

**“Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați**  
**The School for Doctoral Studies in the Socio-Humanities**



## **PHD THESIS SUMMARY**

# **IDENTITARY DISCOURSE AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN ORHAN PAMUK'S WORK**

**PhD student,**

**Cristina Stan**

**PhD supervisor,**

**Alina Daniela IORGA**

**Series U2: Philology-Romanian Nr. 17**

**GALAȚI**

**2018**

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**Key words:** identity, memory, alterity, interculturalism, transculturalism, intertextuality, cosmopolitanism, cultural hybridity, textual hybridity, autobiographical narrative

# Identitary discourse and intercultural dialogue in Orhan Pamuk's work

## Summary

The aim of this research is to showcase the specific aspects of the identitary discourse that mirrors an existential journey of an artist that was born and lives at the crossroads of two cultural spaces. For the Turkish author, the construction of personal identity and the defining of cultural identity are marked by the oscillation between modernity and the ottoman tradition, by the effort to secularize in a liberal manner and political islamism, with a double reference: to the cultural memory and collective memory belonging to the homeland, on one hand, and to the Western literary tradition, on the other hand. These dichotomies are found both in the novel and the autobiographical works.

The three literary works that we have selected will highlight an identitary project which bears the assimilation of two cultures. The purpose is also to outline the relation between personal history and Great History, between individual memory, collective memory and the "manufactured" or inflicted memory by a political regime which is obsessed by westernization and denies the past.

The intercultural dialogue is not a planned artistic creed. Pamuk himself states in many interviews that his intentions were not to assume the status of a "bridge" between two cultures. Besides the literary themes encountered, what forms a dialogue model is, firstly, the rich intertextual network that characterizes a great part of the novel, through rewriting and reinterpretation of certain histories and texts belonging to different cultures. In other words, the intercultural dialogue conducts the construction of the discourse through transcultural intertextuality and literary transculturality. Furthermore, literatures considered to be small, like Turkish literature, could put forth a new dialogue model, whose purpose is not to blame the Other for an entire history of discursive authority and cultural domination, but to reflect through dialogical imagination upon the experiences that the two cultural space have in common and upon human condition.

The first chapter, **Reference points for reception**, focuses on the context of reception for Orhan Pamuk's work, as a preliminary approach to choosing our main analytical directions and methods. Reception by the specialised critic discourse and by the international press also forms an overview of the visibility and impact that the Turkish novelist's works have had. Most studies and articles belonging to critics have concentrated on the defining images and symbols from the urban universe presented in *The Black Book* and *Istanbul* and also on the thematical structures and transtextual strategies, stressing the metatextual and hypertextual aspect of the novel. The academic world has overlooked the identitary dimension that can be pinpointed in the volume of essays *Other Colors*, which is mostly made up of an autobiographical discourse. Most reviews and articles in the press focused on

the novelty and thematical importance of the work, noting reinterpretations of literary genres from a postmodernist perspective and also a possible “educational” dimension concerning Turkish history and tradition.

The second chapter of this thesis, **Theoretical and methodological preliminaries**, lays the foundation of the identity discourse analysis. This includes theories about the relation between identity and alterity, different perspectives concerning identity as a concept, as well as means of constructing collective and cultural identity. In literary texts, the relation between identity and alterity is reflected as a means of reconstructing personal identity, while cultural identity gets involved in a process of recognising the alterity projection. The debate about identity problems also includes an inventory of the uses and abuses of memory and the impact of memorial practices on identity construction. An overview of the orientalist discourse offers some support for the contemporary approach of intercultural dialogue, while current debates about interculturalism, coupled with the concepts relating to transculturalism (liminality, cosmopolitan status, cultural hybridity) unveil certain possibilities of attaining intercultural dialogue in writing.

