

The Reflection of Lacanian Mirror-Gaze and Thought in Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*

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ABSTRACT

The theme of "identity" in Orhan Pamuk's works, and in specific to this study in *The Black Book* is prominent. This article aims to approach this work of Pamuk in a psychoanalytic Lacanian criticism. Lacan as a psychologist with a post-structuralist viewpoint, believes that the unconscious is structured like a language. He explains that the language, the signifying chain with a perpetual sliding of the signified under the signifier, never provides "ultimate meaning" or a "transcendental signified". Accordingly, this article, provides a Lacanian reading of Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* with emphasis on the main roles of the "other", and language in forming of the unconscious and individual identity. "Galip", the protagonist of the novel, is in search of his lost wife "Rüya". But in fact, following this lack, he starts his search for knowing himself through a chain of signifiers. His search does not lead him to reach to a complete ultimate meaning of his "self". His bewildered subject cannot anchor at a fix point of integrated and wholeness of the "self".

INTRODUCTION

Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book* circles around the protagonist Galip, a thirty-three-year-old Turkish lawyer, living in Istanbul. His wife "Rüya" has disappeared, only left behind a brief note without any explanation about where she has gone or when she might return. It seems that she is rather passive towards him whereas Galip loves his beautiful wife. Moreover, at the same time, Rüya's half-brother, a fifty-three-year-old famous columnist, Celâl Salik has vanished too without any trace. Celâl is also living in Istanbul and recently, he suffers from a memory loss. Chlip's guess is that both Rüya and Celâl are hiding together because Celâl wants to save his memory by telling his stories to Rüya. Through his search, Galip roams the streets of Istanbul and visits different places and different people without any result. He goes through a series of experiences in hope of finding a clue. He sees himself as a hero of a detective and mysterious story resembles those ones Rüya likes to read. He wants to decipher the hidden signs of the world like what Celâl has declared in his writings. But his search for finding Rüya and Celâl never leads to anywhere. Finally, Celâl and Rüya are found shot to death whereas the murderer is never

found. Through his search, Galip moves to Celâl's apartment. He not only stays there, wears Celâl's clothes and uses his furniture but also he treats in a way as if he were Celâl. Galip starts to write Celâl's columns under the name of Celâl. The novel's narrative alternates back and forth between the narrations of Galip's search for Rüya and Celâl and representing of Celâl's journalistic columns. By choosing Istanbul as the setting of the events apparently, Pamuk represents an amalgamation of sceneries in regard to the past and the present, the west and the East. As a matter of fact, during the different parts of the time, this city as Byzantium, Constantinople and also Istanbul has had a great importance for great Empires such as the Roman and Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, Istanbul can be assumed as a bridge for connecting the West and the East as it is located on the Bosphorus Strait between Asia and Europe. Thus, Istanbul is a place for confronting the West and the East and also a place for meeting different cultures and ideas. Among these variations, Pamuk brings wandering Galip to the stage, an anxious man who starts apparently a search for his lost wife but in deeper layers, his search can be a representation of his search for knowing himself. It seems that Pamuk enriches his novel with some Lacanian psychological ideas through a challenging search which is rather a window to human psyche. In fact, Pamuk in *The Black Book* confronts the reader

with a symbolic search of identity. According to Göknar (2006), *The Black Book* makes "use of doubleness, imitation, neo-Sufic themes, cultural archaeologies, and allusions to "Eastern" and "Western" narrative traditions to establish a space of psychohistorical fiction that demonstrates the integral role played by narrative in the construction of individual, social, and religious identities" (p. 36).

On the other hand, the traces of Lacanian concepts such as "lack", "desire", "signifying chain" and "other" can be seen through the lines of this novel. As this article aims to study *The Black Book* through a Lacanian lens and represent a psychoanalytic Lacanian interpretation of this work, it is necessary to have a brief explanation of the Lacan's ideas in the following lines. Lacan "posits three orders or states for explaining human mental disposition" (Habib, 2005, p. 238). The imaginary order is pre-Oedipal phase where an infant cannot distinguish itself from its mother's body as it does not yet know itself as a "self". This phase is the realm of unity between the child and its surroundings, this realm is not fragmented or mediated by difference and categories or precisely by language. The mirror phase is a point at which the child can recognize itself as a separate thing from its surrounding in the mirror and at this point the comforting imaginary condition of the child breaks down. Then, the child is pushed into the symbolic order which is the realm of predefined social roles and gender differences, or precisely the world of subjects and objects and the world of language. Thus, Lacan reformulates Freud's account of the "Oedipus complex" when explains that the infant's desire for its mother is prohibited by the father through the Law of Father. Accordingly, infant's repressed desire opens up the dimension of the "unconscious" a relation to the social world of law (Habib, 2005, p. 239). This process continues as follows:

