Of Masters and Subalterns- Shifting Narratives in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998) *and The Black Book* (1990)

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk is a controversial writer whose works have often caused controversy at both home and abroad. While Pamuk's brilliance as a writer has been contested by few, if any critics, his status as an enfant terrible of Turkish Literature is due to his ability to force the custodians of Turkey's secular institutions to question if the identity crises the modern day republic is experiencing, is not due to the rigorous censorship of Turkey's forgotten and forbidden Ottoman past? Pamuk's novels, especially *My Name is Red and The Black Book*, explore the theme of subaltern identities and how certain identities while buried beneath the grand narrative of the secular Turkish Republic, reinforce their presence through various means. Writers such as Pamuk, with their fingers on the pulse of Turkey's identity crises, explore through the means of fiction, how certain identities, especially those related to Turkey's Ottoman past and its esoteric Sufi traditions have continued to haunt the modern day Republic. This article explores Pamuk's attempts to unearth Turkey's forbidden past with the help of certain "silenced" narratives that I refer to as "subaltern narratives" in this paper.

Keywords: Orhan Pamuk, subaltern identities, subaltern narratives, Ottoman history, Turkish secularism,

Orhan Pamuk's fiction, besides attempting to answer the questions regarding the unstable Turkish identity, is also remarkable for its emphasis on the subaltern of Turkish history, i.e, those things that are often ignored in the meta-narrative of Turkish history. The aim of this study is to explore how Pamuk, in his fiction, gives voice to that subaltern through a rigorous revisionism of the grand or master narratives of Ottoman history and Turkish secular nationalism.

Pamuk's fiction, while concerned mainly with the Turkish landscape can be read and identified with on a universal level. Pamuk's Istanbul, much like James Joyce's Dublin, is not a city rooted in a particular geographical locality, but a city that, influenced as it is by both Eastern and Western civilizations, has timeless wisdom and beauty and is universal in its appeal. This vantage point allows Pamuk to comment upon issues sacred not only to a Turkish audience but to humanity worldwide. What this study would primarily focus on, is how Pamuk lets the subaltern narratives speak for themselves in two of his major novels, *My Name is Red and The Black Book*. My Name is Red, set in the seventeenth century, captures the Ottoman Empire in all of its glory, while hinting towards something hidden in the competing narratives of the text. The Black Book portrays the era between the 1960 and 1980 military coups, an era remarkable for its persecution of intellectuals, censorship and a general air of gloom.

One major reason this study aims to analyze Pamuk's writings through the lens of subaltern studies is that his fiction demonstrates flawlessly the vanishing point where explanation fails and only description is possible, i.e, an uncertainty that is linked to religion, spirituality and the subaltern voices (*Novetzke* 126). Antonio Gramsci, when he set out to

define the term subaltern was motivated chiefly by political considerations. By the time the Subaltern Studies Group started writing on the subject of the 'subaltern', they started covering a much wider range of ideas. What this study aims at is unique in the sense that Pamuk has never been linked with whatever the Subaltern Studies Group has had to offer, perhaps because of the exclusively South Asian context in which the authors belonging to this group write. However, as we shall explore in this study, Pamuk, while not belonging to the same geographical location, can be studied in the context of Subaltern Studies Group because of the way he sets out to question the official version of Turkish history, much like the Subaltern Studies Group authors set out to question the dominant Indian narratives.

Literature Review

Reviewing Pamuk's works through the lens of Subaltern Studies is complex to say the least, as there have been few studies to date that explore his fiction using this approach. There have been however, many studies that focus on the Ottoman theme in his works, and the way Pamuk attempts to rewrite the official narrative of Turkish history and points out the way Ottoman history has been relegated to the periphery in modern Turkish society. However, very few studies have actually attempted to work out the way Pamuk exposes the bias of elitist historiography and attempts to establish the 'subaltern' in his works as the maker of his own destiny. Pamuk also studies the relationship between texts and power and this hermeneutic strategy on his part can be seen as a quest to determine the role of the subaltern in the existing metanarratives.

Subaltern Studies, primarily a project associated with Indian history, has now come to be associated with many different disciplines, including literature. When we set out to

trace the evolution of Subaltern studies, one thing that immediately becomes obvious is that as an approach Subaltern Studies has been found to be extremely useful in analyzing things not only from a historical perspective, but a literary perspective as well.

Chakrabarty attempts to explain how Subaltern Studies, that started off as a "specific and focused intervention" in the discipline of Indian history, spilled over into the genre of *Postcolonialism* (Chakrabarty 10). Postcolonial theorists particularly made use of the subaltern studies approach to criticize nationalism, orientalism and Eurocentricism. Subaltern studies, as Ranajit Guha put it in an introduction to a volume of subaltern studies, was an attempt to view things from a different perspective than the one used in prevailing academic practices in historiography, that refused to acknowledge the subaltern as "the maker of his own destiny" (15). However as Chakrabarty is quick to point out, Subaltern Studies was not merely "good Marxist history", nor did it have much in common with the "history from below" approach (15). While it definitely counted Marxism as one of its inspirations, it was primarily focused on its aim to present an anti-elitist viewpoint that determined the "subaltern as the maker of his own destiny" and also examined the relationship between "texts and power" (22). This involved, as Chakrabarty explains, the need for a historian of subaltern social groups to look out for the biases of the elite as well as avoid representing the subaltern groups through elite modes of representation as these would not so much provide a voice to the subaltern classes, as subjugate them (23).

In "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" Chakrabarty stresses the importance of Subaltern Studies while referring to various

histories of India. Chakrabarty establishes a complex argument, the crux of which is that just as the phenomenon of Orientalism refuses to die in spite of the critical awareness critics have towards it, Eurocentrism remains a fundamental part of the discipline of history, as it is taught at Universities (2). This has led, according to Chakrabarty, to a "mimetic" mode of self-representation for the Indians and Indian history. Indian history, even when it comes across as strictly Marxist or Nationalist, remains a mimicry of a hyper-real Europe and European history (18). The only way out would be a project to "provincialize" Europe, something which again is fraught with difficulties. Chakrabarty suggests that project of provincializing Europe would entail embracing a new approach towards discussion of history. According to him, the new historiography "will attempt the impossible: to look towards its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous" (23).

