theories and methodologies

Implementing Disform: An Interview with Orhan Pamuk

Z. ESRA MIRZE

ORHAN PAMUK, BORN IN ISTANBUL, IS THE AUTHOR OF *MY NAME IS RED*, *SNOW*, *ISTANBUL: MEMORIES AND THE CITY*, AND NUMEROUS other works. Over his career, Pamuk has investigated questions of identity, cultural representation, and political agency, achieving fame in Turkey for his complex, ambitious prose, which contrasts with the predominantly realist tradition of the Turkish novel. In 2005 he faced charges in Turkey related to statements he made regarding the killings of Kurds and Armenians in Anatolia. The charges were eventually dropped.

The following interview with Pamuk took place in August 2006, two months before he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. I met him in his summer home on Heybeli Island, in the Sea of Marmara near Istanbul, as he was preparing to come to New York to take up an appointment at Columbia University.

Mirze: How do you categorize your work within the literary tradition? In what section of a bookstore would you want your work displayed?

Pamuk: My section of course would be literary fiction. And I am grateful to American bookshops for putting fiction—both literary fiction and popular fiction—in a fiction category, where popularity and nationality are overlooked. In France, for example, I am sometimes categorized as East German; my books are placed next to those by writers from the [former German Democratic Republic], or in an "Eastern" category, which is a very loose category including work from Japan to Turkey, next to Tanizaki (a great author I am happy to be next to). The tendency is to categorize authors who are not writing inside the West or who are not living in America or Europe as the Other, and placing them on shelves in bookshops to suggest this kind of division does not serve the commercial needs of the author. Even if you write the most Japanese novel or the most Islamic novel—whatever that is—it's better to be categorized under the general title of fiction.

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Mirze: Do you see yourself working in a particular tradition—for instance, the tradition of the novel, or Turkish literature, or Muslim writing?

Pamuk: I am only working in the tradition of the novel. I'm interested in the novelty, the recent experiments, the whole history of my craft. But of course I am living in Turkey, and my whole subject matter is Turkish.

Mirze: Since the novel is a genre imported from the West, do you see your adoption of that genre as a dismantling of Turkish literary conventions or as an attempt to wed Turkish traditions with Western traditions?

Pamuk: Well, the Turkish novel has a hundred-and-fifty-year history—and then how European is the novel? How Western is the novel, and how non-Western is Turkey? Is that difference so much that my attempt to implement disform in my part of the world is worth thinking about? These are important issues for me, which I've been thinking, rethinking, turning around for years. There is not a single answer to that, but obviously there is some—let me be essentialist here—essential difference between the cultures, which we have to recognize, clearly see through, and address accordingly rather than ignore out of a desire to be politically correct.

Mirze: In *My Name Is Red* there is a tension between two different artistic schools. Do you feel similar tensions affecting your work?

Pamuk: No. Artistic traditions can be politically damaging, damning, in fact would put you in politically problematic positions as in *My Name Is Red*—especially if the societies in which these traditions are being used are entirely closed, such as the Ottoman Empire in *My Name Is Red* or the Soviet Union, where Kafka was prohibited. In Turkey today—although there is a lot of political, nationalistic, East-West, cultural, religious tension—artistic forms



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are not at the heart of political struggle as they were, say, in the Soviet Union, or as they were in the period depicted in *My Name Is Red*.

Mirze: Do they transcend these differences?

Pamuk: No, they don't transcend: no one cares about them. It's simply that people who are very touchy or hypersensitive about nationalistic or national-representation issues do not mind much, do not get offended, when all the national writers imitate Western forms, because they do not identify these issues with national problems. Artistic and literary forms are more complex and marginal issues. There are no tensions, popular tensions, in all this. And most of the time, tensions come from using various artistic forms—these things happen in more closed, more controlled societies.

Mirze: Are you interested in defining Turkish identity and clarifying its heterogeneity? For example, in *My Name Is Red*, you not only address the East-West divide but also demonstrate the conflict between identities within the empire. How important is it for the West or more generally for your readers—both at home and abroad—to understand these ideological clashes?

Pamuk: Well, look, I am the sort of writer who is interested in all sorts of political ideas, including this representation of these ideas as a clash of civilizations. In fact, I think there is not much of a "clash," but rather what happens in history most of the time: a sort of a combination. Identities are combinations of cultures. I write my novels most of the time for the story, for an image, for an almost instinctive drive towards a certain subject, towards a story. Of course, there are all sorts of problems of ideology and representation in them. But then I never attempted to know what Turkish identity is. If you press me on this, I would say all sorts of attempts to define an identity are bullshit and fake. All sorts of description and clarification of a given identity, all sorts of attempts to define a group, a tribe, a nation and pinpoint its identity, I think, are vain and, most of the time, serve very conservative political needs. I write my novels addressing both the national reader and international reader, and to both I would say that our national identities are fabrics designed to suppress rather than free us or liberate us. So I am not going to suggest that this Turkish or that Turkish identity is better. When I am making political comments outside of my books and [journalists ask] whether Turkishness and Europe are contradictory, I say no, I don't think so. Sometimes I think "this is Turkishness," and then I think "this is Europe," and I don't think there is much difference.

Mirze: Have your opinions changed between *The White Castle* and *Snow*? For example, in *The White Castle* you talk about the differences between Eastern superstition and Western positivism, and the same theme appears in *Snow*.

