

Shaping Identity: Role of Memory and Myth in Orhan Pamuk's The Red-Haired Woman

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Abstract:

Orhan Pamuk's novel *The Red-Haired Woman* is a narrative that traces the formation of Cem Celik's identity through memory and myth. From being a naive teenager to being a father, Cem's identity is heavily influenced by memories of his past and the cultural narratives of Turkey and the West. Pamuk has treated memory as a tool that helps comprehend the present, rather than a constant past. He shows how the formation of identity is a dynamic process since identity itself is something fluid. This research article employs concepts from Memory Studies to explore and understand how individuals struggle to connect their personal memories with cultural narratives in the process of forming their identities that seek constant validation.

Keywords: Personal memory, collective memory, cultural memory, sites of memory, identity
“Memory is the seamstress and a capricious one at that”

- Virginia Woolf

Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish writer who won the Nobel Prize in 2006, thus making Turkish Literature occupy an undeniable place among world literature. Pamuk, throughout his writings, deals with Turkish identity. Turkish identity is a complex term to understand because of the various annexations and settlements Turkey underwent and because of the constant East -West tension. The nature of identity being dynamic adds to this complexity. In his novel *The Red-Haired Woman*, Pamuk uses memory and myth as factors defining the identity of the protagonist Cem Celik. He has treated identity as interplay between memory and myth. Cem's evolving identity reflects his attempt to reconcile the fragmented layers of his past with the cultural narratives he inherits. Cem's personal memory and the enduring powers of the cultural narratives shape his identity and destiny.

The narrative structure in itself is symbolic of the fragmented nature of memory. Tools of metafiction employed in the novel facilitate multiple perspectives to the novel. Flashback technique, changing narrators and apparent omissions and reconstructions reflect the nature of memory. Cem's narrative is not only composed of the memories of his past but is at most times accompanied by his retrospective views of the past. This makes it obvious that his present self is largely influenced by his past and also his past is constructed in

reference to his present. The way Cem recalls his past, erasing and reconstructing it, is reflective of how memory is influenced and constructed based on its interactions with social groups.

Cem's spiritual views, his individualist ideals, his political views and his rootedness to Turkey are all formed based on the various transformations that the society undergoes and how the society collectively remembers it. Istanbul's geographical location in Europe makes it possible for Istanbul to undergo modernization at a faster pace. When Cem goes back to Ongoren after many years he realizes that everything has changed. Back when Cem was an apprentice to the well-digger, the red-haired woman was considered as a woman of questionable character but in the present Istanbul has so many uncovered red heads. Though things have transformed largely, Cem's attachment to his cultural grounds, roots from his obsession over the cultural narratives and how he connects his individual memory with those.

In the novel, during Cem's episodes with Master Mahmut, one can see how social structure shapes the way one thinks, i.e, Cem wants his absent father to interact with him in Mahmut's place. He says, "I was a child: he was neither my friend nor my father, but my master. Only I saw in him a father" (Pamuk18). Despite his mother's presence in his life, Cem yearns for his father's guidance. This is because, in the society that Cem lives, fathers are seen as characters that protect and provide. As Cem's father is absent for most part of his life, he looks for and finds a father figure in Master Mahmut. "Master Mahmut took much more of an interest in my life than my father ever had: he told me stories and taught me lessons; he never forgot to ask if I was alright, if I was hungry, whether I was tired" (Pamuk 28). He also wants his father's approval for the life he lives. "I still craved my father's approval and wanted to believe that I was leading the honorable life he would have expected of me" (Pamuk 128).

Maurice Halbwachs, the French philosopher and sociologist who formulated the concept of 'individual memory' and 'collective memory' asserts that individual memory is always associated with a group consciousness. "The succession of our remembrances, of even our most personal ones, is always explained by changes occurring in our relationships to various collective milieus- in short, by the transformations these milieus undergo separately and as a whole" (Halbwachs 49). Cem's individual memory, as Halbwachs asserts, is influenced by 'collective memory' or what Jan and Aleida Assman call 'cultural memory'. Assman's concept of 'cultural memory' explains how societies maintain their relation with the past and how the memories of the past are preserved and transmitted through generations. "Cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assman 132). The concept can be applied to *The Red-haired Woman* to understand how cultural memory plays a crucial role in shaping Cem's identity. Cultural memory refers to the memories preserved through material symbols, rituals and organizations that enable communities to preserve their connection with the distant past thereby remaining vital in the formation of cultural and personal identity. The myths employed in *The Red-Haired Woman*

are such symbols that enable Cem to understand himself and shape his identity which otherwise might have proved difficult with the guilt he bears.

