



**The Repercussions of East-West Interactions in Orhan Pamuk's  
'A Strangeness in My Mind'**



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**ABSTRACT**

*Orhan Pamuk & Turkish Literature cannot be separated from each other as he offers a broader view of integrated diverse cultural paradigms of Turkey in his writing. His literary discourse mainly reflects a wide variety of issues in binary such as Homogeneous & Heterogeneous, Traditional & Modern, Singularity & Pluralism, East & West, Theism & Atheism, Religious Fundamentalism & Secularism which are deeply rooted in*

*Turkish culture and society. The present article is an attempt to define the repercussions of East-West interactions as reflected in his novel 'A Strangeness in My Mind' with critical commentary and objective analysis of the elite as well as marginalized sections in the Ottoman society.*

**KEY WORDS**

*Ecology, Identity, Displacement, Westernization, Religion, Culture*

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Preliminaries

Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Prize winner (for literature in 2006) and follower of new aesthetic sensibility, is one of the writers from the modern Republic of Turkey. Orhan Pamuk & Turkish literature cannot be separated from each other. His novels often deal with the vivid descriptions of Turkish society in general and Istanbul in particular. He offers a broader view of integrated diverse cultural paradigms of Turkey. His literary discourse mainly reflects a wide variety of issues in binary such as Homogeneous & Heterogeneous, Traditional & Modern, Cultural Singularity & Plurality, East & West, Theism & Atheism, Religious Fundamentalism & Secularism which are deeply rooted in Turkish culture and society. At the same time, he remains critical of the tribulations and extremist domains of contemporary Turkish society. He explores the roots of all these issues in the history, traditions, attitudes, tendencies, value system, moral codes, conflicts, socio-politico-cultural practices and unrest of Turkey in the light of East-West interactions. His novel '*A Strangeness in My Mind*' (2014) offers a broad view of East-West interaction and its consequences that occurred in the Republic of Turkey.

### About the Novel : '*A Strangeness in My Mind*'

The novel '*Kafambda Bir Tuhaflik*' (A Strangeness in My Mind) offers a panoramic account of Istanbul and the transitions that took place in Istanbul on socio-politico-cultural front. It revolves around the life story of the protagonist named Mevlut who is in search of identity, emotional solace and eternal crave for happiness in the midst of the strangeness in his mind. The same strangeness is revealed through his inner world. Due to the force of fate, he shifts from rural to urban and witnesses the transition of Istanbul from typical old fashioned Ottoman city to a metropolitan town in the second half of the twentieth century and after. The novel mirrors transitions, challenges, conflicts and turmoil from 1969 to 2012 caused by the socio-political upheavals and geographical expansion in an attempt to attain the status of a modern liberal country. The non-linear narrative with episodic points of view enables the characters to share their views and anxieties, clarifying their positions as a part of reality rather than merely a fiction. Thus, they provide critical commentary and objective analysis of the elite as well as marginalized sections in the Ottoman society.

**Plot**

The protagonist named Mevlut Karatas, from a poor village in Central Anatolia, not getting as far in school moves to Istanbul at the age of twelve following the footsteps of his father. When the novel begins, Mevlut falls in love with a girl named Samiha at a wedding ceremony, spends three years writing her letters and mistakenly elopes with her sister named Rayiha with the help of his cousin Suleiman. He accepts the reality and starts living happily with Rayiha in Istanbul selling Boza after marriage. Later on, he came to know that it was the trick of Suleiman who wanted to marry Samiha, Rayiha's sister. Soon, Rayiha gives birth to a baby girl and Mevlut establishes a small shop selling Boza, ice-cream and other sweets. Rayiha helps him in the business. Though the family wants Samiha to marry Suleiman, she elopes with Ferhat, an electrician. They take shelter nearby Istanbul secretly. Suleiman pursues the couple for a long time to take revenge but then marries another girl in despair. One day, Ferhat gets killed mysteriously and Samiha continues her life in Istanbul visiting her sisters frequently. Rayiha dies because of illness and Mevlut finally marries Samiha. They live happily for seven years.

