Capitalizing Istanbul: reading Orhan Pamuk’s literary cityscape

Almas, H.E.

Link to publication

_Citation for published version (APA):

_General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

_Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible._

_UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)_

Download date: 29 Dec 2018
A great painter does not content himself by affecting us with his masterpieces; ultimately he succeeds in changing the landscape of our minds. 

*My Name Is Red*, 195

With the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, Orhan Pamuk was internationally acknowledged as a master-writer. Subsequent to the award, *My Name Is Red* (1998, 2001), Pamuk’s most acclaimed work and winner of the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2003, is framed as a masterpiece by the accolades of both the writer and the text.\(^{103}\) The notion of masterpiece is not an external fact about, nor simply a value associated with *My Name is Red*, but literally a constitutive aspect of the work itself. Set in the Istanbul of the 1590s, the novel tells a story of murder and love that revolves around an unfinished masterpiece. The Sultan secretly commissions an illuminated book that will be sent to the Venetian Doge in the Islamic millennium. Meant to depict his dominion over both worlds and to testify to the Ottoman supremacy in the East as well as in the West, the Sultan requests that the miniatures be painted in the European manner. This leads to an unprecedented commotion both among the miniaturists, and the Islamic zealots who regard painting as heresy. Recounted through twenty-one distinct voices, ranging from corpses to Satan, interwoven with romance, Islamic legends and Koranic parables as well as with discussions on style, time and perspective, *My Name Is Red* is a treatise on art, a historical novel that reflects sixteenth century Istanbul, and a text that aims to represent the now forgotten art of miniature painting.

The concept of masterpiece as such holds twofold significance in relation to the novel. On the one hand, it defines the highly favorable transnational reception of the novel and its writer. On the other hand, a close reading of the novel suggests it to be negotiating both thematically and aesthetically with the concept. Masterpiece is a frame, both inside and outside the novel, linking the within and without, and shaping our responses to the work. I

\(^{103}\) The International IMPAC Literary Award is the world’s most lucrative literary prize of 100,000 Euros.
use framing as a conceptual alternative to “context” when situating a work in time and space: unlike context, framing emphasizes the highly selective and subjective nature of defining a work. In this paper, I will argue that framing Pamuk’s most acclaimed novel as a masterpiece helps situate both the writer and the book within the dynamics of contemporary culture. My discussion of the novel as a masterpiece is based on a dictionary definition of the word. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, masterpiece refers to “a work of outstanding artistry, skill, or workmanship.” As an exceptional work, a masterpiece is expected to become both a part of the tradition it stems from, and to modify it with its extraordinariness. Here I will explore a series of frames that constitute the novel as a masterpiece, ranging from the launching and the reception of the novel, to the master-writer, the masterpiece as a key to frame a murder, anachrony, pluralism, Islam and finally, writing miniatures. Through a kaleidoscopic perspective that follows suit with the book, I attempt to draw out the many facets of the masterpiece status of this novel and to show how plurality—itself one of the frames I delineate—is intrinsic to framing this work as a masterpiece, and in turn reflects on an understanding of the concept and the work. By employing these frames I also hope to show how *My Name is Red* frames, and ultimately reconfigures, the definitions of masterpiece.

**Frame 1: Publicity**

*My Name Is Red* was published in Turkey in 1999 and was immediately the center of media attention; its record sales (150,000 copies in a year) and rigorous advertisement campaigns, such as billboard ads, were unprecedented for a work of literature and became a source of

---

104 In *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002), Mieke Bal theorizes framing through discussing how she set up a museum exhibition on a lesser-known Dutch painter as a dialogue with the ‘master’ pieces of the time, so that it would appeal to the visitors. To emphasize her deliberate choice of supplementary background information when showcasing the subject, Bal proposes framing as an alternative concept to context (133-73).
scepticism and reproach. Pamuk was accused of “inundating” the media with his news and thus of robbing his readers of the pleasure of reading it in solitude. Moreover, the novel was simply considered a difficult read, with exaggerated sales figures (Yılmaz 50-51). The literary reviews of the novel acknowledged it as a masterpiece, but pointed out its historical inaccuracy (Ertuğ). The English translation of the novel, by Erdağ Göknar, came out in 2001 and sold 160,000 copies. The English publication also received great media attention, which, unlike in Turkey, was not met with skepticism; the novel was featured on the cover of The New York Times Book Review. In the same vein, the novel was swiftly established as a masterpiece in the West and nominated for the IMPAC award.105

The Turkish and English editions of My Name Is Red further illustrate the differences in the novel’s framing. The 1999 paperback edition of the novel in Turkish includes no praise on the front cover. The rather long summary of the novel on the back cover starts with a comment by Pamuk on the novel, calling it his most cheerful novel. Ironically, however, the novel is referred to as “a requiem for the forgotten beauties of the ancient art of painting.”106 The two commentaries at the bottom display rather broad perspectives. The first one from Frankfurter Allgemeine reads as praise of Turkishness: “The young Turkish novelist shows Europe how to write a novel” (Steinfeld). The second one, from The New Statesman, is about Pamuk’s works in general: it suggests reading his work as a must. There is also a short biographical note on Pamuk, mainly on the international acknowledgement of his work, all framing the novel as a master’s piece. The 2003 paperback edition of the novel in English, on the other hand, emphasizes its artistic value. The reviews on the cover focus on the novel, and not the writer. The front cover includes praises from The Guardian, The New Yorker, The Observer, and the IMPAC, whereas the excerpts in the back cover praise the author as a

105 In 2003 it was nominated by three libraries—the Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek Bonn; Hartford Public Library (USA); and Bibliotheques Municipales in Geneva, Switzerland (Yılmaz 51).
106 This quote and the following ones are from the 1999 İletişim edition of the novel.
possible Nobel Prize winner (Freely) and the book for reflecting the tensions between East and West (IMPAC). The review included by John Updike includes comparisons of Pamuk with Proust and Mann and the review by Kelly compares Pamuk to Umberto Eco. The English edition makes explicit use of the masterpiece status of the novel when promoting it. In short, the framing of *My Name Is Red* in the Turkish and English publications highlights the discrepancy between the Turkish and the Western media, and between its national and international reception.