In "History as Critique and Critique(s) of History", Chakrabarty begins by quoting Edward Said's views on Subaltern Studies. Edward Said describes the "historiographical effort" of Subaltern studies as "history as critique" and elaborates that history here is treated as a critique of imperialism, but more importantly, it is a critique of imperialist knowledge. Said particularly lauds those anti-colonial writers who work with techniques and discourses once reserved exclusively for European scholars (2162). Taking Said's argument a step further, Chakrabarty asserts that Subaltern Studies can be instrumental in transforming the discipline of history at its very "center". According to Chakrabarty, even Nationalist histories in India, share a metanarrative with imperialist histories. It is

only through the means of Subaltern Studies that the situation can be rectified.

Subaltern Studies' area of influence is not limited to South-east Asia only. In her article, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies", Florencia E. Mallon explores the role of the Subaltern Studies project in Latin American Literature. She explains how some Latin American intellectuals, decided to appropriate techniques used by the Subaltern Studies scholars for mapping historiographies, in a bid to move beyond Eurocentric traditions of analyzing conflicts and debates within political and literary circles. The compromise that Subaltern Studies offers is that it was founded by a group of theorists based in the so-called third world who were at the same time conversant in the latest postmodernist trends. Their theories were incorporated by the Latin American intellectuals in a bid to analyze the subversive potential of the Latin American classical texts and writings of various sorts. Mallon argues that to fully take advantage of the potential of Subaltern Studies project, one ought to employ postmodern critical theories by Derrida and Foucault and read them in conjunction with the Gramscian version of postmodernism as the Subaltern Studies project is influenced by the views of all three of them.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her groundbreaking article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" questioned the practice of judging other cultures based on a primarily eurocentric approach. Taking the example of the ancient Hindu practice of self-immolation of widows after the death of their husbands -sati- and its condemnation by the British as an example of the way "masculine imperialist ideology" works, Spivak points out to the irony of "white men saving brown women from brown men". Spivak argues that in

the imperialist accounts of widows burning themselves in the wake of their husbands' deaths, one never comes across the testimony of the women themselves. Their voices are never recorded and so they are never allowed to speak. It is a case of the privileged talking to the privileged about "the other". Spivak also notes that ultimately all such discourses that claim to represent the subaltern almost never represent them. Most such discourses are eurocentric anyway, in both their tone and mode of representation and therefore it becomes impossible for the subaltern to speak.

Erdag Goknar in his book *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy*, the first critical analysis of all of Pamuk's work, including his untranslated novels, focuses on the *Turkishness* as well as the various forms of blasphemy in his novels. Pamuk was charged with insulting Turkishness under Article 301 of the Turkish law in 2005, when he stated in an interview with the German Das Magazin that both the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic were guilty of certain horrifying crimes which no one was allowed to talk about. (Göknar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* (3-4). This stance of Pamuk regarding the Kurdish and Armenian genocide in which more than 30,000 Kurds and 1 million Armenians were killed landed him in considerable trouble, not only with the Government and law, but ultra-nationalists as well. Nearly eighteen months after this interview, Pamuk was awarded the Nobel prize in Literature, cementing his place as a dissident author and intellectual.

Goknar in his book explores this dissidence of Pamuk, as the latter himself describes it as well as the expected allegations of native informant that have been labeled against him. In addition to that the fact that Pamuk can't be easily pigeonholed in one

category has been discussed. Goknar in Part 1 of the book "Tropes of 'Turkishness' from Sufism to State" discusses Pamuk's attempts to transgress the secular in his works as well as explore the *din and devlet* through a revisionism of Turkish Republican and Ottoman historiography. The second part of the book "The Archive of Ottoman Istanbul" focuses on how Pamuk explores "the other" Istanbul, one that has been "othered" by the West and the Republic on account of its Ottoman heritage. The Third part, "The Literary Politics of the Secular-Sacred", explores how the secular and sacred become tied to the narrative and the deconstruction of either narrative leads to an exploration of the other too.

Andrew Gibson in his 2005 article "On Not Being Forgivable: Four Meditations on Europe, Islam and the 'New World Order'", argues that Pamuk is a novelist who produces "panoramas of desolation" (90) depicting a "denuded world repeatedly forgotten by the imperial powers" (90) who ransacked it and left it to lick its own wounds while they casually went their way. Pamuk in short is a storyteller who has a difficult task to perform – that of highlighting *desolation*, naming who is responsible for it and pointing out Europe's reluctance in admitting Turkey to the European club. Pamuk's task however is two-fold. He also represents an alternative version of Islam and Muslims that allows for reinterpretation of the problems the Muslim world is facing and Muslims' own role in aggravating these problems. He goes on to describe hüzün, the Turkish word for melancholy that is tied to both spiritual loss, as well as loss of identity. The invasion of Turkey by modern European businesses (94) has left behind this sense of hüzün that is explored in nearly all of Pamuk's works.

My Name is Red-Exploring the Subaltern of Ottoman History and its Lost Ideals Through the Mode of Painting

My Name is Red marked a new chapter in Pamuk's literary career and cemented his place in the international arena as a novelist of solid literary merit. Published in 2001, the novel set against the back drop of the Ottoman Empire is at once a murder mystery, a reimagining of Ottoman legacy and a postmodernist text comprising a multitude of identities or first person narratives, that each chapter begins with. The chorus of different "I"s in the novel creates a beautiful symphony of voices-voices that not only reveal the complexities of narrative but also highlight the subalterns within.

The eponymous character of the novel, the color *red* in the chapter "I am Red" states that since it is a color that is depicted in blood, clothes, paintings and all things irresistible, it basically is a multitude of different identities rolled in one. *MNR* is certainly rich in colors. The novel which relates the story of a group of miniaturists makes use of a dazzling variety of colors to portray different things but it is the color red which ultimately stands out among different colors.

MNR that takes place over a period of 9 days in 1591 begins with the gruesome murder of a miniaturist. The miniaturist who was working on a secret book commissioned by the Sultan dies as a result of his work for the book. The corpse of the murdered man is depicted as speaking from the bottom of a well and sets off a chain of narratives that clearly indicate that *MNR* is a novel that reveals its secrets slowly, almost teasingly.