During these years, Hadji Hamit Vural, an owner of a construction company, alters the whole city by building new apartments and by restructuring the old buildings. Mevlut's cousins, Korkut and Suleiman, who are working in the same construction company, plan to develop their old building. Samiha convinces Mevlut to claim his rightful share in it. Soon, they shift to a new apartment. Mevlut sells Boza in the evening. They try to adapt themselves according to the new circumstances and changing scenario of Istanbul. The obstinate and stubborn nature of Samiha sometimes causes him distress. However, he leads a satisfied life with her. When introspect, Mevlut finds that his mind is full of strangeness and uncommon thoughts. In the end of the novel, he finds that he had loved Rayiha more than anything else in the world and feels alone.

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**History**

The fusion of history with literature produces a new fresh insight into the critical discourse for Orhan Pamuk. It provides him with a platform to discuss the issues like socio-politico-cultural consciousness, representations and identity within the context of Istanbul through the novel '*A Strangeness in My Mind*'. Istanbul was a part of the Ottoman and

Byzantine Empire which incorporated many social, political, ethnic, cultural and religious groups. The Ottoman empire then became a nation state witnessing clashes and conflicts in these different groups. The Empire embraced modernity through westernized socio-political reforms that took place by the end of the nineteenth century. These comprehensive reforms greatly impacted the life of modern Turkey. Inspired by secularist principles of the French Revolution, the traditional hierarchies were replaced by the emergence of the new class of intelligentsia. The character of Mevlut represents the change from the old traditional world to the new world. He magnifies the journey of Istanbul towards a threshold of power, wealth and self-confidence. Turkey is situated in between the geographical and cultural crossroads of the East and the West. Its cross-cultural interactions with western societies greatly influence day-to-day life of the Turkish people. The novel '*A Strangeness in My Mind*' aptly touches upon the enigma of being caught between tradition and modernity. Pamuk presents the conflict between Turkish Islamic Culture and Pan-Islamic traditions prevalent in Turkey with the help of his characters which are characterized by confusion, uncertainty and instability.

### **Social Repercussions**

In '*A Strangeness in My Mind*' Orhan Pamuk highlights not only middle class but also the marginalized sections such as working-class people, street vendors and the daily wage labourers etc. with their struggle for survival and identity. These people migrate from rural areas to cosmopolitan cities like Istanbul. Mevlut Karatas follows the footsteps of his father, Mustafa Karatas and settles in Istanbul selling Boza and yogurt for the rest of his life. The migration, displacement and presence of street vendors seem common in Istanbul. Mevlut quotes Ataturk saying –

“Street vendors are the songbirds of the streets, they are the life and soul of Istanbul, he said. Under no circumstances must they ever be banned. From that day on, street vendors were free to roam the streets of Istanbul.” (SMM, 28)

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Mevlut witnesses the industrialization and infrastructural development influenced by the West in Istanbul and other neighboring villages. He feels suffocated in the city. As Ottoman Sultans had banned alcohol in Turkey, Mevlut endured many hardships produced by



conservative sects while selling Boza. Military training was mandatory for young Turkish people. However, many people find it difficult to undergo the training and services. Mevlut too finds himself incompatible for the training.

Due to sectarian violence, the military used to intervene in the life of the common man implementing martial law and curfew which often resulted in chaos. The freedom of expression was restricted and journalists were oppressed. Revolutionary groups were indulged in robbery and kidnapping of foreign diplomats. The sectarian violence in groups like Alevis, Kurds, Hanefis, leftist etc. was prevalent protesting against the government policies. As usual, the marginalized lower-class people fall prey to the violence while trying to meet both the ends. Ferhat's revolutionary spirit flies away as he indulges in marital life. He runs after material pleasures like wine, raki, clubs and dance parties. The city is characterized by corruption and bribe. In the end, Ferhat gets killed by an unknown mugger. Women too suffer from the lack of basic rights. Pamuk rightly depicts the saga of these women through his characters. Women are subjected to household, mental and physical violence. They seem like imprisoned within the four walls and become economically dependent on men. It was obligatory for them to follow customary dress code of Muslim woman with headscarves. However, the situation changes with the gradual transformation caused by the process of westernization. For example, Fatma, the daughter of Mevlut does not wear headscarves while taking university education. Due to the custom of 'Brideprice', Korkut suffers much as he wants to marry Vediha, the daughter of Abdurrahman Efendi. Meanwhile, Istanbul has turned into a highly industrialized metropolitan city. Capitalism replaces the agrarian economic system causing large scale migration from rural to urban or semi-urban areas. Mevlut defines –