**Frame 2: The Master-Writer**

Orhan Pamuk’s writer persona incorporates that of a master-writer, one relating simultaneously to both ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ traditions of storytelling:

I learn and pick-up things from other authors. I’ve learned from Thomas Mann […], Italo Calvino […], Umberto Eco, [and from] Marguerite Yourcenar. […] What inspired me most for *My Name Is Red* were the Islamic miniatures. Thousands of little details from countless miniatures that I’ve looked at took their place in the novel. Behind these scenes of love and war lie the classical Islamic texts because the miniatures were always drawn to illustrate the best scenes of stories that once upon a time everyone knew by heart and today, because of westernization, very few remember. (Pamuk 2001)

In the above statement, Pamuk emerges as a writer with an understanding of the tradition in the sense T.S. Eliot defined it in “The Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1922), his seminal essay on poetry as a meeting ground of tradition and the creative powers of the poet. Tradition, from Eliot’s perspective, “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (131; emphasis mine). Tradition, including the past and the present, invokes a present of multiple temporalities, where the present is crowded with the echoes of the past:

[T]he historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (Eliot)
For Eliot, then, historical sense leads the writer to an understanding of individualism, as one that reflects local literature but in a sense that complements a highly Eurocentric understanding. Pamuk’s sources of inspiration reveal a similar perspective, and his authorship of *My Name Is Red* is also about being framed by past master-writers and masterpieces. Yet, Pamuk’s statement dislocates Eliot’s definition, as the tradition it reflects draws not only from Europe, but also from the Islamic East. The tradition in the novel, in other words, is a twofold one, where not only past and present, but also East and West converge.

When mentioning his sources, however, Pamuk comes up with specific names from the western novelistic tradition, while he refers anonymously to the Islamic tradition of miniatures. He fails, in other words, to mention any of the master miniaturists that are common knowledge for those familiar with the art form, the names and traditions are ironically abundant in the novel. In this sense, the novel is not simply “homage,” as he claims, “to these forgotten stories (associated with the miniatures) and the wonderful pictures drawn for book lovers of the time”, but more of a requiem (an elegy), the space where the past is the present (Pamuk 2001).

**Frame 3: IMPAC Citation: a Vantage Point**

Among the mostly favorable international reviews of *My Name Is Red*, the Judges’ citation for the IMPAC has become the most memorable one. The citation, primarily repeating the themes generally associated with Pamuk’s works, merits reflection for a number of reasons regarding the form, the content, and the politics of the novel:

> A work of intense beauty, Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* opens a window into the reign of Ottoman Sultan Murat III, inviting us to experience the tension between East and West from a breathlessly urgent perspective. (IMPAC)
The window metaphor here evokes the thematic and aesthetic concerns of a novel that is, above all, about perspective. The window has been commonplace when discussing painting since Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise on perspective in painting, *De Pictura* (55). It was also used by Jean Paul Sartre when referring to the redemptive value of art in “Why Write?” Windows that art constitute offer unlimited perspective: “paintings are windows that open onto the whole world” (42). The window analogy in the IMPAC Citation relates the novel’s masterpiece status to how it functions; the novel is a “window into the reign of Murat III.” This of course leads one to question the ontological and epistemological implications of the metaphor. The window trope assumes that a work of art is transparent (Fırat). The reader, therefore, is posited in a privileged situation to see through both. *My Name Is Red* is not simply an outlet into the past; it is a frame, a subjective re-presentation of a historical period. The window metaphor, focusing on the truth-value of the novel, is therefore problematic as it forecloses a reading motivated by the aesthetic concerns that frame the novel.

The citation, therefore, emphasizes the perspective of the window not as a subjective point of view, but as a vantage point from which to view the past and the present. From the “breathlessly urgent perspective” that the window furnishes to the reign of Murat III, what the readers may view is “the tension between East and West” in its quasi-atemporality. The masterpiece status of *My Name Is Red* is therefore linked to its framing of east-west conflicts. Similarly, its political significance is often linked to the present day power struggles and conflicts between Islam and West, especially after September 2001. In the US, for example, the launching of the novel coincided with the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, and the novel was received as a source of insight into current conflicts, as the review below attests to:

---

107 Alberti’s use of the window metaphor is ambiguous; Alberti’s original work was in Latin, but he later translated it to Italian, pluralizing its meaning. There is still dispute whether he intended the window metaphor as an outlet to the story or to the world (55).
*My Name Is Red*, like the best historical novels, is a super-parable, a novel of our time. As the Taliban destroys statues of Buddha thousands of years old and Bible thumpers burn art books and ban John Lennon, we realize that still for some, it is not McDonald’s but Michelangelo who is the great Satan. (Levi 1)

Within its presentational context, then, *My Name Is Red* appears as a retrospective story, which is more about the present and the future than about the past. Literature, however, is a medium of storytelling in which form is equally important as content. In the words of a ‘voice’ in the novel, “it’s not the content, but the form of thought that counts” (*My Name* 353-54). In this novel, which is narrated through multiple voices, perspective is neither transparent nor does it offer direct access to its object. On the contrary, the use of multiple perspectives draws attention to perspective itself, encouraging us to look ‘at’ it rather than ‘through’ it. As such, perspective reveals itself in the novel as what Hanneke Grootenboer posits as its essential role: “rhetoric,” and “a mode of thinking” (10).108 The novel invites its readers to adopt an unsteady vantage point that requires constant reconfiguration and readjustment.