The subaltern in the text is the Ottoman legacy of Turkey, symbolized through the agency of miniature painting. The Istanbul of 1591 is a witness to the absolute

pinnacle of Ottoman glory, yet there is a strong sense that the Ottoman Empire is slowly but steadily on its way to decline.

Towards the very beginning of the novel the readers are greeted with a shocking spectacle that allows the readers to *see* from the perspective of a dead man. There is a feeling at the very beginning of the narrative that perspective is given a lot of importance in the universe of *MNR*, with people, objects and drawings all contributing their viewpoints and helping to build a multilayered narrative that does not rely on the security of a linear one-dimensional narrative. In a sense, the narrative of the dead man recounting his own death as "… my arrival to this side was soothing, like the dream of seeing oneself asleep…"(5) serves as an allegory for the Ottoman Empire recording its own decline and foreshadowing its demise that took place in 1918. The entire novel can be read as the last will and testament of an empire in its last days.

The death of the miniaturist Elegant Effendi in the beginning can be read as an invitation to solve the ensuing mystery and discover the hidden meaning of such a gruesome act as murder.

> Let me say also that if the situation into which we've fallen were described in a book, even the most expert of miniaturists could never hope to illustrate it. As with the Koran-God forbid I'm misunderstood-the staggering power of such a book arises from the impossibility of its being depicted. I doubt you've fully comprehended this fact. (6)

While talking about subaltern identities in the novel, it is important to note that it is the subaltern voices in the novel that actually dictate the course of events in *MNR*. The urge

to liberate the subaltern in the text is therefore tied not only to solving the mystery but also to see how these subaltern narratives help shape the master narrative.

The dead miniaturist asserts that the situation he and his fellow miniaturists find themselves in is too intense and too shocking to be illustrated. He provides an interesting comparison by comparing the impossibility of his own situation to that of the impossibility of illustrating the Koran. He ends with a sharp observation that much of the power of the Koran as a narrative, stems from its impossibility to be illustrated. When something resists attempts to have itself depicted in pictures, it ends up being enormously powerful. This opens up another possibility for the readers – maybe the subaltern in the novel cannot be precisely illustrated; maybe it ought to remain somewhat abstract and in the background so that ultimately it would end up being much more powerful than the master narrative itself.

One of the key themes and binaries in *MNR* is the revelation of self and concealment of self. The Western tradition of painting encouraged the painter to paint an individual in sharp contours, so that s/he would not merge with the background. This was in stark contrast to the Eastern tradition that encouraged a more esoteric approach to painting. The Eastern tradition held that it was not the painter but the painting that held supreme importance and a true artist, knowing that he would be immortalized in his art would never consider the option of signing his paintings.

In *MNR*, the anecdote of Bihzad, the famous painter who never signed his own paintings, establishes that at times, the subaltern is considered as a more powerful entity even by connoisseurs of art. Unlike the Venetian painters who preferred a more

individualistic approach to art, signing their paintings in an insecure bid to foil any attempts of forgery, the medieval Ottoman and Byzantine artists took pride in works of art that aimed to reach a point of perfection where one master artist's work becomes indistinguishable from another. This can be compared to the idea of an ideal sufi, as propagated in esoteric traditions as someone whose ultimate aim is to merge with the Beloved. Thus, what is visible becomes secondary in importance to what is hidden.

> Bihzad was so well aware of this fact that he didn't hide his signature anywhere in the painting. And according to the elderly master, there was a sense of embarrassment and a feeling of shame in this decision of his. Where there is true art and genuine virtuosity the artist can paint an incomparable masterpiece without leaving even a trace of his identity… What was venerated as style was nothing more than an imperfection or flaw that revealed the guilty hand. (22)

This leads to the argument that Olive, the murderer of Elegant Effendi and Enishte Effendi makes about style. According to him, a style that denotes the individuality or eccentricity of a painter is actually nothing more than an admission of imperfection on part of the artist.

The very practice of making pictures in a predominantly Muslim world, let alone declaring oneself as the maker of those pictures was fraught with impossible difficulties. This is acknowledged by Enishte Effendi who is about to be murdered by Olive and in a clarity of vision that is often experienced by a man about to bid life on earth a farewell, Enishte correctly deduces that part of Olive's excuse to murder him is not ambition

but fear. It is the fear of a sinner who is forever in dread of an impending doom or punishment regarding what he does and practice:

> As with Sheikh Muhammad of Isfahan, we miniaturists are inclined to feel guilty and regretful, we're the first to blame ourselves before others do, to be ashamed and beg pardon of God and the community. We make our books in secret like shameful sinners. I know too well how submission to the endless attacks of hojas, preachers, judges and mystics who accuse us of blasphemy, how the endless guilt both deadens and nourishes the artist's imagination. (200)

The description of the color *red* is important and very interesting in this regard. The anecdote of the two blind master miniaturists talking about describing a color to someone who is blind and has never encountered the color Red with his own eyes is brimming with symbolism.

> 'Because we've spent our entire lives ardently and faithfully working as painters, naturally, we, who have now gone blind, know red and remember what kind of color and what kind of feeling it is,' said the one who'd made the horse drawing from memory. 'But, what if we'd been born blind? How would we have been truly able to comprehend this red that our handsome apprentice is using?'
>
> 'An excellent issue,' the other said. 'But do not forget that colors are not known, but felt.'

> 'My dear master, explain red to somebody who has never known red.'
>
> 'If we touched it with the tip of a finger, it would feel like something between iron and copper. If we took it into our palm, it would burn. It we tasted it, it would be full-bodied, like salted meat. If we took it between our lips, it would fill our mouths. If we smelled it, it'd have the scent of a horse. If it were a flower, it would smell like a daisy, not a red rose.' (227)

This incident itself is an extension of the argument that the unknown while always has a certain charm and a mystique, is also too complex to be understood completely. The Ottoman era, much romanticized by the Neo-Orientalists and reviled by the staunch Republicans is an example of such a phenomenon. It can only be described in terms of certain images and keywords like "religion", "mysticism", "mythical", "rich", "kings" etc, but is more than a little beguiling for a generation that has been forbidden to try and access it.

