The Tactical Act of 'Walking in the City': Decoding Orhan Pamuk's *A Strangeness in My Mind*

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Narratological explorations on literary representations of collective memory have revealed the presence of specific literary techniques at play in the depiction of memory and identity. As Birgit Neumann (2008) points out, "on the textual level, novels create new models of memory. . . They combine the real and the imaginary, the remembered and the forgotten, and, by means of narrative devices, imaginatively explore the workings of memory, thus offering new perspectives on the past" (p. 333). Delving into the semantic connotations of literary forms, narratives techniques operate as carriers of meaning and offer multiple interpretative possibilities (p. 333). The paper "The Tactical Act of 'Walking in the City': Decoding Orhan Pamuk's A Strangeness in My Mind" attempts to delineate how the past experiences and the present coexist in the 'act of walking in the city'; how it evolves as a crucial narrative strategy that shapes memory and identity into a new matrix to (re)construct the past which remains an abandoned but ubiquitous part of everyday life in Istanbul.

Keywords: Memory, identity, walking in the city, narrative technique, past, present.

In fictions of memory, the past and the present converge through the eyes of a reminiscing narrator who employs analepses to depict specific past events. Unlike the typical chronologically ordered analepses, in contemporary fictions of memory, the "chronological

order is dissolved at the expense of the subjective experience of time" (Neumann, 2008, p. 336). There is a constant movement between different time levels and this "deviations in sequential ordering are often semanticised" as they foreground the "haphazard workings of memory" which "contribute substantially to highlighting the memory-like quality of narratives" (Neumann, 2008, p. 336). Orhan Pamuk's *A Strangeness in My Mind* can be identified as an interplay of the past experiences and the present through the lens of Mevlut, the protagonist, who prefers walking through the city of Istanbul selling boza. In the act of walking through the streets of the city of Istanbul, the past and the present, memory and identity, and the spatiotemporal aspects intermingle.

Two views, one Istanbul; for Orhan Pamuk and his protagonist Mevlut, life from above and down below, signifies the present and past of Istanbul-a city that straddles the East and the West. Traversing the streets of Istanbul selling boza, the protagonist Mevlut calls our attention to a rhetoric that subverts the assigned order and confers new meaning to the everyday practices of life. Orhan Pamuk's protagonist cum boza seller, Mevlut, blatantly embodies the archetypal observer of modern life, the *flaneur.* The French term *flaneur*, which means stroller or loafer, was used by the French poet Charles Baudelaire to identify an observer of modern urban life. *Flanerie* or the act of strolling/walking, gains prominence as it adds a subjective dimension to modern life. The French cultural critic, Michel de Certeau (1988), views the ordinary everyday practices like walking, reading, talking, cooking etc, as a form of political resistance of the marginalised majority. Such everyday practices are "tactical in character" and for Certeau (1988), the "place of a tactic belongs to the other" (p. xix). He foregrounds the marginalised majority- the ordinary people or users of society, over the producers of culture. He adds to the concept of the *flaneur*, by foregrounding the ordinary common people over the privileged ones who derived pleasure out of the act of walking in the city.

Viewing Istanbul from the top floor was the only motive Mevlut had, when he conceded to the invitation from Suleyman, who lived on the top floor of their apartment. Thinking about the "new thirty- and

forty-story towers" that sprang up everywhere in Istanbul, he wondered "What might the world look like from the top of such a tall building" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 574)? His desire to enjoy the magnificent view of the city from the top is what made him convince his present wife Samiha to attend the dinner. Observing Istanbul that night from the top floor made him realise how different the city looked like some forty years ago; he had then viewed it from the top of a hill along with his father. The city that was full of factories and poor neighbourhoods, has now transformed into an "ocean of apartment blocks of varying heights" (Pamuk, 2015, p.578). "The city- powerful, untamed, frighteningly real- still felt unbreachable" to him. Watching Istanbul, at fifty five years of age from far up was at once "dreadful and dazzling". Everything that existed forty years ago had been replaced by a "concrete curtain formed by all the tall new buildings", yet he could "make out traces of old Istanbul" (p. 579). What Mevlut viewed was, as Certeau (1988) points out:

