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East-West Dichotomy in Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle*

Soumya Samanta

Lecturer in English

Department of English

Science College Autonomous Hinjilicut,

Odisha, India

Email Id: smsmnt520@gmail.com

ORCID Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7682-7704>

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* is a historical novel that is set during the Ottoman reign. The novel presents the metaphysical opposition of East and West, self and the other, intuition and reason, mysticism, science and global and local, and the recurring issues of conflict of civilization, identity crisis, and cultural variations. Orhan Pamuk as a postmodern writer tries to bridge the gap between the East and the West through his writings. Although Turkey is at the backdrop in most of his novels, the treatment of themes is universal. The paper proposes the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said, which represents the encounter and treatment of the "Orient." The concept of identity expressed by Pamuk in his wide range of novels also can be related to the "Orient" and "Occident." The culture of the East has always been portrayed as the binary opposite of Europe in history and fiction. The loss of identity of the East reflected in the works of Pamuk is an outcome of the clash between East and Europe, further leading to chaotic contexts and dilemmatic protagonists. Individuals unable to choose between the traditional self and the fashionable West mourn the lost identity of a country and their self.

Keywords: The East-West clash, The Orient, Culture, Dichotomy, Modernism, Mysticism

The internationally acclaimed Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk has published more than ten novels and non-fictional works to his credit. Translated into more than sixty-three languages and selling over thirteen million books have made him the best seller in Turkey. His novels cover a gamut of subjects ranging from identity loss to imitating the West and East-West tensions to tradition and modernism. The writings of Pamuk were compared with the works of literary stalwarts such as V. S Naipaul, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Salman Rushdie. Pamuk received the Nobel Prize in 2006 for his exquisite prose and glorious representations of history. *The New York Times* Book Review asserted, "A new star has risen in the east—Orhan Pamuk." Pamuk began shifting from modernism to postmodernism, experimenting with its techniques with the publication of *The White Castle* in 1990.

Pamuk's works usually deal with the tensions entrenched between East and West and tradition and modernity. The hypothesis of this paper involves tracing the elements of contrast/conflict by establishing the coexistence of factors/subjects representing East and West. It has also been observed that the important component of the implicit discourse--such as the doppelganger theme, the postmodern and postcolonial concepts which the Pamuk perform uses in *The White Castle*- serve to discredit some prevailing hegemonic ideas linked with globalisation: the issues of the modern world and particularly Turkey. In consequence, the postmodern concept of identity vs. otherness, east vs. west is being used as filters in our interpretation. The theme of *The White Castle* has a direct connection with Pamuk's relation with his competitive elder brother, whom he considers as his 'alter ego, the representation of authority.' The theme of impersonation reflected in the novel is compared with the way Turkey grapples with the Western way of life and culture. Pamuk says that,

I realized that this jealousy—the anxiety about being influenced by someone else—resembles Turkey's position when it looks west. You know, aspiring to become Westernized and then being accused of not being authentic enough. Trying to grab the spirit of Europe and then feeling guilty about the imitative drive. The ups and downs of this mood are reminiscent of the relationship between competitive brothers. (*Other Colours* 368)

As Pamuk remarks, the sadomasochistic relation between the two characters of *The White Castle* is based on the author's relationship with his brother.

Esin Akalin, in "The Ottoman Phenomenon and Edward Said's Monolithic Discourse on the Orient," explicates that Said's *Orientalism* attempts to ingratiate the East, undermining the power of the Ottoman Empire, even though the Ottoman Empire was held as the supreme power in the past. Akalin, in addition, disagrees with Said's discourse of generalisation of the East. The context is a bit different here as Turkey has orientalised itself. Esin Akalin further argues that, although Said's generalization of the Orient is questionable; his broad outlines, based on a superficial historical perspective, are deceptive. Said's exaggerated portrayal of the Orient, confirming "its sensuality, tendency to despotism, aberrant mentality, habits of inaccuracy, backwardness" even the straightforward dichotomy of Orient and Occident has

been contested by several current scholars. Daniel Vitkus makes a strong argument against Said's simplistic formulation of Orientalist discourse, stating that it has "theoretical rigidity" and "historical limitations." As said, it would be incorrect to apply Said's dichotomy of patronizing West and humble East to two thousand years of Western civilization, as Western Christians have been subject to Islamic power and affluence since before the 18th century. Thus, Western Christian depictions of Islam must be more sophisticated than those presented by Orientalism.

