

The Fundamental Problems of Writing History in Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City*

Suchetona Pal

Abstract

Orhan Pamuk's stimulating reading and writing of the magnificent past of his city Istanbul weaves a magical charm in his partly memoir and autobiographical *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. Although by conjuring the past of the city he functions as a historian, Pamuk also reminds us that his text is as much about his own destiny as much about the city. It is in the process of discovering the similarities between these two purposes as well as segregating one from the other, calling one personal, nostalgic and the other as impersonal and objective that we begin to question how far a historian is allowed to be imaginative and the imaginative writer to be a historian. It is because with the discipline of history that the claims of authenticity and legitimacy are bound together. At the heart of the text, Pamuk introduces us to the complex relation he shares with the city like any other citizen of Istanbul when it comes to discovering the rich texture of the city through the lens of history. In this course, we are also confronted with the very problem about the construction of the Turkish identity through the narrative of History. In this paper I have attempted to explore Pamuk's views about difficult role of a historian for this city, especially the one who strictly follows the 19th century parameters of the Western model of writing history. As Pamuk's ostentatious purpose comes out to be the narrator of the city's past, I have attempted to bring out the various confusions and contradictions to the role of a western modern Historian and his objective narrative of history which Pamuk raises and calls into question reminding us again and again about the uniqueness of his city.

Key words: writing of history, objectivity and universality, identity.

Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the city*,¹ an amalgamation of autobiography and memoir, like his other renowned novels attempts to explore the distinctiveness of Turkish identity, in relation to its glorious historical past. Narrating his own life from childhood to his early youth, precisely the epiphanic moment of his decision to become a writer, Pamuk's text on the one hand follows the structural

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qualities of an autobiography, and on the other like a memoir attempts to shape the history of this varied city. While his text provides numerous authentic excerpts about the city, he also merges his personal understanding which he considers equally important in writing the history of the city. From the very beginning question arises whether Pamuk's text can be considered the history of the city itself. This leads us to explore the definition of history. Pamuk playing the role of a reluctant historian also sheds light on the conventional role and function of a historian.

The discipline of History does not comprise merely the description of past events in an episodic manner, but a systematic analysis of the past that deeply facilitates our understanding of the present. This definition is primarily an invention of the Europeans who attempt to segregate fantastical elements from history as well as intend to resolve the anxiety over the secular-mythical binary associated with the origin of history. The 19th century Positivists² made an attempt to present history as an empirical science, governed by the universal laws. They place enormous emphasis on the importance of facts, indicating the historian's role to that of a disinterested accumulator and critical analyzer of past evidences. While Herodotus's *The Histories* has often been criticised for digressions and inclusion of fantastical tales, from 1820's with Leopold von Ranke's *Introduction to History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations* the discipline of history embraced the law of objectivity associated with the principles of science. Ranke recommends that a historian "should not moralise at the past from contemporary political or personal standpoints; historians should extinguish their own presence because it was not in the past." As he comments emphasizing on the importance of "impartiality" in a historian, "There is in man a happy trust in the judgement of history and of posterity which is appealed to a thousand times. But rarely is

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this judgement passed objectively. There is not alive within us an interest similar to that of the past.”³

Opposition to Ranke’s conception of history has been perceived in the arguments of Nietzsche who observes the impossibility of reproducing the past on the historian’s part and recommends to “interpret the past out of the fullest exertion of the vigour of the present”⁴ Thus an active role of a historian who interprets the past events and presents its causality to explain its importance in the present can be perceived in the arguments of authors ranging from Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt to Nietzsche, Croce and Foucault. Similarly R.G. Collingwood observes, “History is the re-enactment in the historian’s mind of the thought whose history he is studying.”⁵ For Collingwood, it is the historian who constructs and organizes historical facts by selecting significant facts from the reservoir of past occurrences. The underlying process of evaluation and interpretation implies that the historian’s own subjective choice is fundamental while prioritizing the historical facts. E.H. Carr in his *What is History?* reveals that history can never exist in pure form, since “they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder.”

Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul presents the problematic relation between the historian and his subject, how the former’s personality influences the latter. The writing of the history of Istanbul further confronts complication since the historian comes across multiple narratives of past, broadly dividing – that of the westerners and the natives. Pamuk’s analysis of the historical accounts produced by the notable western travellers indicates how the western tradition of writing has influenced the native writers. Yet curiously we observe that Pamuk hardly refers to any of the historical writing which is secular, rationalist and Universalist in spirit. In this context, Pamuk seems to question the role of a historian, whose task entails not only

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to record the historical facts that he finds important but also to discuss what the predecessors have discovered about the past.

This paper intends to analyse how Pamuk defies the 19th century European model of writing history in totality, and attempts to identify alternative modes as more fitting medium for writing a history of Istanbul. Pamuk challenges the objective mode of writing history with his subjective approach of narrating the evolution of city without any reference to chronological time-frame. Contrary to the expected role of a traditional historian Pamuk identifies himself with the city and mentions, "Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am."⁷ Thus Pamuk shows his tendency of writing about his own life by interweaving his discovery of the city itself. He voices his own experiences around and within the city where he lived almost his entire life, and has gained consciousness from childhood to early adulthood.

A memoirist surely can take liberty of his own imagination, but Pamuk explains that even to trace the history of the city he is required to recount the past subjectively. The significant role of imagination for a historian is underlined here since a historian like a writer of fiction also presents his account in a narrative form. He impulsively declares the impossibility to be strictly objective in the description of a city like Istanbul, reminding us Walter Benjamin's saying that being an inhabitant of the city, he can represent the past only through memory.⁸

In an interview with Joy.E.Stocke, published in *Wild River Review*, Pamuk said that originally he wanted to publish only his collection of published documents, articles and photographs about the city like an archival work.⁹ However Pamuk changed his mind, and wrote to give it an independent status remembering "the beauty of the book." In his Nobel lecture,¹⁰ on December 7, 2006 Pamuk mentioned that the art of creative writing as the discovery of the

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“second being” within one’s own self. He further notes that a successful writer’s innovativeness lies in his art of maintaining the objectivity to present his own story as the relevant one to everyone and narrate others’ tales with as much intensity as if his own. This method is undertaken by a historian also, who must strike a balance between his own interpretations from the factual data he collects. A historian cannot be entirely objective in tone and omniscient in his knowledge.

In Pamuk’s first person narrative, he posits himself at the centre like a protagonist of a fiction, yet at times he voices the necessity of being objective and detached chronicler when he mentions, “...as if my life were something that happened to someone else, ...”¹¹ Pamuk’s oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity, personal and universal is the quintessential dilemma that constitutes Turkish identity. The text attempts to present three accounts of the past – Pamuk’s own experience of the past since his birth in the 1950s, the foreigners’ accounts of the city since the city’s change of its name from Constantinople to Istanbul, and the story of his own life till his early youth. Pamuk seems to question which of these three strands of accounts has the potential to be designated as history?

Owing to the diversity of its inhabitants, the complexity of myriad race and culture, the history of the city, Pamuk observes is a discontinuous one. Foucault in his *The Archaeology of knowledge* opposes strongly against the uninterrupted monolithic historical accounts and favours new history which focuses on various disjunctions of the past.¹² The author’s recounting of Istanbul therefore includes scraps from the journalistic articles, humorous columns from newspapers, novels, memoirs and travelogues of the European authors and the significant Turkish writers. Pamuk ingeniously blends the literary and artistic world with the memorable stages of his own life – childhood, relationship with

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parents and brother, school life, trip around the city, his hobby of painting, developing a painter-like perception of the city. This method of presenting the history of the city by aligning it with Pamuk's own growth from childhood also indicates why as a historian he chooses his materials for writing the history of the city.