The third chapter, **Identity representations in Orhan Pamuk’s work**, takes Turkish cultural memory representations into consideration, as well as the relation between narrative identity and “assumed” identity. The critical focus was the means of projecting the biographical self in the novels (the construction of fictional masks) and the fictionalization of the self in the autobiographical works, that reflects the auctorial figure in the narrative identity of the character-narrator and in the essayistical self. The analysis of the thematical structures reveals the problems of personal and cultural identity in relation to alterity. The description of the relationship between abstract instances, with their respective roles, unveils the emplotment of a certain history, as well as aspects which contribute to the construction of narrative identity. The latter is characterized by a series of “attachments” that tend to transform themselves into identity obsessions.

One of the identity discourse features in Orhan Pamuk’s work is the fact that exploring both the self and life experiences involves a spatial dimension of identity, since identity indicates the fact of belonging to a particular geographic medium. The projection of masks in novels, of an alter-ego or that of the essayistical self involves a re-examination of the history of the urban space and a reference to collective and cultural identity. Besides forming the self-portrait “of the artist as a young man”, they render a particular view of the world: that living between two cultures or in liminality can be an advantage for artistic creation and a lifestyle itself. This projection highlights a plural and shifting cultural identity, since spatial representations involved in it are also variable, according to B. Westphal.

*Istanbul* is written as an “autobiographical narrative” (a phrase borrowed from Hande Gurses), in which the profound self and the troubled history of a space are equally represented. The autobiographical essays in *Other Colors* are also a type of search for the

authentic self, an effort to clarify the self, but with a playful and experimental approach; it is not the bare truth of the facts that is fundamental (considering them as more or less intimate confessions would be a sin of biographism), but the authenticity impression and especially the meaning that can be derived from putting something down on paper, from the essayistical speculation – things that could be universally valid. As narrative solutions of analysing the self, both *Istanbul* and the autobiographical essay revisit personal history in order to convey an idea of unity about life – this is the unstated purpose of an identity discourse.

*The Black Book* describes a social and cultural context marked by identity aberrations, the loss of individuality and vicious memorial practices which oscillate between active and passive forgetting. Their compensatory mechanism is forming utopias and writing stories. The dynamic of personal relationships unveils a problematic reference to the *Other*, while personal and collective identity lose their benchmarks in a huge carousel of imitations that turns into an urban odyssey for the characters (or the fictional masks). The identity dilemmas that the characters have to face show the vulnerability caused by drastic political changes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the aim was to make up an identity from scratch, while ignoring history. The failure to do so stresses the feeling of living in the Periphery, both socially and culturally. All the histories in *The Black Book* reflect an obsessive concernment with the mechanisms of individual memory, ambiguous attitudes towards cultural memory, and a permanent oscillation between tradition and modernity – these are all the epic substances of the identity representations.

The last chapter, **Interculturality and transculturalism in Orhan Pamuk's work**, is concerned with intercultural and transcultural aspects and emphasizes textual strategies which highlight them. Transtextuality and textual hybridity both represent important aspects for the thematical and stylistical level analysis and they reflect the intercultural dialogue. The ambiguous attitudes shown by people from the West (fascination and terror at the same time) manage to render a clear image of an eclectic city and an overview of a life in this space. Thus, interculturalism is reflected in a process of constructing the self, in relation not only to the native city, but to its inhabitants, and West culture as well. It tends to accept cultural differences, ambivalent cultural placing, plurality and hybridity. The balance of power concerning the relation between West and East shifts toward cultural models and discourses that are present in the European space. A bilateral exchange or intercultural communication firstly needs a new "politics of truth", which could be supported by an intellectual or writer through a literary work as an honest representation of flaws in the social and cultural practices.

In *The Black Book*, imitation and the whole debate about the contrasts between East and West are integrated as themes through transtextual strategies. The purpose of the former is the construction of a cultural identity, as a form of claiming one's personal history.

