

Orhan pamuk and the orient-occident dichotomy

Syed Moniza Nizam Shah

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Abstract

The present paper entitled as "Orhan Pamuk and the Orient-Occident dichotomy" is an attempt to state that despite the contemporary world has undergone the transition from one stage to another, i.e., from an agricultural world to the global village, yet the centuries old collision between the two entities: East and West has not ended. The dichotomy between the Orient and Occident is still prevalent in the contemporary world in one or the other form. The West is still viewed as an epitome of rationality, modernity, materialism, democracy and so on and the East as quintessence of religion, spirituality, tradition, nature, superstitions and the like. To be precise, despite globalization, economic growth, and scientific developments in Asia, the West is still regarded as a superior entity to East. It is pertinent to state here that the collision between the two entities may not be visible everywhere but its traces by and large are still palpable in large metropolitan cities and even distant regions of the world. For example, Orhan Pamuk in his much acclaimed work-Snow shows us the footprints of Orient-Occident collision in a distant and forbidden region of Turkey called Kars.

Keywords: orient, occident, contemporary world, modernity, democracy, religion, spirituality, nature, turkey, kars

Introduction

North and West and South are quaking
Thrones are cracking, kingdoms shaking
Fly to the East, so pure and fair
Taste the patriarchal air!

- Goethe

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a very famous German poet, novelist, playwright, influenced a good number of world thinkers/writers including Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann, Freud, Carl Jung, George Eliot, and Sir Mohammad Iqbal. He was himself influenced by Islamic tradition, Sanskrit literature and Persian poetry (particularly the works of Hafiz). The aforementioned lines are from his poetic collection called *The West-Eastern Divan* (1819). The theme of the poem is antithesis of popular Orientalists' works, i.e., it connotes that the two ends of the earth – East and West – cannot possibly meet but men from all nations must put aside their differences of nationality, race, religion, culture, language, development and must appreciate one another's universal qualities of fraternity, humility, nobility, rectitude, etc. The poem symbolizes an everlasting and blissful union/blend of not only between Orient and Occident but also between North and South Pole, Christians and Muslims, and other cultures of the world. Goethe's voice is truly the voice of altruistic love which pleads for the reconciliation of the East and the West. According to Goethe:

To God belongs the Orient!
To God belongs the Occident!

Goethe's vision i.e., the combination of scientific West and spiritual East, was later on beautifully described by none other than the great poet of the East, Allama Iqbal, who says:

For the Westerners Reason is the proper equipment of life
While for the Easterners Love is the secret of the universe.

Arise and lay the foundations of a new world order
By combining Reason with Love.

Walt Whitman too longed for such a synthesis:

The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south
are mine...
All seems beautiful to me.

It is explicitly stated in the above mentioned lines that these writers present the idea of one world in which man is not the enemy of man. This implies that peace, harmony, love, etc. must rule the world. Their vision is of the world where spiritualism, mutual amity between nations, universal brotherhood reigns and baser passions like hatred, animosity, monotony, etc., find no place. The gulf/collision between the Orient and Occident must be bridged; the people from both poles should work together for the cherished dream of Goethe, Iqbal and Whitman. But, one would only like to add that Orient-Occident relationship by no means has been bridged hitherto despite decolonization, modernization, liberalization, universalization and the globalization. Stuart Hall aptly remarks: "Far from being a "formation" of the past, and of only historical interest, the discourse of "the West and the Rest" is alive and well in the modern world.

With the changing world situation especially after the First World War, orientalism took a more liberal stance towards most of its subjects; but Islamic orientalism did not enjoy this status. There were constant attacks to show Islam as a weak religion, and a mixture of many religions and thoughts. With the end of the Second World War, all the European colonies were lost; and it was believed that there were no more Orientals and Occident's, but this was surely not the case. The western prejudice or their superiority towards eastern countries is still prevalent in one or the other form. For example, the Arabs are often represented as uncivilized, cruel and violent.

Africans are viewed as black and dark skinned people. Japanese are associated with Karate. Hindus are connected with superstitious beliefs whereas the Muslims are considered to be terrorists and so on. Aimé Césaire's words regarding the relationship between Occident and Orient are worthy to recall: "The colonizer (Occident), who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man (Orient) as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal." Turkey, being a Muslim populated country, is denied the European Union membership till date. In this regard, Joseph J. Hobbs writes: "Their (Turkey's) membership in the European Union was denied because they are Muslims. This shows the biased stand of the developed countries and their people. We must remember that since times immemorial the West represents a world of knowledge, enlightenment, rationalization/scientific temper, advancement, individualism, innovativeness, pragmatism, utilitarianism and so on. On the contrary, the East has been viewed as a symbol of imitateness, sorcery, spirit, nature, exoticism, sluggishness, interdependence, backwardness, passivity and the like. This binary opposition is summed up by John Mackenzie in the following words: "The West rational, mature and normal, the East irrational, backward, depraved.

