

The East-West Encounter in Orhan Pamuk's *The New Life*

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Abstract

The research paper deals with the encounter between the East and the West reflected in Orhan Pamuk's *The New Life*. The protagonist Osman leaves his university studies in civil engineering and undertakes a harrowing three-month journey by bus across Turkey with Janan, a fellow student, to find Mehmet. Through the simple act of reading a book, he is uprooted from his old life and identity. He, like Pamuk, had desired to set himself apart from others, someone special who had a goal that was entirely different. Finally he regrets leaving his old life and recalls the guilt he felt, as he read a book that "estranged" him from his mother's world.

Key Words: the East, the West, culture, identity, modernity, existence

Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Laureate of 2006 in Literature from Turkey, is a major voice in the globalised world of modern letters in understanding the "new" Turkey. He is a "cultural" Muslim rather than religious one. Since his orientation is Western and secular, he has radical differences to that tradition of the "Old" Ataturk's Turkey and equally uncomfortable relations with the "New" Erodgan's Turkey. He is both Turkish national and postmodern in a global sense, as noted in his Nobel speech: "My world is a mixture of the local—the national—and the West."

The protagonist in Orhan Pamuk's novel *The New Life* (1998) Osman leaves his university studies in civil engineering and undertakes a harrowing three-month journey by bus across Turkey with Janan, a fellow student, to find Mehmet, her boyfriend. He, like Pamuk, had desired to set himself apart from others, someone special who had a goal that was entirely different" (8). Osman clings to the fantasy that Janan is his

intended, and he can persuade her to fall in love with him. Osman describes his unforgivable crime in the opening lines of the book: "I READ A BOOK ONE DAY AND MY WHOLE LIFE WAS CHANGED" (3). He explains the powerful impact of this book that the light surging from the pages illuminated my face; its incandescence dazzled my intellect but also endowed it with brilliant lucidity. "This was the kind of light within which I can recast myself. I could lose my in this light; I already sensed in the light the shadows of an existence I had yet to know and to embrace" (3). He regrets leaving his old life and recalls the guilt he felt, as he read a book that "estranged" him from his mother's world. Osman thus cautions the readers about the results of violating the deep-rooted cultural conventions and how he feels excluded from collective identity.

During another bus trip searching for Mehmet, Osman and Janan sit together in a different seat from their usual one. As they

view a television screen hanging from the center of front windshield, Osman recalls, “we felt we were about to discover the secret of the concealed and incalculable geometry called life; and just as we were eagerly figuring out the deep meaning behind the tree shadows, the dim image of the man with the gun, the video-red apples, and the mechanical sounds on the screen, we would realize that, goodness, we had already seen this movie!” Readers later discover that Mehmet left the university and his family to embrace a monk-like existence copying that remaindered book, which delivers no answers, but like the bus videos offers comfort through familiarity.

The novel *The New Life* belongs to the genre of “the road novel” where the protagonist searches for the Turkish dream. The male characters in the road novel are usually the youths who question their goals, morals and everyday life of their parents, and focus on exploring their sexuality. Osman believes that orgasm is a way of achieving beatitude, but Osman has to be satisfied with a kiss from his beloved Mehmet, whose name in Turkish means “soul mate.” The characters that travel in a road novel either a literal or a metaphorical road end up disappointed, because they find no answer to the big questions in their life. Osman at the moment of final bus crash regrets his choice of the front seat and knows that he is not going to meet that planned goals and returns to his wife and daughter in Istanbul.

The search for meaning becomes more important for Osman than any other thing. He and his fellow students also seek to escape from old routines and familiar possessions binding them to an “old world.”

They travel without specific plans or a specific destination. Their search, which requires travelling across Turkey by bus, that provides distraction, an opportunity to focus upon the moment. Traveling by bus is an adventure in Turkey as your future is no longer in your hands, which brings a sense of freedom. There are no strict rules and regulations for the drivers’ training and sleep time; hence the passengers have their lives in order. Pamuk describes this: “whenever the driver slams on the brake or the bus whips road, trying to figure out if the zero hour is upon us. No, not yet” (54-55). Each trip promises the ultimate answer to life, but becomes just another search, just another bus trip. Ultimately students have learnt that they have watched thousands of kissing scenes and hundreds of action films feature car chases, crashes, and lots of blood and gore that dominate the world of male movie attendance in the Middle East. The town possesses similar crowded bus terminals where people carry “plastic bags, cardboard suitcases, and gunnysacks.”