Transcultural intertextuality means a series of references and revivals of substantial texts from two cultures (apparently) totally different (*In search of lost time* and the mystical poem *Beauty and Love*). Renowned motives and stories (such as Mevlana's) are transformed inside a narrative frame where cultural alterity is reflected by the alternation of narrative perspectives and by the diverse characters, each with his or her own personal history, more or less bizarre. Having an open discourse, that reflects a rich literary and cultural conscience, *The Black Book* constantly displays its fictional codes and conventions, it obsessively comments upon its textuality, but beyond the postmodern tricks, it has a major accomplishment aesthetically: it showcases how necessary intercultural dialogue actually is, firstly conceived in the act of reading and through the invention of stories as means to approach identity dilemmas.

The essays in *Other Colors* broaden the debate about alterity and suggest a critical act of reflection upon europocentrism, with its use in literature and social behaviours, the latter guided by a dominance of European identity. The cultural positioning chosen by the essayist is a cosmopolitanism based on a subjectivity that harnesses visions and mentalities from both cultural spaces. Intellectual mobility is materialized in a discourse that resorts to literary models and narratives from the Centre; the aim is to obtain new meanings for the art of the novel and for a certain way of being in the world as a writer or as a simple man that has lived almost his entire life in the margins of Europe.

The essayistical comments about the art of the novel and reception convey the idea of interculturality through means of assimilation (such as reading) of other cultures, texts and myths, all part of an intercultural dialogue, since there is no perfect coincidence between the author's culture and the reader's, according to Jean Derive. Likewise, the essayistical self is the "paper being" projected by the transcultural individual, as it reflects "the interconnectedness of cultures" (favoured by the novel) at the level of cultural identity, as Welsh shows.

While in *Other Colors*, the transcultural perspective is pretty obvious due to the introspective-cognitive approach, and each idea brings forth the need for intercultural dialogue, in *Istanbul*, on the other hand, interculturalism and transculturalism are shown mainly as experiences of cultural alterity, which is possible by reading texts belonging to western intellectuals. The dialogue carried on with "orientalists" (Nerval, Flaubert) is a way of knowing the self and of revealing identity features, as well as of discovering the complex image of an urban space whose representations are present in western cultural memory.

Going back and forth between the pleasure of being seen as "exotic" and the shame and melancholy caused by the parody that is the transformation of the city, the narrator-character associates this identity ambivalence to a liminal position, managing to transgress the limits of a local frame and internalize the western's perspective, thus coming back to his *self*. Family memories are a particular way of referring to the past, which is not given, but



must continually be reconstructed and represented, according to Astrid Erll. Their relation to spatial representations render an overview of a community that was “defeated” by Great history, but also an individual’s possibilities to turn to intercultural experiences in his artistical shaping and identity endeavour.

Orhan Pamuk’s literary work is still worthy of praise after the receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature, as a discourse that permanently diversifies its stylistical and thematical resources. From the traditional nineteenth century novel, to the historical novel, metafiction and postmodern writing, to urban “odysseys”, this writer reinvents fictional and narrative formulas: his most recent novel, *The Red-Haired Woman*, is a philosophical reclaiming of some mythical histories from both the Orient and the West. The narrative formulas and strategies render the cognitive dimension of a literary text at an aesthetic level.

The symbol right at the core of Pamuk’s novels is his native city, Istanbul. The history of this space inevitably marks an individual destiny: the author focuses on cultural memory in order to recall his personal past. The setup of life experiences in the autobiographical novel follows a certain “autobiographical ideology” which unveils a particular view of the world: a certain opening to and a critical thinking concerning European role models and narratives, from one corner of the Periphery, dominated by loss, ruin and introversion, but with some hope unfortunately conceived as imitation and simulacra. The effort to build up an image of the self means the use of different stylistical expressions and autobiographical features at the narrative level: authenticity, interpretation and intelligibility, an interchange between the representation function from the autobiography and the action function from memoirs, portraits of memorable characters, presentation of *the self as another*.