Blindness is another trope used by Pamuk in the narrative and signifies insight in a classic postmodernist twist that leads to a reversal of meaning. Meaning as Derrida and Foucault point out is something arbitrary as indeed it is the case in *MNR*. Blindness here is an attempt to preserve one's honor and one's genius after having been at the absolute pinnacle of glory.

> 'The old masters,' Master Osman said, 'would suffer pangs of conscience about changing their talent, colors and methods. They'd consider it dishonorable to see the world one day as an Eastern shah commanded,

> the next, as a Western ruler did- which is what the artists of our day do.'
>
> 'When the great masters of old were forced to adopt the styles of victors and imitate their miniaturists, they preserved their honor by using a needle to heroically bring on the blindness that the labors of painting would've caused in time. Yes, before the pureness of God's darkness fell over their eyes like a divine reward, they'd stare at a masterpiece ceaselessly for hours or even days, and because they stubbornly stared out of bowed heads, the meaning and world of those pictures-spotted with blood dripping from their eyes-would take the place of all the evil they suffered, and as their eyes ever so slowly clouded over they'd approach blindness in peace. Do you have any idea which illustration I'd want to stare at till I'd attained the divine blackness of the blind? The scene, rendered in the style of the old masters of Herat, wherein Hüsrev, burning madly with love, rides his horse to the foot of Shirin's summer palace and waits!'(396)

This ties up with the epigraph from Koran in the beginning of the novel that states that "The blind and the seeing are not equal". Here the two words swap meaning. It is actually the blind who are enlightened and the seeing who obstructed by their sense of vision can no longer see properly. This leads to Olive's argument for murdering two people, and proves the text's assertion that the blind and the seeing indeed are not equal.

> Had Enishte Effendi's book been completed and sent to them, the Venetian masters would've smirked, and their ridicule would've reached

> the Venetian Doge-that is all. They'd have quipped that the Ottomans have given up being Ottoman and would no longer fear us. How wonderful it would be if we could persist on the path of the old masters! ...The old masters of Herat tried to depict the world the way God saw it, and to conceal their individuality they never signed their names. You, however, are condemned to signing your names to conceal your lack of individuality. (487)

This argument is what Olive describes as his excuse for murdering both elegant Effendi and Enishte Effendi. He claims that an adoption of the Venetians' style would have led to the Europeans deriding the Ottomans for having given up on being Ottomans and the extent of shame and ridicule would have known no boundaries. It also, according to Olive, is an assertion of the secular identity of a work of art, something that smacks of the Turkish Republic's Ottoman cleansing efforts. In fact Olive's entire speech seems to have been directed at the contemporary Turkish metanarrative and how the master narrative refuses to acknowledge the subaltern Ottoman narrative. Olive's diatribe ironically leads him to experience whatever he has been passionately preaching. He is blinded and beheaded and just before it, in a final mockery of his stance he is told:

> 'According to legend, blood clots in the eyes of some and not in others. If Allah is pleased with your artistry, he'll bestow His own magnificent blackness upon you and take you under His care. In that case, you shall behold not this wretched world, but the exquisite vistas that He sees. If He is displeased, you shall continue to see the world the way you now

do.' (489)

The final pages of *My Name is Red* are from the account of Shekure who wishes she had a youthful portrait of herself and that too in the manner of the Venetian artists. Her lament that the cost of depicting a face like any other as the old masters of Herat did, was to forget the magnificent beauty of a face. This lament evokes the lament of a subaltern that its muted voice can never actually make itself heard.

> My own portrait; but I knew however hard the Sultan's miniaturists tried, they'd fail, because even if they could see my beauty, woefully, none of them would believe a woman's face was beautiful without depicting her eyes and lips like a Chinese woman's. Had they represented me as a Chinese beauty, the way the old masters of Herat would've, perhaps those who saw it and recognized me could discern my face behind the face of that Chinese beauty. But later generations, even if they realized my eyes weren't really slanted, could never determine what my face truly looked like. How happy I'd be today, in my old age-which I live out through the comfort of my children-if I had a youthful portrait of myself! (502)

However, Shekure is made to see things realistically by her son Orhan who tells her that if the old masters of Herat could not immortalize her, the Venetian masters could capture her youthful beauty but could never actually stop time. This signifies a compromise that the subaltern narrative has to make. Between being depicted faithfully and being in a limbo with time being frozen, there is a grey area, the true abode of the subaltern.

Towards the end, Shekure ends the narrative and in another postmodernist twist warns the readers not to be taken in by her son Orhan's exaggerated storytelling who would do anything to make a story more interesting.

> In the hopes that he might pen this story, which is beyond depiction, I've told it to my son Orhan. Without hesitation I gave him the letters Hasan and Black sent me, along with the rough horse illustrations with the smeared ink, which were found on poor Elegant Effendi. Above all, don't be taken in by Orhan if he's drawn Black more absentminded than he is, made our lives harder than they are, Shevket worse and me prettier and harsher than I am. For the sake of a delightful and convincing story, there isn't a lie Orhan wouldn't deign to tell. (503)

This is perhaps the real Orhan's (Pamuk) manner of revealing to the readers that what is considered subaltern and master actually depends upon the readers. The identities in the course of this narrative are very fluid. It is the reader that must impart them consistency to them. Ultimately a nations's metanarrative, for all its solid foundations, is also fluid. As much as a metanarrative struggles to subdue the subaltern narratives, it ultimately

***The Black Book*-Digging Out the Subaltern Narratives Through Alternate Identities and Sufi Parables**

Kara Kitap or The Black Book is often credited with providing Pamuk with his first break on the international scene, after it was translated in 1992. *The Black Book* is considered a postmodernist text with different genres intermingling to produce an incisive commentary on the Turkish cultural and social landscape.

In *The Black Book*, identity and what it means to be visible/invisible takes on a wholly different perspective. The main protagonist of the novel is Galip, who obsessively investigates the disappearance of his wife Rüya, and the disappearance of his cousin and Rüya's half-brother Celâl, which took place at the same time as Rüya's disappearance. The obsessive compulsive behavior that Galip demonstrates aptly portrays the confrontation and clash between identities, in which one identity is often overthrown by another. By the time the novel ends, Galip has taken over Celâl's identity and is in fact also writing his columns and answering Celâl's post in his name. This act of Galip ultimately becomes a metaphor for how the visible subaltern narrative is at times thwarted by the invisible master narrative. Galip's character, though present throughout, pales in comparison to the absent character of his cousin, Celâl.

