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Fluid Identities in Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle*

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Defining identities has been an elusive task for generations of philosophers and thinkers. Identities are ever changing and constantly end up in identifications. The Cartesian cogito establishes the soul as the 'I' as the body is the inert non-thinking thing in the body- soul combination. This emphasis on thinking is explored in Pamuk's novel The White Castle in which doppelgangers engage in elaborate thinking exercises. This study examines how Pamuk engages with question of identity head on by exploring the identities of two individuals who are similar in appearance. The characters are constructed as representatives of the East and the West. But the inner urges of the Western character the Venetian are more inclined to luxuries while Hoja is obsessed with science and learning. This study substantiates how Pamuk has deliberately deconstructed this binary and enacted an inversion of the interiority of identity in favour of performativity.

Keywords: Identity, Fluid identities, Binary oppositions, East-West dichotomy, Performativity

Introduction

Orhan Pamuk, in his books, adopts an approach in which he explores the interiority of his protagonists rather than allowing individuals to express themselves via their behaviours and relationships with one another. Pamukian characters exhibit a yearning for the need

for self-knowledge and actively engage in pursuits that they hope will capture the essence of being that has eluded them till date. They wrongly attribute their inadequacies or rather 'lack' to immediate circumstances, totally unaware that the lack is never going to be addressed.

The White Castle is a doppelganger drama that delves deeper below the similarities in outward appearance. It records the experiences of a Venetian who is captured by Turkish pirates and taken to Istanbul while on a voyage from Venice to Naples. This story is recounted while still living in Istanbul almost fifty years later. The narrator who is learned and fond of books get preferential treatment from the pasha. He is called for occasionally to treat the pasha when ill. But that doesn't exempt him from the requirement of converting to Islam if he wanted to stay alive. He soon ends up at the guillotine, from where he is rescued by his look-alike who is known only by the moniker Hoja, literally master. It adds to the question of identity in the novel that neither the Venetian nor the Turkish master is named in the novel.

The narrator and Hoja have a symbiotic relationship where the narrator is kept alive by Hoja's thirst for knowledge. Hoja is ecstatic that he gets to extract the secrets of Western enlightenment first hand from an Italian. Hoja and the narrator involve themselves in an array of scientific projects that exalt them in the eyes of the sultan. The story complicates itself with a constant shift in narratorial voice. At times the narrator is the Venetian scholar and at others, it is Hoja who has been imagining the whole episode. This muddled up narrative and the elaborate action in the plot that involves interchange of identities between the Venetian and Hoja examine the nature of identity.

The thinking self

The Cartesian definition of bodies is that they are by their nature inert, it cannot be attributed agency. It cannot move by itself, sense or think. Thus, 'I' cannot be a body. But when in doubt about the nature of 'I', it is proof enough that 'I' exist. The existence of bodies is still doubtful, while it is certain for Descartes that 'I' as a thinking thing exists. Since it is not the body, 'I' can be defined negatively as a non-bodily or immaterial thing (Skirry, 2008, p. 34). *The White Castle,* in its plot structure, by positing two individuals who are

identical in appearance, relegates the material body to the back seat and concentrates on the 'I'. It is the soul that is immaterial and the real essence of self.

Orhan Pamuk, in this seminal novel takes the question of identity head-on. The outward similarities between Hoja and the narrator in the narrative sets the stage to examine the constituents of identity that make up the 'self' of the Turkish sage or scientist, Hoja and the Venetian sailor captured and enslaved by the Ottomans. The uncanny resemblance between the two unnerves the narrator while the master, Hoja seems impervious to the fact. But this facade is soon torn away and together they begin to explore the avenues of similarities and differences that tell each other apart. The relationship between the two turns out to be symbiotic with Hoja's unquenchable thirst for knowledge and 'science' and the narrator's need for companionship. The identities of the two melt and merge until they are virtually interchangeable. The conceit that drives the story is the two sides of the dichotomy that they represent. The narrator presents the ostensible rational Western entity while Hoja embodies the anticipated Eastern other. The tables are however turned when the dichotomy breaks down with the two exhibiting more similarities than differences that eventually forefront the rationalist nature in both.