> A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilised before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide-extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's building, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space. (p. 91)

Seeing Istanbul from top, Mevlut realised that the "light and darkness in his mind" was akin to the "night time landscape of the city". He was undoubtedly an integral part of Istanbul, or Istanbul was an integral part of his existence. And this underlines why he had been selling *boza* in the streets of Istanbul every evening for the past forty years. Mevlut realized that "walking around the city at night made him feel as if he were wandering inside his own head. That was why whenever he spoke to the walls, advertisements, shadows, and strange and mysterious shapes he couldn't see in the night, he always felt as if he were talking to himself" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 579).

The French cultural critic, Michel de Certeau is concerned with the everyday actions of the common people (like walking) that tend to resist the ruling structures and powers. Certeau (1988) underscores the prominence of walking over viewing from above; for

him "the ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below" (p. 93). He points out that "they walk- an elementary form of this experience of the city, they are walkers, *Wandersmanner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it" (p.93).

> These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen, their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterised by their blindness. The networks of these moving intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to interpretations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (Certeau, 1988, p. 93)

Mevlut wanders through the mazy streets of Istanbul, selling boza, though he is now aligned to the newly sprung "concrete curtain" (5 Pamuk, 2015, p. 79). He could still discern traces of old Istanbul amidst the new. At every possible opportunity he would turn to the empty streets selling boza. This practice of walking the city, selling boza, thus encapsulates certain "strangeness that does not surface" (93). The city that he saw from above the balcony seemed similar to the "gravestones in the picture from the *Righteous Path*" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 581), he felt that the city had been conveying messages to him in the past forty years of selling *boza*. He felt that it was his turn to respond, and starts pondering over what to say to the city. As he wandered the streets selling *boza* one night, he realised that he sold *boza*, because he wanted to do so and wouldn't give up, that he would "sell *boza* until the day the world ends" (Pamuk, 2015, p.584). The past is so much in him that he cannot give up the tradition of walking in the city and selling boza. The boza represents everything ethnic and true to his identity. The protagonist's unwillingness to give up his true self in the midst of change remains crucial to this narrative, as it upholds the essence of being one with one's city.

In *A Strangeness in my Mind,* Pamuk traces the modernisation of Turkey as he depicts the life of Melvut Karatas over

a span of forty years. The modernisation of Turkey stands tall in the history of Turkey. As the president of Turkey, Ataturk succeeded in creating a new nation that was almost self-sufficient and independent. The Kemalist reforms transformed and even revolutionized the country; however, the consequences were extreme. The consequences that underlie such transformation form the basis of Pamuk's oeuvre. As Pamuk (2010) opines:

> Seen through the eyes of it characters, the world of the novel seems closer and more comprehensible to us. It is this proximity that lends the art of the novel its irresistible power. Yet the primary focus is not on the personality and morality of the leading characters, but the nature of their world. The life of the protagonists, their place in the world, the way they feel, see and engage with their world-this is the subject of the literary novel. (p.60)

As characters are semiotic constructs of the author, it is through the protagonist Mevlut that we engage in the discourse that Pamuk has set in motion. Born in a poor village, Mevlut shifted to Istanbul with his father when he was just twelve. The novel, in the form of a bildungsroman, traces Mevlut's adventures and dreams as he migrates from the village to the city of Istanbul. The novel describes in detail the migration of poor villagers like Mevlut and his father to the city, their attempts at building simple homes on distant uninhabited hills, and the struggle for land entitle-ment as Istanbul bears witness to its own growth and decay. Metaphorically, Mevlut thus becomes a chronicler of the changing attributes of Istanbul from 1969 to 2012. Though basically a third person narration, the story of Mevlut/Istanbul is unravelled through different points of view, through the first person narration of Mevlut himself as well as the multitude of characters we meet in the narrative like his cousin-Suleyman, his father-Mustafa Efendi and many other acquaintances of Mevlut. Such a multiple perspective structure is a frequent technique used in novels where collective past is represented. The perspective structure functions as a fundamental device that allows for the negotiation of collective memories, identities, and value hierarchies. As Brigit Neumann (2008) says:

