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## **Like a Snowflake – Possible Stories in the Novels of Orhan Pamuk**

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### **Abstract**

The word narrative as discovered from its etymological roots means either 'knowing' or 'skilled'. It is the contemporary form of the ancient traditions of storytelling. David Herman in his *Basic Elements of Narrative*, describes the narrative as the fundamental human need for understanding the world. He defines it as "a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change" (2). The word 'story' in the contemporary context assumes many forms. In literary studies it assumes the role of 'just another story'. The aim of this paper is to examine the nature of 'possible stories' and how it can be applied to the works of Orhan Pamuk. The concept of 'possible stories' arises from this essential human drive to – as Herman calls it – *storying the world*. Narratives have an ancient tradition of not just entertainment but also preservation. The concept of Indigenous storytelling speaks of primitive need to transmit acts of memory from one generation to the next. By analysing

the different conceptual figurations of ‘possible stories’ this thesis will examine the multi-layers of meaning making and hereditary communicative acts that abound in the works of Orhan Pamuk. It will analyse the different artistic mediums through which the stories – fictional, mythical, historical and autobiographical are expressed. Through this analysis, it will explore the evolution of the art of storytelling. Finally, it will generate an inter-art and inter-medial approach for and through the works of Orhan Pamuk.

### **Keywords**

Possible Stories; Narrative; Orhan Pamuk.



The framework of the paper grew out of the question of fictionality and perception. There is a fundamental schism between the actuality of a text and its various perceptions. The postmodern attribute of blurring of genres and extreme simulation makes this question a rather urgent one. For even a current novel can become the site of critique from its succeeding novel. And it is in the site that we encounter the “Unnatural Narrative”. Brian Richardson in the essay “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models” discusses the need for ‘unnatural narrative’ in order to understand the roles of fictionality and ‘synthetic’ discourse. Contemporary narratives so often mutate from the traditional systems of narration in order to indulge in a free play of imagination and myth-making. In discussing this idea of synthetic discourse, Richardson puts forward the subversive nature of narrative:

Many narratives defy, flaunt, mock, play, and experiment with some (or all) of these core assumptions about narrative. More specifically, they may radically deconstruct the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, and the minds associated with them, or they may move beyond real-world notions

of time and space, thus taking us to the most remote territories of conceptual possibilities. (114)

The mimetic capability of literature and art has been discussed and disseminated throughout the annals of literary history. Plato's charge against the poets stemmed from a fear of the representative nature of art which can deceive the philosopher or lead his mind astray. Aristotle's notion of mimesis however forms one of the bedrocks of the Western literary criticism. This notion of mimesis presupposes a similarity between reality and art. As he postulates in *Poetics*, the nature of the 'medium' and the 'objects' is one and the same. This essential assertion is later discussed an object of lively pleasure. The 'instinct of imitation' he writes, lied 'deep in our nature' and this instinct becomes the source of creation of a work of art.

This ancient assertion can be sharply juxtaposed with the 'Unnatural Narratives' of Brian Richardson. Aristotle throughout the course of *Poetics* asserts the importance of 'imitation' or mimesis. In the article, Richardson aims at a critique of the Realist position of the preceding century and the Structuralist inheritance of Narrative Theory. The idea of a 'natural narrative' as he calls it, is based on the idea of the cognitive functionality of the human reader where "each and every aspect of the narrative can be explained on the basis of our real-world knowledge and resulting cognitive parameters" (Richardson, 115). In order to truly realize the potential of narratives – especially medial narratives – one needs to move beyond the accepted parameters of mimetic criticism and consider the specific unnatural possibilities.

The juxtaposition of these two models of thought is crucial to the understanding of fictionality. Fictionality, as described by Patricia Waugh, is the condition of being fictional. Dolezel uses the same concept in order to challenge the notions of logical semantics which stem from previous mimetic models. The condition of fictionality in a given text consists of its 'unnatural'

elements – elements which “depict situations and events that move beyond, extend, or challenge our knowledge of the world” (Iverson, 115). Brian McHale in his chapter “Real, Compared to What?” discusses the idea of implications of such a notion of fictionality through his analysis of novel disclaimer. The introduction of real-life characters becomes a point of disorientation in the text. In the constitution of such ‘transworld identities’, he notes, “boundaries between worlds have been violated” (85). The inclusion of Pamuk’s self into the confines of the novels becomes an aporetic passageway through which gateways to his other novels open in order to create a gigantic space of negotiation and disorientation. This metaleptic consideration becomes a characteristic of fictionality whereby it is able to challenge and critique while at the same time creating new points of interpretation.