Identity is an elusive concept that has disturbed the smug confines of definition. Even as politics of identity is invoked repeatedly to compartmentalize experiences and allocate entities in various subject positions, theories of identity continue to emphasize the construction of identity as an ongoing process rather than a fixity defined by past life. Pamuk has played on the floating nature of identity by creating look-alikes that attempt to acquire self-knowledge through painstaking exercises of introspection. The shared experiences of the two however culminate in forging a shared identity that blurs the line between dreams and reality; memory and imagination.

In *The White Castle*, at the dinner to celebrate the Pasha's return from Erzurum, the Pasha confesses that whenever he tried to think of the narrator's face, what popped up in his mind was the face of Hoja. There is a discussion on how human beings are created in pairs; about twins and bandits who stole lives of innocents and lived

their lives. All the intrigue inherent in the subject due to muddled up information that defies comprehension displeases the Pasha. He tries to pay attention to the explanations of Hoja regarding the clock and the power of prayer performed at exactly the same time. He watches the Earth and the stars turn on the elaborate orrery. But nothing serves to distract him from the jarring consciousness of the mysterious similarities between Hoja and the Venetian. This duplicity haunts him to such an extent that the theories, ideas and inventions of Hoja do not interest him.

In the Pasha's disillusionment is the reflection of the universal desire to pin identity. The predicament portrayed through the conceit trying to assign identities to two look-alikes attempts to do the impossible. The poststructuralist breach in signifier/signified bond that freed the signifiers from the signifieds set the tide of signifiers floating. It is futile to try to pin them to a definite entity, because the ever-changing nature of the signified evades any effort to stabilise any architectonic structure between the two. The construction of identity is never complete. The ongoing process necessitates constant revision of defined identities. This ubiquitous phenomenon foils the Pasha's bid to assign the identity of 'Hoja' to one and that of the Venetian to the other. They continue to float and mingle as if in a dream escaping stability.

> The question of identities overwhelms him so much so that he explodes:
>
> 'Be rid of him!' he'd said. 'If you like, poison him, if you like, free him. You'll be more at ease.' I must have glanced at Hoja with fear and hope for a moment. He said he would not free me until 'they' realized.
>
> I didn't ask what it was that they must realize. And perhaps I had a premonition which made me afraid I might find that Hoja didn't know what it was either. (Pamuk, 2009, p. 29)

The question of identity disturbs Hoja and the narrator as well. The scientist that he is, Hoja likens the insides of their heads to trunks with lids or cupboards in their rooms- tangible receptacles that could be opened up and frisked for its contents. This exercise, of course, is rendered futile by the decidedly elusive nature of identity. Hoja wanted to open up the drawers and search the compartments in the narrator's

head to soak up all the ideas and theories of Science that the 'others' had filled it with. It is precisely, the contents of these drawers that distinguish Hoja and the narrator.

Hoja's thirst for knowledge overrides his emotions and curiosities. He is at first seen unaffected by their resemblance. Everybody except Hoja seemed to notice the resemblance. The pasha's obvious dismay is reassuring to the narrator who finds a reflection of his disillusionment. This secret which Hoja didn't want to acknowledge was the stick that the narrator was going to use to beat him with.

Hoja's primary concern is to make the most of the opportunity of having a representative of the West under his patronage. We find that as soon as he is relieved from his immediate scientific exercises, he pounces on a trail to unravel the existential question. "Who can know why a man is the way he is anyway?"(Pamuk, 2009, p. 37). But in the absence of a prodding partner to engage in dialogue, the question remains unanswered. The narrator finds his learning inadequate to address the issue satisfactorily and evades the question. When confronted repeatedly, the narrator tries to ward off the discussion giving varied pretexts. It is the narrator's helplessness that we find in his excuses. He acknowledges that it is a question that has disturbed many minds in his native country, but he does not have a plausible explanation to it.