Absence is something that resonates strongly throughout the course of the book. It is an absence not only of the two main characters but also of meaning in nearly everything – the texts, everyday objects, conversations and even the mystic traditions. This feeling of absence that permeates the text and the quest for finding meaning in meaninglessness is what *The Black Book* is about. The very beginning of *The Black Book* sets the tone for this endless chase and quest for finding meaning. The epigraph of the novel hints towards an ensuing chase for an answer to the mystery, but at the same time, there is a sense that the mystery would be one with no closure:

> Ibn' Arabi writes of a friend and dervish saint who, after his soul was elevated to the heavens, arrived on Mount Kaf, the magic mountain that encircles the world; gazing around him, he saw that the mountain itself

> was encircled by a serpent. Now, it is a well-known fact that no such mountain encircles the world, nor is there a serpent.

The epigraph then points to the fact that this mystery would transcend the physical realm and actually become a metaphysical mystery. At the same time, Rüya, the protagonist Galip's wife and one of the absent characters of the novel is described as being a voracious reader of cheap detective novels. Absence, mystery and detective stories therefore, are all intertwined in the fabric of this novel. In fact the metaphysical detective story is one of the genres that can be used to describe *The Black Book.* (Göknar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* 216*).* It is by introducing this genre into the novel, that Pamuk sets out to explore the subaltern themes related to Turkish society's Ottoman past, the secular/ sacred divide in Turkish society, and of course historiography and identity.

Merivale and Sweeney define a metaphysical detective story as

> …a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader – with the intention or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot. Metaphysical detective stories often emphasize this transcendence, moreover by becoming self-reflexive (that is, by representing allegorically the text's own process of composition). (qtd. in Göknar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* 217*)*.

The Black Book can thus be defined as a metaphysical detective story on one level. It is through this means that subaltern voices in *The Black Book* are allowed to resurface. The novel is an allegory for the Turkish state's inability to come to terms with its Ottoman past and its blatant refusal to acknowledge whatever preceded the modern day Republic. Its status as a metaphysical detective story allows it to uncover many complex issues and ask many difficult questions that might otherwise go unanswered in a typical whodunit.

Rüya, Galip's wife is an avid lover of detective stories and he tells her that the only detective story he might find interesting is one in which the author doesn't know of the identity of the perpetrator of crime. This statement of Galip is interesting not only because the entire novel is an inverted detective story but also that Galip himself functions as the detective in this one, albeit one who is as clueless as any of his readers.

The detective in a traditional detective story would function, as Merivale and Sweeney put it- a "surrogate reader", one who is on the receiving end of the mystery, one who is simultaneously reading the mystery as it unfolds, but also one who ultimately solves the mystery well ahead of the other readers. In a metaphysical detective story on the other hand, a detective like Galip shares all his clues with the other readers and attempts to get to the heart of things, but fails to do so. That is because as pointed above in the definition of a metaphysical detective story, the solution to a problem lies not in solving it but in self-actualization that results from a failure to solve such a mystery.

Galip when he sets out to hunt for Rüya and Celâl, his cousin, is overwhelmed by his obsession to find them out, so much so that in a desperate bid to learn about their whereabouts, he assumes the identity of Celâl himself. Galip starts living in Celâl's

apartment, wearing his clothes and even writing his columns. His life, which is for the most part overcast by a hunt for Rüya and Celâl, is interspersed with brief moments of eureka, when he feels he might have stumbled onto some clue regarding their location, while browsing old clippings of Celâl. Every single time however, he is thwarted in this.

Galip therefore, remains unsuccessful in solving this mystery. He does however find success in a place he least expected. In a plot twist that is reminiscent of The *White Castle*, Galip, when he starts living Celâl's life finds to his utter astonishment that he is actually coming into his own. He, who has never been able to actualize his own potential, can now proudly claim for himself, his own identity. This peculiar phenomenon can be tied to the Sufi mystical traditions that have stressed the importance of love as a means of meeting not the beloved, but oneself. The device of metaphysical detective story therefore is vital in liberating the subaltern of identity. Galip's identity is set free the moment he gives into his obsession with Celâl and adopts the latter's identity.

The story of Mevlana Rumi and Shams of Tabriz is often referred to in the main plot. Whenever Galip is shown as having doubts about the usefulness of his quest for Rüya and Celâl, he is shown as referring to the tale of the two mystics. Rumi, the greatest theologian of his age was so transformed by his meeting with Shams of Tabriz that he literally had eyes for no one else. Later, when driven by intense jealousy, Shams was murdered and thrown into a well by Rumi's disciples and students, the Mevlana went mad with grief and wandered from place to place in search of the beloved. In the end, his suffering led him to self-actualization, the ultimate goal of a lover in Sufi mystical traditions. Thus Rumi, while pining for his beloved, actually realized himself,

much like Galip did.

However there is something, which is still hidden beneath the surface. The question is raised in one of Celâl's columns and later resonates throughout the novel as to who benefitted the most by Shams' murder? The answer, it is implied, is Rumi himself since by having Shams murdered, he was actually able to find himself.

> All his life, Rumi had been searching for his 'other', the Double who might move him and light up his heart, the mirror who might reflect his face and his very soul. So whatever they'd (Rumi and Tabriz) done or said in that cell, they were best seen as the words and deeds of a multitude masquerading as a single person or of one person masquerading as a multitude. Because to endure this suffocating thirteenth century Anatolian town and the devotion of his brainless disciples…Rumi needed to be able to draw from a storehouse of alternative identities…In much the same way, the ruler of a benighted country…might keep hidden in a trunk the peasant garb he dons from time to time to roam the streets in comfort.