The idea of ‘Unnatural Narrative’ is important to the conceptualization of ‘possible stories’. The concept of ‘possible stories’ can be discussed in conjunction with the idea of ‘travelling stories’. The aftermath of Narrative proliferation in the various disciplines of knowledge brought the porous nature of narrative into light. This narrative or story or storytelling capacity could move on its own volition between different media and disciplines and adapt itself accordingly. As Monica Fludernik writes in her *Towards a Unnatural Narratology*:

A narrative is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic/ and or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonist of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (actions and plot structure). (6)

The understanding of the ‘possible stories’ stems from the first half of Fludernik’s quote where the nature of narrative is to generate possible worlds and then amend it to include different possible narratives as well. It also takes its understanding from the additional medium variant mentioned by Fludernik

that is the inclusion of the visual medium. The focus of narrative study was to look at not just the literary narratives but to look at different narrative potential in all of human interactions and thought. Jerome Bruner in his “Life as Narrative” discussed the interrelations between life in general and narrative in particular. In his formulation of a narrative methodology, Bruner points out the dizzying truth of life being influenced by narrative or fictionality. This ground breaking assertion can be complimented with what Thomas E. Kennedy statement that “the reality here is everything, the sum total of it all – that which happens, that which is only imagines, that which is watched, wished for, dreamed, planned, enacted, felt, and thought” (64). The violation of boundaries as put forward by McHale also breaks down the barriers between the real and the imagined. The gap created as a result forms the underpinning of the concept of ‘possible stories’. Matti Hyvarinen sums up this argument succinctly in his *Travelling Concepts of Narrative*:

When storytelling is understood as a vital tool for meaning-making and the understanding of reality, it needs to be regarded as a global and even existential phenomenon ... it raises an important question on the interplay between narrative as a text and narrative in the real world. What is the import and export between life and fiction? (5)

Possible stories defy natural tendencies of a narrative structure in order to construct ‘impossible scenarios’ where real action and dream-like imaginative tendencies are ‘violently yoked together’. The purpose of this idea is to understand the different disorienting scenarios depicted in the works of Orhan Pamuk. In *Other Colours*, Pamuk describes the act of Shirin noticing the painting of Husrev for the first time. In that moment of knowing, Shirin feels not only the gaze of the reader but also the gaze of the author about to scribe her in the novel. It is also worth noticing that Pamuk deliberately describes this scene as the inspiration for *My Name is Red*. In incepting this idea in the

consciousness of the reader, Pamuk seeks to break down the traditional projections of narrative boundaries – an act which is crucial to the navigation of the novel. Once the idea of Shirin has been firmly placed in the minds of the reader, he/she can understand the implications of the multi-perspective narration which is moving towards its own destruction. In disregarding the traditional structures of mimesis, *My Name is Red* can truly acknowledge its own desire to overcome the boundaries of the narrative and become another medial entity altogether. It thus turns into a ‘zone of potentiality’ which refuses to be reduced into ‘any simplistic account of the way things are’ (Iverson 118). Once this aporetic barriers have been crossed the text can move into a free play of simulations and interpretations which have been induced by the simple intervention of a mythical figure.

The coming of the postmodern movement of thought brought with different challenges to the regular conceptions of reality and fiction. In complete contrast with the Structuralist drive in Narratology, Postmodernism sought to a pastichial reconstruction of life imagines assuming that “there is nothing new under the sun”. This extreme subversion exemplified in Lyotard’s adage of ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ brought forward a renewed interest in the particularity of the story. Cristopher Nash’s ‘which story’ can be put together with Lyotard statement in order to put forward a space of multiple narratives which can either co-exist or remain in constant tension or simply remain indifferent to each other.

Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* explores the ‘ambiguity of meaning and the plularity of interpretations of the art works” through the different notions of ‘disorder, chance, mobility and indeterminacy” which are always a part of the structure of the text. Eco explores this notion in reference to the creation and transmission of a musical work of art. The transience nature of music and its versatility allows for an appropriation of the basic notations in order to re-create and reproduce. The relation between art and narrative has always been

a complex one. Rudolf Arnheim discusses the perception of a literary work in his “Unity of the Arts”:

The very perception of a literary work is thus a reminder of temporal impermanence ... sharing in the impermanence of humanity itself ... It can overcome the doom only by persisting in the memory. (42)

This idea of impermanence is crucial to the notion of aesthetic engagement. The transitory nature of our negotiation with a work of art causes a disruption in order to temporal structure of interpretation. The various artistic movements in the twentieth century have tried to elicit such notions of transiency in order to bring the reader’s attention most violently into the processes of artistic creation. W.J.T. Mitchell describes the interaction of word and image in his *Picture Theory* as:

“Word and Image” is the name of a commonplace distinction between types of representation, a shorthand way of dividing, mapping and organizing the field of representation. It is also the name of a kind of a basic cultural trope, replete with connotations that go beyond formal and structural difference. (3)

The motivation of this thesis is to explore the implications of the ‘beyond’. The corroboration of the narrative and arts brings out such a state of *Aporia* where the conventional boundaries are crossed in order to inhabit and understand the realm of the unknown. As Foucault claims, “the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation” (9). Horace coined the phrase *ut picture poesis* or “as is painting so is poetry” which has been regarded as the starting point of the debate between word and image. In Chapter II we shall discuss this concept to the fullest charting the genealogies of inter-art relation from Horace, through the enlightenment thinkers to the current day cognitive tools of aesthetic entanglement. The relation of word and image has always ebbed and flowed with the hegemonical appropriation of either poetry or

painting. Lessing in his “Laocoon” summed up the entire debate by differentiating between the different categories of painting and poetry and warning practitioners to keep them separate. This lesson was to achieve purity in either of the genres. The current contexts through their need to make meaning like conceptual, kinetic and abstract expressionism take the form to their other extreme in order to shock the audience and flag their attention to the artistic processes involved in making the work of art. Through these various practices we can find a certain gap or a pathway through which an entanglement with the narrative can happen. The media of films, photography as well as the digital media have moved beyond the binary implications of Lessing’s “Laocoon” in order to generate a dizzying generations of words, images, pictures, files, media which coagulate into the mind of the reader resulting in bizarre and subversive storyworlds

In the tradition of Eastern Art and most specifically Turkish painting, the notion of art and narrative interrelations is best exemplified in the miniature tradition and the horizon line. The profusion of eyes and eye metaphors in the works of Orhan Pamuk are an indication of this artistic technique. This technique is depicted in detail in *My Name is Red* where the master painter Bihzad in trying to escape the slaughter of a marauding Persian army hides on a hilltop. From the vantage point, he can see directly on to his city where his fellow citizens have been brutally killed by the plundering army and it is in this moment that he gains a clarity into the true workings of the Illumination tradition. Through Bihzad the functioning of the horizon line is put forward in the novel.

The Horizon Line functions as an aerial view of the scene where one takes in its entirety that lies below him/her. This idea of a watcher looking down at the scene below is not a new phenomenon in the works of the Orhan Pamuk. And yet, Pamuk imbues it with his own notions of storytelling. In *My Name is Red*, the line functions as an indication of the tradition as well as the

concept of eternal and mortal time. It becomes a veiled referent to the watcher-character who is always prevalent in the works of Orhan Pamuk. Through this conceptualization ordinary events assume mythical capabilities. By the introduction of the all-seeing eye, the narrative introduces the element of uncanny into the configurations of the different characters that inhabit the 'pamukian' world.

A glimpse into the 'possible world' of *My Name is Red* as well the author world of *Other Colours* foreshadows the interpretations of the other works of Orhan Pamuk. This inexorable linking of the different works of Pamuk forms the foundational methodology into the reading of the various possible stories residing in his works. Chapter III will discuss the implications of ekphrasis and storyworlds in the analysis of works like *My Name is Red*, *The Black Book* as well as *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. The work of Jean Clandinin has been instrumental in the framing of this chapter. In understanding the difference between the art-informed analysis and narrative art, the chapter moves forward to discuss the complex relations between ekphrasis and storyworlds. The ekphrastic image takes place entirely in the mind of the reader as has discussed in Chapter II. This image causes a reader reaction culminating in the creation of the storyworld. The travelling aspect of 'possible stories' has been derived from this 'dual referential allegiance'. The different stories of *My Name is Red*, *Other Colours*, *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*, *The Black Book* and *Istanbul: Memories and the City* can be interpreted according to this idea of 'ekphrastic image'.