Pamuk expresses his reluctance and unreliability to be designated as a conventional omniscient historian on more than one occasion. The opening line encapsulates the idealistic incapacity inherent in the role of a traditional historian, "From a very young age, I suspected there was more to my world than I could see..."¹³ Here he seems to suggest the limited scope in the typical historian's role who records only the substantial evidences of the past. Probing deeply into the matter of past interest in order to discover its causal link with the present requires imagination of a creative writer. Thus even a theorist like Leopold Von Ranke who advocates maintaining detachment and avoidance of fictional elements while writing history in practicality resorts to imagination to portray a picture of past in totality. Pamuk also warns that imagination has played a crucial role in his account, "So anyone reading these pages should bear in mind that I am prone to exaggeration."¹⁴ Further when Pamuk mentions that his memory of the past does not match with that of his family members he raises question about the reliability, even authenticity of history itself. This reminds us how writing history in the Post Second World War is posed with the fundamental problem of writing one universally accepted history, since historians of each country develop history from their nationalist position, thus each giving suitable explanation of the causalities of war. When in the opening chapter "another Orhan" Pamuk describes the existence of his imaginative look-alike living in another part of the city, the "other Orhan,"¹⁵ he hints at the perspective of 'other', whose presence echoes throughout the text. This bifurcation of the self is not uncommon for a writer like Pamuk

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who studied the historical past of his own city, less from an indigenous Turkish historian but from the accounts of the westerners. As Pamuk conceived the idea of the fanciful another Orhan through “a web of rumours, misunderstandings, illusions and fears,”¹⁶ he believes, the earliest accounts of the events and occurrences that came to be considered as part of history have its base in some similar unreliable origin. The European history before 1820s frequently offered mythical explanation to the historical facts. The presence of Orhan’s twin figure not only parallels the divided self of a Turk but also the dual contradiction inherent in the writing of history – its loyalty towards a truthful investigation of the past and its literariness which requires the author to use imagination in order to paint an authentic image of the past. Since Pamuk has to rely on others’ report to complete the picture of his own childhood, in recounting the history of his own city, he requires the travel accounts, reports, researches made by his predecessors.

Unlike the official history of a nation with a political agenda, Pamuk’s list of historically significant occurrences neither records the victory and defeat of the host of battles nor the actual time-period of particular historical episodes. He measures the remarkable point of historical past with his own life. Pamuk adds to the fact of Flaubert’s visit in Istanbul in 1850, with his birth year which will occur after 100 years. He also relates to the time of Nerval, Gautier and Flaubert’s visit to Istanbul with his own experiences of those places.

While in the 19th century German historians wrote history focusing on political, military and diplomatic events, Pamuk’s approach comes close to the Italian theorist Benedetto Croce’s argument that a historian pursues one particular aspect of the past out of his own personal interest. He observes that when the historian thus critically assesses one singular aspect of the past he also advances

towards solving its set of problems.

The history of the city of Istanbul Pamuk imagines, commenced influencing him the moment he was born and attained further distinctive colour as the author's consciousness and imagination began to expand around the city. His gradual understanding of the city records the author's emotional and spiritual growth and intellectual maturity. Foucault approves of a historian writing specific history, a decentred history, where the historian's standpoint becomes clear. Similarly the author here reminds the reader that his age is fifty and therefore his recollection of the past is interlaced with the consciousness of an educated and culturally privileged elite's perception and experience. As the writer with an air of sincere honesty reflects on his childhood, family and school life, giving precision to the time when and how he was caught up with certain ideas and concepts, he suggests by analogy how it is absolutely necessary to know the historian himself before being benefitted by his accounts of history. Pamuk here follows Collingwood's suggestion that to know better from the historical facts which a historian jots down, one must know the historian himself, his world-view and socio-religious belief.¹⁷ Pamuk while introducing us to the accounts of the various Westerners or native writers, also simultaneously provides details from the lives of these memoirists, essayists or journalists.

