



East West Dichotomy in Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague*

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Abstract: Orhan Pamuk has explored the rich traditional past of Turkey in his fiction in detail. In *Nights of Plague* he revisits his favourite trope of East West dichotomy. A fictional island of Mingheria serves as the background of action. The bubonic plague is seen differently from the perspectives of different characters. The story is set in 1901 when the Ottoman Empire was fading. The multi layered narrative gives a detailed account of how a society deals with a pandemic. The crisis posed by plague is a threat to the existing authority. The Sultan tries to manage the challenge posed by plague by sending a delegation to the island of Mingheria. The existential threat is dealt with differently by various characters.

Key words: East West dichotomy, traditions, modernity, existentialism.

Introduction

Orhan Pamuk has cherished the traditions of his country in his fiction and represented it in different forms time and again. He has explored the boundaries that can define the East and the West. Turkey has witnessed a vast change in the twentieth century in the political dispensation. It has moved from the Ottoman legacy to becoming a Republic. The charismatic leaders like Ataturk have paved the way for country's development. *Nights of Plague* was published in 2021 and translated in English in 2022. This novel is a rich presentation of various sections of society against the backdrop of bubonic plague. Plague breaks out on a fictional town Mingheria. This disease poses a challenge to the present regime. The clash of the values of the East and the West are depicted in the reactions of characters. Some take this as a natural problem and wants to deal with this in traditional way. Whereas the characters like the doctor Nui deals with this disease in a scientific manner. The theme of murder mystery interwoven with the chronicle of plague is used to portray the political transformation happening in Turkey. Judith Shulevitz reviews:

Orhan Pamuk's new novel, *Nights of Plague* is set mainly on Mingheria, a "fairy-tale," "otherworldly," and fictional Ottoman island—a "pearl of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea," or so say the painters and tourists enchanted by its rugged mountains and its pink-stone capital, which glows when seen from afar. But behind the Orientalist fantasia lies a microcosm of empire at the point of collapse. In 1901, a bubonic plague breaks out. Pamuk will use it to expose the infirmities of this body politic. (Shulevitz).

Mingheria is an imaginary island in the Ottoman Empire. It is located in the Mediterranean Sea between the island of Crete and Cyprus. When bubonic plague breaks out on this island then the quarantine measures are imposed. There is religious uproar against these measures. Pamuk has portrayed the reaction of religious orthodoxy against the scientific remedies to control this disease. The social upheaval, the struggle to survive and the conspiracies to overturn the present regime is depicted skilfully by the master story teller Pamuk.

Pamuk has used the technique of metafiction in his fiction and in the present novel also. Mina Mingher is a fictional historian and she presents this story as a historical account. She is the great granddaughter of the Sultan. Pamuk presents this fictional story as a story extracted from the history books. Mina Mingher herself admits that her sources are not reliable. She says: "I was able to verify the authenticity of the world described in Princess Pakize's letters by consulting archives in Istanbul, England, and France and by reviewing historical documents and memoirs from the era" (Pamuk, *Nights of Plague* 4). Princess Pakize the niece of the Sultan gives an account which is different from the state record. She deliberately confides with the readers about the unreliability of her sources and the reader has to look carefully like a detective that the given account is correct



or not. By using this technique Pamuk drives home his point that history can never be absolutely objective rather it is a record given through the perspective of the ruling class. In the preface it is claimed that “This is both a historical novel and a history written in the form of a novel.” (Pamuk, *Nights of Plague* 1). This quote emphasizes that the boundary between the fiction and the actual facts is blur.

Nights of Plague on the surface level gives an impression that it is a story about the outbreak of pandemic on an island. But the plague is used as a background to showcase the fading of Ottoman Empire and the movement of Turkey towards becoming a secular and nationalist republic. Sultan Abdul Hamid II represents the traditional authority who finds it difficult to manage the problem posed by the bubonic plague. The scientific measures to contain the disease like quarantine are strongly resisted by the local persons. A person says:

Nobody ever wants quarantine, not governors or mayors, not shopkeepers nor the rich. Nobody wants to accept that the comfortable lives they are accustomed to might suddenly come to an end, let alone that they might die. They will reject any evidence that disrupts their usual ways, they will deny any deaths, and even resent the dead. (Pamuk, *Nights of Plague* 299/300)

The island has a mix population of Muslims and Greeks. They have their deep religious values which hinder their faith in the scientific measures to tackle this disease. This problem is further aggravated by the political conspiracies. The local administration finds it difficult to impose the quarantine which necessitates international intervention.

Mingheria is cut off from the rest of the world because of a naval blockade. Ottoman authority fails to help these people during this crisis. Kamil is a popular bodyguard and he takes this opportunity to rally people behind him for the cause of liberty and attaining independence. Through Kemal, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's character is projected in this novel. Atatürk is considered as the father of modern republic Turkey. He advocated the adoption of western values for the development and overall growth of his country. The population divided on the basis of religion and other factors finds a reason to unite to face the crisis posed by a pandemic. Kemal is able to forge a national identity by transforming a fragmented society into a progressive modern state.