The narrator at first advises Hoja to "think about why he was what he was" (Pamuk, 2009, p. 49). This inevitably leads to the Cartesian dictum cogito, ergo sum – "I think, therefore I am", though the narrator seemingly has no obvious purpose in dispensing with this advice. Descartes, in his extended philosophical investigations have tried to grapple with the issue of self-knowledge. Rejecting the Aristotelian presumption of man as a rational animal, he doesn't mask his distaste for dialectics which he feels only serves to obscure the natural light of reason. For Descartes, the only way to gain knowledge is intuitively or deductively.

"Caretesian 'intuition' consists in a mental or intellectual 'look' or 'gaze'. What this implies is that there are some truths that the mind can immediately perceive without the mediation of something else" (Skirry, 2008, p. 11). Descartes' belief in the characteristic of the mind

to grasp the truth or knowledge is explicitly implied in his faith in the power of intuition.

> By 'intuition' I do not mean the fluctuating testimony of the senses or the deceptive judgement of the imagination as it botches things together but the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there is no room for doubt about what we are understanding. Alternatively, and this comes to the same thing, intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason.(Descartes as cited in Cottingham, 2013, p. xiii)

The only certainty that 'I' or a self must exist springs from a point of doubt. According to Descartes, the very presence of doubt presupposes an entity that doubts or rather thinks. This actor, here the thinker pre-exists the action, that is, doubting or thinking. Hence, 'I think, therefore I am' is self-justified. This knowledge though appears to be deductively arrived at, is an act of intuition. This may be explained using Descartes' attribution of perception of truths as self-evident when the chain of deduction is so short that it does not necessitate the use of memory to retain linking arguments. On the contrary, it is perceived or 'recognized' by an act of simple intuition.

Thinking as a legitimate exercise to arrive at truths thus gains centre-stage. The off-hand remark of the narrator that he should think 'why he was what he was' turns out to be a loaded proposition- a method endorsed by giants like Descartes. Leading the discussion or line of thought in the direction seems more than mere co-incidence in *The White Castle.*

Pamuk's extended deliberation on the nature of human identity takes on philosophical overtones that transcend conventional characterization techniques employed in novel. The characters in the novel are self-reflective and the intrigue drives the whole plot. Hoja and the narrator write about themselves in an attempt to discover the essence of their selves.

Descartes' response to the question 'What am I?', examines the duality of existence. On the one hand, he is the mechanical configuration of limbs called 'the body' and on the other he is nourished, moved about and engaged in sense perception and thinking, which is

attributed to the soul. Hence, he was a combination of body and soul. But the Cartesian concept of the body is that it is inert, something incapable of self-movement. Something that cannot move, sense or think cannot possibly be 'I'. Veritably, 'I' is negatively defined as "a non-bodily or immaterial thing" (Skirry, 2008, p. 34).

Pamuk echoes this belief in various instances in the novels. The narrator has repeated dreams where he finds himself separated from his body. He tells Hoja of a dream he had of how his body separated itself from him and joined with a look-alike. The two of them conspired against the narrator. Dreams verily defy reality. Here, the body of the narrator conspiring against him would require them to direct their conspiracy against his asomatous self – his thinking self.

Thought alone is indispensible for me to exist. It is thinking that differentiates a human being from an animal. 'I', then am a thinking thing, the nature of which is immaterial, signified variably as 'a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason' (Cottingham, 2013). For Descartes, mind is the human soul as this is what makes humans unique.

In Pamuk's *The White Castle*, the question of the human soul is examined in depth by analysing the process of thinking. Analysis in the true Cartesian manner of study follows the order of discovery. The approach is a posteriori where particular instances are studied to understand the causes. Thought that inevitably ensues from self, is recorded in pages day after day. The narrator's suggestion that one can know oneself by examining one's thoughts is put into practice. But before that we find that the narrator explodes suggesting that "a person could no more discover who he was by thinking about it than by looking in a mirror" (Pamuk, 2009, p. 50) - a direct reference of two noted ways of knowing the self: thinking as the proof to existence, and the mirror which initiates the sense of selfhood in an individual according to Lacan. We will examine the literal enactment of the mirror exercise later.

