

EAST-WEST DICHOTOMY: A STUDY OF ORHAN PAMUK'S NOVELSILENT HOUSE

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Abstract

Geographically and linguistically, Turkey has been at the core of the debate surrounding the conflict between East and the West and subsequently between the West and the Islamic world. Orhan Pamuk characterises Turkey as a "JanusNation" which within itself accommodated generational contradictions: between East and West, secularism and religion, and modernism and tradition. Pamuk does not choose one over the other but argues that the country must incorporate all of these contradictions. Orhan Pamuk's literary works are frequently characterised by the East-West conflicts leading to a sort of confusion or loss of personal identity. In the press announcement made on Orhan Pamuk's receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, the Swedish Academy lauded Pamuk as a novelist "who in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures" (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2006). The clash between two dissimilar cultures East and West, and the phenomena of history and modernity and love and hate make the kernel of Pamuk's literary works. The article attempts to illustrate that the current world has experienced the transition from one stage to another; nonetheless, the dichotomy between the East and the West is still pervasive in the modern world. The East-West dichotomy has multiple implications in different disciplines, including sociology, geography, history, theology, and literary studies. Regardless of the differences in its practices, it continues to symbolise the historical separation or polarization between the East and the West, which still exists in the contemporary world. In this context, Orhan Pamuk have been chosen to investigate the scope and depth of the conflict between two cultures and ideologies.

Key Words: *Conflict, Ideologies, East –West, Modernization*

East-West Conflict:

The origin of the dispute may be traced back to the mediaeval period of history. The West began to explore other worlds not merely out of curiosity but for financial gain. As a result, the West began to colonise the rest of the world, notably the east. Western countries were fully-prepared due to the advancement of science and contemporary technologies. The western powers colonised most of the eastern regions and began exploiting them socially, culturally, and economically. According to Dr Selahattin in *Silent House*, the East was in a deep sleep during the middle Ages while the West raced forward owing to their breakthroughs in science and technology. The Western revolutions, such as the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Renaissance instilled a consciousness in their societies. The West enslaved the eastern countries with the might of science and technology. Resultantly, a collision between the two worlds – the East and the West was unavoidable.

The West became civilised and well-equipped with sophisticated science and advanced technology in all elements of civilisation. So, with the unparalleled might of science, the westerners overcame the eastern culture, religion, economy, literature and everything native to the east. For example, Lord Macaulay's strategy in eastern nations like India was a deliberate plot against the locals. In Yashveer's words:

Lord Macaulay banned the printing of Arabic and Sanskrit texts and imposed a Western education system as he knew that the inferiorisation of native culture was impossible, if

expressions were not controlled. They not only misrepresented Orientals but also appropriated their language and education (Yashveer 26).

Because of advancements of science and contemporary technology in the West, the East proved to be inferior. The westerners undervalued eastern culture, religion, society, economics and civilisation. The themes of the dominance of the West over the East reoccur in Pamuk's writings.

The assimilation of the Western ideas and practices into Turkish culture started straight from the Ottoman period itself. Sultan Mehmet II, one of the famous rulers of the Ottoman Empire, understood the need to improve society by embracing several western principles. He laid emphasis on the necessity of establishing equality in social life. He projected to establish a class of sophisticated individuals in the empire by supporting education. After the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmet II brought a large number of Western artists to the Ottoman capital. This resulted in the advent of numerous unique styles, not only in paintings but also in medals, sculpture, architecture and others. Gentile Bellini, one of the great painters of Venice in the fifteenth century, was called "to produce the Portrait of MehmetII" (Jardine and Brotton 8). This copy of European culture forcefully lays forth the unconscious ambition of the Ottoman Sultans to embrace Western paradigms of modernity. All the following Sultans followed the footsteps of Mehmet II and effectively strove to reconcile the cultural paradigms of both the Orient and the Occident. Sultan Murat III even commissioned a group of artists to create an illuminated book based on Western models to mark the 1000th anniversary of the Hegira year. Hegira Calendar started with the migration of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his companions from Mecca to Yathrib. The Sultan and the governing elites eagerly adopted western patterns but the popular opinion deemed the absorption of the Western methods unthoughtful and contrary to the basic tenets of Islam.