The dichotomy between East and West is not a phenomenon of novelty. Rather, its origin is deeply rooted not only in the writings of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, S. T. Coleridge, Thomas Moore, Karl Marx, Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster, Joseph Conrad and others but even in the Greek dramas for instance in Homer's *Iliad*, Aeschylus' *The Persians* and Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Edward Said states in *Orientalism*:

Consider first the demarcation between Orient and West. It already seems bold by the time of the *Iliad*. Two of the most profoundly influential qualities associated with the East appear in Aeschylus's *The Persians*, the earliest Athenian play extant, and in *The Bacchae* of Euripides (p.50).

These works according to Said are the first literary texts which had demarcated the world into two divisions – East and West, the civilized and the barbaric, the European and the Asian, the natives and the non-natives. One of the worst sufferings that the people of Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America experienced in the course of the seventeenth through the mid-twentieth century is the course of colonialism and imperialism. In Europe, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the industry had transformed not only the socio-economic structure of the state but the day-to-day life as well. During Industrial Revolution the Europeans established their factories in Asia, Africa and North-America. The reason is simple because there was no Industrial Revolution in these continents then. The goods produced in Europe were far superior and the invention of science had made the European countries very powerful. The European countries found these continents the best places for the sale of finished goods and for the purchase of raw materials. The Europeans came to these nations as traders and established their colonies. This way they finally became the rulers in these countries. Ania Loomba states in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*:

... In whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called 'mother country'... the colonizers moved ... as ... the colonial masters as administrators, soldiers, merchants,

settlers, travellers, writers, domestic staff, missionaries, teachers and scientists.

This collision between the Orient and the Occident is described by Stuart Hall in these words: "The world is first divided, symbolically, into good-bad, us-them, attractive-disgusting, civilized-uncivilized, the West-the Rest ... By this strategy, the Rest becomes defined as everything that the West is not.

Apart from proving a material career for the West, the East proved an equally fecund plane for the imperial intellectuals of varied subjects. The notable intellectuals like Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Flaubert, Nerval, T.B.Macaulay etc., owe their debt to the silent East. East became a geographical, religious, and cultural cipher for these intellectuals and they constructed a mythical Orient. This Orient was presented as somewhat 'Other,' the negative binary opposite of civilization – lacking in culture, unable to change ancient ways of living, biologically inferior to those of European descent and eager to be dominated by the 'superior' race – the colonists. The fictitious line between the East and West becomes clear and visible as Kipling sings in his poem "The Ballad of East and West": "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." E.M. Forster in his masterpiece, *A Passage to India*, states that "I know all about him. I don't know him," articulated by Fielding about Dr. Aziz, is a clear cut indication of the general western perception about the east; that area or imagined place that has come to represent the concept of otherness in the minds of westerners. This is how, Disraeli, widens the gulf between the Orient and Occident in his novel, *Tancred*: "An Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life of Oriental ease, in a state of Oriental despotism and sensuality, imbued with a feeling of Oriental fatalism. Edward Said writes in *Orientalism*:

Oriental or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, "devoid of energy and initiative" ... Orientals are inveterate liars, they are "lethargic and suspicious," and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race (p.38). Edward Said in *Orientalism* asserts that the Westerners separated the world into two entities – the East and the West or the Orient and the Occident or the civilized and the uncivilized. Said draws a line between the two: "Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant ... It is Europe that articulates the Orient ... represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries." The Europeans defined themselves as the superior race compared to the Orientals, and they said that it was their duty towards the world to civilize the uncivilized in order to achieve their goal, they had to colonize and rule the Orient. They asserted that the Orientals themselves were not capable of running their own government. Said reminded us in *Orientalism*:

From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself (p.283).

Edward Said's theory of orientalism is chiefly constructed on what he considers the negative images of the Orient that has been concocted by European travellers, missionaries, novelists, poets, dramatists, philosophers and so on from the days of Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798. He presents the Orient as the primitive, uncultured, backward, underdeveloped, and uncivilized 'other', in order to create it in opposition to the advanced/developed and civilized Europe. Said considers that

a European colonizer has imposed their language and culture while on the contrary traditions/cultures, histories and languages of the subjugated/colonized peoples have been overlooked and even deformed or misrepresented by the colonialists in their pursuit to rule these peoples and exploit their natural resources/wealth in the name of what Kipling calls 'white man's civilizing mission' or in John Ruskin's phrase 'Imperial duty'. Therefore, in the colonial texts we have stereotyped Indians, Turks, Africans, Palestinians, Latin Americans and the like who are in utter contrast to the Occidentals and which Said refutes. It is indisputable that a critical reading of both the Orient and the Occident collision can never be holistically comprehended without Edward Said's writings, particularly his *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*.