> Texts with a multi-perspectival narration or focalization provide insight into the memories of several narrative instances or figures and in this way they can reveal the functioning and problems of collective memory-creation. An analysis of the perspective structure provides information about the social structure of the fictional world and about the importance or value of specific versions of the past: Which versions of memory are articulated, which remain underrepresented? Who or what is remembered by whom? Are there convergences between the individual memory perspectives or are they incompatible opposites in the battle for interpretative sovereignty?
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> A fundamental privilege of fictional texts is to integrate culturally separated memory versions by means of mutual perspectivization, bringing together things remembered and things tabooed and testing the memory-cultural relevance of commonly marginalized versions of memory. By giving voice to those previously silenced fictions of memory, they constitute an imaginative counter-memory, thereby challenging the hegemonic memory culture and questioning the socially established boundary between remembering and forgetting. (p.338)

The third person narrator begins the narrative in medias res, narrating the day when Mevlut eloped with a girl named Rayiha (though he had in mind a different person attached to the name). A strange feeling crept into him as he realised that the girl he had written letters to was not the one who was with him on the day of elopement. He had mistaken Rayiha for her sister Samiha and wrote letters to Rayiha. Yet, he didn't try to resolve the confusion, though he knew he had to spend his life with this girl. He became a *boza* seller to earn his daily bread, but twelve years after his elopement, he realised that "in Istanbul [the] custom of buying goods from street vendors by means of a basket tied to a rope and dropped down from an upper-story window had all but disappeared" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 17). Mevlut works hard for his family trying to sell yoghurt, rice dishes and ice-cream on the street. He even ventures into business, joins a new electricity company and so on. As he remembers his past in Istanbul, Mevlut chronicles various cataclysmic events like the political clashes between the left

and the right, outbursts of ethnic and sectarian violence, terrorist assaults, military coups, and even an earthquake. Mevlut is evidently a representative figure of modern Turkey. He is devoid of political views as he felt "something pretentious about politics when it is taken to extremes" and is more troubled about his survival (Pamuk, 2015, p. 124).

Pamuk's portrayal of a boza seller who wanders through the streets of Istanbul crying "Boo-Zaa", carrying his wares with the aid of a long stick balanced across his shoulders becomes significant as Mevlut emerges as a link to a tradition that endures in the midst of modernisation. And more fervently, the beverage, *boza*, appears to offer a special bonding between the past and the present.

> ... boza is a traditional Asian beverage made of fermented wheat, with a thick consistency, a pleasant aroma, a dark yellowish color, and low alcohol content....
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> Boza is quick to spoil and turn sour in the heat ... when the Ottomans ruled, it was sold mainly in shops and during winter. By the time the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, the boza shops in Istanbul had long closed down . . . . But the street vendors who sold this traditional drink never left. After the 1950s, boza selling became a preserve of those like Mevkut, who walked the poor and neglected cobblestone streets in winter evenings crying "Bozaaa", reminding us of centuries past, and the good old days that have come and gone. (Pamuk, 2015, p.18)

Pamuk's works have always chronicled the ambivalent existence of the Turkish people living in a nation caught between tradition and modernity. Mevlut, like other protagonists of Pamuk, is engrossed in the *huzun*/melancholy of his city, Istanbul. He too like Galip in *The Black Book* roams around the concrete city of Istanbul. "Mevlut had been in Istanbul for forty- three years. For the first thirty-five, every year that went by seemed to strengthen his bond with the city. Lately, however, he'd begun to feel increasingly alienated from it" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 573). The transformation of Istanbul was so drastic that the "memories now looked like fairy tales" to him. A feeling of strangeness always engulfed his public and private thoughts as he lived his life witnessing the transmogrification of his city, Istanbul.