Writing the self

Hoja turns the tables on the narrator and asks him to write about himself. The narrator begins by writing down about his happy childhood at Empoli. Hoja was quick to notice that this could not possibly be what 'they' thought about when 'they' contemplated them-

selves in the mirror. The narrator however kept up with recounting his past - two months of reviving and reviewing all the happy and sometimes painful memories. It was starting to get interesting for the narrator. He needed no goading anymore. He was actually starting to enjoy it. It was the narrator now who took the initiative and whetted Hoja's appetite by revealing tiny bits of information which Hoja would inevitably latch on to.

It was at this time that he spoke of an experience in childhood when he had gotten into the habit of thinking the same thing at the same time with a friend of his. This is clearly more than child's play. According to Descartes, a person is the combination of body and soul. The soul of a human self is distinct from that of an animal in that that it can think. This faculty of the mind which affords acts of intelligence and volition is what the human soul is. It is the mind. And for Descartes the mind is better known than the body. The body can be known only through the senses which cannot be relied upon as it is deceptive. The senses deceive and only the mind is able to grasp the real truth. In a context where the body is inconsequential and the mind prime, the self is where the mind is.

The narrator and his friend do not share bodily attributes but parallel their acts of intellect. When his friend dies, the narrator fears that he will be mistaken for the dead child and buried instead. This is legitimate because it is only the insignificant part of the body-soul duality -that is, the body - in which they differ. It is only the unreliable senses that are capable of distinguishing this difference. Otherwise, the most important part of the mind-body duality, the mind becomes indistinguishable the moment they start thinking alike. The likeness of thoughts equates the two in such a manner that the two boys are one and the same to the mind. And the mind perceives more readily without the mediation of the deceptive senses. It is only natural that the boy fears interment.

This is a precursor to the exercise that the narrator and Hoja are going to undertake. The narrator and Hoja are one step forward in their merger as they are already similar in appearance. The melding of souls will render the two so equal that it would no doubt be impossible to tell one from the other.

The narrator is the only one writing in the beginning as Hoja shies away from the challenge. Later, Hoja decrees that they would both write sitting at the table facing one another. More than a simple face-off, this was a confrontation of minds testing dangerous waters. Hoja is reluctant to step in and scrawls a few sentences for the narrator's go-ahead before embarking on a full-fledged exposition of his past. Writing and exchanging their past experiences, the narrator and Hoja have succeeded in amalgamating a section of their mind or soul; apart from similarities in their bodies. The gap is now closing in. The narrator seems aware of the course this journey would take and encourages him to write further as he "already sensed that I would later adopt his manner and his life-story as my own"(Pamuk, 2009, p. 53).

Pamuk begins merging the identities of the characters through the middle of the novel when the two start exchanging thoughts. Hoja observes that they should be writing down thoughts and not just memories. It is in his thoughts that a man could examine his essence (Pamuk, 2009, p. 55). Hoja had faltered at a point when he could only think of why others were so foolish. The narrator suggests that he should try recording the faults in himself. Owning up on his negative side could bring out a more comprehensive account of his self.

Hoja was reluctant to admit to his faults and it irked him so much that he compels the narrator to write by tying him into his chair. The only brief that Hoja could give him was the analogy of the mirror: “just as a person could view his external self in the mirror, he should be able to observe the interior of his mind in his thoughts” (Pamuk, 2009, p. 56). The narrator with no choice but to write had to persist in detailing his negative aspects. Under pressure to go on, he starts exaggerating his faults and the transgressions so angered Hoja that he would beat him up regularly.

The narrator suffering Hoja's violence rather than breaking down was emboldened by a strange sense of security. The activity was dictated by Hoja but the narrator controlled the outcome. The narrator had the reins to Hoja’s thoughts and behavior and could dictate Hoja's response to the writing. Hoja finally recognises the futility of the act that has now become defunct. The writing now was not a

reflection of thoughts but a sham that was entertaining at times and at times provocative.