**Frame 4: Framing a Murder with Masterpieces**

Set in the winter of 1591 in Istanbul, at a time when the glory of the Ottoman Empire was beginning to wane, *My Name Is Red* recounts the nine days following the murder of Elegant, a master miniaturist. Along with three other miniaturists, Elegant has secretly been commissioned by Enishte,109 whom the Ottoman Sultan has asked to compile a

---

108 In her close reading of Dutch still life painting in the seventeenth century, Grootenboer posits perspective as a mode of thinking that claims transparency: “We are unable to observe perspective directly because our position is always already implicated in its configuration. […] therefore, we need to find an alternative position from which we ‘see’ the ways in which perspective operates as a system that manipulates our vision” (100).

109 Names in translation lose some of their connotations, and Enishte’s name is one such example. In Turkish, Enishte designates one’s uncle from the maternal side, and as such seems to be a name created by Black, whose mother was Enishte’s sister.
“masterpiece,” an illuminated book that will be sent to the Venetian Doge in the Islamic millennium. Meant to depict the Sultan’s dominion over both worlds and to testify to the Ottoman supremacy in the East as well as in the West, the Sultan has asked for miniatures painted in the European manner. The book itself is thus supposed to become an encounter between the two ways of seeing. This encounter, however, is one marked with conflict and strife. Within the iconoclastic tradition of Islam, painting is a controversial topic (Çiçekoglu, “Pedagogy”). Realistic painting is considered the painter’s claim to be as creative as God and hence a means of competing with Allah, the master-creator, which is the greatest of sins. Within this framework, painting in Western style, including the use of human perspective, connotes arrogance before God, as it prioritizes human point of view over the godly one. The only admissible painting style within this worldview is the art of miniature paintings, a search for divine vision, “the act of seeking out Allah’s memories and seeing the world as He sees the world” (My Name 96).

Miniatures primarily serve as a means of complementing the story and repose for the eye; they “are the story’s blossomings in colour” (My Name 30). The miniatures in the secret book, on the other hand, include a portrait of the Sultan, a practice regarded as doubly transgressive as it not only elevates a human point of view, but also idolizes it by putting a life-like image at the centre of a painting. The Sultan’s miniatures pose a threat to all who are even peripherally involved. For Enishte, whose own encounter with Venetian portraiture is also the reason why the Sultan commissioned him; the secret book is to be a pinnacle of both Ottoman miniature and his career. Yet he feels it is also a threat on his life. The miniaturists who contribute to the book, on the other hand, feel they are betraying their art and their ‘master,’ Master Osman, who has taught them illumination. The religious bigots under Erzurumi Effendi, who relates the present weakening of the state to the abandonment of

---

110 See My Name Is Red at 193 for a discussion on the status of the painters in Islam. The accusation, as Enishtē points out, is not from the Koran, but from a Hadith, a saying attributed to the Prophet.
‘true’ Islam, seek to destroy the book, its promoters, and eventually the art of miniature. Ultimately, the miniatures in the secret book are a threat to the very art itself, both by the antagonism they generate, and by advocating values that are diametrically opposed to the very precepts of the art itself, which is to erase all traces of the illuminator’s style in order to achieve a representation of the world as God would see it. The killing of Elegant, apparently for all of the above reasons, unleashes a series of events prompted by these fears.

Miniatures in the secret book, as well as the art of miniature, also frame the love story. Black, Enishte’s nephew, returns to Istanbul from a twelve-year exile to help Enishte complete the secret book. Black’s misfortune has also been brought about by way of portraiture: enamored of Shekure, Enishte’s daughter, Black declares his love through a scene from *Khusrev and Shirin (My Name 46-47)*, a popular Persian epic love story, and a cherished subject for miniaturists, following Bihzad, the Persian master miniaturist.\(^{111}\) The love affair between Black and Shekure is a contemporary take on the romance, yet it takes quite a different course. In the romance, Shirin, an Armenian princess, falls in love with Khusrev, the crown prince of Persia, upon seeing his picture. For Black, however, a miniature portrait is an insufficient means of generating love. In his miniature, the nondescript faces of the two lovers are replaced by his own with Shekure.\(^ {112}\) Revealing his identity and his feelings in a miniature, Black violates both the very precept of anonymity in miniature, and of familial bonds. He is subsequently banished not only from Enishte’s household, but also from Istanbul. Black relates his desolation in exile to not having a portrait of his beloved

---

\(^{111}\) The romance of *Khusrev and Shirin*, a classic text of Persian literature, was written by Genceli Nizami in the twelfth century and became a popular subject for miniaturists, notably Bihzad and a masterpiece in circulation. It was translated by many poets living in Anatolia and Azerbaijan.

\(^{112}\) Black’s attempt at realistic portraiture echoes what for Pamuk is a major problem with the epic itself: the (im)possibility of falling in love by seeing one in a miniature painting. Following is Pamuk on the romance and *My Name Is Red*: “If Shirin fell in love with Khusrev after seeing his portrait, then this portrait should have been painted in Western style, not as a miniature. In the epic, Shirin falls in love after she sees the portrait the third time. Is it because she has loaded the picture itself with meanings and significance of her own? Inspired by these questions, the initial title was *Love at first painting*” (Pamuk 1999: 156).
Shekure: “if a lover’s face survives emblazoned on your heart, the world is still your home” (2001 37). His romantic yearning for a portrait reveals his inclination for Western aesthetics as it contradicts the precepts of miniature, where the aim is to depict the meaning, not the object as it appears. Ironically, twelve years later, helping Enishte’s secret book of portraiture becomes a means to finally have Shekure’s hand. Shekure, now a widow, has just returned to her father’s house with her two sons, Orhan and Shevket, to avoid Hasan, her brother-in-law and pursuer. So when Black steals a furtive glance of Shekure in a way that reminds him of the romance, his love for her is rekindled: “When I recognized [a] similarity, oh how I burned with a love such as they describe in those books we so cherish and adore” (42). Black, yearning to revive the romance, indeed recognizes the depth of his feelings only when his experiences remind him of a scene from the story. Life then imitates art, and the utmost aspiration is to imitate a masterpiece.