Since Mehmet II's conquest of Constantinople, the connection between Turkey and Western civilisations has remained complicated. The European countries regarded Turkish culture as strange and distant. This ongoing process of "othering" is seen in the popular consciousness of European artistic productions. Edward Said addresses this concept in his great work *Orientalism*. The conflict between the Oriental and Occidental has always been a struggle for power, and their relationship has always been characterised by changing degrees of complicated hegemony and dominance. According to Edward Said, in this situation, the negative stereotype is invariably connected with the Orient. He states that "the other feature of the orient was that Europe was always in a position of strength. There is no way of putting euphemistically... the essential relationship, on political, cultural, and even religious grounds was seen to be one between a strong and weak partner" (*Orientalism* 40).

Scientific progress and technical advancements in the west facilitated cross-cultural exchanges across the Bosphorus. As Pamuk argues in his works, the Ottoman culture was profoundly impacted by both, the Western material growth and European masters' artistic achievements. Pamuk's works brilliantly depict the complicated interaction between Turkey and Western nations. He highlights the dissonance and assimilation of two disparate cultural paradigms.

Turkey, particularly Istanbul, never lost its cosmopolitan character. This was also the product of a complex meeting of different cultural and theological factions that began with the establishment of the empire. The presence of several ethnic groups and the business interests of the nations in east resulted in making "Istanbul" a cosmopolitan capital. Pamuk's creative works are filled with acute perceptions and analyses of cultural hybridity.

The path of westernisation continued alongside the Ottoman Empire's decline. The administration of the Empire observed the west as a source of new knowledge and cultural forms. This was obvious in the nineteenth century when a large number of Western works was translated into Turkish as part of the Empire's efforts to infuse new scientific consciousness. As Ozlem Berk points out, it was a watershed moment in Turkish history:

In the Turkish case, the west as the source culture was given a superior status as early as the nineteenth century. By the start of the nineteenth century, new influences began to enter the

Ottoman Empire. Knowledge started to increase. Educational institutions multiplied, while military and technical works were being translated (Translating the West 2).

Under the wise leadership of Kemal Atatürk, following the transition from an empire to a democratic republic, Turkey underwent a considerably greater revolutionary process of modernisation and westernisation. The Turks emphasised the need for secularism and avoided using religious scriptures as the guiding principles of state. At the same time, they were suspicious of an uncritical embrace of all Western models. This difficulty has been passed down the generations and is still present among contemporary Turks. Almost in all of his works, Pamuk has highlighted Turkish subjects' enthusiasm and concern towards embracing Western culture. He exhibits the inherent hybrid nature of Turkish culture by combining Eastern and Western traditions in his creative works.

Discussion and Analysis:

Orhan Pamuk's *Silent House* is a powerful novel that spans all areas of conflict. The struggle between eastern and western ideals is well depicted in this novel. In all aspects of life, the east is always considered primitive and the west as advanced. Religion, faith, and culture prevail in the east, whereas the west is deemed to be oriented to science and modern technology. In *Silent House*, Pamuk portrays east and the west ideologies through his characters. Turkey which became a republic in 1923, was first enthralled by westernization but it soon became disenchanted. The setting of the story is Cennethisar (the 1980s), a Turkish city near Istanbul. The plot revolves around three siblings who visit their grandma Fatma, a devout and pious nonagenarian living in an ancient house known as Silent House by the locals.

Fatma's spouse, Dr Selahattin who had died many years before, recurrently fills her head by placing his western and scientific notions. Dr Selahattin is exiled from Istanbul. He arrives in the seaside city of Cennethisar where he resides with his wife and his illegitimate son called Recep who works as an attendant after his death. Fatma lives a reclusive life immersed in her past thoughts and remembers her spouse and his passion for western notions. Dr Selahattin resists the traditional Turkish way of life and calls for the western ideology to be imposed in the Republic. He condemns the Turkish people for their outdated religious ideas and for not accepting Western science. He labours on an encyclopedia for his entire life, discussing western science and its growth. He observes that society should embrace the secular and advanced mindset of the west. In his words:

The incredible advances of the sciences in the West had now made God's existence a ridiculous question to be cast aside; he'd written that the East's continued slumber in the deep and despicable darkness of the middle ages had not led us a handful of intellectuals, toward despair but, on the contrary, toward a great enthusiasm for work, because what was obvious was that we were not obliged to take all this knowledge and transport it from there to here, but to discover it all over again, to close the gap of centuries between east and West in shorter time (SH 24).