A cursory reading of the works of Orhan Pamuk will reveal a most prolific effusion of artistic references, traditions and compositions. In *My Name is Red* for instance, Pamuk traces the tradition of Ottoman illumination which in itself was inspired by Chinese and Persian artistic traditions. In the chapter titled "I am a Corpse", the murdered victim discusses the occupation of illumination,

I was responsible for painting and embellishing books. I illuminated the edges of pages, coloring their borders with the most lifelike designs of leaves, branches, roses, flowers and birds. I painted scalloped Chinese – style clouds, clusters of overlapping vines and forests of color that hid gazelles, galleys, sultans, trees, palaces, horses and hunters. (4)

*Snow* provides us with an inner perspective on how the protagonist creates his poems by listening to the music of the snow around him. Ka, the main protagonist of the novel, is struck by the snowflakes falling on the city. He describes them as, “...giant snowflakes wafting slowly through the glow were the stuff of fairy tales” (27). In witnessing their falling, Ka is struck with creative inspiration – “I found that my memories were shrouded in a sort of silence. Out of this silence would come a poem” (33). In the novel, Ka would go on to write at least eleven poems in his green notebook. The novels *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, *The Black Book*, *Museum of Innocence* give a glimpse into the engraving tradition prevalent in Istanbul which is juxtaposed with contemporary visual representations like photographs and films. In *Kara Kitap* or *The Black Book*, the narrator writes of his intention “to mix objects dating back from centuries with those from his own past”. *Istanbul: Memories and the City* is an expression of this interface of history and personal, of city and the individual, of stories and the self so as to generate a critical construct of the image of the city. As he writes, “to see the city in black and white is to see it through the tarnish of history: the patina of what is old and faded and no longer matters to the rest of the world” [38]. The Istanbul that Pamuk has grown up in and where he still lives is “littered with the ruins of the great fall” of the Ottoman Empire that had one day ruled strong from this capital. From the images that he knows he wants to form his intentional view of his city.

Mikhail Bakhtin writes that “novelist representation is always an open, unresolvable conflict of representations” and that the novel reveals a “plurality

that no single genres, meta-discourse, or master-game encompasses”. The inclusion of these events blurs the boundaries of art and reality, of art and narrative so as showcase a dissemination of forms and assertion of the subversive elements of the novel. From these events we come to the novel *My Name is Red* which begins with the most disorienting opening of the novels of Pamuk. The murdered victim speaks from beyond and begs the reader to find his murderer. It is not enough that we glimpse into the traditions laid out in the novels. The providence of a corpse gifting with a narrative voices jars us out a complacent reading. The gap between the pages of the book and the reader’s mind is immediately constricted. This is further elaborated by the murdered illuminator appealing to the readers to find his murderer so that he may be given a proper burial and ascend into heaven.

Possible stories in context of artistic medium especially visual medium concerns itself with the poetics of seeing. The narratives of *My Name is Red*, *Snow*, *The Black Book*, *Museum of Innocence*, *Istanbul: Memories and the City* discuss the travelling concept of stories from one medium to the other and while these stories travel they influence the very medium that they travel on. In context of seeing, they speak to the desire of the narrative to incorporate itself into a painting and vice versa the desire of the painting to gain a voice and tell the story of its various elements. Possible stories base themselves in the plurality of its constituents. It “disturbs our conventional expectations in what is told [the story’s substance] and in how its told [the telling’s form and language]” (Nash 15) and in doing so “it breeds an infinity of new tellings” (Nash 19). The tradition of Illumination is an example of such possible stories. But before we discuss this tradition in greater detail and its significance to the working of possible stories we need to discuss two metaphors in relation to the poetics of seeing. The first appears most strongly in *Museum of Innocence* and is illuminated in other works of Orhan Pamuk through the consciousness of the text. This metaphor is the metaphor of a museum. At the end of the novel

*Museum of Innocence*, the writer Orhan Pamuk is employed by Kemal to write a novel which will form the brochure to the museum he is constructing in order to preserve the memory of his beloved. This museum consists of all the objects touched by Kemal's beloved from cigarette butts to certain curios. Through this metaphor we realise the desires of the most of characters, the city of Istanbul and to a certain extent the intentions of the author. The characters in the various works of Orhan Pamuk are trying to not to forget their past and to do so they require the help of objects, traditions and people. In *The Black Book*, Galip discusses the idea of memory as a garden,

When the garden of memory begins to dry up a man cannot but dote on its lingering rosebuds, its last remaining trees. To keep them from withering away, I water them from morning until night, and I caress them too. I remember, I remember so as not to forget.  
(*The Black Book* 22)

The negotiations between two different significations are at the heart of the museum metaphor. The word 'remember' is immediately followed by a negative indicator 'not to forget'. The introduction of this phrase is significant as it introduces the element of fear and tension. There is a self – conscious reevaluation which “promotes irreality of the self” embedded in the idea of the self which is lost under a layer of false voices. It is a postmodern problematizing of the stability of meaning which is directly correlated to the problem of the stable self.