Black’s investigations concerning the murder are like a treatise on art and serve as an introduction to Islamic aesthetics: he has tête-à-tête conversations with Butterfly, Olive, and Stork, the three artists who help with Enishte’s book, on issues that define a miniaturist: style, time, and illumination. This treatise on art entails a worldview in which Europe, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s title, is “provincialized.” The discussions between Black and the miniaturists refer to parables and stories from the mosaic that constitutes the Islamic world: Turkish, Turkmen, Mongol, Arab, Indian, Chinese, and Persian thought, philosophy, and art. In each conversation concerning the aesthetics of miniature, characters recount stories from Islamic lore, legends, even fables, to illustrate their point. Butterfly interprets the concept of personal style as a means of disguising the painter’s ineffectuality. He recounts love stories set in Afghan and Persian courts “to demonstrate that ‘signature’ and ‘style’ are but a means of being brazenly and stupidly self-congratulatory about flawed work” (My Name 80). In the same manner, Stork explains timelessness in miniature: he tells the story of how Ibn Shakir,
witnessing the Mongol invasion of Baghdad from the top of a minaret, realized that “the depiction of the world from an elevated Godlike position” is a means to achieve timelessness (My Name 85). Olive, on the other hand, proposes blindness as the ultimate in a miniaturist’s career. He describes a master miniaturist who, blinded by his patron, went to the rival court with the claim to paint even more magnificent books, thanks to blindness:


Since [his] eyes will no longer be distracted by the filth of this world, [he] will be able to depict all the glories of Allah from memory, in their purest form. (2001 94)

In short, through these dialogues, we are introduced to a different way of seeing, to a world of masterpieces where meaning precedes form, word precedes image, and where style is considered a flaw.

Black’s investigations initiate the reader into Islamic aesthetics, but withhold the identity of the Murderer. Incited by the discussions on perspective and style, the Murderer visits Enishte to appease his guilty conscience and to convince himself of the righteousness of painting in the Western style. The Murderer voices miniaturists’ concern that the use of perspective will debase the purity of their art and enslave them to Western style of seeing. Enishte’s comments, however, reveal a different side of the discussion between tradition and innovation. For Enishte, a meeting of seemingly inappropriate techniques is what ensures the creation of a masterpiece. He comments:

Nakısta, resimde ne zaman harikalar yaratılsa, ne zaman bir nakkaşhanede gözlerimi sulandıracak, tüylerimi ürperecek bir güzellik ortaya çıksa, bilirim ki orada daha önceden yan yana gelmemiş iki ayrı şey birleşip bir yeni harikayı ortaya çıkarmıştır. [...] Doğu da Allah’ındır, Batı da. Allah bizi saf ve kaşırmış olanın isteklerinden korusun. (1998 186)

In the realm of book arts, whenever a masterpiece is made, whenever a splendid picture makes my eyes water out of joy and causes a chill to run down my spine, I can be certain of the following: two styles heretofore never brought together have come
together to create something new and wondrous. [...] May [God] protect us from the will of the pure and the unadulterated. (2001 194)

In a tone that evokes the reviews of *My Name Is Red*, Enishte considers a masterpiece as an unprecedented encounter, a synthesis of two different approaches, of which an east-west encounter in art is only one instance. Yet, for the Murderer, the very encounter for which he killed Elegant, now entails self-alienation. His ruthless response is to kill Enishte with an inkpot.

Traditional stories and meditations on art become crucial in solving the mystery and literally framing the murderer. To disclose the identity of the Murderer, Black takes recourse, by the Sultan’s decree this time, to masterpieces and to the master miniaturist, Master Osman; they spend two nights at the Imperial Treasury studying the masterpieces in order to identify the style in the miniatures found on Elegant’s corpse. Master Osman identifies the Murderer as Olive, but also blinds himself, with the same needle Bihzad had, to attain the ultimate darkness from which “colour and sight arose” (*My Name* 92). Blindness then is to reach the dark, or “God’s pureness,” and to protect one’s honor, which is here equated with vision, from unwanted influences (*My Name* 396). Black, enamored of Shekure rather than of miniatures, captures Olive, who is about to flee to India to devote himself, under the Shah of India, to the purity of his art. Olive’s yearning for purity of vision finds an ironic answer as Black blinds him with Bihzad’s needle.

The novel ends with a bleak denouement, foreboding the greater disintegration that awaits the art of miniature painting. Black becomes “crippled” after his struggle with Olive. Olive manages to escape Black, but is killed by Hasan, Shekure’s brother-in-law. Black and Shekure’s marriage is shadowed by Black’s failure to kill Olive, as well as his inability to complete Enishte’s deadly book. The remains of the book are confiscated and placed in the Imperial Treasury. Shekure, as the last ‘voice’ in the novel, tells “how withered the red rose of the joy of painting and illumination that had bloomed for a century in Istanbul, nurtured by
inspiration from the lands of Persia” (2001 501). The workshop is eventually closed and the art of miniature evanesces as the Ottoman Empire is increasingly under the influence of religious bigotry and anything representing Western ideas is eradicated. One of the final images of the novel is how Sultan Ahmed, upon a dream in which he sees the Prophet denouncing the heretical creations of the ‘infidel,’ personally demolishes the monumental clockwork organ, itself a masterpiece, which was a present from Queen Elizabeth I.