Several of the chapters in the text contain Pamuk's interpretation, ruminations and the resulting effects of the written accounts, by the distinguished western writers such as Flaubert, André Gide, Gautier, Nerval and how that influenced the native writers to formulate Turkish identity. Pamuk notes the bitter truth that in Istanbul the greatest writers of Turkey always acknowledged their western predecessors while producing an account of the city. In the French writer, poet, essayist Nerval's account, Pamuk observes the shallow

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assumptions about the city and its culture. Written from a mere tourist's point of view, Nerval's frequent indulgences in weaving fanciful stories about the city produced the stereotypical image of Istanbul with picturesque landscape. We are informed that he was a victim of recurrent bouts of melancholy, and Pamuk believes he has thus purposefully refrained from describing the poverty-ridden neighbourhoods of Istanbul. However, Pamuk also reminds us the fact that the Istanbul as the gloomy melancholic city with which he identifies himself is a post- World War, post- imperial phenomenon, far remote from the year 1843 when Nerval came. Unlike Nerval, Gautier's *Constantinople* allowed Yahya Kemal and Tanpinar the greatest of Turkish writers to form an "image of the city".¹⁸ When he depicted the ruins of the Byzantine past, the poorer neighbourhoods of the city, the Turkish writers found something to associate with the real Istanbul.

Pamuk reveals the undeniable impact of the literary accounts by the western predecessors that helped to form an essential constituent of his identity as a Turk. His identity partly formed through the history of the city is the outcome of the westerners' "construction of the exotic."¹⁹ The anxiety over forming an identity is quintessentially Turkish and here Pamuk voices the collective struggle of the inhabitants of the city of Istanbul. Thus he also indicates the absence and even impossibility of writing a nationalist history without heavily relying upon a westerner's view. Pamuk mentions that this tendency haunts him even in his art of writing. He observes that during the absence of an outsider's account, he as a writer invents a European Other within his literary self in order to write anything about the city. As the European travellers exoticize Istanbul not being an inhabitant of the city, similarly Yehya Kemal and Tanpinar who found the Turkish identity in the images of the ruinous city, did not belong to the impoverished parts of the city. Pamuk's narrative also

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recounts how the city-dwellers severed from their glorious past, come to perceive themselves. Critical comments of the Europeans have also affected them, as from 1920s Istanbul prioritized the necessity to modernise themselves in order to be at par with the progress made in the western countries. In this attempt of modernising the country, Istanbul is robbed off its multicultural history and multilingual status. As soon as André Gide's derogatory comment on the attires of the inhabitants of Istanbul has been made, traditional clothes have been banned. Similarly the Arab scripts are replaced by Latin. The old architectural style, mosques and buildings are demolished to erase the past. Pamuk mentions his and the city's indebtedness to the western writers and travellers for inscribing the history of the city and its evolution through their writings. In Istanbul however not any native historians, but the Turkish novelists have enlightened the citizens about its history and their collective identity. The pattern of defeat and failure has repeatedly appeared in the novels of Tanpinar, the greatest Turkish novelist, whose heroes exude the expression of futility and loss in the most poetically eloquent manner. In the context of the arrival of the immigrants and the perpetual tension between the Muslim majority and the Greek and Armenian minority, their writings produced the national identity more than the inconsistent, discontinuous narrative of history.

The autobiography or the memoir is a recognized historical source and Pamuk's narrative contests the east and west dilemma, the contradiction of past and present which to the author is also a conflict between the self and the other. Pamuk's deterministic notion that all the fellow citizens of Istanbul probably think in the same way suggests his narrative's ability to transcend the barrier of one individual's account. He mentions, "...I realise that 'my' city is not really mine."²⁰ Through the introduction of the concept of *Huzun* roughly translated as melancholy in English, Pamuk provides the

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common, shared reality of the fellow inhabitants of the city. Pamuk suggests that his account can no longer be called pure or unalloyed since the subject of his research – the city – is a site of diversity, hybridity and multiplicity.