Thus Shams was merely a pawn, the peasant garb that Rumi had donned from time to time, as an alternative identity to take refuge in. Ultimately, it was not Shams whose loss Rumi had bewailed about, it was an alternative identity that Rumi had lost. This situation of Rumi, as described in the novel mirrors the one faced by Galip. Galip bemoans the loss of Rüya (whose name translates as 'dream') and Celâl (the namesake of Rumi) as a loss of his own identity. However, by going to Celâl's apartment and hiding there taking on Celâl's identity, much like Rumi had gone on a long journey after Shams' loss,

serves as a metaphor for the spiritual journey in the Sufi tradition, one must undertake to redeem oneself and regain one's lost identity.

This Sufi parable in *The Black Book* also brings to life another lost subaltern voice that of the sacred, the deified and the lost mystical traditions. Read against the backdrop of the authoritarian modern day Turkish Republic and its denouncement of anything religious and anything remotely reminiscent of its Ottoman past, this particular parable becomes another subaltern that must be liberated.

For one thing, the very mention of these Sufi traditions that have largely been relegated to the periphery of the grand master narrative of Turkish Republic, would be blasphemous especially from an overtly nationalistic viewpoint. Pamuk then, turns this blasphemy on its head and deliberately creates binaries of the sacred and blasphemous to drive home the idea that a master narrative can only ignore the subaltern narrative for so long. Ultimately it has to be unearthed, and often once this subaltern narrative is dug up, it often threatens to overthrow the master narrative.

Secondly, as the Subaltern Studies Project basically aims towards a revisionist historiography, we consider how *The Black Book* achieves this aim. The Sufi parable already demonstrates the fact that subaltern narratives can be immensely powerful in creating tensions in a master narrative. In addition to this, subaltern narratives can also be used to pinpoint the biases of master narratives, which more often than not are Eurocentric in their approach.

As Chakrabarty points out in his article "History as Critique and Critiques of History" (1991), the Subaltern Studies approach can be used to change history at its very

center. Chakrabarty argued that most histories of colonial India were unapologetically eurocentric in their approach and even when recounting narratives of the unprivileged, the tone was unmistakably imperialistic. The only way to correct the tone of these narratives would be according to Chakrabarty, to reanalyze them from a different viewpoint, i.e., the viewpoint of the subaltern.

This incidentally is what is being done in the universe of *The Black Book.* Pamuk, the devil's advocate rejoices in blaspheming about everything from Republic to Sufi parables. When Rumi and Shams are mentioned, it is actually the dominant discourse of the Republic that is being challenged through means of a Sufi parable. Similarly, when Hurufis the fourteenth century mystical brotherhood and their *pir* Fazlallah Astarabadi are mentioned in the novel, there is a sense of loss of mystery in the narrative. This loss extends to the loss of the old Turkish alphabet as well, and contributes to a general sense of loss in the narrative.

The Hurufis and the old Turkish alphabet are therefore many of those subaltern voices that have been brutally relegated to a peripheral status. Indeed the description of the letters Galip comes across in Celâl's old notebooks reiterates this.

> To be like a hero in a detective novel, Galip thought wearily, to apprehend an endless string of clues in everything you see, all you need to do is convince yourself that every object that surrounds you is hiding a secret. He found faces formed from letters from the Arabic alphabet: the eyes were *wâws* and *ayns*, the eyebrows *zâys* and *râs*, and the noses *alifs*. Celâl had drawn the letters so carefully he might have been a good

> natured schoolboy struggling to master old Turkish. In one lithograph he saw weeping eyes made of *wâws* and *jîms*; the dots in the jîms were fashioned to look like tears rolling down the page. (294)

This description of the alphabets suggests something that has been part of most of Pamuk's narrative. It suggests that inanimate objects and letters do actually have a life and emotions of their own. It also serves to illustrate the point that most subaltern voices have been strangled to a degree that they can only silently cry at their plight. Celâl who has made all those drawings that Galip comes across, seems to be as sensitive to the plight of the Arabic letters as if they had been victims of a mass genocide.

The Turkish alphabet, one of the relics of the Ottoman era, thus become a symbol of things that have been pushed into background for so long that their secrets have been lost forever. The tears that Galip comes across in the *jims* seem to be part of this lament. The plight of old Turkish alphabet letters and that of the Hurufis are linked together as if linked together in the narrative by mutual sorrow. Fazlallah Astarabadi, the founder of Hurufism is quoted in the novel as having preached that there is a secret hiding everywhere in the world and that the world does not easily divulge its precious secrets to anyone that easily.

Fazlallah's words of course evoke one of *Kuran's* most oft quoted verses, "Indeed, within the heavens and the earth, there are signs for believers", and Pamuk's use of such intertextualities that point at once to Kuranic passages and incidents from Ottoman history, show how different narrative dovetail into each other to form the official state narrative. It is quite disturbing then, when some narratives are ignored

in favor of others. The life of Fazlallah Astarabadi and his Hurufi followers reads like an allegory of Ottoman Turkey itself. The pictures and accounts of the Hurufis and documentation of their persecution, torture and abduction in general are all eerily reminiscent not only of Ottoman Turkey that has been firmly pushed to the background by the state but also alternative narratives that have historically been overpowered by the winner's narratives.

The themes of detective novels, secrets and mystery serve a purpose of extending invitation to the readers of delving beneath the surface to extract the subaltern plot and narrative, and work out the metaphysical mystery embedded within. In a familiar postmodernist trope used by Pamuk, that is reminiscent of Umberto Eco, there are endless clues strewn throughout the novel that ultimately amount to nothing. These clues do not contribute anything to the plot at all but perform a very different function – that of dethroning the main plot and shifting the focus to the small sub-plots within the text. For example, just when Galip is getting to the heart of the narrative regarding Fazlallah Astarabadi and Hurufism in F.M. Üçüncü's book *The Mystery of the Letters and the Loss of Mystery* the discussion somewhat digresses from the topic and veers off into a new discussion of what happens to civilizations that end up on the losing side of history and therefore lose everything along with a sense of center:

> There existed in both Eastern and Western traditions the idea of a center hidden from the world: the 'idea' in ancient Greek philosophy, the Deity in Neoplatonic Christianity, the Hindu's Nirvana, Attar's Simurgh, Rumi's Beloved, the Hurufi's Secret Treasure *(kenz-i mahfi)*, Kant's *noumenon*,