The problem of identity started with the formation of the new nation-state. Pamuk's works represent a non-stable image/identity keeping Ottoman or Turkish history as the backdrop. The dominant theme is always history, and the characters are usually shown as a symbol of oriental and national at the same time. The characters question their identity that is generally historically imposed, and this is how the narrative proceeds.

Not only does Orhan Pamuk question the meta-narrative of Turkish secular nationalism (Turkism) in its various manifestations, he is thoroughly engaged in the work of interrogating the possibility of national transformations. This is most evident in his representation of Ottoman history, which broadly contains many secular national "taboos," including multiethnicity, multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, religion, and homosexuality, among others. Still, Pamuk is not interested in history with a capital H; he is in the writerly pursuit, rather, of new imaginative spaces. His technique of compounding points of view in a narrative (the very medium through which identity is reified) to destabilize fixed identities has been a characteristic of his work. (Goknar 34)

Orhan Pamuk's works are known to be postmodern and, at the same time, evoking resonances of the vibrant and aesthetically colourful historic period of the Ottoman Empire (1301-1922). The importance of the Ottoman theme to Pamuk is seen by intertwining the 17th century Ottoman Turkey/ Istanbul with the postmodern existential and political issues.

The funeral ceremonies of the former Turkish presidents, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923-38) and Turgut Özal (1989-93), are compared in *"Beloved Istanbul": Realism and the Transnational Imaginary in Turkish Popular Culture* by Martin Stokes to highlight the "multi-souled" nature of Turkey. The above contrast exemplifies the different places of burial when the former was buried in Ankara, the newly found capital, and the latter in Istanbul. Stokes refers to two cities as the country's two faces in this text. Istanbul was vilified as the ancient city that the fallen empire inherited, while Ankara came to be known as the newly developed emblem of the secular and contemporary Republic. In this milieu, Stokes asserts the following:

If modernist republican aspirations were clearly focused on Atatürk's capital, Ankara, Istanbul was condemned as an unpromising site for national regeneration; the labyrinthine complexity of the streets, it was largely fed by Persian, Byzantine, and Arab art, ethics, and traditions. (224)

With Ankara becoming the newly arisen capital, the past and the cosmopolite history of Istanbul was ignored, and the modern and old capitals were depicted as opposed. As a

colonizer-imperial state, the Ottomans' Islamic heritage was always a salient feature to glorify. The transition of the Ottoman empire from a heterogeneous to a monolingual, homogenised nation was a discord between the Islamic-rooted civilizations. This incompatibility resulted in a dislocated identity.

The 15-year presidential regime by Atatürk from 1923-1938 brought several reformations under the Westernization-modernization project. These changes initiated by Atatürk were brought at the cost of eliminating the Ottoman past, which is the major reason for the present-day's identity perplexity.

Turkey was obligated to vacillate between two identities, labelled as the true persona and the imposed other. The traditional and cultural heritage of the East, expressed via the use of the Ottoman alphabet and Ottoman clothing – taken over from its sovereign past. The new mask is imposed upon the other, which the emerging nation attempts to wear. The identity latter of the secular West was developed through the use of the Latin alphabet and the French hat. Turkey's newly created identity attempted to assimilate the undesirable partial presence of Ottoman culture, drifting Turkey into cultural exile within the nation. In this way, one might argue that the monarchical, religious body of government and the tradition of the East were masked by the reformulated national secular Turkish and cultural (Westernization-modernization) identities. In reference to the unambiguous contrast established between imperial history and the republican nation-state, Nergis Canefe argues, "the founding narratives of Turkish national history were efficiently institutionalized, popularized and canonized under the aegis of a Turkish nation-state" (137). As a result, it is reasonable to assert that the leaders to bring westernisation, selected a conscious and internalised repudiation of the Ottoman past. Canefe notices this internalised rejection of the past was "an alarming degree of amnesia institutionalized by the Turkish nation-state" (139) which intended for a communal memory loss and "officialised and popularized forgetfulness" (140).

Stuart Hall asserts in "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" in *Formations of Modernity* that identity is produced by self-regulated "historical and institutional" (4) processes. Significant changes were allegedly undertaken in the name of westernisation in the case of Turkey. One of the amendments was the switch from the Ottoman to the Latin alphabet in 1928. The interstitial mentality that is trapped in-between is best depicted in the prologue to Faruk Darvinoglu's *The White Castle*:

I found this manuscript in 1982 in that forgotten 'archive' . . . at the bottom of a dusty chest stuffed to overflowing with imperial decrees, title deeds... At first, I didn't know what I would do with the book other than to read it over and over again. My distrust of history then was still strong ... after reading a couple of sentences from the manuscript I kept on one table, I'd go to another table in the other room where I kept my papers and try to narrate in today's idiom the sense of what remained in my mind". (*The White Castle* 9-12)

Darvinoglu tells the reader that he has found the manuscript in an old archive at Gebze and is initially unsure what to do with it. Due to his extreme disdain for history, he

concentrates only on the tale. "rather than the manuscript's scientific, cultural, anthropological, or 'historical' value" (*The White Castle* 9).

Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) defines the scope as "Orientalism is a style of thought based on the ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'" (*Orientalism* 2). It is a model employed by the West to show their authority and overpower the Orient. It is a consequence of Europe's "mainly British and French political forces and activity as well as domination and hegemony over the East" (*Orientalism* 4). Being a political philosophy, it encourages friction between the East and the West. Based on this philosophy, Said displays that Europe is strong, superior, and developing faster, and the Orient is weak, inferior, and underdeveloped. It simultaneously asserts Denys Hay's concept of the West, "the idea of European identity as a superior one over Oriental backwardness" (*Orientalism* 7). Nevertheless, Said's projection is "how this idea about the Orient is part of Western-style for dominating, restructuring, having authority, and maintaining power over the Orient" (*Orientalism* 3).

The shift from a transnational, ethnolinguistic, and multi-continental empire to a nation-state was difficult. The project of Westernization in the newly found state made the pre-1928 history inaccessible to the new generations in Turkey. So we can say that the Turkish situation exemplifies internalised colonialism. The *White Castle* is an excellent illustration of how tightly East and West ideals are interwoven.

The East-West dialectic in the light of the novel's narrative and frame-tale structure delivered by Pamuk is focussed in this paper. So based on the discussion above, it can be argued that the reality was, the Orient was far stronger than the Occident and controlled both the East and the West in the past. Hence, Said's discourse on Orientalism can bring out the complexity between the East and the West.

The methodological background includes Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The *White Castle* is inextricably linked to Orientalism's discourses through the techniques of intertextuality and narrativity. By refusing to (re)produce binary oppositions, the novel takes a stand against Orientalist discourses. Furthermore, by transforming the novel's presumed incongruous binary oppositions into fluid, malleable, and interchangeable ideas, the novel seeks to challenge Orientalist discourse's hegemony: the West is neither superior nor is there a West without the East. Anti-Orientalism, as defined by Jale Parla, is as follows:

The argument propounding that if the Western subject has an unconsciousness that structures its relation with the East, the Easterner is not a passive or an innocent object either and that it, too, possesses an unconscious that constitutes its relationship with the West, is considered an anti-orientalist discourse proposed against orientalist discourses since it implies an optimism regarding the disruption of the binary of East-West which relies on power relations. ("Novel and Identity: *The White Castle*" 93).

Pamuk's work may be described as anti-Orientalist in that it portrays Hoja as an active, rather than passive, subject. On the contrary, he is the novel's most active character, with his zealous goals, intellectual ideas, and daring beliefs, eerily mirroring Westerner

personalities as portrayed in Orientalist discourses. According to Parla, the story shows the Westerner's division into two factions as a result of his desire to control the other.

The White Castle is a well-known historical novel set in the seventeenth century during the Ottoman reign bearing the question of national identity and interchangeability. The author uses history to raise socio-cultural awareness. The novel presents the opposition of East and West, self and other, mysticism and science, global and local, and the recurring issues of conflict of civilization, identity crisis, and cultural variations. Orhan Pamuk as a postmodern writer tries to bridge the gap between the East and the West through his writings. Although Turkey is at the backdrop in most of his novels, the treatment of themes is universal. The paper focuses on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism which represents the encounter between the "Orient" and the "Occident" and treatment of the "Orient." The concept of identity expressed by Pamuk in his wide range of novels also can be related to the "Orient" and "Occident." The culture of the East has always been portrayed as the binary opposite of Europe in history and fiction. The loss of identity reflected in the works of Pamuk is an outcome of the clash between the traditional East and fashionable Europe, further leading to chaotic contexts and dilemmatic protagonists.