Beneath the unresolved conflicts between East and West, Islam and Europe, word and image, writing replaces image as the means to attain delight, to voice distanced tales, and ultimately to create masterpieces. After recounting the havoc that befell on the art of miniature, Shekure tells about the two paintings she has longed for: her portrait, and a picture of bliss; a picture of nursing her children. The picture of bliss, in fact paraphrasing an eponymous poem by the celebrated Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet to another celebrated figure, the Turkish artist Abidin Dino, renders the wish itself a masterpiece. The novel self-admittedly aims to become a masterpiece, by writing the un-paintable and replacing the lost masterpiece. Like Pamuk’s other novels, My Name Is Red is in dialogue with both the concept of ‘masterpiece,’ and with ‘masterpieces’ themselves. Thus, in terms of form, letters and giving voice to inanimate objects in My Name Is Red echo the classic epic

---

113 The very first work written on Turkish miniatures by Richard Ettinghausen is reminiscent of the finale of My Name: “Many people chancing upon this book will be surprised that there is such a subject as Turkish miniature painting. It should be in no way embarrassing to have held such an opinion, because until about 1950 there was hardly any general awareness of the existence of this art” (5).
114 The “clockwork musical organ” was a gift for the then new Sultan, Mehmed III, as a token of friendship and newly established trade partnership, in February 1599. The ‘clock’ “was destroyed” by Mehmed’s son, Ahmed I, who considered keeping it a heresy (MacLean 4).
116 Note the thematic recurrence, in Pamuk’s work, of the desire to write a masterpiece. White Castle (1985) is a manuscript discovered by a historian, one of the voices of an earlier novel, Silent House (1983), which features a grandfather who devoted his life to writing an encyclopedia that would cure East of its backwardness. In The Black Book (1990), the protagonist ultimately becomes a master-writer; New Life (1994) is centered around a book that changes the lives of its readers, Snow itself is triggered by Pamuk the author/character’s search for his friend’s masterpieces in Kars. Pamuk’s work is also distinctive with its use of Islamic heritage and mysticism. See Moran, Ecevit, and Almond.
narrative style ‘mesnevis,’ which characterizes the poetics of Khusrev and Shirin (Çulhaoğlu 16). The novel ends in a bittersweet tone, as Shekure’s voice, although recounting loss and melancholy, also voices hope. Telling her un-paintable story to Orhan, Shekure’s sole consolation now is writing, the space where all conflicts and identities blend within Orhan’s “delightful and convincing stories” (My Name 503).

Frame 5: Anachrony

Reminiscent of the IMPAC citation, the novel’s masterpiece status has also been related to its depiction of the predicaments surrounding present day Turkish identity. A historical novel, My Name Is Red is set in the sixteenth-century Istanbul. The conflicts it portrays, however, relate more to the present than to the past. Concerns over westernization as loss of personal style, identity, and individuality characterize the novel, but not the period it portrays (Kuyaş). Whereas portraiture is repeatedly represented in the novel as a great affront to Islam and to Ottoman society in general, in that period it was already a branch in its own right. Portraiture in fact goes back to 1460s, when Mehmed II invited painters from Italy to the Porte. In the same vein, Master Osman, the traditionalist painter in the novel, for whom portraiture is a “dishonorable” practice, a “disgraceful affront to his dignity” (408), was actually the leading portraitist of the period, famous for his portraits of the Sultans. Osman was also renowned as a great innovator and a promoter of realism.

117 One example regarding the contemporaneity of My Name Is Red is “Gained in Translation,” an article by Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York on a recent art exhibition by “a new generation of artists from the Islamic world” who mix Islamic and western painting. Lowry starts the article by describing My Name Is Red, and then refers to the artwork as an echo of the “epic battle” in My Name Is Red (Art News).

118 “There are three manuscripts illustrated by Osman between 1550 and 1590 at the Serai—the history Hünername, the Surname which deals with the festivals on the occasion of the circumcision of Prince Mehmed, son of Murad III, and the Şemâl-I Al-I Osman containing portraits of twelve Ottoman Sultans” (Meredith-Owens 19).
Another master miniaturist of the period was Velican, Olive in the novel, who was renowned for his highly individual charcoal illustrations of animals, with most of his surviving works containing his signature (Meredith-Owens 20; 53).\footnote{Ironically, most of Velican’s surviving works contain his signature, or “inscriptions bearing his name” (Meredith-Owens 20). A representative of Olive’s charcoal miniatures, “miniature with hunter and lion,” was in an exhibition held in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam (“Istanbul”). Velican was introduced as a “Safavid,” Persian, painter, active in the Ottoman Palace workshop around 1580s.} In the novel, however, Olive is a painter whose passion for Western painting leads him to utter disillusionment and ultimately to rejection of Western methods, including signature. Stealing the Sultan’s unfinished miniature from Enishte after killing him, Olive tries to make a self-portrait in the space assigned for the Sultan. The result, however, is a realization of his inadequacy related not to his individual talent, but to lack of tradition: painting in the European style requires a proficiency that will take years to attain (My Name 487). Without the proficiency, innovation becomes mere imitation, and individuality is reduced to nothing but a signature:

Sizler ise bir şahsiyetiniz olmadığını gizlemek için imza atacaksınız. (1998 455)

You [...] are condemned to signing your names to conceal your lack of individuality. (2001 487)

In contrast to Enishte, who suggests, in a tone reminiscent of Eliot and of reviews of My Name Is Red, that masterpieces arise out of unprecedented encounters between two styles, Olive emphasizes that encounters without mastery and knowledge risk resulting in mere imitation. In the same vein, Olive responds to Black’s scorn of his desire to “practice genuine artistry,” with a warning against all attempts at Westernization:


“For the rest of your lives you’ll do nothing but emulate the Franks for the sake of an individual style,” [...] “But precisely because you emulate the Franks you’ll never attain individual style.” (2001 489)

The paradox in Olive’s words points at the complexities of the novel and its discussions on aesthetics. Art is inescapably linked to imitation. Imitation for its own sake and without the intention to move beyond it however can only result in loss of authenticity. Olive’s argument,
as the novel in general, is a dialogue with the present. As the story of a struggle between the pro-westerners and the traditionalists, the past in the novel is one that echoes the present, the space “where the subconscious of our contemporary neurosis is captivated by an anachronistically established “east-west” confrontation” (Çiçekoglu 3). Olive’s words as such resonate with the present-day criticism of pro-western self-modeling that has characterized the policies of Republican Turkey.

