Capitalizing Istanbul: reading Orhan Pamuk’s literary cityscape
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Summary

This study examines the link between Istanbul's cityscape and literary capital through the work of the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk. Contemporary Istanbul is a dynamic city, its long history including two empires and a republic. Extending over the European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus, the 2010 European cultural capital boasts of a culture that also bridges the two sides. Turkey’s largest city is also one of the largest in the world, representing the country’s global aspirations as well as its heritage. Something of Istanbul's global image resonates in the work and career of Orhan Pamuk. An established international writer, Pamuk has been in the limelight with his political and politicized views, especially on Turkish cultural identity and politics. The pinnacle of his career was the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, one of the first to pay specific attention to Pamuk's literary cityscape, and to posit a twofold relationship between Pamuk and Istanbul, where the city and the writer feed each other. That the city is a compelling narrative resource for Pamuk is also the main theme of this thesis: Istanbul is Pamuk's literary capital.

With Pamuk’s literary cityscape as its focus, this thesis deals with Istanbul’s location on the imaginary east-west divide. “The east is a career”: Edward Said uses this line from Disraeli’s *Tancred*, as an epigraph to his *Orientalism*. The statement is also relevant to Pamuk’s international standing. With Pamuk, if not the East, then the east-west divide and Istanbul’s position in it have become part of his career. Such a position evokes Said’s dilemma: speaking for the other—in this case the Orient—means also to silence, and to build a work, if not a career, on it. I contend that in Pamuk’s work the tension between the so-called opposites becomes a productive force to intervene in the image of the city and the binaries associated with it, and to articulate the spaces in between.

In recent discussions of urbanization and literary studies, the city has emerged as a site for new cultural claims and struggles, and a new geography of the centre and the periphery. A relevant concern, based on the emergence of different networks and binaries, involves the struggle for identity and identification in a world conceived through metropoles. Through close readings of the encounters between city-space and literary-space, I explore how Pamuk's narrative establishes Istanbul as a global city within the network of literary cities, and why it is relevant for cultural debates around urbanization and literary studies.

The first chapter focuses on the parallels between global views of Istanbul and Pamuk through the image and the practice of bridges. I propose to critique the stereotypical image of the bridge associated with Istanbul, and with Pamuk as its foremost writer. This juncture
between Pamuk’s and Istanbul’s imagery accentuates different markers of change and points of contact. Accordingly, I examine the bridge as a monument, a cultural site, and an epistemological tool. Just as bridges come in many forms, so do my uses of the term in this chapter. It alternates between a symbol of a city, a metaphor to define a writer, a vantage point and hence an epistemological tool, and the ‘real’ bridges that straddle the stretches of water that define Istanbul.

Chapter two sets out to delineate Pamuk’s transcription of Istanbul into writing in his encyclopaedic novel, The Black Book. This comprehensive and labyrinthine account of the city's subterranean as well as submarine past, its conflicting pasts and presents, explores the tension between viewing, walking, and writing as various forms of experiencing the city. Taking a critical stance towards the association of visibility with cognition, I argue that the literary cityscape that emerges from the novel reminds us that narrative is not simply a mode of cognition, but a means of expression in which clarity or consistency may not always be the primary concern.

Chapter three captures the cityscape in Pamuk’s memoir Istanbul: Memories and the City: the city emerges as an entity that moulds the self that inhabits it, whereas the self, in turn, shapes the city by writing it. The chapter traces the sense of space that Pamuk’s memoir conveys. It begins with the visible space of writing, the language, then moves on to Istanbul's literary cityscape on an East-West axis, and concludes in the identification of the self with the city. Despite its surplus of images, the city emerges as a void and a locus of exile for reasons that relate to Istanbul’s cultural history. The void, characterizing the self, Istanbul, and by extension, Turkish identity, no longer appears as an unfathomable emptiness. A space of multiple possibilities, the void that the memoir describes is not only a place of residence, but a locus of both individual and cultural identity. In a similar vein, Pamuk’s own sense of “homelessness at home” becomes a transnational marker of identity, situating his work within the disciplines of comparative and world literature.

Pamuk’s memoir is also a recent addition to the literature on melancholy, which I address in Chapter four. In the memoir, Pamuk identifies with the city, only to diagnose the predominant mood of the city as the melancholy of a city in a state of decrepitude. His Istanbul is a humanized city suffering from chronic, even pathological sadness, which transmits its mood to its inhabitants. This chapter pursues this personalized understanding to explore how melancholy makes sense when relating to Istanbul, and, reciprocally, what makes the city’s melancholy, as it arises from Pamuk’s work, stand out from the large body of literature on the term. I contend that the response lies in what starts out as a
straightforward contrast between the past glory of a bygone empire and the present sprawl of a teeming city drawing from histories unique to Istanbul’s distinctive history and topography, comprising all, and yet reducible to none.

Chapter five traces the ‘meteorology’ of Istanbul’s melancholy in the early morning mists and crepuscular haze of the city, as well as in the images of haze, steam, and smoke, all giving substance to the melancholy of the city. The hazy melancholy points to the popular image of the city as a locus of the east-west divide, while linking it to modernist literary cityscapes. Pamuk’s literary cityscape curiously bridges this imagery of the city and the foggy literary cityscapes of the modernist London, the literary and artistic capital of fog. Positioning Pamuk's preoccupation with mist in relation to London's literary cityscape and literary modernism suggests that his depictions work not only with the tradition of literary cityscapes, but also with notions of seeing, knowing, and understanding.

The final chapter situates Pamuk as a master-writer, with a discussion of his most acclaimed work, My Name is Red. With the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2003, the literary value of this novel was internationally acknowledged. The notion of ‘the masterpiece’ is not only an external fact or added value but a constitutive part of this historical novel that represents the now forgotten art of the miniature in sixteenth-century Istanbul. This chapter interrogates the role of the masterpiece inside and outside the novel in order to explore how notions of ‘masterpiece’ and master-writer frame our reading and how Pamuk's cityscape creates its literary, cultural, and political capital.

I conclude by repositioning Istanbul and Pamuk on the imaginary divide between East and West. The division between Eastern heritage and Western influence becomes a resource, rather than a liability. Pamuk's work uses this stereotypical imagery tactically, to capitalize (on) Istanbul by multiplying its shores and straddling multiple binaries. Istanbul is a phoenix as well as a fictional city; its histories consist of conquest and destruction which lay claim to the site for competing meanings and lifestyles. This city of ruptures, continuities, and oppositions possesses the ability to metamorphose itself in time and survive as part of different traditions. So does Pamuk’s literary cityscape: encapsulating various forms of capital, it embodies different patterns, as well as maneuvers, that emerge from Istanbul’s constant change.