When Hoja finally has had enough and suggests moving to Gebze for a change of scene, the narrator tried to arouse his curiosity by goading him to write about himself.

> (W)hat would he lose if, before leaving for Gebze, he tried one last time- in order to understand how I could be the way I was - to write about his own faults? What he wrote need not even be true, nor need anyone believe it. If he did this he would understand me and those like me, and one day the knowledge could be useful to him! (Pamuk, 2009, p. 57)

Hoja takes up the challenge and starts writing, but tears up whatever was written at the end of the day. He storms out to the prostitutes. But he sits down to write again the next day and we see gradual changes as he finally gets down to actually penning down his faults. Now he doesn't tear it up, but he doesn't show it to the narrator. At first, Hoja had insisted on the narrator sitting in front of him at the table while he wrote, but now he doesn't insist. This was progress. However, the narrator is aware that Hoja's identity lay in the papers. He knew the power he could wield if he could get hold of the papers.

Hoja's contempt for the narrator was receding because he could see that he was equally contemptible. The activity, therefore, was not in vain. Hoja had better understanding of himself and this understanding gave him better perspective of the behaviour and character of others. The dawning of this knowledge may be the reason that he does not strike the narrator even when he realises at times that the narrator was playing him.

The thought of the superiority that he would gain when Hoja had thoroughly humiliated himself by immersing himself in his own sins was the glimmer of hope that sustained the narrator. He thought that he could then demand his freedom. But it was at this time that the plague broke out in the city and got the narrator all paranoid. Hoja felt that the narrator's accounts of his wickedness did not imply courage. It was rather his shamelessness that eventuated in the candid confessions. It was during these times that the narrator attempts to capture the meaning of dreams; an exercise that would later be practised with

the sultan.

The exercise later extends to include the body. Hoja who had so far categorically ignored his resemblance to the narrator is emboldened enough to look in the mirror with his doppelganger. This spooky exercise freaks the narrator out. The breakout of the plague at about the same time intensifies the narrator's fears as Hoja had an unexplained boil on his abdomen. Hoja is amused by the narrator's fears and he seemed to forget his existential crisis momentarily and is entertained by provoking the narrator. The later mirror exercise, however, reveal the repressed desires and fears that he had kept under wraps in his enthusiasm for knowledge. Hoja is relentlessly in pursuit of a resolution to the question of identity.

Conclusion

Hoja and the narrator are presented as the two sides of a coin in this fable that presents a postmodern conceit in the characters representing the two poles of the East-West dichotomy; yet cannot form clear binaries because of the unmistakable similarities in their appearances. It is not just appearance that binds them together but how Pamuk has cleverly intertwined their identities that eventually mingle and merge.

Ever since the narrator's bondage, we find the narrator more inclined to an easy life without any discernible drive to acquire knowledge. The fireworks, the clock and the war-machine are all projects that they undertake together at the behest of Hoja. Hoja is seen constantly engaged in intellectual pursuits: the enthusiasm for which he wants those around him to share. He is frustrated by the smug ignorance in which they while away their time. His contempt is more than evident in his preoccupation with 'his fools' that at times threatens to inundate his own productive endeavours. Despite being a native of the East, Hoja's rationality deconstructs the binary that relegates rationality and emotions to two sides of a neat bar. Hoja is hardly seen as the exotic 'other' languishing in luxuries, rather his scientific aspirations set him closer to the Western stereotype. The Venetian however is seen settling into a comfortable life in the city when he gives up all hopes of escape. He has been around long enough to feel at home in the circumstances. Moreover he reasons that his mother and fiancée

would have naturally given up hope on him and moved on in life. Both Venice and Istanbul were his home now.

The narrator is not devoid of scholarly ambitions. Initially in the novel, we find that he'd rather not leave without a book even though it is into captivity.