The novel blurs the lines not only between the past and the present, but also between author and character, fact and fiction. Pamuk’s author persona is also present within the novel through carrying details of his childhood and family life into the novel: the mother and her two sons are nominally and anecdotally the same as their real life counterparts (Pamuk 2001). In the same vein, Shekure, the last voice in the novel announces the writer of her story as Orhan, and his preoccupation with the symmetry rather than with the truthfulness of his story.


For the sake of a delightful and convincing story, there isn’t a lie Orhan wouldn’t deign to tell. (2001 503)

Shekure’s announcement is both a warning against ‘literal’ reading of the novel, and an emphasis on its aesthetics. Pamuk’s readers are familiar with his prioritization of aesthetic symmetry over “objective truth” in his narratives. In Istanbul: The City and the Memories, for example, Pamuk warns the reader of alternative versions of ‘truth’ and promises instead a symmetrical structure (2003 265). Pamuk uses his subject as a playground, where his aim is “not to render a perfect imitation of the past, but to relate history with something new, enrich and change it with imagination and sensuousness of personal experience” (3). For Pamuk then, form and not content, aesthetics and not truthfulness is the key to construing the perspective that the novel offers. Author’s intentions are obviously inadequate to explicate what his work ‘does.’ However, in the case of My Name Is Red, the master-writer’s
perspective of his piece, highlighting its aesthetics, encourages alternative vantage points to view the novel and to maintain the dialogue with its masterpiece status. Accordingly, the style of the novel will be the next focus of this study.

**Frame 6: Multiple Voices and Literary Style**

This novel, whose theme is the conflict between “two ways of seeing,” stylistically recounts how perspective determines perception (Çicekoğlu). The story, set in nine days, is recounted through twenty-one distinct voices that range from corpses, to the color red, and to Satan. The multiplicity of voices that characterizes the novel’s style indubitably enhances its pluralism, which has thematic connotations within the novel as well; its indeterminacy relates to postmodern sensibility with its evasion, postponement and unreliability of meaning. Pluralism is essential for putting the reader on stage and for transforming the reading practice from that of passive reception to active production. Reading in this sense becomes a play, linking literary, musical and recreational practices. Pamuk himself voices his concerns for polyphony when writing the novel, yet with the intention to “entertain his readers with kites and yo-yos” (Pamuk 1999). In the same vein, the storyteller, the voice of the inanimate objects, refers to the east-west dichotomy as a means of achieving more amusement:


> I only want to amuse myself frontside and backside, to be Eastern and Western both. (2001 431)

---

120 In his article “From Work to Text,” Barthes proclaims his concept of a *text*, as opposed to that of a *work*. The *text* is a play, an activity, a production, practiced not by the author, but by the reader. It is without closure and without any definitive meaning, and is thus incomsumable. His perception of reading of a *text* as a hedonistic act resulting in *jouissance* is itself a play with language.
The reader then, is encouraged to play (with) the text as both a musical and an entertaining activity.\textsuperscript{121}

Multiple viewpoints within this framework appeal to postmodern aesthetics, but they also perform as the mirrors in a kaleidoscope, which reflect changing patterns with each rotation of the tube. In the fifty-nine chapters that make up the novel, no two consecutive ones are in the same voice. Re-presenting the same events through rotating perspectives, writing is indeed kaleidoscopic: almost each episode starts with re-telling the events in the previous one, but from a different vantage point.\textsuperscript{122} In Chapter 28, for example, the Murderer visits Enishte, and the Chapter ends with his confession. Chapter 29 starts at the same point again, rendered through Enishte, with the point of view reversed to present the perspective of the seen. As such, despite the repetitions and overlaps of the events in the consequent episodes, the overall picture refracts with each voice. The reading process is then about constantly reviewing and questioning the text. Even within the same “voice,” we detect alternative ones, voices and ideas vying for recognition, as in the murderer’s split subjecthood that we read as two distinct voices, and in the gap between what the narrators share with the reader and what they articulate to the other characters in the novel. Unitary and objective meaning, as well as identity, is challenged, as there is no fixed ground, nor an authoritative voice on which to base a definitive reading.

\textsuperscript{121} Yildiz Ecevit’s comments along the same lines: “The main fictional principle of this text is pluralism; it is a structure most of the time composed of paradoxes—and at times parallelisms. Love and sexuality, the concrete and abstract, drawing and writing, art and life, the East and West, the blind and the clear-sighted, humanism and theocratism, life and death, the murderer and the murdered, art and murder, God and the devil, soul and matter, dog/horse/tree and human being, Black and Shekure, Husrev and Shirin, yesterday and today, the autobiographical and the fictional, pornographical idiom and verses from the Koran. Despite the bloody events it entails, My Name Is Red is a multilayered text where all such paradoxes/parallelisms are experienced with the joy of a carnival” (130).