Dr Selahattin attacks the east for its antique and weary conceptions of the existence of God. Eastern people in human civilisation were in deep slumber in the middle ages when the west initiated a Renaissance in their nations. This reformation movement in the form of the renaissance led them towards infinite improvement and prosperity. Dr Selahattin criticises the east for their primitive thinking about their families, societies, and nations. He claims that the easterners are stuck in the outdated old ways of life. He believes that science is a crucial component of human development. The root cause of lagging behind of the East is the lack of scientific and technological knowledge. Like the East, the West too needs a Renaissance or scientific enlightenment without which to progress is not possible. Dr Selahattin expresses his gratitude to Talat Pasha who exiled him from Istanbul to Cinnethisar, a remote region of the world. He aspires to guide his nation towards scientific and technological advancements of the west. People in Turkey remain enthralled to traditional and religious taboos even after its establishment as a Republic. He wants his people in the east to be free from religious enthrallment. He thinks that the baseless teachings of religion should be discarded out and out. He asserts that eastern people face problems in their development because of their religious beliefs. He chides his patients because they believe in God's healing power and do not take their ailing children to a doctor.

Dr Selahattin aspires to build a society based on logic. He wishes his people to enjoy simple, cheerful and free lives. He imagines a society of liberty that the east has never seen. He believes that once the east accepts science, they will be able to outperform the west. They can do better because they have witnessed the errors and missteps of the west. They shall not repeat those errors and missteps. Dr Selahattin wants his children and grandchildren to be free from eastern backwardness and be endowed with western knowledge and rationality.

Dr Selahattin is a devout believer and admirer of Rousseau's lessons on the love of nature. He chastises Turkey's self-proclaimed rulers and pashas for their sycophantic behavior. He wants his Turkish people to think for themselves rather than following others mindlessly. He has high hopes for the Republic of Turkey and believes that he will be able to free his nation from all forms of backwardness. He admires and adores the Turks who have a sophisticated European appearance. People from the east should know how to run a business and generate money. The east should learn maths from the west and acquire the knowledge of trade and human behavior. He wants the east to adopt western technology so that they may earn money and become wealthy like them. According to him, the east should first think and act like the west, and then only they can make money through industrialisation and technological advancement. He works on a 48-volume encyclopaedia to bridge the great divide between east and the west.

Pamuk holds that the future generation of the east shall definitely rise and contend with the west in all aspects of life. Dr Selahattin is so swayed by western science that he adopts the name Darvinoglu as his surname meaning Son of Darwin. He aims at becoming a serious and genuine disciple of science just as the westerners are. However, in the east, man can do nothing. When a person conducts tests using his or her own intellect and hands, he or she will be successful. The brains of the eastern people can only be developed by observation and experimentation. Dr Selahattin slams ordinary Turkish folks who spend their time in coffeehouses and doing nothing. People in the east should focus on education, research and technology. They must break the shackles of religion and outdated notions of God and divinity. Things must have scientific explanations rather than divine ones. The rule of life should be that people should trust what they see with their own eyes. Dr Selahattin exclusively believes in reason and the rationality of science. He says: "Westerners produced and tried to reconfirm it in experiments is either a fool or an egoist" (SH 147).

The east should accept that the Europeans discovered everything before them and thoroughly researched everything. According to Selahattin, a republic is always the ideal regime to govern and lay the foundation of the scientific knowledge. The Westerners have discovered everything and have nothing more to add. The east should only follow in the footsteps of the west and embrace the development. The east should neither believe in falsehood nor be scared of selecting and consuming the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Selahattin refers to himself as an independent man who has plucked the fruit from the tree of knowledge. He suggests that people should the scriptures and religious bodages and study science. They should live according to the scientific principles.