The child's desire passes in an unceasing movement along infinite chain of signifiers, in search of unity, security, of ultimate meaning, in ever elusive signified, and immaturely clings to the fictive notion of unitary selfhood that began in the imaginary phase. The child exists in an alienated condition, its relationships with objects always highly mediated and controlled by social structures at the heart of whose operations is language. (Habib, 2005, p. 239)

For Lacan the real "is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and

impossible to attain in any way" (Evans, 2006, p. 163). Lacan believes that "the unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan, 1993, p. 167; as cited in Evans, 2006, p. 219). Thus, "the unconscious is as much a product of signifying systems". Both conscious and unconscious are like language in their constant deferral of meaning. For Lacan, "the subject is empty, fluid, and without an axis or center and always recreated in his encounter with the other" (Habib, 2005, p. 241). Through this way, Lacan believes that "desire can never be satisfied" (Evans, 2006, p. 38), as "No matter how many signifiers one adds to the signifying chain, the chain is always incomplete, it always lacks the signifier that could complete it. This missing signifier is constitutive of the subject" (p. 99). For Lacan the sense of lack which has started from the point at which we feel our separation from our mothers will continue annoy us for the rest of our lives (Bressler, 2012, p. 134).

Lacan explains about two kinds of identification: first, identifying with a specular image, with something which is outside, which constitutes the primary identification. This identification is called "imaginary identification" and it gives birth to the "ideal ego", an imagination of a perfect whole self. The other identification is a secondary identification which gives rise to the formation of the "ego ideal". This is the "symbolic identification" which "represents the completion of the subject's passing into the symbolic order" (Evans, 2006, 83). Qazi states that the "ego ideal" is the image of the ego, derived from others, which ego strives to achieve or live up to" (2011, p. 7). Lacan pays special attention to the "other" regarding the issue of identification. Qazi states "for Lacan, the identification of "Self" is always in terms of Other" (p. 6). Lacan distinguishes between the little other (other) and the big other (Other). The first one is in fact, the other who is not really other but the counterpart and the specular image of a person and Other designates radical alterity, an other-ness which Lacan equates it with language and the law (Evans, 2006, pp. 135-136).

DISCUSSION

Istanbul in *The Black Book*, represents itself through a collection of fragments. A place for meeting the west and the East and also a place for encountering various cultures and ideas, which Pamuk shows it through Galip's search and also through different side stories in the novel. Thus, Istanbul can be a symbol for the fragmentary nature of self and a splintered self. Apparently, in this atmosphere of variety, Galip and some other characters are in search of completeness and wholeness through the concept of the "other". Pamuk describes the persons who want to

be someone else. Belkis wants to be Rüya, Galip likes to be Celâl, or the women in a brothel who pretend to be films stars, and "Celâl spoke of Rumi as if he were the man himself; somewhere between the lines, he had retreated into the shadows without anyone's noticing and exchanged his identity for Rumi's" (Pamuk, 2006, p. 257), even it was mentioned that the great Persian poet "Mevlana" wanted to be "Shams". All of these can be an indication for the ceaseless movement of desire. This desire has arisen of what Lacan calls lack. This desire pushes an individual to achieve fullness, wholeness, and lost plenitude of the imaginary order which is unattainable. Pamuk tells about an ideal wholeness whom all people are in search of Him through a chapter which is titled "We're waiting for Him" (Pamuk, 2006, pp. 151-159).

Besides, in *The Black Book*, Istanbul with all its variety, can also be a symbol of an oceanic world full of clues or for Galip who is fascinated by Hurufism, a world full of letters, and in a Lacanian viewpoint a world of language. In this oceanic world, Galip moves from one signifier to another to decipher the clues. But the more he tries to decipher the clues, the more he immerses into this oceanic world. He cannot anchor at a fixed point, an "ultimate meaning" of his "self".