The Gaazi Quarter was just one steep hillside populated by people of every conceivable city, country, trade, race, tribe, and tongue. (SMM, 178-179)

This gives birth to the bourgeois class. After spending forty-three years in the city, Mevlut feels alienated and the city still remains strange to him. He thinks-

“Was it because of unstoppable, swelling flood, the millions of new people coming to Istanbul and bringing new houses, skyscrapers, and shopping malls with them?”  
(SMM, 374)

Even so, he decides to spend the remaining life as a Boza seller. The strangeness remains in his mind as he thinks about the city-

‘In a city, you can be alone in the crowd, and in fact what makes the city a city is that it lets you hide the strangeness in your mind inside its teeming multitudes.  
(SMM,107)

Mevlut’s nostalgia does not only mean being homesick, it implies the awareness of traditions too. The people feel nostalgic as their expectations are not fulfilled by Istanbul. Some of them do not fit into the changing city. The rapid and hasty social, political, economic and cultural changes make these people nostalgic. Being a Boza seller, Mevlut remains more sensitive to these changes as he is more emotional, inward and insecure. He has been attached to the city since childhood but he feels the new settlements strange and alien. The increased storey disconnected the apartments with streets. People lose acquaintances among them. Mevlut experiences the feeling of unease in this concrete jungle. While selling Boza, he thinks that the city has been talking to him and he does not know how to respond to it. In the later part of the novel, Mevlut tries to find the cause of his estrangement, unease and anxiety but unfortunately, fails.

Rayiha too is not satisfied with the city. She wants to live with his sisters and family in a house at Duttepe between trees and chickens. Those characters in the novel who compromise and adjust with the changing environment feel satisfied with their migration while those like Mevlut who are unable to cope with the changes yearn. The processes of industrialization and globalization bring with it urban transformation, poverty, immigration, crime and many more ills. Mevlut represents the lower poor class and its struggle to survive, lamenting the past of Istanbul.

## Cultural Repercussions

The old, traditional Istanbul and Istanbul as a part of Turkish Republic, both are sites of cultural exchange. The geographical location of Turkey, between Europe and Asia, contributes mainly to the plural nature of Turkish culture. Here, pluralism is associated with diversity, multifacetedness and heterogeneity. Orhan Pamuk highlights territorial expansion, migration, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, communal harmony, disintegration, secularism and religious fundamentalism. The wholehearted acceptance of foreign culture leads Turkey to the enigma of being caught between the traditional Ottoman Islamic culture and the Western modern outlook. Since the beginning, the Ottoman Empire accepted and accommodated a number of people and groups with different backgrounds becoming culturally heterogeneous to maintain the cross-border relationships. For the sake of peaceful coexistence, Turkey adopted various aspects and cultural patterns of other civilizations. The nationalists turned Turkey from an Ottoman Empire to a Republic Nation State. The seeds of this nationalism had been spread from Western European cradle.

The real tension is caused by conservative East and scientific West. Throughout history, most of the Ottoman Sultans recognized the need to reform society through implementation of Western policies in most of the fields of life such as education, military, socio-political-cultural structures etc. However, the actual process of westernization gained currency in the nineteenth century when the privileged elite people of Turkey adopted western ways of life. Naturally, the conflict was inevitable and its roots can be traced back into the psyche of Turkey. According to Edward Said, the conflict between Oriental and Occidental is a conflict for power accompanied by hegemony and domination.