Orhan Pamuk and the Orient-Occident Dichotomy

Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's only Nobel Prize laureate (till date), was born, brought up and schooled in a highly secularized Istanbul. This made him a typical Istanbul like man who is torn between the traditional values of the city (century's old Ottoman culture) and Kemalist Cultural ideology/Kemalism. He is deeply attached to Istanbul where he continues to live in. Though Pamuk faces life threats, constant attacks from secularists in Turkey yet he continues to live in Istanbul. Like Joyce's Dublin and Dostoevsky's St Petersburg, Pamuk considers his birth city (Istanbul) as a constant source of inspiration for his works. His affection, honor and attachment to this beloved city (Istanbul) is clearly evident in the following lines from *Istanbul: Memories and the City*: "Here we come to the heart of the matter: I have never left Istanbul... I am attached to this city because it made me who I am." Pamuk's fiction arrays the development of modern Turkish history and culture, messiness and complexity of social transformation, force and oppression that Turkey has been undergoing since its inception in 1920 to the present day. He doesn't even hesitate in using the great historical accounts about the later part of the 16th century Ottoman Empire, Sultan and artists in his works. He presents bravely before his readers the stark reality of his nation. His oeuvre moves primarily around the repercussions of the Orient-Occident collision in Turkey. Orhan Pamuk's writings primarily deal with the division between the Orient and the Occident raising questions about identity, history, culture and economic conditions, religious conservatism, modernity and westernization. He describes in his novels not only the clash between East and West but also the harmony of these two which becomes the life style of his modern people. In fact, he edifies the Orient-Occident collision and shows his readers a half-westernized and half-traditional Istanbul with its acceptance of 'modernity' and vast cultural history. He doesn't advocate superiority of one nation over the other but rather suggests understanding each other perpetually. Thus, a co-existence of multiple cultures, mixed languages, identities, borrowed religious and technical ethnicities find enough space between East and West and in Pamuk's texts.

Turkey is a country which is torn between its Ottoman roots/Islamic tradition and secular republican present/western ideas. Due to this ambivalent attitude it has been the epicenter of Orient-Occident collision since centuries. This dualistic identity of Turkish citizens has created a dilemma in modern Turkey, i.e., its citizens are suspended whether to go with the

Western ideas, to remain fixed to Ottoman tradition or to assimilate both. In the context of this paper, the phrase Orient-Occident Collision stands for a clash between tradition and modernity, between foreign culture and native culture, between spirituality and materialism, superstitions and rational outlook, dictatorship and democracy, between upper middle class/secularists and lower class of people in Turkish life. Traditional Turkish/Ottoman values and the resources on the one hand, modern/western ideas and attitudes on the other, the theme of collision between tradition and modernity have always assumed a vital significance for the Turkish writers. The collision between the Occident and the Orient or between modernity and tradition is a recurrent theme in Turkish fiction. Orhan Pamuk depicts the clash of deep-rooted values of Turkish culture, characterized by Ottoman culture, with those of the modern West in many of his novels.

The city of Istanbul, the gate way between Europe and Asia, is a cosmopolitan city in Turkey. It is a fascinating world between the Occident and Orient or more commonly between tradition and modernity and between Islam and West. It is a symbol of Islamic architecture and Ottoman culture. It is a city where number of people follows westernized life-style who are popularly called westernized Istanbul bourgeoisie and Orhan Pamuk is one of them. The city has remained under the influence of Ottoman culture and tradition for more than six hundred years. The city witnessed a ban on veil, fez and other religious symbols under the regime of Ataturk in the name of secularism, modernization and westernism. This project of Europeanisation resulted in a fierce confrontation between the Islamists and the secularists or more precisely, a direct clash between religion/Ottoman tradition and modernity/West which is still going-on in Turkey. The popular subject in Pamuk's fictional/non-fictional works is the Ottoman Turkey and the repercussions of Ataturk's project of modernization. The city of Istanbul is a classical symbol of direct collision between the Orient and the Occident or between Ottoman culture and western modernity. Pamuk in this regard in his masterpiece memoir, *Istanbul Memories and the City*, states "Istanbul caught between modernity and Ottoman culture" (p.152). In *Snow*, Ka who is a highly secularized and westernized person in Turkey expresses his indifferent attitude towards the traditional culture in these words: "The fact remains that they don't live that way in the West" (p.233). In complete contrast to Ka's views, Blue who is a typical Istanbul conversationalist puts his resentment towards the West this way: "The people of Europe are not our friends but our enemies" (p.277). In *The White Castle* Faruk Darvinoglu's presence in the archive symbolizes how the secularization project of 1920s erased the centuries old cosmopolitan Ottoman culture in Turkey, particularly the Ottoman language. His very presence there in the archive and more importantly, his cherished dream to transliterate the disordered Ottoman documents is an indication of the revival of Ottoman culture/tradition or what is famously called neo-Ottomanism. On the Other hand, the Venetian slave is an epitome of all what West stands for. Margaret Atwood aptly remarks: "His (Pamuk's) fictions turn on the conflict between the forces of "Westernization" and those of the Islamists."

