

A Study of Self-inflicted Identity Theft in Orhan Pamuk's *The Black Book*

J Jebaraj Kingsly Zechariah

Ph D Research Scholar in English

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

Tirunelveli – 627012

Abstract

Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish writer with international reputation. He is the author of ten novels, which include several international best sellers like *My name is Red*, *Snow* and *The Museum of Innocence*. His novels are very much contemporary in its setting and themes. Pamuk's characters, often, suffer from a sense of doubleness, which makes them lose their identity. The protagonist and the other characters of the novel *The Black Book* also experience the same mental suffering. This research paper explores the possible reasons for such an experience found among the characters.

Orhan Pamuk, one of the few internationally recognised authors in the field of Turkish fiction, is the winner of 2006 Nobel Prize for literature. He is being celebrated as Turkey's new literary genius. While his contemporaries are still working out for the success formula of a well-made modern novel, Pamuk has already excelled in the field of postmodernism. In his book, titled, *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*, Orhan Pamuk says: "The art of the novel is the knack of being able to speak about ourselves as if we were another person, and about others as if we were in his shoes" (71).

The Black Book is the fourth novel of Orhan Pamuk. The plot of the novel is deliberately simple. The lawyer Galip is the protagonist of the novel. When he comes back home from work, one day, he finds his wife, Ruya, disappeared, leaving behind a brief note, telling Galip that she will be in touch with him. The grief-stricken husband does not tell anything about Ruya's departure to anybody. But, instead, he begins his personal investigation in order to find out why and where she has left. While he is searching for her, Galip

discovers that Ruya's mysterious older half brother, Celal, a powerful newspaper columnist (who is Galip's first cousin), has also disappeared. So Galip convinces himself that his wife and Jelal are hiding together in one of Celal's places. Believing that he can find clues in Jelal's apartment, Galip moves into Celal's place. Eventhough Galip does not find both Ruya ang Celal there, he finds plenty of Celal's columns. When he begins to read those columns more and more, he becomes Celal by living in his apartment, wearing his clothes,and even writing Celal's columns. In the last chapter of the novel, Jelal and Ruya are murdered and the readers are not told of the murderer.

Though the novel presents a conventional mystery story, the way in which it is presented by Orhan Pamuk is in no way conventional. The search for a missing person grows into a broader one that incorporates issues more metaphysical than empirical.

Identity is one of the most important themes of the novel and it is dealt on many levels. Being true to the age, Pamuk deals with one of the relevant themes of the present. Robert Langbaum says in his work, *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature*: "the spiritual problem of our time is a problem of identity" (23). Identity relates to self-image, self-esteem, and individuality. Charles Taylor in his work, *Sources of the Self*, talks about identity:

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others—our parents, for instance—and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. (230)

None of the important characters in the novel is happy with who they are as they are not sure about their self image. They have the desire of becoming someone else. So they either look for opportunities to become somebody else or dream of being in somebody else's shoes. Galip, for example, is unhappy with who he is. The narrator says thus about Galip's desire in Chapter Nineteen: "But this was not the world he wanted to enter; the world he longed for was the one Celal had conjured out of words" (218). He does not like his life as a lawyer and has always envied the successful Celal for years. The plot shows how he gradually changes his identity to become Celal. At the same time, one can also find that Celal also longs to become someone else, that can clearly be seen in some of his columns like the one titled "I Must Be Myself". The character of

Ruya also remains mysterious in the novel, which implies that she is not satisfied with who she is. The only picture one can get of her is through the personal descriptions made by Galip. Her lifestyle remains strange throughout the limited space that she occupies in the novel. She is found sleeping during the day, reading detective novels in the evenings and at night, and hardly ever leaving the house. So it is evident that she wants to escape from the real world into the world of her detective novels. There is also the character called Belkis, who confesses to Galip that she has always wanted to be Ruya. She says: "I can't even explain why it was Ruya's life I wanted" (203). Belkis' obsession is so deep that she would follow Galip and Ruya as they walked along the street or when they went to the movies. She wanted Galip to be in love with her.

Not only the characters in the main plot but also the characters in Celal's Columns have the same desire to become someone else. Pamuk has bravely dealt with the same theme with an endless number of variations, without worrying about repetitions. There is a ruler, who disguises himself as a commoner and leaves the palace at night. But, to his shock, he encounters a commoner, who is in disguise as the ruler. Another interlude of the novel is about a prince, who is obsessed with the same question of personal identity. In order to find his real identity, he keeps himself isolated from family and friends. There is one master mannequin maker in the novel, who fails to attract customers. Because the customers expect those mannequins to appear like foreign models. One more story in the novel talks about a brothel, where the women pretend to be well-known film actresses.