Pamuk has depicted the clash of the East and the West in his fiction repeatedly. The East and the West are not simply two different geographical areas but they represent two different ways of life. The clash of cultural values has always been a key trope in the fictional world of Pamuk. In *Nights of Plague* the attitude towards a pandemic projects this cultural conflict. Medical measures required to contain the disease are received differently by the progressive persons and the persons following traditional ways.

The plague is not only a threat to the island but there is a risk that it can spread to the other parts of the country. Sultan Abdul Hamid II tries to handle this situation by sending a delegation of dispatches accomplished quarantine experts. This delegation comprising of doctors are expert in handling this disease in a modern scientific manner. They have to face the resistance from the local people who perceive this disease as a punishment sent by God. They do not want to follow to the modern medicines and the quarantine measures imposed by the delegation. Further the local population is culturally and religiously diverse and they see medical aid as futile in combating the disease.

The authority of the Ottoman Empire is challenged by the friction posed by the local persons. Ultimately the warships are employed to block the entry and exit of the island. Mingheria is isolated and bereft of the anchor of traditional authority. This crisis forces the public to devise a way to tackle this problem independently. In this turmoil an island purely dependent on the Ottoman Empire forges a way to become an independent state. Though the local persons are averse to adopt scientific ways like use of modern medicines, quarantine measures but nevertheless they make a united front in the hour of crisis. The decay of the imperial authority paves the way for the birth of a secular nation.



This novel has used the theme of murder. A murder has to be interrogated against a lavish background of historical and political narrative. An expert quarantine doctor is murdered. The narrator tells the reader about the Sultan interest in Sherlock Homes. The deductive method of Sherlock Homes is used by Princess Pakize and her husband, Nuri Bey to find the real culprit. This investigation is done in a pervasive tone of suspicion in Mingheria. This situation of political conspiracies shows Mingheria as a microcosm of the world outside where a continuous struggle for power is going on.

The fear caused by the COVID, the measures of quarantine, the disruption in the society's routine life find its echo in the *Nights of Plague*. The humanity suffered a big jolt with the outbreak of COVID. The characters of this novel depict the loss, anxiety and trauma caused by the pandemic. The plague shows the vulnerability of human beings in the times of acute duress. The characters confront the problem of survival with the help of their cultural values. On one side the fear psychosis created by the plague derails the normal functioning of the society and on the other hand shrewd persons take this opportunity to manipulate the masses in their favour.

Pamuk has used a fictional historian to tell the story of this novel. The novel depicts the basic nature of history about digging deep into the truth and on the other hand a novelist shows the basic facts in an artistic manner. Pamuk has painted the historical facts with the artistic brush and in the process he has shown the transformation of a country from imperialism to a democratic country. Like Pamuk's previous novels this novel has many digressions. The narrator talks about the influence of Ottoman in China, about the cultural diversity of the Empire. These digressions demand an active reading from the reader sifting the real facts from the fiction.

The position of women is also used to show different attitude of the West and the East. Though Princess Pakize is the niece of the Sultan even then she has a limited freedom. She has to live in seclusion during the spread of plague. Her views about the on-going social uprisings, the political upheaval are mediated through the information given by her husband. This shows the marginalization of women in a traditional society where women are not allowed to participate in public life openly. Often, The historical account is shown through the lens of patriarchy. To counter this bias Pamuk has created Mina Mingher, a fictional historian to tell the story of Mingheria. She is a descendant of the princess Pakize. She studies the letters of her ancestors and incorporates these facts in her book. In this way by creating a female narrator Pamuk has tried to give voice to female perspective and has allowed marginalized sections to voice their opinion.

Conclusion:

Orhan Pamuk has reflects on the real world situation through an imaginary island Mingheria. Mingheria serves as a microcosm of the world. How a society tackles a pandemic shows the maturity and growth of the society. On one hand the twilight of the Ottoman Empire is shown and on the other hand the rise of a Republic advocating democratic values is depicted. Pamuk has created a fictional historian and he raises a question on the authenticity of the historical records as history is always the history of the dominant ideology. History is not free from biases and subjective interpretations. The plague evokes a call for unity and exposes the limitations of a traditional authoritative structure.

The East and the West trope is analysed in detail. On one hand we have characters who want to use modern medicine and modern ways to combat the on-going pandemic and on the other hand we have traditional authority vested in the Sultan who wants to use the modern ways only to retain his authority. The religious beliefs hinder the process of recovery by modern means. The impact of pandemic in shaping a nation's future is elaborated. Pamuk has blended the tropes of history, murder mystery and metafictional technique in this rich story to show the chaos caused by a pandemic paves the way for political transformation and adoption of modern ways to combat the crisis.



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