Conflict between spirituality and materialism is another facet of Orient-Occident collision and one can observe it in all the major works of Pamuk. According to Pamuk, due to the modernization project, western upbringing and secular

education materialism got into many Turkish minds. On the other hand, spirituality is the hall mark of the Turks for they have been under the influence of Islamic rule for more than six hundred years. The conflict between the spiritual East (Islamists) and materialistic West (secularists) is an everyday affair in Turkey. The characters in Pamuk's works can be divided into two categories: spiritualists and materialists. Ka and Sunay Zaim of *Snow*, Venetian slave of *The White Castle*, Orhan Pamuk of *Istanbul Memories and the City* are materialists by disposition. Blue and Fazil of *Snow* are spiritualists and to some extent Nilgun Darvinoglu in *The White Castle* belongs to this group.

Secularism is an important concept attributed to the West. The term secularism implies that the religious influence is declining in the society and its related institutions due to the growth of modernism and developments in the fields of science and education, in other words, the more secular a country the less impact of religion on it. In a secular country all citizens have complete freedom to follow any religion. India is a secular country and so is Turkey. The difference between the two is that in the former women rights and the rights of minorities are protected (which are indispensable to equality and democracy) whereas in the latter the case is otherwise. In Turkey women are not allowed to wear headscarves and men are forbidden to wear traditional fez in public places (it is pertinent to state that the ban on these objects was lifted recently). After its establishment as a secular democratic country, the Turkish state erased almost all vital objects which belonged to Ottomans. Turkish state is extremely secular which paved the way of confrontation between the secularists and Islamists. This conflict is going on since Turkey became a Republican country. Pamuk depicts rightly the clash between secularists and traditionalists/Islamists in almost all his works. For example, in *Snow* Ka's expression upholds this dichotomy: "They'll kill you just for being a little Westernized" (p.207) and in Blue's words: "All they need to say is that I'm one of the most prominent Islamists in Turkey" (p.233). In *The White Castle* the clash between these two is reflected throughout the text in the works of Venetian slave and Hoja. *Istanbul Memories and the City* is a classic example of this conflict. It is a memoir which painfully portrays this clash between the westernizing/secular reforms and Ottoman dilapidated architecture in contemporary Turkey.

The subject of the Turkish identity, which is oscillating between the tradition and modernity or East and West, is one of the favorite themes of Pamuk's works. His novels are both a creative interpretation of the past and the criticism of the contemporary life. His fiction is a comprehensive account of the agony and the pride, the trials and tribulations of Turkish people. He denounces the process of Turkish modernization for it has deeply affected the psyche of general masses in Turkey. Pamuk's scornful attitude towards this project is clearly visible in the following lines of *Istanbul Memories and the City*: "This city, like my soul, is fast becoming an empty – a truly empty – place." The people in Turkey, according to Pamuk are wandering between the two worlds—East versus West, i.e., either to behave like a westerner or to adhere to the traditional Ottoman values. His characters: Galip, Ruya, Kemal, Fusun, Sibel, Hoja, Cevdet Bey, Doctor Selâhattin, Fatima, miniaturists are torn between two diametrically opposed sides and hence constitute part of hybrid culture which is visible in the following excerpt from *Istanbul*:

Memories and the City: "For people like me, Istanbul with one foot in this culture and one in the other."

Conclusion

Pamuk's works mainly deals with many themes such as orient versus occident, Islam versus secularism, and traditionalism versus modernism. The East-West antagonism which is preponderant in the Turkish consciousness is dexterously presented in Pamuk's all major works. Istanbul. What is unique to Pamuk is that he is not only well familiar with East-West dichotomy but he never takes sides and loves it to dramatize the Eastness of the East and Westness of the West.

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