Out of the many symbols of cultural memory employed in the novel, the presence of the western and eastern myths significantly shape Cem's identity. Cem's obsession over the myths of Oedipus, and Rostam and Sohrab becomes apparent and it seems to influence the activities that define him. When Cem Celik begins his apprenticeship at Deniz's bookstore, he happens to read the western myth of Oedipus and for some strange reason, the myth affects him deeply. Later when he joins as an apprentice to Master Mahmut, the well-digger, he wants to share his memory of the myth to his master as a way of causing him agony. He says "I tried to think of something that would upset him. If Master Mahmut meant to bring me to heel with his stories, then I must at least try to unsettle him with one of mine! I kept thinking of things like blindness and theatres. So I began to tell him the story of the Greek king Oedipus" (Pamuk 43).

Cem is oftentimes reminded of his father when he is with Master Mahmut. He imagines how it would have been if his father was there in place of Master Mahmut. Cem also feels a kind of hatred towards Master Mahmut because he has an air of fatherly dominance over Cem. When Cem thinks that he has accidentally killed Master Mahmut, his guilt makes him consider himself to be the eastern equivalent of Oedipus. Though deep in his heart he believes that he did not kill Master Mahmut, his obsession with the Oedipus myth convinces him that Master Mahmut is dead. "Why had I spent almost thirty years believing that I might have accidentally killed Master Mahmut? It was probably because I'd read *Oedipus the King* and relied on its truths" (Pamuk 175). Even after his marriage, Cem and his wife together go to different places around the world looking for books, illustrations and paintings that portray the Oedipus and the Sohrab and Rostam myths.

Guilt springing from his memory of the well-digger is predominantly present throughout the narrative. Pamuk's employment of Cem as the narrator of the novel is effective in conveying this guilt. Not only the well-digger's memory but his affair with the red-haired woman also connects him to the Oedipus myth. When he discovers that the red-haired woman was his father's mistress, his obsession with the Oedipus myth surfaces in his thoughts. However, Cem finds a way to subside his guilt. He says, "Eventually, I discovered that reading the *Shahnameh* or *Oedipus the King* purged my thoughts of money and figures and helped me sleep better-like hearing an old fairy tale. Though they were both stories about terrible guilt, my own guilt seemed to subside when I read them again" (Pamuk 148).

Cem is not only obsessed with the Oedipus myth but also with the Rostam and Sohrab narrative from Ferdousi's *Shahnameh* and other eastern cultural narratives. Right from the moment he witnesses the play of Rostam and Sohrab enacted by the Theatre of Moralities in Ongoren, his obsession over patricide is accompanied by that over filicide. He desires to witness the suffering undergone by Rostam as he learns that he had killed his own son. Cem even acknowledges the impact of those narratives later on in his life and how remembering Master Mahmut's stories made him read more. "Many years later when I grasped the

immeasurable effect the Master Mahmut's stories had over the course of my life, I started reading anything I could find about their origin" (Pamuk 37).

As Cem is unable to birth any children with Ayse, he names his firm 'Sohrab' and considers it to be his son. At a point, Cem and his wife worry that they might lose their son to the red-haired woman like how Rostam lost his son Sohrab. Cem's obsession over Rostam and Sohrab deepens as he becomes aware of the existence of his son, Enver. Cem's wife is equally obsessed with these myths. It makes her realize that Cem is about to be murdered when he is in Ongoren unbeknownst to her. "If it's true, everything we've always believed about Oedipus and his father, and about Rostam and Sohrab . . . then if that young man is your son, he is going to kill you!" (Pamuk 213).

Though Cem's life is mostly similar to the western Oedipus myth, he tries to stick on to his heritage by becoming the Rostam of the eastern myth. When his wife warns him of the impending danger of being killed when he meets his estranged son, he says, "Don't worry. If he tries anything, then I'll be the authoritarian Asian father, like Rostam, and kill the brat myself" (Pamuk 213). But unfortunately for Cem, his case becomes similar to that of Laius of the Oedipus myth. He is murdered by his son. However Cem's affair with the red-haired woman and the birth of their son unbeknownst to him, resonate with how Rostam had an affair with Tahmina and begets Sohrab. Cem's desire to stick on to his Turkish identity is visible when he is reluctant to act like western people in the advertisement that is shot to promote his firm. However he is forced to do so and that becomes the reason for his estranged son to reach out to him like Sohrab going in search of Rostam. "We were made to enact the affected, ostentatious, Westernized lifestyle of a wealthy couple –a kind of life we didn't even lead" (Pamuk 181).

