

ORHAN PAMUK'S 'ISTANBUL, MEMOIRES OF A CITY': A MUSEUM IN PROSE



* Prof. D.S.Choudhari

* Dept. of English, Dayanand College of Arts, Latur

The Nobel laureate Turkish writer Ferit Orhan Pamuk, generally known as, Orhan Pamuk, was born in the great historical city Istanbul in 1952. Now, a Humanities professor in Columbia University, Pamuk teaches Comparative Literature and Writing. Today he is one of Turkey's most prominent novelists. His works are translated into more than fifty languages. He was a national best selling writer but after the reception of Nobel prize for literature in 2006 for his famous novel 'My Name in Red' he became the world best-selling writer. He is also the first Turkish writer to be honoured by Nobel Prize. Much has been said and argued elsewhere about his novel My Name is Red but his autobiographical book Istanbul is awaiting the attention of the readers. Though many leading newspapers have taken a considerable note of the novel yet the general reading populace is away from this enchanting journey into the ancient city Istanbul.

The book concerns the ancient city Istanbul. The city itself has a very interesting life in the history of Europe and later, in the history of world. Before 2600 years, the city was known as Byzantium. The great Byzantium poems of W.B. Yeats are about the same city. Later on, the city was also called as Augusta Antonina, It was a kind of New Rome to Europeans. Constantine the Great gave his name to the city. So it was called as Constantinople. We all know the history of European colonialism and exploration of the world by sea routes is related to the conquest of Constantinople by Turks in 1453 A.D. There are evidences that the name Istanbul was widely used to mention the city even before 1453 A.D. The name Istanbul comes from a Greek phrase which means, "in the city". Istanbul was one of the two major cities in the world, another was Baghdad.

The city has witnessed the western and the eastern culture. The practical, aesthetic and the religious aspects of human life are co-existing from centuries. The city has aspects of both cultures. In the city of Istanbul Pamuk was born in 1952 and grew up in a wealthy, yet declining bourgeois family. The book centres on his life in the city and the city in his life. He has many times stated that what he is today it is due to the city. His all novels except Snow, are based on

the lives of the people in Istanbul. In an interview to The Hindu, he was asked by Nirmala Lakshman about his frequent visits to the city in his novels. He answered :**"I came across humanity in Istanbul and all I know about life comes from Istanbul... I also love the city because I live there, it has formed me, and it's me."**

¹
(Lakshman : 2010)

He identifies himself with the city and he feels as if he is the keeper of the soul of the city. Through his works he wants the readers to feel, smell and see the colours of Istanbul. By thus particularizing his writing he does not mean to write exclusively about Istanbul. Rather he feels that his novels are ambitious towards reaching to the depths of Istanbul culture and also deep into universal eternal culture. He believes that human beings are same every where but the cultures are different so they behave differently. The human life and its pleasures and sorrows are universal His memoirs of his childhood contain his early childhood days of happiness and sorrow. He compares his source of inspiration-Conrad, Nobokov, Naipaul. These writers have managed to migrate between languages cultures, countries continents, even civilizations. In the opening chapter 'Another Orhan' he states about them.

"Their imaginations were fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness ; mine, however requires that I stay in the same city Istanbul's fate is my fate ; I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am."²

(Pamuk : 2005. P-6)

Half of the book deals with the life of Orhan till the age of 22 in the city and the half of it is devoted to the city. In the first half part he talks about his family and his life in it. His father would stay away from the family for months and his mother, a beautiful woman, would be with the children. There would be quarrels in the family. His mother would talk to his aunt for hours and hours. He would guess that something was wrong but he could never know it. When boredom loomed, he would cheer himself with arranging the mirrors in such a way so as to see his tens and hundreds images in the mirror. His slight movement would bring hundreds of changes in the mirror. He knew they were all illusory.

Later he writes about his mother's leaving the home in the chapter 'My Mother, My Father and Various Disappearances' that when she would disappear from home, they would say something like.