Apart from the East-West conflict, religious, familial, and political conflicts exist in multiple layers in the works of Pamuk. But he plays out these clashes and provides a solution to the world by promoting the intermingling of the best cultures. *The White Castle* is a story about an Ottoman scholar and a Venetian slave captured. The novel is presented as an archive manuscript—a first-person narrative by the abducted Christian—accompanied by a fictional preface by the modern scholar who purportedly 'discovered' the text. The Venetian, who is sold to the Turkish Hoja as a slave, has an incredible physical likeness to him by accident. The novel integrates two characters representing two different identities where the distrust between them later turns into affection and collaboration. At the novel's conclusion, roles shift, creating perplexing circumstances for both reader and characters. The master represents the spirituality and tradition of the East, whereas the slave represents the world of scientific developments and technology. After living together for more than ten years, they develop an incredible weapon. As the weapon fails to serve the purpose, the characters exchange their identities for escaping an imminent death sentence. The characters are unable to preserve their stable positions and personalities, eventually, stage mutant identities that serve as a counterpoint to Orient and Occident. With this Pamuk shows the probability that even though East and West are poles apart, they can still develop compatibility. Even though some of his heroes belong to the West they respect their tradition and Turkish values. Though sometimes Pamuk criticizes the backwardness of the East through the characters such as Dr. Selahattin, in *The Silent House*, the purpose is not dislike but development and betterment of the East. Pamuk does not emphasise blind imitation of the West, but the synthesis of both cultures.

Turkey's craving for Westernization and the search for the identity of the Ottoman Turks after the impact of the West has been highlighted by Pamuk through Hoja's inventions of scientific gadgets. Edward Said has outlined the Orient as likely weaker and the Occident as superior and stronger as the West dominates politically and economically. The Orientalism

has been revisited with a subverted form and style as in reality, and the West is colonised by the Ottoman. Even so, Turkey's self-infliction has led to orientalism of the self as it attempts to efface the grand Ottoman past and replace it with the modernity of the West.

The linkage between Occident and Orient is a matter of power play and hegemony in various ways. It was also believed that the Orient got its identity and intelligibility from the West even though they had a much organised system. Said emphasises that "the other feature of the Orient was that Europe was always in a position of strength. There is no way of putting this euphemistically... the essential relationship, on political, cultural, and even religious grounds was seen in the West which is what concerns us here to be one between a strong and weak partner" (*Orientalism* 48).

Said depicts that the frame constructed by superiors exposed the Orientals to "Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire." The East is seen as the West's cultural contestant. Said also reasons that the Orient aids Europe to redefine itself as "its contrasting image, idea, personality, and experiences." The West feels that the East needs attention and support for its development and revival and plays an active role in the mainstream contributing to the economic progress. After the fall of the wounded Ottoman empire and the coming of the new Republic, the reign of Ataturk motivated the Turks to look forward to the West for cultural assistance. But as they were less enlightened in this field, they felt isolated from the Western world. Furthermore, Pamuk emphasises that Europe has been a role model, dream and future, for the natives of Turkey. Europe plays a pivotal role in Pamuk's *The White Castle*, as the locale Turkey is the image of the Other, and hence the novel is an example of self-inflicted orientalism.

The religious encounter between Islam and other religions prevailed in the era of the Ottoman Empire and during the other eras. Istanbul is the locale of Pamuk's *The White Castle*, which connects Europe with Asia through the Bosphorus bridge. The European architecture of 16th century Istanbul, which can be seen in the city's buildings, also resembles the 1940s. Among the ancient monuments is the stadium for the horse race and the church which Hoja visits along with the Sultan. As the narrator says, "They'd gone by carriage to the hippodrome, to the lion-house. The lions, the leopards, and panthers the sultan showed Hoja one by one were chained to the columns of an ancient church" (*TWC*, 43). It helps ascertain the symmetrical and corresponding relationship which Istanbul shared with other cultures and ethnicity. Furthermore, these concrete structures are metaphorical with regard to what Pamuk presents as "an affirmation of the survival of the traces left by Turks, Armenians, Kurds, Jews, and several other ethnic and religious communities...under the Ottoman Empire" (*East-West Entanglements* 224).

The clash of the two hemispheres can be seen in the region of the Mediterranean Sea as it plays a very significant role for the Ottomans, being the trade route between Europe and the East. When the Ottomans faced the inferiority complex and otherness, they envied the West with a desire to take after the West. It is only through the Mediterranean that the war or domination of the West could take place. So here in *The White Castle*, the novel begins with

the capture of the young Venetian by the Turks enroute from Venice to Naples, which shows the antagonism towards the West.

As in Said's *Orientalism* the West is portrayed as civilized and the East as barbaric, the siege of the ships by the Ottomans and the treatment of enslaved Italians are seen as a threat. Apart from a noticeable difference in knowledge and power, a clash of Islam and Christianity is also dramatized. The narrator mentions that "The Muslim slaves, after being set loose from their chains, set about taking vengeance on the Italian sailors who have wiped them... and the other Christians are put to the oars" (*TWC* 15-16). Though the Sultan pressurises the young slave to take up Islam, no religious animosity could be seen between Hoja and the Venetian. Many Italians were captured in the earlier days and had taken up Islam and under duress changed their names, whom the Italian slave meets. This shows that the cultural encounter had existed much before.