Unlike the European cities that protect their historical past fiercely, the inhabitants of Istanbul do not treat their past as enormously significant to be preserved. While for a city-dweller the enriched historical past becomes a significant part of his identity, for an inhabitant of Istanbul the identity is one of defeat, resignation and loss for the decline and severance from the splendourous glory of the Ottoman Empire. It is not only the old Greek neighbourhoods and the poor quarters of the Armenians but the ruined mansions of Pashas that reminded them of their loss. For Pamuk the old accounts of the fairy-tale setting of Istanbul have no relevance to the contemporary reality. The history of Istanbul emerges rather after the dissolution of Ottoman Empire, “...Here among the old stones and the old wooden houses, history made peace with its ruins, ruins nourished life, and gave new life to history.”²¹ Since the city has undergone an array of changes, a series of defeat and victory in battlefield, possessed and dispossessed innumerable times by a range of sovereigns, Pamuk seems to suggest that the writing of history in the traditional sense can provide no meaningful explanation to the present condition of the city.

The alternative format of writing history is suggested in Pamuk’s discussion of Resat Ekrem Kocu’s encyclopaedia. His *From Osman Gazi to Ataturk: A Panorama of Six Hundred Years of Ottoman History* gives detailed expression to the strange facts of the city, its tradition, old habits and customs of past, that exist often in form of rumours and tales. Pamuk observes unlike his text book history Kocu’s book possesses — “...series of curiosities, strange events and stranger people — a shocking, hair raising, terrifying, sometimes even revolting picture gallery.”²² Kocu’s writing also explores the

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various methods of torture and punishment which fascinate greatly the westerner's mind and appeal to the author's youthful imagination. In his second attempt of compiling the encyclopaedia which he left unfinished, Kocu's writing frequently indulges in digression from the factual data. Influenced by Ahmet Rafik's memoirs, Kocu depicts facts about the city in the language of fiction. When Pamuk reveals how Kocu's depiction of his personal fancies and obsessions enable him to fill the gap between past and present, he reveals not only the dilemma but the impossibility on the historian's part to segregate events of past without an insider's memories, his subjective analysis and assumptions.

Pamuk however accomplishes the task of a historian whose very venture of writing about the city as an active entity is an attempt of restoring its enriched past from the threat of destruction. The contemporary project of modernising the city has been involved in the process of erasing its varied past as Pamuk mentions:

They take stones from the city walls and add them to the modern materials to make buildings, or they go about restoring old buildings with concrete.²³

While the author is well aware of how traditionally Istanbul has been viewed by the western travellers, for Pamuk the city appears to mourn for the loss of splendour and abundance. Without any hope for recuperation, Istanbul wears the black and white garb. The burnt and charred mansions left by pasha and other officials, the ruinous pieces of Ottoman architecture, the shadowy night and the season of snowfall, all evoke the colourless panorama of Istanbul. As an explanatory note Pamuk adds, "This is how you grieve for a city that has been in decline for hundred and fifty years."²⁴

Endnotes :

- ¹ Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul : Memories and the City*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).
- ² Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006), pp. 3 -11, 69-75, 91-93.
- ³ Leopold Von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merril Company, 1973), p. 41.
- ⁴ Curthoys and Docker, *Is History Fiction ?* P. 75.
- ⁵ E.H C arr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 22.
- ⁶ Carr, *What is History?* P. 22.
- ⁷ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.6.
- ⁸ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.216.
- ⁹ Joy. E. Stocke, The Melancholy Life of Orhan Pamuk. *Wild River Review*.n.p, 2006. <https://www.wildriverreview.com/interviews/orhan-pamuk-the-melancholy-life/> Accessed 10 Dec.2017.
- ¹⁰ Pamuk, *My Father's Suitcase*. The New Yorker, December 25, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/12/25/my-fathers-suitcase>. Accessed 7 July, 2019.
- ¹¹ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p. 8.
- ¹² Curthoys and Docker. *Is History Fiction?* Pp. 180- 187.
- ¹³ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*,p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p. 265.
- ¹⁵ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.4.
- ¹⁶ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.3.
- ¹⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 379.
- ¹⁸ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.202.
- ¹⁹ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.261.
- ²⁰ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.261.
- ²¹ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.318.
- ²² Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.138.
- ²³ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.92.
- ²⁴ Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, p.39.