"Your mother is ill and resting at Aunt Neriman's. I did with these explanations as I did with the mirror reflections : knowing them to be illusions, I still accepted them, allowed myself to be fooled."³

(Pamuk : 2005, 70)

The memoir, is a way for Pamuk to speak out his inner soul, to caress his wounds and thus to strike the similar cords in the hearts of the readers all over the world. Though he writes about the culture of Istanbul, his life in that culture, yet he feels the universality of it lying at the deeper levels. The memoir focuses on his prime focus of his profession as a writer which he clarified in his Nobel lecture in 2006 at Swedish Academy in Stockholm.

"For me, to be a writer is to acknowledge the secret wounds that we carry inside us, the wounds, so secret that we ourselves are barely aware of them, and to patiently explore them, know them... and to make them a conscious part of our spirits and our writing."⁴

(Pamuk : 2006)

In the later part of the book he exhibits how in Istanbul the Eastern and Western civilizations are co-existing. Sometimes there are clashes of the faith but otherwise it is in peace and harmony. He mentions one event in the life of his wife, Aylin Turegun, a historian, when she wrote the word 'conquest' in relation to the event of 1453 A.D. in Columbia University exams and she was accused of nationalism. Orhan Pamuk says in his chapter 'Conquest of Decline? The Turkification of Constantinople' that:

"You can often tell whether you are standing in the East or in the West just by the way people refer to certain historical events."⁵

(Pamuk : 2002, 156)

Pamuk tries to trace Turkey's existential dilemma and the present day schism. He discusses about the

different forces at work to take hold of Istanbul, the various ideas that govern the cultural, political life of Istanbul. In his another book, 'The Museum of Innocence, where he relates story of a rich Istanbul heir, Kemal, who falls in love with his poor, distant cousin, Fusun. He describes in melancholy about the decaying splendour of Istanbul, in which the westernized classes send their children to study in Europe and speak dismissively about fellow Turks. He states :

"For 200 years Turks tried to change their civilization by making more westernized. This conflict continues today and has formed the modern and Turkish soul."⁶

(Pamuk : 2009, 75)

Pamuk describes himself, while he describes the city and he describes the city while he describes himself. At intervals single chapters introduce Turkish writers, the Divan poets with their homoerotic fantasies, or early western travellers. The book is brilliantly constructed, it delves into the phenomenological world of the young boy. The quarrels of mother and father, his quarrels with his brother. The family sorrows are described in abundance. Nouritza Matossian writes in 'The Telegraph on 17th April, 2005.

"... The reader is drawn into a dark house, his family museum, crammed with uncomfortable formal furniture, unplayed pianos..... such is its gloom that when he goes out into the street the sunshine blinds him first."⁷

(Matossian, 2005)

To conclude, Istanbul, Memoirs of a city, brings into light the formation of young boy into a painter, later on into a writer. It also traces out the melancholy frequently seen in his books. Pamuk's beloved city Istanbul is visible not only through the photographs he has attached here and there in the book but also through the succession of prose images. Jan Morris wrote in praise of the book in The Guardian in the following words.

"This is an irresistibly seductive book and its seduction lies not in the author's self-portrait, but in his poetical identification with Istanbul."⁸

(Morris : 2005)

REFERENCE

1. Pamuk, Orhan, Istanbul Memoirs of A City, London, Faber and Faber, 2005.
2. Pamuk, Orhan 'The Museum of Innocence, New York, Vintage International, 2009.
3. Lakshman, Nirmala, "Writing and Writing is my Happiness" thehindu.com. 2 Feb. 2010 – 20 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/article98808.ece>>
4. Matossian, Nouritza, "Pamuk's Istanbul" thetelegraph.co.uk. 01 Jan. 2010, 21 Nov. 2010 (<http://www.thetelegraph.co.uk/culture/books/6866832/orhan-pamuk-interview.html>)
5. Pamuk, Orhan, "Orhan Pamuk Nobel Lecture" Nobel Prize.org. 17 Nov. 2010 (<http://nobelprize.org/nobel-prizes/literature/laureates/2006/pamuk/lecture-en.html>)
6. Morris, Jan, "The Map of the Hearts", theguardian.co.uk. 2nd April 2005. 21 Nov. 2010 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/apr/02/biography.highereducation>)