For ages, the East-West encounter has fascinated the East as they consider it a measure for their development. As mentioned by Said, "Europe is always seen as superior, powerful, and articulate" and steered Ataturk, the representative of the Turks, who "believe that Europe to be the source of all truth." This change initiated by Ataturk led the Turks to believe that Turkey could be freed from retardation only through Westernization. For Pamuk and "for many people who live on the edge of Europe" "Europe has always figured as a dream, a vision of what is to come; an apparition at times desired and at times feared; a goal to achieve or a danger" (*Other Colours* 190).

Though a slave, he still feels superior to Hoja and feels obligated to direct his master. Said similarly has said that "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power and domination and Europe is always in a position of strength" (*Orientalism* 191). As has been narrated by the unnamed, "After Hoja had thoroughly humiliated himself I would make him accept my superiority, or at least my independence, and then derisively demand my freedom" (*TWC* 71). Though Europe is the cultural contestant of the Other, East entices Europe and also helped redefine the West.

Vast developments in science and technology in the West allures the East, resulting from the East-West clash. Modernity is associated with the acceptance of updated technology and developing modern warfare. Similarly, here in *The White Castle*, the Turkish master Hoja and the Sultan are also equally interested in learning new techniques for making modern gadgets for which they engage the slave for building an incredible weapon and the Sultan said, "Let us see this incredible weapon that will ruin our enemies" (*TWC* 111).

Hoja did not favour the overdependence of the sultan and others on astrology and belittled the children's ignorance. Hoja noticed the interest of children more in supernatural things rather than in science. He says that "the students in the primary school were more interested in the angels than in stars" (*TWC* 47) which disheartens him. The dismissal of technology by the younger Turks re-enacts the binary opposition of the underdeveloped East and advanced West. Moreover, the silent rejection of traditional practices of the Turks as quoted by Boyar and Fleet in *Ottoman History* is equated with Hoja's criticism that "largely regarded the Ottomans as uncivilized and trammelled by a religion that was inimical to

progress” (*A Social History of Ottoman İstanbul* 327). Apart from the unbelievable similarity between Hoja and his Venetian slave, they shared a special bond. The likeness and the tension between the two characters and the theme of impersonation run throughout the novel.

As discussed above, in *The White Castle*, Hoja is the alter ego of the Italian slave and is further desperate to acquire all the knowledge of science possessed by the slave. So he asks him to pass on all the knowledge he has, “Everything meant all that I’d learned in primary and secondary school; all the astronomy, medicine, engineering, everything that was taught in my country” (*TWC* 32). Simultaneously the slave also feels higher in rank and superior, as an effect of the stereotype of the Occident prevailing over the Orient. Sometimes the slave wants to take the position of Hoja for the sole reason of the ability of the latter to act.

As explicated by Said “the Orient has helped to define the West as its contrasting image and idea” (2); Hoja has enabled in proving the slave more advanced by expressing his wish to learn everything. The exchange of culture also takes place between them by understanding their customs, languages, and values. Hoja also acquires knowledge about Western culture and customs. As he “ate his food at a table like an infidel instead of sitting down cross-legged” (*TWC* 77). So the complexity of the East-West clash in Pamuk’s *The White Castle* demonstrated above defines how the West is presented as a threat and an attraction to the East. In Said’s *Orientalism*, the binaries between the East and the West are fuelled. In his writings, Pamuk portrays a subverted Orientalism. Europe is Turkey’s cultural dissenter and the icon of the Other as, according to history, it has not been colonised by any developed countries. This is in addition to Pamuk, who “likes Edward Said’s idea of Orientalism, but since Turkey was never a colony, the romanticizing of Turkey was never a problem for Turks” (*Other Colours* 370).

The making of İstanbul is associated with the identification of the West. The construction of Turkey’s identity takes place by competing with Europe. The European phenomenon is a play of power money by misrepresenting and giving less space to the Oriental self-representations. Ultimately it can be said, as quoted by Akalin, that Said’s Orientalism is “to homogenise the East and fails to recognise the Ottoman Empire as a world power in the 16th-17th centuries” (*Ottoman Phenomenon* 112). Thus, Pamuk handles this conflict as an idea that carries geographical, social, and cultural significance but identifies him as an aqueduct between the two societies.

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