> My eyes filled with tears as I turned the pages of a volume I'd paid dearly for in Florence; I heard shrieks, footsteps rushing back and forth, an uproar going on outside, I knew that at any moment the book would be snatched from my hand, yet I wanted to think not of that but of what was written on its pages. It was as if the thoughts, the sentences, the equations in the book contained the whole of my past life which I dreaded to lose; while I read random phrases under my breath, as though reciting a prayer.(Pamuk, 2009, p. 6)

But this love for books is not a universal Western phenomenon. It is the narrator alone of all the captives who is treated preferentially for his knowledge of medicine. It is this love for learning that has Hoja yearning. He rescues the Venetian from the gallows and takes him home. Thus begins the process of introspection and exploration.

The distinction between Hoja and the narrator begins to blur when Hoja starts working on the weapons project alone. The intellectual domain purportedly a Western terrain is mastered by Hoja as seen in his work on the weapon independent of the Venetian. From this point onwards the interchange of identities progresses continually. Hoja is now sure of himself and works diligently for years as the Venetian settles to his Turkish life. He moves around in Turkish aristocratic circles indulging in affluence and stuffing himself; while Hoja seems to have forsaken this side of life completely.

> In the absence of a core from which identity emanates, the approach angle has been reversed. Forms of identity are often internalized by the individual who takes them on. This process can be theorized in terms of what Judith Butler has called 'performativity'. This refers to the repeated assumption of identities in the course of daily life.(Weedon, 2013, p. 6)

Judith Butler in explaining the expression of gender identity states, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Thus, expressions by means of dress, behaviour, walking, etc do not ensue from identity but actually construct identity. The construction of identity depends on explicit processes of identification with certain established codes. This is in tandem with Lacanian psychoanalytical theory that foregrounds identification as central to the process of individuation. The individual inserted into a specific discourse acquires cultural practices of the discourse. This is by no means natural. It is the repetition of the modes of subjectivity and identity that is gradually internalized to form part of the lived subjectivity which is later experienced as natural.

This is what we encounter in the evolution of the Venetian sailor in *The White Castle.* He is confounded by the presence of the doppelganger and struggles to make sense of the situation. His sense of self is under threat and we find his fears visiting him in his dreams.

> ...a dream I'd had: he had gone to my country in my place, was marrying my fiancée, at the wedding no one realized that he was not me, and during the festivities which I watched from a corner dressed as a Turk, I met up with my mother and fiancée who both turned their backs on me without recognizing who I was, despite the tears which finally wakened me from my dream. (Pamuk, 2009, p. 35)

This is the first instance of the interchange of identities which is established by a simple exchange of attire.

The introduction of a simple piece of furniture like a table is an intervention into the prevailing discourse. The use of a table is an innovative behaviour that adds to the process of identity construction. Hoja unaccustomed to the concept of a table likens it to a funeral bier initially. Performing acquired practices repeatedly establishes new modes of subjectivity and identity. Earlier Hoja is not pleased with the appearance of the table but he later finds it practical. "He grew accustomed to both the chairs and the table; he declared he thought and wrote better this way" (Pamuk, 2009, p. 25).

> As individuals inserted within speci?c discourses, we repeatedly perform modes of subjectivity and identity until these are experi-

> enced as if they were second nature. Where they are successfully internalized, they become part of lived subjectivity. Where this does not occur, they may become the basis for dis-identi?cation or counteridenti?cations which involve a rejection of hegemonic identity norms. (Weedon, 2013, p. 7)

This is seen to have enacted in the case of the narrator who was inserted into the Eastern circumstances and has imbibed the ways of the individuals there by means of the simple process of performativity. This study has thus posited that the question of identity dissected from the interior angle in *The White Castle* is resolved by the inversion enacted in performativity, provisionally only.

Further studies on the mirror exercise that the two characters engage in will benefit engagement from a Lacanian perspective. The explicit trope of slave-master is replicated in the characters of the narrator and Hoja. This warrants an application of the Hegelian slave-master dialectic to see how that adds to the arguments in this paper.

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