> the detective novel's culprit. In F.M. Üçüncü's view, a civilization that lost its notion of such a center couldn't help but go off kilter. (304)

This ties up with what F. M. Üçüncü had to say in the first section of his book. According to him, of the two "warring twins" (304) East and West:

> … all these great historical events illustrated a truth to which Fazlallah had made frequent veiled illusions in his writing…In 'any given historical period', the winning side was the one that succeeded in seeing the world as a mysterious place awash with secrets and double meanings. Whereas the side that saw the world as a simple place, devoid of mystery and ambiguity was doomed to defeat and in inevitable consequence, slavery. (304)

Üçüncü goes on to describe the relationship between letters and faces and suggests controversially that in good times, people's faces are full of meaning, and predictably only the Hurufis could gauge that meaning. However since the persecution of Hurufis began and since they vanished without a trace, the world lost its mystique and the human faces their letters. The only way out according to Üçüncü was to locate the meaning of faces using Latin letters now, as the old Turkish alphabet was extinct.

Üçüncü's logic regarding all this is that all texts carry any number of infinite possibilities within - a bit like "an unending maze of city streets, with each street leading to another…" (318). He also develops his argument further by claiming that the more a mystery becomes apparent, the more it intensifies. And when, a person finally wearies of these series of never ending mysteries, he would be met with divine revelation in the form of the Mehdi or the Messiah's message, or so Üçüncü claims. This argument

of Üçüncü is another step in the direction of the unearthing of the subaltern narratives. Subaltern narratives however are not simple plot devices that merely play peek-a-boo with readers. Such narratives lead to other narratives and it is suggested if the meaning of a text is to be gleaned in its entirety, a more holistic approach is needed, that of looking for narratives beneath narratives. *The Black Book* in a sense is exactly about this hunt for those layers of narrative beneath the master narrative, that lends a richness to the main narrative without ever being visible themselves.

While discussing the subalterns in *The Black Book*, there is another theme that is extremely important especially if we wish to trace the relationship between the subalterns in *The Black Book* to those of Pamuk's other novels. The theme of hüzün is one that is often repeated in Pamuk's works and is a recurring metaphor for the feeling of loss that permeates his texts. Hüzün, the Arabic and Turkish word for melancholy is used to describe not just a feeling of unrelieved sadness and gloom but also its reason, namely spiritual loss. In *Istanbul: Memories of a City,* Pamuk in the chapter devoted to hüzün states that

> …when it appears in the Koran…it means much the same as the contemporary Turkish word. The Prophet Mohammed referred to the year in which he lost both his wife Hatice and his uncle Ebu Talip, as *'Senettul huzn'*, or the year of the melancholy; this confirms that the word is meant to convey a feeling of deep spiritual loss. (qtd in Gibson 92)

Hüzün is the quality that describes that describes the sense of loss that saturates the universe of *The Black Book* not only in a secular but spiritual sense as well. Both the *din*

and *devlet* have been affected by it. This sense of melancholy is felt early on as Galip is abandoned by his Rüya (meaning dream in Turkish), and there is an implication that he has not lost merely his wife but his dream along with. It transpires somewhat later in the novel that to Galip, Rüya has always been something along the lines of an enigma, and much of his life has been spent trying to hold on to, impress and probably possess Rüya, his dream. The closer he comes however, the further she seems to be until one day she disappears completely, her disappearance coinciding with that of Celâl, another figure he has always sought to please and impress throughout his life.

Galip's quest for both Rüya and Celâl is one that resonates of the quests of medieval knights in shining armor and also quests of the kings and princes mentioned in the Indo Persian and Arabic *dastan* tradition who must go on an expedition that requires considerable hard work and soul searching to finally break through and be declared victor of the *tilism* that obstructs their way. Thus Galip going in search of Rüya evokes the mythical quests undertaken by historical figures for their dream and Galip's dream is much about self- realization as anything else. Hüzün, the melancholy that is felt throughout the text is there because of a loss of spirituality and by extension, there is a sense of loss in the material world too. Towards the end of the novel, while much of the mystery remains unsolved, as is to be expected of a metaphysical detective story, Galip himself feels as if he has found his voice and identity. What is more, he has found peace in writing. Hüzün therefore is one of the most important devices in the text, used for digging out the subaltern voices in the novel. While we consider the atmosphere of *The Black Book* and its melancholy laden air, there is an intense feeling

that this melancholy is due to the presence of many unacknowledged subaltern voices that might never get to be on center stage, but nevertheless do contribute significantly to this narrative. This is due to the fact that Pamuk treats Istanbul as a palimpsestic text (Göknar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* 218*)* that has been written, erased and rewritten upon. This palimpsestic text then hides a wealth of discourses within that are slowly revealed to the readers as the story unfolds itself. Thus the sense of Hüzün can be said to be linked to a text that has been forced to imprison many subalterns within it. It is only through the liberation of these subalterns and subaltern voices that the text can breathe free and help dissipate the overwhelming feeling of melancholy that is evoked in the atmosphere of the book.

Hüzün also makes its presence felt in the authentic Turk mannequins of Master Bedii. His mannequins while extremely realistic and skillfully molded are not popular with the general public due to their Turkishness. It is mentioned with regard to Master Bedii that Turks nowadays do not care for their own likenesses but want likenesses of the Europeans. This means that Turkishness itself is treated as a subaltern at one level with people refusing to acknowledge their Turkishness and consigning it to a peripheral position. The final passages of *The Black Book* while don't exactly provide a closure to the mystery of Rüya, Celâl and their murderers, bring together two identities so that they could be merged together. The identities of Galip and the author of the narrative who has revealed himself more than once during the course of the narrative, finally merge into one and thus the narrative finally succeeds in bringing the subaltern beneath its surface, to above the surface. It is hinted in the last passage that writing is the only

agency that made it possible.

Summing Up: Revisiting Turkey's Subaltern Identities with the Help of Pamuk's Fiction

What Pamuk demonstrates throughout his fiction is that identities will remain subaltern as long as they are imprisoned within a homogenous narrative. The moment, this presence of different narratives, is acknowledged in the text, the imprisoned identities or 'subalterns' come into their own. *My Name is Red, The Black Book* and *Snow* illustrate this fact on different levels.