In the discourse of the novel, the narrative identity of all characters suggests a fragile cultural identity of a vulnerable community in relation to Great history through alterity and *exotopy*. Some of the narrative formulas and transtextual strategies around the identity theme are: a parody of the detective novel, textual hybridity, transcultural intertextuality, *mise en abyme* and the layering of numerous fictional worlds. The emplotted histories show the breaking and continuity elements which are inherent to collective identity, as well as an alternation of hybridization and cultural homogeneity, in a society that denies its duty towards memory. Interculturalism and multiculturalism, as cultural problematic phenomena in Turkish society, are an ideological layer of the analysed works solely for the purpose of building up narrative identity: there are no intentions of indoctrination in presenting the objective reality. Fictional narratives are not a mirror image of reality, they are inevitably ideologically mediated by the specific practices and events of the medium in which they are conceived.

“Fictions of memory” such as *My Name is Red*, *A Strangeness in My Mind*, *The Red-Haired Woman* search for an answer to the question “who are we?” by rebuilding the past from a social and cultural perspective, while cultural memory representations include

stories about lost traditional occupations such as miniaturists, well-diggers and yoghurt and boza street vendors. In *My Name is Red* and *A Strangeness in My Mind*, the discursive poliphony is the main strategy that aesthetically underlines the idea of plurality, exchange and dialogue between two different visions.

*The Black Book* is built through the use of two reading pacts, the autobiographical one and the fictional one, for the purpose of exploring themes such as alienations, identity dilemmas and the failures of westernization. The transtextual strategies support textual postmodern hybridity, which helps to build the characters: most *mise en abyme* suggest identity construction as a process that is relying on constantly making up stories about the self. Beyond Galip's and Celal's histories, the stories of individuals from different walks of life (met by Galip in his wanderings) offer an overview of the relationship between Turkey and Europe. The characters' meditations on the fragile individual memory are the clearest clue for identity insecurity and fragmentation, while alterity is the key for the narrative identity of the characters.

*Istanbul*, autobiographical narrative that presents the figure of an individual consumed by melancholy and artistical aspirations through the *alter-ego* Orhan, emphasizes the way to adjudge to oneself a special cultural identity. Beginning with the acknowledgement of being located in liminality and taking the exogenous point of view into consideration, a process doubled by the interpretation of one's life, the narrator-character internalises the double spirit of his city and consequently manages to obtain some peace of mind concerning the plurality of conflicting identity benchmarks. "The second life" in writing involves a fictionalization in the spirit of alterity, metatextually reflected by the existence of "another Orhan" in the city. A story concerned not so much with honesty, but symmetry, that presents a historical background of political and social reformations at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Istanbul* singularizes the shame caused by the western Eye, the pleasure of believing in an exotic identity, "backward" tradition representations and the process of strengthening Turkish identity. Cultural identity and each representation of the city reflect possibilities of transgressing cultural borders – the essence of re-developing an identity.

In *Other Colors*, the fictionalization of the self in the narrative essays and the "textual" self from the literary and "cognitive" essays emphasize strategies such as introspection, digression, paradox, theory development – ways to recount a life in "Other Colors". "The continuous narrative" planned by the author involves bringing forth a character, as well as a series of debates and reinterpretations of the main existential coordinates, in a certain order of life fragments, from personal issues to the outside world's problems: more or less ordinary life scenes, literary role models influence, the art of the novel, aspects of cultural identity, the speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony.

Placing oneself in a cosmopolitan and intercultural perspective, a choice visible in *Istanbul* and *Other Colors*, occurs as a result of both representing cultural differences and

the dynamics of cultural hybridity and reflecting upon the ways in which these are internalized individually and collectively. To conclude, both fictional instances from *The Black Book* and textual instances from *Istanbul* and the essays revolve around a series of identity representations which are relevant for the writer's condition – “one foot in a culture, and the other in another one” –, a writer that manages to identify an existential formula in the intercultural dialogue.

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