\textsuperscript{122} In Chapter 2, Black goes to the coffee house where he listens to the storyteller impersonating a dog, which happens to be Chapter 3. In Chapter 5, while Enishte is talking to Black, Orhan interrupts the conversation, only to narrate it from his perspective in Chapter 6 and introducing Shekure as an active character into the story. In Chapter 7, Black’s story moves with respect to both narrators.
Frame 7: Islam

*My Name Is Red* involves multiple perspectives not only with its narrative, but also with its representation of Islam. The novel includes numerous discussions on *The Koran* and the Islamic canon that form the basis of the interdict against portraiture, refracted through its kaleidoscope. Elegant Effendi, whose voice from the bottom of a well starts the novel, ushers in a set of morbid themes that the novel is associated with. His call for vengeance, his hesitation to speak of his current existence in a purgatory-like space and the mention of his pain because of the murder, however, is rather reminiscent of the most renowned ghost in literature: the Ghost of Hamlet’s Father. Yet, in this contemporary novel, Elegant’s hopes as a ghost reside not in his offspring, but in the reader. He thus beckons the reader to avenge his foul murder, and to beware of the text he has just started to read. In Enishte’s death, on the other hand, giving voice to a corpse becomes an outlet to recount Koranic images of the afterlife and purgatory. Enishte’s experiences after death validate all the Islamic literature he has read about the matter. He asks God about the meaning of earthly existence, and he cannot clearly hear the answer; it is either “Mercy or mystery” (2001 279). The response he receives, however, is nevertheless in line with the humanist tradition of Islam that he represents.

With Satan, voiced by the storyteller in Chapter 47, the kaleidoscopic narrative is at its most unusual. Satan refuses to be associated with portraiture as it contradicts what he stands for. Boasting that he “never bowed down before man,” at the cost of banishment from heaven, Satan is now resentful that painting, portraiture and perspective are attributed to the only angel that refused to acknowledge man’s superiority (*My Name* 352). Satan attributes human vanity, therefore, to God’s ways:

---

123 Satan’s argument and free will evokes its Miltonian interpretation with emphasis on his individuality and perseverance at the expense of infinite torture. In the Turkish edition his refusal to bow to human, as the equivalent of “non serviam,” is in capitalized letters (2001 332).
Meleklerini insana secede ettirerek onlara mağur olmayı sen öğretmedin mi? Şimdi de senin meleklerinden uğrendikleri şeyler kendi yapıyor, kendi kendilerine secede edip kendilerini alemin merkezine yerleştiriyorlar. (1998 333-34)

Was it not You who instilled man with pride by making the angels bow before him? Now they regard themselves as Your angels were made to regard them; men are worshipping themselves, placing themselves at the centre of the world. (2001 353)

Satan’s voice thus transforms the understanding of right and wrong, virtue and sin. Is this a paradox, or a critique of Islamic precepts? From Satan’s perspective, banishment of painting seems contrary to Islam as a religion where human beings are considered superior to angels. Satan’s words ends with another twist on the matter of style and form:

Düşüncelerin içeriği değil biçimi önemlidir. Nakkaşın ne resmettiği değil, üslubu. (1998 334)

It’s not the content, but the form of thought that counts. It’s not what a miniaturist paints, but his style. (2001 353-54)

The kaleidoscope moves once more to shift the pattern: the highly charged argument on religion turns into a question of aesthetics as a means of meaning making.

Diametrically opposed to Enishte’s humanism and Satan’s inquisitiveness stand Islamic fundamentalism, portrayed through the adherents of Erzurumi Efendi. As shifting perspectives and fleeting identities are considered heresy, an affront to ‘true’ Islam, Erzurumis seek ways to destroy the pluralism that they associate with the art of miniature. Throughout the novel, the Erzurumis symbolize the threat that Islamic fundamentalism poses to any encounter between the East and the West. Indeed, religious bigotry is the underlying reason for the murders and the ensuing tribulation: Olive kills Elegant because he fears Elegant will report the heretical miniatures to Erzurumi Hodja, the leader of an extremist Muslim sect, and ensue trouble. The Erzurumis kill the storyteller, who acts out, by giving voice to the drawings of the miniaturists, inanimate characters in coffeehouses to entertain his audience through responding to the course of events and criticizing fundamentalism. The ensuing mayhem ultimately leads to the waning of the art of miniature (Chapter 55). What
sets the stage for the apparent encounter between Islamic and Western art is thus the bigoted adherents to the Islamic canon.

The primary hue that the novel adopts in its representation of Islam is the destructiveness of religious fundamentalism. The encounter between Islamic and Western aesthetics wreaks havoc on those involved: two miniaturists and Enishte are killed; the remains of the book are confiscated and placed in the Imperial Treasury; Master Osman blinds himself; his workshop is closed and the art of miniature evanesces as the Ottoman Empire is increasingly under the influence of religious extremism. One of the final images of the novel, Sultan Ahmed demolishing the monumental clockwork, eerily evokes another enemy of clocks and time, the Imam in Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), who destroys all the clocks in his city (214).

The ultimate dialogue is the one with the masterpiece, *The Koran*. As unusual intertextual elements, the verses from *The Koran* quoted in the epigraph and within the novel serve a double purpose. According to Yıldız Ecevit, Koranic verses are “an aesthetic element, ripped from its sacredness by Pamuk as an innovation in Turkish literature” (155). Koranic verses are not completely stripped from their sacredness, however, since the *Koran* maintains its ethical and religious power within the story. The verses are rather pluralized, as they are included into the dialogue on masterpieces. The most striking reference to is an anachronistic one. In this novel on Islamic precepts, *The Koran* is the divine Masterpiece, the Book that characters refer to for rhetorical purposes, when in need of self-justification. In the final dialogue between Olive and Black, however, a quote from Kipling’s “The Ballad of East and West” (1895)\(^\text{124}\) seems to make more sense than the Koran when discussing East West relations:

\(^{124}\) Black’s words quote part of the first line of the poem: “Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”
In this novel on Islamic precepts, the inclusion of the Koran as the ultimate masterpiece to the characters multiplies the discussions on masterpiece, introducing the divine as a mere perspective. Unlike Kipling, Black does believe in the meeting of East and West as a means of creating a new space. The conflicts that the novel depicts suggest that the encounters between the two are wrought with distress and destruction. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of the novel does not adhere to a strict opposition, framing the East, unlike Kipling, not simply as East, but also as West.