Pierre Nora's concept of 'lieux de memoire' (sites of memory) can also be applied to understand how Cem's obsession over these myths are fulfilled through objects. 'Lieux de Memoire' refers to the physical places like museums, monuments, symbols or even texts that help preserve and transmit cultural memories through generations. Nora asserts that these sites of memory facilitate the reconstruction of a fragmented memory of the past into coherent narratives. "Memory is life, always carried by groups of living people, and in this sense it is in permanent evolution..." (Nora 8) The sites of memory not only reconstitute the past but also actively influence and shape the present. They create a sense of belonging where individuals can connect to a larger group. Cem's quest for texts, images, illustrations or anything related to those myths can be well comprehended by this concept of Nora.

Cem's identity is not only shaped by the influence of the cultural narratives but also his individual memory, particularly his episodes with Master Mahmut. The 'well' that was excavated by Master Mahmut during which Cem served as his apprentice can be called Cem's personal site of memory. Pamuk's employment of the well serves as a perfect symbol because excavating a well is similar to constructing a narrative with memory as a tool. The well significantly reminds Cem of his apprenticeship under Master Mahmut. The memories of that experience play a vital role in shaping Cem's identity. Cem is often reminded of the well and the plateau in which it is located. "At times I would notice a faraway plot of land

resembling our plateau, and I would become agitated, as if I were about to bump into Master Mahmut” (Pamuk 115). His life is totally altered and he realizes that he’s never going to have an ordinary life anymore.

Every decision Cem makes afterwards is influenced by his memories of the well-digger. Cem chooses to be a geological engineer because of the well-digger’s influence. “My mother had noticed that the apprenticeship with the welldigger had left some mark on me. I wondered in passing whether she realized somehow that the newfound maturity she observed was in fact a black stain on my soul” (Pamuk 120). Whenever something important happens, he tries to deviate himself from those memories and think that his life would take a turn. When he is engaged, when he gets married, when he starts a business and when he expands it, every time he is effortlessly reminded of the well-digger and all those memories associated with the well.

It is evident that Cem represses his memory of Master Mahmut and the accident that he caused him in his narrative. “For a long time I told myself nothing happened anyway” (Pamuk 124). He deliberately ignores the details of Master Mahmut’s death until he learns that he was not killed in the accident. Whenever he contemplates on whether he killed Master Mahmut or not, he always comes up with explanations that prove him innocent. But deep inside he understands how cowardly he has been. This explains the melancholy surrounding Cem’s life despite having a successful career and a loving wife.

Besides the well, the village of Ongoren itself is a personal site of memory to Cem. When he thinks of Ongoren he is reminded of Gulcihan (the red-haired woman), the theatre of moralities, and the military troops which in turn remind him of his father. When Cem returns to Ongoren after around fifteen years, he sees that everything has changed. Since Ongoren is close to Istanbul, modernization has taken over and nothing looks like they used to be. Cem is still able to locate the place where the well is. He wants to go and have a look at the well which is so important to him. He says, “Our characters is forged not just by our freedoms, but also by the forces of history and memory. This well is history and memory to me” (Pamuk 221). He clearly recognizes and acknowledges the importance of the well’s memory in the formation of his identity.

Memory and myth play significant roles in shaping personal identity as well as collective and cultural identity. They present a scaffold for individuals and groups to form their identities by understanding their past and navigating the present. Remembering, forgetting and altering the perspectives of the past help individuals define themselves within a social context. Pamuk shapes Cem’s identity in the same way. His individual memories of the well and the feeling of guilt it leads to, his obsession with the cultural narratives and his personal sites of memory help him locate himself in a huge historical and cultural gamut and develop a sense of belonging. Memory facilitates the personal past influenced by its interaction with the collective past and myth provides that framework that is necessary to locate this past in a larger context. They together create an ever-evolving interplay that forms, shapes and alters identities.

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