The final chapter, "The Form of a City", declares "I can only Meditate When I'm Walking" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 563). The practice of walking is what connects Mevlut to Istanbul now. Life had indeed changed and he felt alienated as millions of new people replaced the old inhabitants. Buildings of the late 1960s were being demolished and "it was as if people who lived in these old buildings had run out of time they'd been allotted in the city" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 574). He resorts to walking in the streets selling boza to listen to the wonderful things that the city would tell him. He envisions Rayiha, his late wife, waiting for him in a mansion, but how hard he tried; he couldn't find the door to her mansion. As if in a maze he just kept going around in circles. The streets had changed drastically, and so to meet Rayiha, he had no other option but to walk along the new streets. He felt incapable of differentiating reality from the figments of his imagination, be it his feeling that Rayiha is waiting for him or that someone is watching him from above as he walked the streets selling *boza,* or that the skyscrapers looked like gravestones as he looked down from above. But he felt assured that every time he called out, "Boo-zaa", it did reach out to the people inside their homes. Once again, walking in the streets, crying "Boo-zaa" Mevlut realized what "he wanted to tell Istanbul and write on its walls. . . .It was both his public and his private view; it was what his heart intended as much as what his words had always meant to say" (Pamuk, 2015, p.584). The novel ends with these words from Mevlut-"I have loved Rayiha more than anything in this world" (Pamuk, 2015, p. 584). Mevlut, thus appears to attach himself to an old Istanbul, where he lived with his first wife Rayiha before its transformation.

Taking cue from Kant, Certeau states that narration is "a balancing act" in which circumstances and the speaker participate in a tactical process. He equates narration to the "art of making a "coup" with the fictions of stories" (Certeau, 1988, p.79). Delineating the relation between narration and tactics, Certeau advances the theory of practices which takes the form of a way of narrating them. Orhan Pamuk appears to be actively engaged in this balancing act as he narrates stories about Istanbul. His postmodern self-reflexive narration equates to fictional "coups" that Certeau speaks about. His narratives

are instances of subversion, where he rejects both Islamic conservatism as well as extreme westernisation to suggest the possibility of a third/ alternate approach than binary oppositions.

Mevlut, the protagonist is an ordinary person, who lives his life quite normally though his environment questions his existence. As times change, he remains an extremely hard working everyman selling boza. Street life proves more compelling to Mevlut even when yogurt finds place directly in shops. He continues to traverse the city after dark calling out "bozaaaaa" delivering it in person. Between the two extremes resides Mevlut, a living reminder of the past, suggesting a third space-which is at once real and imagined. Mevlut, in his act of walking through the city, seems to challenge all conventional and accepted modes of thinking about the meaning and significance of space. Pamuk blatantly draws attention to the dynamic, relational and agentive role of space as he describes and the streets of Istanbul frequented by Mevlut. The narrative is ostensibly a depiction of daily life; about how the self and the surroundings complement each other creating experiences. As Brigit Neuman (2008) says,

> Fictions of memory may exploit the representation of space as a symbolic manifestation of individual or collective memories. Space may not only provide a cue triggering individual, often repressed, past experiences; it may also conjure up innumerable echoes and undertones of a community's past. Hence, space serves to symbolically mediate past events, underlining the constant, physical presence of the multi-layered cultural past, which is even inscribed in the landscape and in the architecture. (p.340)

The lived space, exemplified by Mevlut's act of walking through the streets selling boza, constantly negotiates the experiences of both the physical and ideological space. As Edward Soja proposes, the third lived space is simultaneously "real-and-imagined" or, something physical, mental, and powerfully transformative of human experience (as cited in Bachmann-Medick, 2016, p. 221). For Soja, third space is a space of opportunity and potential, a space where transformation is possible. By narrating in terms of the third space/lived space, Pamuk disrupts the conventional modes of thinking and writing. As Mevlut witnesses the modernisation of Turkey, there are opportunities for

him too, but he is unwilling to embrace it, unwilling to forsake his roots. He remains loyal to his memories and hence to his emotions for Istanbul by voicing the hitherto marginalised memories. Mevlut thus appears to voice a much needed alliance between and the past and the present rather than letting the past fall into oblivion. Orhan Pamuk's *A Strangeness in My Mind* thus directs our attention to the 'third space'/ 'lived space' through the act of walking in search "for the melancholic soul of his city, Istanbul" (nobelprize.org).

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