In *Snow*, the narrative seems to be deliberately finding the grounds to find tears in its reality to reach out to the other genres and finally through them to reach out to our reality. Consider the events of the novel where Ka is supposed to read a poem at the National Theatre. The newspaper report reads, “Ka, the celebrated poet, who is now visiting our city, recited his latest poem, entitled “Snow”. The protagonist protests to this report, to an event that has

not happened and to the poem that he has not written. The writer of the report, Serdar Bey, smiles and says,

Don't be so sure. There are those who despise us for writing the news before it happens; they fear us not because we are journalists but because we can predict the future. You should see how amazed they are when things turn out exactly as we've written them. And quite a few things happen only because we've written them up first. (29)

The lines delivered with utter confidence form the prophetic warning to the events to come. As the snow shrouds the city, it seems to constitute the veil that forms between the world of Kars and the world outside. In that time of three days, there are three events that form the hinges around which the representation of gaps of narrative can be explored. The first is the newspaper report which compels Ka to write the poem thereby sifting the line between the creation of reality and the formation of a creative process. The second is the firing on the audience by the police in the National Theatre. This event portrays the actors playing characters who have taken the stand against the national guards. When the scene approaches when the guards are supposed to open fire on the revolutionaries, they turn and "take aim straight at the audience". The firing volleys conclude with the gunslingers shouting that "This is not a play – it is the beginning of a revolution" [163]. The third event is Kadife, the sister of the protagonist's love Ipek, removing her headscarf and then shooting Sunay Zaim with a revolver on the stage. The subtitle for this chapter is "Preparations for the Play to end all Plays". This event long publicized comes at the end of the narrative of the novel. And with the description the last gap of the narrative is thrown wide open.

Again the thread of blurring of art and reality rears inside the space of narrative in order to confront the space of no memories. The lurking of the "monster's soul" amid the "crowded collage of people, places and images" forms

the perfect metaphor for the memories that need to be guarded in order to arrive at the new life. Orhan Pamuk in his *Other Colours* describes the moment when Husrev comes across Shirin bathing in the river. This is first time that the two lovers meet each other after having fallen in love with each other's painting.

The gaps that have been charted the writer to "exploit the constant readiness of posit a mind whenever we observe behaviour as they experiment...with the character's mental states". The art forms charted through the novels of Orhan Pamuk speak of an aesthetic moment that encompasses. Holon is a term coined by Arthur Koestler in his *The Ghost in the Machine* which means being a part and a whole at the same time. Holons exist as self-contained, individual wholes while at the same time they are sub-nodes in a complex, inter-connected system. The workings of arts within such a medium would engineer such a synthesis. The narrative and the body both are such systems where the arts can be integrated and performed. The boundaries of genres are being blurred increasingly in this day and age. One field feeds from the other field and in this mutual symbiosis an inter-disciplinary integration of the fields of study can be posited. The next step of the perceptions of various media in symbiosis can be done in awareness of the step that has been taken. In the contemporary situation the interdisciplinary approach to the various fields of thought speaks of a need to find something new under the sun. The mutation of fields stimulates man's desire to break new paths of discovery and interpretation. The forms of painting that revive the historical tradition of miniature and narrative, the architecture that steadily grows to the pinnacle and then starts its slow decline, the narrative that aspires to seep through its crack and form something else entirely, the photographs which are black and white – they all find "their proper place" held by the various branches of the snowflake.

The novels and non-fiction of Orhan Pamuk posits a conscious re-configuring of its narrative. The vein of Ottoman that runs through, the fascination and fear of the gaze of the western cinema, and the inking of the pictures into the lettered production forms the basis for the metafiction that Hutcheon imagined in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*. The field of cognitive sciences add another dimension to this formulation by explaining the processes of cognition necessary to cross the aporetic fields and explore the depths of the narrative.

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