Galip sees himself as an expert detective who wants to solve a great mystery. Galip's searching for Rüya is the first stage of his investigation for deciphering the clues, for knowing himself. The missing of Rüya can be a symbol for the feeling of the lack in Galip. Besides, Rüya can be a hint of the imaginary order of Galip's unconscious. For Galip, Rüya, his "soul mate" can be a representation of his ideal ego, which he wants to see himself through her. Moreover, the meaning of "Rüya", the "dram" is again a hint to the realm of the imagination. The search of Galip continues through a world full of signifiers. He moves in a signifying chain. He goes from a signifier to another and from a story to another. Through this way, he sees himself in Celâl's identity. Celâl can be an emblem of the symbolic order of Galip's unconscious, For Galip, Celâl can be a representation of his ego ideal. According to Evans, the ego ideal is "the guide governing the subject's position in the symbolic order" (2006, p. 53). By reading Celâl's columns over and over, Galip "would gain access to Celâl's memory" (Pamuk 200). Thus, Galip wants to gain access to Celâl's unconscious as "the unconscious is a kind of memory, in the sense of a symbolic history the signifiers that have determined the subject in the course of his life" (Evans, 2006, p. 220). Galip's search to gain the ultimate meaning of his "self" ends in failures as Qazi states "we

continuously search for the lost-impossible real but the search ends in failure because our attempts to gain the ultimate meaning of our "self" is impossible" (2011, p. 11). Thus, attaining a wholeness of self is impossible. In this novel, the death of Rüya and Celâl can be a hint of the real order and also is a hint of Galip's search failure in seeking completeness. There is no anchor, no stability to his effort.

There are some moments of Lacanian mirror-gaze in Pamuk's *The Black Book*. Evans states "The imaginary exerts a captivating power over the subject, founded in the almost hypnotic effect of the specular image. The imaginary is thus rooted in the subject's relationship to his own body (or rather to the image of his body)" (2006, p. 84). According to Evans, Lacan places a special emphasis on the role of the image (p. 82) and defines identification as "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan, 1977, p. 2; as cited in Evans, 2006, p. 82). "To assume an image is to recognize oneself in the image, and to appropriate the image as oneself (Evans, 2006, p. 82). Thus, there are a number of hints to those moments of the mirror-gaze in *The Black Book*, the moments in which a man strives for knowing himself through the mirror and also the world of letters and signs. For instances, in this description concerning Galip when he looks at his image in the mirror:

...drenched in terror, hardly able to breathe, longing to put a great distance between himself and the dark mirror, with cold beads of sweat forming on his forehead. For a moment he imagined going back to that mirror, tearing this papery mask from his face like a scab from a wound, and being no more able to read the signs and letters on the new face that emerged behind the mask than the ones he'd found on billboards, plastic bags, and the city's tangled streets. (Pamuk, 2006, p. 324)

Sometimes a sense of alienation accompanies these moments. In a part, Pamuk states as Celâl:

But as the barber and I discussed how to cut my hair, as we looked into the mirror to look at the head beneath the hair, and the shoulders and the chest beneath it, I immediately knew that this person sitting in the chair looking at his reflection in the mirror was someone else. When the barber asked, "How much should we take off the front?" the

head he touched, like the neck that carried it, and those shoulders, and that chest – they did not belong to me, but to the columnist, Celâl Bey. (2006, p. 183)

It seems in mirror-gaze moments a person is a signifier which wants to know the meaning of himself through the deciphering his image in the mirror which acts as a signified. According to Eagleton, "we could read the mirror situation as a kind of metaphor, one item (for example a child) discovers a likeness of itself in another (the reflection)" (2008, p. 144). In another moment of the mirror-gaze in *The Black Book*, Galip says "I gazed into the mirror and read my face. My face was the Rosetta Stone I had deciphered in my dream. My face was the tombstone from which the turban had fallen. My face was a mirror made of skin in which the reader beheld himself (Pamuk, 2006, p. 334-335).

Here, it seems that Galip attempts to read his unconscious like reading a text and understanding the meaning of it. Sometimes, there is not a real mirror but another person works as a mirror to show us ourselves. For instance, in a place Pamuk states "The forty-five-year-old Rumi longed on that rainy day to find just such a "soul mate"; what he longed for was to look into a man's face and see a replica of his own" (Pamuk, 2006, p. 255).

CONCLUSION

The reflection of Lacan's thought can be seen through the lines of Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*.

Galip starts his search apparently, for finding his lost wife Rüya but in fact, for knowing himself. Through this way, he tries to decipher a world of signs, letters and language. He moves from one signifier to another without anchoring at an ultimate point of meaning of his "self".

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