Supporting the Western education system, Pamuk's protagonist Mevlut says -

“Turkey will not be saved by cooked rice peddlers, hawkers and kabab vendors, but by science!” (SMM, 73)

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Mevlut represents the dream of modern prosperity and acts as a link between the East and the West.

There are three types of buildings in Istanbul, he used to say- (1) those full of devout families where people say their daily prayers, and leave their shoes outside, (2) rich and westernised homes where you can go in with your shoes on, (3) new high-rise blocks where you can find a mix of both sorts. (SMM, 22)

It reflects three types of people – traditional, modern and traditional-modern leaving in the city. With this, Pamuk also throws light upon the ills of westernization such as slums, corruption, bribe, murder, kidnapping, loss of tradition, cunning stratagems, alienation, confusion etc.

The gradual transformation of Istanbul from an old traditional Islamic country to westernized sophisticated city takes place in the second part of the twentieth century. Capitalism becomes the order of the day and people shift from Boza to modern imported beverages which mark their changing attitudes towards traditions. The eating habits of the people change according to their social class. Chicken with chickpeas and rice was considered as a food of poor people. The imported companies encroached the small-scale businesses like Boza selling and street food. The intervention of westernization gives rise to many conflicts and tensions. The migrated people prefer micro family system in the urban localities. Mevlut often visits Elyazar Cinema and is used to compare Turkish films with Western films. Most of the films are imported from European continents. With the new western-model skyscrapers, people also adopt cosmopolitan culture but Mevlut fails to cope with this new environment. He feels suffocated and continues Boza selling with the strangeness in his mind.

### **Religious Repercussions**

Although Islam remains official religion of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is characterized with its religious tolerance since the beginning as it amalgamated various religious sects and groups. Orhan Pamuk portrays the rituals and religious practices of Turkish people in the novel pointing out the religious clash between Islamists and Secularists. The conservatives use religion as a tool against Leftists, enforcing military to intervene in the clash. Mevlut seems Islam more allied with political parties than spirituality and tries to keep himself away from the political clash. Pamuk defines his condition saying –



‘These people’s Political Islamism had begun to unnerve Mevlut and eventually he stopped going there altogether.’ (SMM, 551)

Mevlut feels suspicious of his faith in God as he is unable to find the purpose of his occasional visits to mosque. He seems more inclined to the Holy Guide, a Christian man in the city who helps him find answers to his questions. The Holy Guide strengthens his faith in God. After the death of Rayiha, Mevlut seeks consolation in the divine. The holy man criticizes westernization for the loss of pure faith, value system and spiritual convictions. The traditional faith and secular practices with their respective ideologies put Mevlut into bewilderment experiencing existential dilemma. He is caught between the two polarized attitudes and ideologies. He observes that the process of westernization is gradually modifying the sensibilities of Turkish psyche resulting into communal discord. The cultural conflict between Islamists and Secularists splits the life of Turkish people. The conservatives try to awake people saying-

“Keeping our ancient traditions alive, rather than discarding them to imitate the West, was a sacred duty, ..... We wanted to preserve our national character, our ideals, and our beliefs.” (SMM, 389)

Mevlut feels disappointed with the loss of glorious culture, value system and moral codes.

Mevlut observes that the army always targets the Islamists, the Kurds and the Communists. There are internal divisions in Islam itself with different groups like Alevis and Kurds. The people in Duttepe are nationalists while in Kultepe are leftists, who want Turkey to be a country like Russia and China. These Islamic sects fight among themselves while protesting against authorities. However, Mevlut keeps himself away from the violence and silently observes the activities of Islamists. He also observes that the poor, illiterate, unprivileged people in the villages remain intact with their religion while the elite class in the cities declares themselves as secular. Most of the migrated people in Duttepe and Kultepe follow Islam. The religious conservatives consider Boza as a traditional holy drink and there is no sin in drinking it while the secularists consider it as a concealment to drink alcohol. Thus, the

society is divided on the basis of religious orientations and beliefs due to the East-West encounter.