Pamuk's popularity at home and abroad might stem from his own assertion that he was a novelist writing in the new and contemporary style just as the older generation of Turkish writers was fading away. It can however in some part also be attributed to the rich complexity of Pamuk's writing and his willingness to explore new avenues in terms of thematic concerns, that have rarely been explored before. His use of postmodernism allows him to let multiple narratives do the talking at once. It also paves a way for him to explore centuries old themes of spiritual love, loss of cultural heritage, as well as contemporary ones such as *din* vs *devlet* and the significance of overlapping narratives. Pamuk redefines and rehistoricizes dominant Turkish literary tropes (Göknar, *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel* 24*)* and in the process lets the subaltern voices embedded in the narrative come out and make their presence felt.

The application of theories of the Subaltern Studies project to Pamuk's works might seem like a strange idea at first. After all, Pamuk hails from a country that has never experienced colonialism and that as a result has never really missed any part of its

cultural legacy. Also it has no residue to speak of from its association with any dominant culture. However Turkey is one of those countries that have been subjected to a massive upheaval from within. The abolition of the Ottoman Empire and the movement to induce in people a mass amnesia regarding all things Ottoman, has resulted in a confusion regarding many things that just refuse all attempts to sweep them under the carpet.

To begin with, the Turkish alphabet was Romanized, but it retains its oriental sounds. The Ottoman Empire was abolished, but the sense of being revered by the millions of Sunni Muslims worldwide remained a distinct memory in the Turkish imagination for many years to come. In addition to this Turkey's bittersweet relationship with the European Union is a frequent reminder of the schizophrenic sense of national identity. What Pamuk does in his novels is to explore exactly this part of the Turkish identity and in his various novels, he has explored different narratives contributing to the grand metanarrative of Turkish identity and culture. The theories of the Subaltern Studies group can therefore act as a gauge to determine exactly how Pamuk liberates the subaltern in the metanarrative of Turkish identity.

The term subaltern is a fluid one that can mean many things at the same time. This study considers the subaltern voices as those voices that have been deliberately pushed into the background as they are seen as a threat to official Turkish historiography and the grand metanarrative of Turkish Republic. While Pamuk cannot strictly be pigeonholed into one category, his writing has a very predominant postmodernist strain and his liberal use of postmodernist tropes in his novels help him in reimagining the Turkish metanarrative and also help him indulge in vigorous revisionism of Turkish

historiography. As Ranajit Guha puts it, many dominant traditions of scholarship and historiography refuse to acknowledge the subaltern as a maker of his own destiny. Pamuk in his works attempts to subvert this tradition as much as possible. For him, as for the major proponents of the Subaltern Studies Project, the relationship between texts and power is a very important one. Texts are mostly used by the powerful as a way of imposing their identities on to others. One major reason the Subaltern Studies group gives such importance to this relationship is because historically nations that have been subjugated by dominant cultures have had their histories cast in an elitist mode, i.e., the mode used by their masters. Pamuk realizes this only too well and this is one relationship he explores at length in *My Name is Red*.

My Name is Red, as a text anticipates the downfall of the Ottoman Empire as the influence of Venetian masters on the Ottoman mode of painting becomes more pronounced. The miniaturists in the novel, especially the young ones are so convinced of their own inferiority to the techniques of the Venetians that they become indifferent to the modes of painting used by the old masters of Herat. The Venetian ideal of letting the individuality of a face come out in the painting is taken up the miniaturists but without much success. They have learned to sign their pictures with their individual stamps but not paint their faces with the same success as the Venetians. The result is a hodgepodge of style and form that refuses them any control over what they paint. The fact that the sultan himself has commissioned a book to be illustrated in the manner of the Venetians is suggestive. When the Emperor himself allows the art of his people to become subaltern to that of another culture, the downfall of an empire can be said to

have begun.

Another concern of the Subaltern Studies Group is that historiography, even when it is staunchly nationalistic or Marxist in its approach is often overwhelmingly cast in a Eurocentric mold, in case of countries that have had their cultures dominated by others. One solution to this dilemma of course would be to provincialize Europe as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, however in case of some cultures, and Pamuk's portrayal of the Turkish culture is one of them, Europe looms larger than life. It resists any attempts to provincialize it to diminish its hegemony by aiming for an alternative version of history. This is not to say that Pamuk writes in the tradition of preachers or rabid revolutionaries, but that Pamuk feels a distinct need to adopt a different approach to storytelling than is usually employed by writers of his country. Pamuk employs all the devices of the postmodern novel, but subverts the narrative structure by letting the subaltern voices that are a part of any narrative dictate the course of the master narrative.

Meta-fiction is another important literary trope that Pamuk makes use of. The creation of texts, narratives, discourses and books are a familiar part of Pamuk's writing and all of them are an extension of the theme of meta-fiction. Pamuk has declared in his book, *Other Colours* that life is full of things that conspire to keep a person from pursuing literature, (Pamuk, *Other Colours.* xi) and this sentiment is echoed repeatedly in all three of his novels discussed in this study. Literature then is another subaltern that emerges from Pamuk's narrative as it is literature that has more subversive potential than any other subaltern the readers might come across in Pamuk. It is so feared that it is often pushed off center stage into the background, for fear that it might help any

subalterns come to light. Also Pamuk's treatment of narrative structure suggests that he does not treat it as something of primary importance. He is only interested in fragments as he calls the different narratives that revolve around a center. And Pamuk in his usual playful tone hopes towards the end of his preface in *Other Colours* that the readers would enjoy imagining the center of his books into being. (xi)

A measure of an author's success in his translatability or his ability to reach out to other cultures, once translated from his original language. The translatability determines the relevance of a text once it has been translated and its reception depends a great deal on the relevance of narrative structure and subject matter once they have migrated from the host text to secondary text. As the title of this study suggests, Pamuk reaches out from the center towards the periphery and then helps pull the subaltern narratives towards the master narrative. The phenomenal success of Pamuk with foreign readers is a testament not only to his great skill as a writer but also to the fact that he has been able to provide the subaltern voices in his text, a safe passage so that they can move from the periphery towards the center of the narrative.

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