Pamuk describes students being fascinated by the romantic idea of death explained in Uncle Rifki’s book. From their youthful perspective, death is not finality, but is a crossing over into a plane of existence better than their current life with platters of meat and potatoes and predictable green salad prepared by their mothers who as desexualized beings fall asleep every night in front of the TV sets. The students hope to travel from the present created world into a world of the Creator. Like many seekers, they seek a guide, the angel or the shaykh, who will guide them on their journey in the presence of God. For Osman the angel

appears in female form, whereas in Islam angels are genderless. The angel appears in Osman's life at the last moments is a bright light that doesn't show any compassion or intervene in events. Angel doesn't absolve Osman for shooting Mehmet, his competitor for the love of Janan. It observes from a distance and does not resemble any of the European and Ottoman artists' depiction of angels as beautiful beings. As Osman says, "I have never encountered the angel the book talks about. It might be that you behold the angel at the moment of death, in the window of some bus."

Characters in the novel believe that union with God occurs not in life but rather through the experience of physical death. They don't seek the second Sufi option of annihilation of the self, of the ego. The three students from their expectations about death and life through their individual interactions with a text that promises a new life, a better plane of existence, rather than from participation in the collective experience of the Mosque. Osman muses: "if life was indeed like what I read in the book, if such a world was possible, then it was impossible to understand why people needed to go to prayer" (14). None of the characters observe prayer times, study the Qur'an, or attend services on Friday.

Osman is unable to find the promises of a new life and bring back the magic that will propel him beyond the veils of the East and the West. A peddler tells him that Turkey has suffered a great defeat because of the West, "the West has swallowed us up, trampled upon us in passing. They have invaded us down to our soup, our candy, our underpants; they have finished us off. But

someday, someday perhaps a thousand years from now, we will avenge ourselves; we will bring end to this conspiracy by taking them out of our soup, our chewing gum, our souls"(290-291).The peddler's belief in foreign forces that will change or threaten his life is a common to all.

Doctor Fine, a law graduate and a father of Mehmet, believes that the world is changing because of the uncontrolled external forces. He feels that these changes threaten to family relationship and business practices. The West through techniques of advertising and distribution drags consumers away from traditional cool yogurt drinks and sour cherry juices into a situation where their minds are muddled by drinking Coca Cola. These new products from the West lack a referent, a connection to the past and threaten the Turkish identity. New ideas entice youth to rebel against their parents. His only son Mehmet is a victim of such a system that lures away youths from good-old values established by Turkish culture. Hence he opposes the West and like his cuckoo clocks proclaiming pleases himself by saying, "Happiness is being Turk" (64).

After realizing the guilt and struggling for identity and existence for a long time he returns to his native life. He remembers his disappointment that the world and adventures in Rifki's comics ended, and that the magical realm was just a place made up Uncle Rifki" (12). When he knows that there is no ultimate meaning, he feels sad, but also feels free as he concludes: "Now that I had no more hope and desire to attain the meaning and the unified reality of the world, the book and my life, I found myself among

the fancy free appearances that neither signified nor implied anything” (289).

He finishes his degree and marries a woman who lives on his street. He takes a nine-to-five job at City Hall and characterizes himself as broken and old by living an ordinary life. He clings to the memories of the shared bus seats and hotel rooms and regrets the loss of Janan. He veneers his search for inner peace through drinking *raki*, sharing a sofa with his daughter’s blue teddy bear, and losing himself “in a fog” before the “images that didn’t seem terribly vulgar” on the television screen. He embraces the ordinary life of being a husband and a father without searching for the new life.

Orhan Pamuk believes that Uncle Railman Rifki wrote these stories to encourage Turks to form their position as victims and to believe that they could be clever, strong and brave, “a kid from the poor neighborhood in Istanbul can draw a gun as fast as Billy the

Kid or be as honest as Tom Matrix” (188). He is trying to bridge the gap between the Turkey’s Ottoman past and the modern Turkey that is moving to democracy to guarantee freedom of speech and press to its people. Alev Cinar finds that the Islamists define Turkey as an “Ottoman Islamic” state, and the nationalists heirs of Ataturk see Turkey as “secular and West-oriented” (47). Both struggle to accept diversity of opinion and trust the other not to use religion or the military as a means of controlling people. Pamuk sees the potential of new life in the sense that the boundaries that demarcate “us” and “other” can be modified through the experience. For him this is liberating experience, “by putting ourselves in another’s shoes, by using our imaginations to shed out identities, we are able to set ourselves free” (45). He questions the nature of Turkish identity and to what extent that modifies as it experiences the push and pull of the East and the West.

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