The divide between east and west is not only confined within materialistic development and growth but also in thinking. Selahattin uncovers the reality of death at the culmination of his life. He visits his wife, Fatma, to express his views on death. He refers to death as "nothingness." In the east, death has a philosophical and theological significance. However, in the west, as he puts it, 'death is just the collapse of an organism.' He rejects all conceptions of death found in stories and religious texts. Thus, according to him, there is no such thing as God, heaven or hell. Nothingness is the only thing that exists after death. Nobody in the east comprehends this notion of nothingness. In his words, "Because in one instant I understood why: why we are the ways we are and why they are the way they are. I understood why the East is the East and why the West is the West" (SH 296). Moreover, Dr. Selahattin states to his orthodox and impassioned religious wife, Fatma:

Tonight, I've identified the invisible line dividing them and us! No, East and West aren't separated by clothing, machines, houses, furniture, prophets and governments. All of these are mere consequences; what separates us from them is that simple little truth: they have discovered

the bottomless pit of Nothingness; whereas we remain unaware of this terrible truth... how could it be that for a thousand years not a single person in the East has thought of it (SH 299).

Selahattin Darvinoglu considers himself the first in the east to comprehend death or 'nothingness'. He labels the eastern people as irrational and imbeciles who do not recognise anything about death except their religious and supernatural beliefs. He gets to know the realities of mortality. Hence, he is a true westerner. He attacks the east with the following harsh words:

“Poor blind creatures! They’re asleep the whole East just sleeps! Slaves! I will teach them about death and deliver them from this silvery” (SH 300).

He mocks at the East for their fervent belief in God, heaven and hell. The people of the East do not live blissfully because they believe in reincarnation and are unaware that they only have one life. Pamuk draws a dividing line between East and West. The eastern world is religious and spiritualistic whereas the western world is realistic and scientific in temperament. Dr Selahattin expresses his displeasure with the typical eastern attitude. The East believes in unreliable thoughts and pleasures born out of their fancy, quite contrary to which the West believes in proven facts born out of research and experimentation. Thus, Pamuk discovers that East and West are entirely two different worlds which cherish two entirely different ways of thinking. He finds east superstitious and west rational.

Dr Selahattin has dedicated his whole life to the exploration of virtues in the West and vices in the East. He advises his illegitimate son Recep to trust his judgement in to and be free and open-minded. Even at the point of his death, he offers his wife Fatma a lengthy lesson on the eastern and western concepts of death. His religious wife is unable to hear her husband's immoral remarks. In the story, Selahattin advocates the western point of view against the eastern. He adores western ideas, and wishes to adopt them in his homeland. He is an Easterner who transforms into a Westerner who expects everyone to be the same. The point of dispute between both is only of ideologies and attitudes towards life and death. He criticises the irrationality of faith in God and Religion in the Oriental world in juxtaposition to the praiseworthy secularism of the west. He looks for a Renaissance in the east so that the entire eastern region be a new universe of science and technology. On the other hand, his wife sees him as a sinner who uses too much profanity. Pamuk harshly exposes superstitions and strong religious beliefs in Eastern countries through Dr Selahattin. The old Fatma and Dr Selahattin in *Silent House* symbolise eastern and the western ideologies.

Conclusion:

The novel *Silent House* explores the disparities between eastern and western ideologies. Dr Selahattin endorses westernisation. Through the character of Selahattin, Pamuk praises the secular West for its advancements in science and technology. Under the influence of the West he does not hesitate in condemning the conservative Islamic East. Dr Selahattin seeks to convert the religious adherents of the country into proponents of contemporary science. The writer depicts the prevailing situation in eastern countries where religion is more important than the development of the nation. Fanaticism, fundamentalism and religious extremism are plaguing eastern countries. For instance, Turkey still confronts these challenges even after declaring itself a secular republic. Dr Selahattin urges his people to approach life with a more scientific inclination. He encourages his followers to reject the deceptive doctrines of the faith and adopt a realistic and contemporary westernised lifestyle. He embarks on the 48-volume encyclopaedia to rouse the eastern world from a long period of darkness. He is opposed by his devout wife, Fatma who considers him a sinner and an atheist. Even many years after the passing of her spouse, the tension between the two ideologies persists. Pamuk presents both eastern and western ideologies and their divergent perspectives.

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