex questions that ensue in the short book, the author mentions the ships carrying counterfeit currencies. For me, this was where the two Pamuks intersected. What does it mean to be counterfeit? What assumptions of truth and authority are operative in our assumptions of the pirate and the pirated? The counterfeit is the one that carries a false promise. But the counterfeit is also someone who strives to fulfil the promise even though she isn’t bound to in the first place.

It is the aspirational, one who tries to break the status quo of the relations surrounding the promise by breaking into it; fulfils the promise even when deemed unworthy. In a world divided into the Venetian and the Ottoman, the East and the West, to be a counterfeit is to unsettle the boundaries of what is in and what is not. To carry out a promise one isn’t burdened with in the first place.

As with many of Pamuk’s novels, *The White Castle* is a retelling of incidents by one of the characters. And the question of memory accentuated through the wounds of the ongoing clasps to the project, even as it disturbs the fault lines on which the memories are built.

The intrigue that *The White Castle* provoked has now brought me to the Müzesi. I find an expansive instalment of a sample of the 4,213 cigarette stubs that Kemal Basmaci collected. Stubs of cigarettes his love Füsun had smoked, stubs that have touched her lips and remind him of the happiest moment of his life when he met her on a trip to buy a handbag for his fiancée.

As I pass the corner with the stubs and make my way up the three storeys of this modest house where Kemal lived his last years, I relive the novel through its objects, situations, motifs, similes and metaphors, a box to each chapter of the novel.

The audio guide leads one to the frames in two narratives. One, that of Kemal, the novel’s protagonist, who offers the first-person narrative of the person who lives through the objects he has collected; and the other, that of Pamuk the novelist, who has set up this museum, in consultation with Kemal, vacillating between styles and objects, contemplating one’s own dilemmas, and baring before us, in a Parrhasius curtain of sorts, his defeats, for deliberation.

Pamuk here is not only a novelist, he becomes a chronicler of Istanbul as it segues through the second half of the 20th century.

**The great unsaid**

The history of Turkey in the 20th century has not been without seismic shifts. After the trauma of defeat in World War I and victorious resistance against the invading forces, history was shaken up literally almost overnight when in 1928 Mustafa Kemal Pasha decreed that the existing Perso-Arabic script for Turkish would be completely replaced by the Latin script, thus rendering the history of a thousand years illegible. Six years later, in 1934, Kemal Pasha also required the Turks to have Turkish surnames, which did not represent any tribes, ethnicities, religions or foreign cultures.
This state imposition of ‘modernity’ and the banishment of the Ottoman and Islamic visibility in the public sphere was a stupendous shake-up that most immediately meant the disenfranchisement of a way of being in language.

The Frankfurt school philosophers, Adorno and Horkheimer, have commented that a totalitarian age brings a break between the signifier and the signified such that neither matter any more to prod political action. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar, whom Pamuk has described as the greatest of Turkish novelists, explores the gap between words and their meanings by laying bare the duplicity of the spoken and the written in his *The Time Regulation Institute*. Madness seeps in through the said as the great unsaid between the words, leaving the reader uncertain.

This gap between the said and its meaning permeates the works of Pamuk too, though not in the frenzy of history as in Tanpinar, but as an inescapable coiling of biography.

In *A Strangeness in My Mind*, Pamuk lays open the power of words, ironically, each effacing itself with every repetition. If Mevlut writes to Rayiha and means it for Semiha, who is the actual addressee of the letter? And what if the inarticulate Mevlut had instead entrusted his articulate and educated friend Ferhat to write in his stead — who then is the author?

As intentions, addresses, the said and the written fail to correspond to any deeply held certainty, every statement is a site of confusion and protean regeneration. Where does the rhetorical conventions end and the person begin? When can one finally escape the Word?

The question of authenticity, who is telling the tale and whose tale it is, can be traced as a perpetual concern in Pamuk’s narrative.

While at times the tale is a retelling by a second person, as in *Snow*, or by multiple enunciators, as in *My Name is Red* or *The Silent House*, the question of authorship spirals in unforeseen ways, as in *The White Castle* with its jumbling of identities, or with *The Red Haired Woman*, which is as much a deliberation on the nature of authenticity in storytelling as it is on the father-son relationship across cultures. “For the sake of a delightful and convincing story, there isn’t a lie Orhan wouldn’t deign to tell” (*My Name is Red*).

The museum tries to recover a history whose passing was much less characterised by the tumultuous than by the overlaying of the self-effacing demotic. History here doesn’t get toppled from pedestals and consigned to landfills — it gets lived over by the sheer exigency of having to live on.

It is in the ever-transforming geography of Istanbul, which will swallow as well as be swallowed by the once-outcast Ongoren, KultepeKültepe and Duttepe, where history will fight out its dialectical forward march, through neighbourhood gang wars, the lockout of soft drink firms, the raising of mosques and auditoriums, and the long shadows of disguises and disappearances.

Curious twists

The second half of the 20th century is when Turkey’s body-politic was torn by street battles of nationalists, secularists, communists, and various ethnicities, with the military coups, disappearances and torture cells that form a backdrop to many Pamuk novels. Yet, it is the intrigues of the everyday and the mundane — electricity, bus stops, bridges — and the politics of symbols — the veil, the graffiti, the mannequins — that mark the body of this nation.

“The gulf between the private and public views of our countrymen is evidence of the power of the state” writes Celâl Salik, the fictional columnist from *The Black Book*.

It is a quote which becomes the epilogue of *A Strangeness in My Mind*. And yet, the distance between the private and the public view in *A Strangeness* is not because of an oppressive regime.

Rather, it is the gnawing mundanity of the quotidian, with its certainties and curious twists, that makes reiteration tragically farcical. For Victor Klemperer, Nazi Germany was a crucible of linguistic perversion. Pamuk, on the other hand, maps the unattainable irony of the departed word in the tensions between the lived reality and the aspirations of everyday Istanbul.

Pamuk’s museum attempts to create the lived upon traces of the past, and since words have proven inadequate, they will have to be captured in their sheer materiality. Pamuk presents to us an everyday as it is suffused not just by objects, but also by the turn of phrases; metaphors find their objectivity here; poetry marvels in its materiality.

Even ideas, if they are to be preserved in this world of shadow-making, have to be transformed to objects to relive the longing of a 30-year-old for an 18-year-old salesgirl. At the same time, the museum is also a contemplation on what a museum should be — what to display, where, what can go together...

The question is not only how to arrange, not just a matter of spatial relationality. The museum asks a fundamentally different question, one that requires a change in register — how can the subjective achieve objectivity? How to not just represent the object, but frame them for what they stand for in Kemal’s mind? And if and where does Pamuk, the novelist, show his hands?

The museum thus operates within three frames of reference simultaneously — the historical, the Istanbul of the 1950 to 2000; Kemal’s subjectivity and the language that gives it shape and truth; and finally, the novelist as the medium of unravelling the story and as the real designer of the museum, a man of the here and now, whose subjectivity too has to be revealed and asserted, among these registers of vérité in a city that used to be.

Toys, needlework, kitchen utensils, newspapers, video ads, photographs of picnics — the publicness of the private life of the Istanbullu bourgeoisie is thrown open in frames that are admonishing, but also nostalgic.

“You like my photographs because they remind you of the Istanbul when you were a child,” Ara Güler, the photojournalist known as ‘the eye of Istanbul’, tells Pamuk. “No,” says the novelist, “I like them because they are beautiful. But are beauty and memories really two different things?”

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