Pamuk: Many things have changed between *The White Castle* and *Snow*. My writing style has changed, and also I was more naive then. I was already thinking about issues that have to do with East and West, and after I read Edward Said's *Orientalism*—that must have been in the eighties—I was more invested in thinking about this. This was not an academic reading, bear in mind. The author's way of reading is essentially different.[1]

Mirze: What do you think Turkey's short-term and long-term relationship with the West will be like?

Pamuk: That's a very political question. For quite a long time it was Turkey's state policy to enter the European Union. The very conservative Turkish state founded by Kemal Atatürk decided twenty years ago that this country, nation, state be part of the European Union, while the same bureaucratic mechanism instinctively or with a clear political agenda is resisting it. And in the European Union as well there is a conservative, nation-

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alistic tendency which clearly sees Turkey as an Eastern nation. At the same time, there are the Social Democrats, Greens, or even various conservative European countries or political institutions who want to take Turkey to the European Union, this time again underlining Turkey's religion. So it's all so complicated. My general observation or my recent observation of things is that they are moving slowly.

Mirze: How is the EU membership process affecting Turkey?

Pamuk: In a good way.

Mirze: Do you think Turkey worries too much about the head-scarf issue?

Pamuk: Of course, but then I wish that head scarves were something that both secular and political Islamist parties weren't aware of. I wish that this was a country where some people wore head scarves, some people didn't, and no one noticed. But unfortunately it is at the heart of political struggle between political Islamists and so-called seculars.

Mirze: Do you think all these questions about Turkey's political and cultural identities are less important than religious identity?

Pamuk: Well, religious identity is part of cultural identity, political identity is part of religious identity, and religious identity is also a part of Turkish political identity, so it's very hard. Even Turkish identity, a lot of it is related to religious identity. We, unfortunately, cannot recognize this. The thought was to try to draw a strong red mark between religion and the culture and identity. I wish it had worked out, but it has not: that line is still blurry.

Mirze: What kind of cultural effect do you think the war in Iraq had on Turkey?

Pamuk: It inspired lots of nationalism. Solidarity with Iraqi Muslims, especially in conservative, rural Turkey, is strong, unfortunately. So the war in Iraq did not bring more democracy, either to Iraq or to Turkey, but in fact made life for democrats in this part of the world harder.

Mirze: How important is the idea of home to you?

Pamuk: It is very important. Why? Because I have been living in the same city, the same neighborhood, even in the same house, for all of my life. Now, as I explain in the beginning of *Istanbul*, there is extra attention paid to immigration, cultural change, hybridity, the creativity of immigrants who invent the new culture, the new identity. These are things that I cherish and I admire, and I think that the vitality of new cultures, their attraction, is created by immigrants because they bring new points of view. A culture that is tolerant of its immigrants, its newcomers, its others, most probably will be a glorious culture in the future, as it was in the past. But, on the other hand, contrary to what I believe in, I have been living in the same neighborhood, the same street, the same house for fifty years. Home, of course, is important to an immigrant, perhaps more important because that is what he left behind. But home is also important for the guy who is at home all the time. And I am geographically, physically at home. Adorno says that morality begins when you do not feel at home. So I was never "at home" at home, but physically I am at this home, and that, and the definition of my home, is different. I am not in geographical or physical exile. I still continue to live and I hope to live to the end on the same street, in the same house. But obviously I have been in trouble ideologically, politically, and felt not "at home" at home as Adorno suggested.

Mirze: Why did you write the memoir (*Istanbul*) at this point in your life?

Pamuk: What do you mean—at this young point in my life? OK, one question is, "Isn't this a little early for you to write your memoirs?" Well, Tolstoy wrote his when he was thirty; André Gide wrote his when he was thirty; Nabokov

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wrote his earlier than I did. So my point is that I realize that, especially for early childhood, I am beginning to forget. I want to capture that still-crisp freshness of the memory. When I realized that it was beginning to fade away, I wanted to capture it before it was too late.

Mirze: So a record for yourself as well as for your readers?

Pamuk: It's a record for myself. It is also a joy to write about it. But then there was another point. Actually, my intention was to write a book on Istanbul, not on myself. But then I realized as I wrote the book this fact, which Walter Benjamin pointed out years ago when he was writing about the German writer Hesse's Berlin book: that there are two kinds of city books, those written by outsiders, which Benjamin pointed out tend to be exotic, and those written by insiders who live in the city, and that kind of city book tends to be autobiographical. That was the heart of the matter. And Benjamin had already recognized problems of the book I was going to write, so I followed the logical conclusion and made my city book also an autobiography. So my intent was not initially to write an autobiography, but, to be honest, my city book was going to be autobiographical anyway.

Mirze: Do you think all writers are rebels?

Pamuk: Not necessarily.

Mirze: Does one need to be dissatisfied to be a writer, about life, about parents, about country, about neighbors, about money?

Pamuk: Of course, no one is satisfied anyway, but then most of the time what is interesting is how we represent our dissatisfaction first to ourselves, then how we understand it, how we elaborate it, analyze it. I think everyone is dissatisfied, even the happiest person, but then thinking is explaining our dissatisfaction, first to ourselves, then to our culture, to the people who are with us. Of course, I am dissatisfied, but then I am happy with my dissatisfaction.

Notes

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1. With the exception of this response, which I have translated from Turkish along with a few passing words in other responses, the interview was conducted in English.

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