### **Ecological Repercussions**

Orhan Pamuk addresses environmental issues like pollution, erosion, increased population, excessive consumption of natural resources and exploitation of nature in his novel. With this, he points out the effects of these issues on the day-to-day lives of the characters. These issues disrupt the balance of nature causing societal deformation.

Mevlut feels depressed after observing the multi-dimensional transformation of Istanbul. His conscience does not allow him to accept the relentless exploitation of nature. The intensity of strangeness in his mind grows with the time as he continues Boza selling. He becomes nostalgic visualizing old cemeteries, gardens, mosques, small houses, fountains etc. Immigration, increased population and slums caused due to industrialization lead to class differences. The haves and have-nots form new patterns of settlement with a multicultural atmosphere in Istanbul.

At one side, Mevlut envies the wealth and luxury of Istanbul while at the other, he mourns the exploitation of nature. Whenever he tries to act on problems, he fails due to the chaos and confusion in his mind. Therefore, he surrenders himself to the transformations instead of protest. The act represents fatalism in the contemporary society. Not only Mevlut but the other characters too feel sorrow for the degradation of nature and culture. The migrated women in Istanbul do not like to reside in colossal apartments. They miss the rural setting. These characters lament the loss of aesthetic values and historical as well as cultural heritage of Istanbul.

### **Repercussions on Identity**

An encounter between cultures often results in several possibilities like amalgamation of two cultures, clash between them, emergence of a new culture as a combination of the two cultures or multiculturalism etc. affecting identities of the people involved in it. The same cultural possibilities can be found in the process of formation of identity/ies. If an individual fails to cope with the changing environment, he or she may experience an identity crisis. The story of '*A Strangeness in My Mind*' unveils the transformation of identities of the characters.

The socio-poli-eco-cultural milieu in Istanbul shape the identities of these characters. As the city itself is in gradual flux so also the identities.

Mevlut and his father go in search of their identities in Istanbul but oscillate between the sense of belonging and non-belonging. However, Mevlut's identity is caught between the binaries such as tradition and modern, conservative and secular, East and West, theism and atheism etc. and scatters through the conflicting tendencies. Both represent the poor, uneducated and unprivileged people from rural area who are forced to move into the nearby cities to meet both the ends. When Mevlut observes political Islamic activities, he leans toward the Holy Guide, a Christian man in the town. A safe distance from political parties does not allow him any individual or collective political identity. Due to westernization, Istanbul gets split between the tradition and the modern. As the traditional culture is vanishing gradually Mevlut feels unease in the new westernized modern culture. It makes him experience identity crisis. His identity remains strange and bewildered like his psyche. Being Islamic, the women had no identity or freedom as such because the Ottoman Empire was basically patriarchal. Rayiha follows Mevlut in Istanbul and helps him in preparing Boza, yogurt and other sweets. Samiha marries Mevlut after the death of Ferhat and Rahiya. Vediha also complains about the men in her family saying –

“Is it fair that my poor little sister and I shouldn't be allowed to go to the cinemas in Sisli? Or that Korkut should categorically forbid me to go out...” (SMM, 467)

She fails to receive education as there was no high school into the village and consequently, becomes economically dependent on her husband. Mevlut's daughter Fevziye elopes with her lover without taking his consent. In the second half of the twentieth century, the conditions improved. Most of the girls start taking education to become economically independent.

The character of Hadji Hamit Vural stands for capitalist and bourgeois class. Turkish people look towards the West considering it positive, progressive, ideal while considering themselves negative, backward and alien. Thus, they identify themselves with the West internalizing the European way of living life. In this way, the encounter between modern and traditional culture transforms the identities of the people involved in it.

## Conclusion

In this way, Orhan Pamuk reflects various socio-poli-eco-cultural issues and its effects as a means of comprehending contemporary reality in the novel. He aims at holistic social order characterized with multiculturalism and heterogeneity. One and the same time, The East and the West seem conflicting and reconciling entities. Pamuk puts forth the need for a balanced attitude to accommodate transformation with its synthesized forms. He mirrors the experience of in-betweenness. The city and the characters drift between the old and the new world depicting the clash between the East and the West.

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