Frame 8: Writing Miniatures

Based on the opposition between word and image, the novel in fact brings them together in ekphrasis, verbal representation of visual art. In that sense, the aesthetics of the novel is reminiscent of word-image dualism, which also defines the novel and ekphrasis as a genre. Yet, in My Name Is Red, these opposites converge within the plural aesthetics of the novel. An even more surprising encounter between opposites is the one between the art of the miniature and the postmodern stylistics of the novel. One technique that relates both to postmodernism and to the art of miniature is the encounter between the reader and the text. Direct address to the reader serves as another means for problematizing boundaries. The characters in My Name Is Red are conscious of the reader watching them; they address the reader and talk about the gap between their thoughts and their words, as well as between their words and their deeds. Accordingly, the murderer challenges the reader to discover his identity through his style (Chapter 2), while Shekure threatens not to tell her story unless the reader takes her word on her beauty (Chapter 9). Direct address to the reader is also a textual
means of returning the viewer’s gaze and thus emphasizing the reader’s involvement in the meaning making process. In the same vein, when Shekure voices her interest in the reader, she not only reminds the reader of the fictionality of the work, but steps outside her frame in an attempt to include the reader within the story:

Sizinle konuşmamı yadırgamayın. (...) Ben de, tüpki bir gözü kitabın içindeki hayata, bir gözü de kitabın dışına bakan o güzel kadınlar gibi, beni kimbirlir ta angi yerden ve zamandan seyretmekte olan sizlerle de konuşmak isterim. (1998 54-55)

Don’t be surprised that I’m talking to you. (...) just like those beautiful women with one eye on the life within the book and one eye on the life outside, I, too, long to speak with you who are observing me from who knows which distant time and place. (2001 51)

Direct address of the reader is not simply a means of ironizing referentiality and of connoting postmodern stylistics; it is a deliberate attempt on Pamuk’s part at writing ‘miniature,’ the very art the novel revolves around:

If some attention is paid, it will be seen that the people in the miniatures look within and also to the eye looking at them, in other words to the audience. My characters speak both to each other and to the reader while they tell their stories. They say both “I am a picture and represent something,” and “Hey reader! I am speaking to you.” The miniatures remind us that they themselves are pictures. While reading my novel, my readers are aware that they are reading a novel. (Pamuk 1999: 159)

Pamuk similarly voices the aesthetic concern of the novel as blending the more distilled and poetic style derived from works in the style of Persian miniatures with the speed, power, and character-driven realism of the novel as we understand it today’’ (265). I would add to Pamuk’s statement that the stylistics of the novel presents a much more elaborate and specialized poetics of miniature.125 This act of blurring the boundaries between in and out, fact and fiction, character and reader, is also a tool that questions our preconceived notions.

125 Pamuk’s use of miniatures is closer to the Ottoman style. Persian miniatures are renowned for their romanticism. Realism and detailed depictions of daily life, on the other hand, are trademarks of Ottoman miniatures (Ettinghausen; Meredith-Owens).
about Islamic and Western aesthetics, as it pertains both to postmodern pluralism and to the art of miniature painting.

This story from already multiple points of view acquires unusual reverse angles, in a style evocative of both postmodern pluralism and the multidimensional character of miniatures. Art, in Islamic context, is “a way of implying the impossibility of knowing reality as it is (and) of knowing the Absolute because the Absolute manifests itself in infinite ways” (Erzen 72). As aesthetic objects where the reader and the writer meet in a common quest for the unattainable, Islamic art and hence miniatures serve primarily to signify mutability, multidimensionality, and the illusory nature of knowledge and earthly existence, and hence appear closer to post-modern or present day ‘western’ sensibilities than portraiture or classical painting. In My Name Is Red, multiplicity is not something that belongs to postmodernism but to aesthetic vantage points that shape the frames we are taught to employ. By writing miniature and giving voice(s) to the mute art of Islamic painting, the novel liberates the art from its traditional role of confinement within the peripheries of books. Indeed, the pluralism attributed to and ‘appropriated by’ the art of miniature affiliates it to (post)modernist notions of art, and not to its traditionally supplementary role as demarcated by Islamic precepts. Such opposites the novel negotiates with redefine the notion of masterpiece as one that links not only the tradition with the individual, but also the past with the present, the East with the West, miniature with portraiture, and postmodern aesthetics with Islam.

Conclusion

Viewing My Name is Red as ultimately the space for an encounter between the reader and the text, I hope to expose how the masterpiece frame contributes to our encounter with both the book and with the cultural debates it is a part of. My Name is Red displays, in a tropismic
way, the commensurability between Islamic art and postmodern stylistics. By writing miniature and giving voice(s) to the mute art of Islamic painting, the novel liberates the art from its traditional role of confinement within the peripheries of books. Indeed, the multiplicity of voices attributed to and ‘appropriated by’ the art of miniature affiliates it to (post)modernist notions of art, and not to its traditionally supplementary role as demarcated by Islamic precepts. The opposites *My Name is Red* negotiates with redefine the notion of masterpiece as one that establishes the link not only between the tradition and the individual, but also between the past and the present, East and West, miniature and portraiture.

With its unusual perspective of the past, the novel reconfigures the present in its representation of the past. In terms of meeting the past and the present, in *My Name is Red* we see not only the presence of the past, but also the ‘pastness’ of the present. As such, the novel considerably modifies Eliot’s historical sense. First, it simultaneously adheres to the novelistic and to the artistic traditions. Perhaps more importantly, the novel also dislocates Eliot’s definition as the tradition it reflects draws not only from Europe, but also from Islamic East, showing not only the presence of the past and the timelessness of the temporal, but also the ‘westness’ of the East as well as the ‘eastness’ of the West. *My Name is Red* opens up a dialogue with the past that modifies the narratives with which we regard the past, the art of miniature, and the notion of masterpiece, generating imaginative approaches as well as spaces.