Almost all the characters in the novel are willing to let their identities to go away and assume someone else's identity. Every chapter in the book deepens and extends this preoccupation with self-inflicted identity theft. This self-inflicted identity theft is found among the characters of *The Black Book*, because they are often tormented by a sense of doubleness. This sense of doubleness could have developed in them due to personal reasons or national reasons. But the desire of becoming someone else is found to be very basic to both the reasons. When asked why 'the idea of becoming somebody else' crops up so often in his novels, Orhan Pamuk himself replies thus in his *Other Colors*:

It is a very personal thing. I have a very competitive brother who is only eighteen months older than me. In a way, he was my father, my Freudian father, so to speak. It was he who became my alter ego, the representation of authority. On the other hand, we had a competitive and brotherly comradeship. A very

complicated relationship... On the other hand, this theme of impersonation is reflected in the fragility Turkey feels when faced with Western culture... You know, aspiring to become Westernised and then being accused of not being authentic enough. Trying to grab the spirit of Europe and then feeling guilty about the imitative drive. (554,555)

So the question of what constitutes the identity of the characters in the novel is based on their personal psychology and the position of Turkey in the Globe: The identity of the characters and Istanbul's identity as a city.

The very thought of 'who they are' does not bring happiness to the characters for they are highly dissatisfied with their lots. To find happiness in life means to live in harmony with one's true self. But the sense of desire in them to take somebody else's position makes them look for opportunities to realise their desires. Pamuk, not only deals with themes like history, politics and culture, but also deals with human individuals as bundle of fears and dreams. In his nobel lecture, Pamuk dealt with this issue, sixteen years after the publication of this novel.

What literature needs most to tell and investigate today are humanity's basic fears: the fear of being left outside, and the fear of counting for nothing, and the feelings of worthlessness that come with such fears; the collective humiliations, vulnerabilities, slights, grievances, sensitivities and imagined insults.

As a true work of literature, *The Black Book* investigates humanity's basic fears. Instead of facing up the fears and overcoming it, the characters prefer to escape from the fears by assuming the identities of others. Psychologists assume that identity formation is a matter of 'finding oneself'. As the characters in the novel have not found their real self, they keep going after assuming somebody else's identity. Pamuk also capitalises on the contemporary psychological insight that 'all one can know of others' are the projections of himself / herself. Identity itself is fluid or one has multiple identities, according to theories on identity. With this insight carried into the novel, it stands to reason that all the characters are figments of the basic enigma which is the mind of the author, as enigmatic to the author himself as it is to the reader who is trying to decipher the text.

Readers are also very much involved in knowing more about Jelal's constant worry over the question of how people can be happy with their identity and not just imitations of other people. With every chapter of this book, this subject gains greater momentum and importance, eventually spreading through every section of the novel. As Pamuk has dealt with this theme throughout the novel with a number of variations, this must be more than an issue of individual psychology. Besides the psychological dimension, the novel has a political dimension as well. Because the search for identity in the novel is strongly characterised by the concepts of the East and the West. Description of Turkey or the streets of Istanbul has taken an important place in the novel. There is commentary like narration in the novel about Turkey in general and its capital, Istanbul in particular, with its multiple identities.

As Galip searches for Ruya through the streets of Istanbul, the readers get to know more about Istanbul's different neighbourhoods. This is a city, where the binaries like East and West, ancient and modern, Islam and secular, the rich and the poor, the pashas and the peasants are found everywhere. The question always stays: what is the true identity of this city? Turkey's quest for its identity still continues for it is not sure whether it belongs to East or West. It is also a matter of Turkey's need to establish its own identity in the world. Because Turkey is highly divided between the contrasting magnetic attractions of the East and the West.

After the Ottoman empire was collapsed, Turkey wanted to merge with the West. So it applied for membership in the European Union, but failed to get that because of their questionable human rights record. As the country is divided, so the characters are as well. Individuals may possess more than one cultural identity as a result of geographical and social mobility and their desire for belonging to a particular community. Orhan Pamuk has effectively presented the feeling of having inferior culture in Turkey and the people's complex desire to imitate the other in the novel *The Black Book*.

Works Cited

- Pamuk, Orhan. *The Black Book*. Faber & Faber. 2006. Print.
- ---. *Other Colors*. Great Britain: Faber & Faber. 2011. Print.
- ---. *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*. Penguin Books. 2010. Print.
- Langbaum, Robert. *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1977. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self*. Harvard University Press. 1995. Print.