

Remembrance of Things Past: Intertwining of Mnemonics and Cultural Memory in Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*

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Abstract: Memory and imagination are indispensable in shaping literature. The production of an image is rather a recreation of tracing the long-lost memories combined with poetic imagination. Orhan Pamuk's statement, "Novels are machines for collecting memories", is pragmatized in most of his oeuvre. The narrators being haunted by the history of Istanbul and their traversing past long-drawn tedium of life are echoed in his narratives. *The Red-Haired Woman*, winning wide acclaim, announces his mastery over the myth and how myth reassures and relives timelessly. Keeping apart the Freudian school of thought, *The Red-Haired Woman* draws heavily on the East-West geographical analogies. The link between memory and fiction is that fiction relies on memory to create a sense of authenticity. Cem, the central character in the novel reincarnates the canonical Sophoclean hero, Oedipus, who depicts how cultural memory takes a turn in his life as the plot progresses. Relentless storytelling between the Master and his apprentice is fashionably presented in the novel. The traveling theatre, which earns a livelihood to the titular red-haired, rewinds the reel to the BCs, picturizing the tragic mother com wife of Oedipus, Jocasta. This paper examines how Mnemonics plays the central role in the life of Cem and Master Mahmut and how the canon possesses longevity and recurs in the present time through cultural memory.

Keywords: Cultural memory, history, myth

1. Introduction

History and cultural memory are transmitted timelessly and are explicit in the fiction that is a true narration of the human brain. The rebounding of historical text and myth are found inevitably in fiction.

Nothing retains the shape of what it was,
And Nature, always making old things new,
Proves nothing dies within the universe,
But takes another being in new forms. (Ovid: 430)

Pamuk who is prolific in correlating history in his many works has not spared *The Red-Haired Woman* in its rendition. This paper aims at shedding light on *The Red-Haired Woman* in terms of Mnemonics, myth and Cultural memory. Cem who narrates the lion's share of the novel lives in and delves into his memories past thirty years. His relentless longing to dive profoundly into the past, like the well dug by him and Master Mahmut despite not having discovered water even after tireless

days of digging, is the crux of the work. "I didn't come here to scout new construction sites; I came for my memories" (210) quotes Cem when he travels back to Ongoren to pay his last filial respect to Master Mahmut, the master well-digger. Memory plays a key role throughout the novel. The faces that were seen and forgotten glimmer as the plot progresses making the reader awestruck. The young boy gets attached to Master Mahmut, a well-digger, under whom he serves as an apprentice. He quickly casts the older man as a replacement for his missing father. It's Cem's memories of his father that bind him to Master Mahmut.

The plot is juxtaposed with the Greek Classic tragedy of Oedipus and the Persian Sohrub and Rostum from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The central character is obsessed with the canonical Oedipus, "I'd come across a summary, and it had stayed with me" (46). As the plot progresses, the intertwining of cultural memory with the present gets evident. Cem who loves to read and listen to stories had these reflections in his real life. "The things he told me in his stories happened to me in real life" (200). He was tormented by the accident that occurred near the well while he and his Master were attempting to bring water to the barren land. "No one had seen Oedipus kill his father. No one in Thebes accused him of the murder" (47). He blindly believed that he was the King Oedipus and the Prince in the Holy Koran, the assaulter of his father-like Master. "...story from Koran about the Prince who left his father to die at the bottom of a well" (207). He resents and regrets what had happened thirty years ago by the well.

Though one races to free away from the memory, cultural and collective memory keep stalking the race. "There is no escaping what is contained within our field of memory, be it of the victim or perpetrator" (Durand, 59). Oedipus and Sohrub live in the novel mirrored by Cem and his son, Enver. Like King Oedipus, Cem was the cause of Master Mahmut's downfall. Cem is taken vengeance upon in turn fatally, when Enver accidentally shoots him in his eyes, reincarnating the very Oedipus who blinds himself for murdering his father and sleeping with his mother and is plunged into the well where Master Mahmut too lied unattended when left alone by Cem.

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“He shot his father in his eyes, the autopsy stated” (246).

Cultural Memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive („we are this“) or in negative (that“s our opposite“) sense. (Assman, 130).

As the plot unscrews the fact that he had Sohrab, his son, unknown to him is revealed following the death of Cem’s father. The Red-Haired Woman, the narrator of the last section, who is a theatre artist running a moving theatre troupe, enacts the role of Thahmina, the mother of Sohrab. This ill-fated mother weeps silently, then screams helplessly at the tragic assassination of her son by his father. Anticipating the death of her son in real life, she was vigilant with Enver and Cem when they met at Ongoren near Master Mahmut’s well years after the catastrophic incident. Ultimately fate had its turn and “... after years of shedding tears onstage, now I have real reason to weep” (231). She attempts to tell Ayse when they meet after Cem’s death and Enver’s imprisonment, “I wanted to tell her that, as women, we were not responsible for what had happened, for it had been all dictated by myth and history” (247) This is also a reminder that cultural memory survives even after several attempts to disregard and distrust the fact.

“No one had ever told them these stories, but somehow, they knew them anyway, just as people can sometimes still know, deep down, things they have forgotten” (243)

Caught between fiction, life and past, Cem is found leading a life of a fictitious character. Deliberate attempts are made by him to overcome and get rid of the past memories into which he is plunged helplessly. Despite his struggles to get over the dark path trodden; he is found handcuffed to the unformidable history. When finally, Cem had to abandon Master Mahmut, deep inside the well in the middle of the barren Ongoren, not able to identify if he is alive or dead, his memories lingered.

“...I had ended up retracing the actions of the protagonist whose story I’d chosen. That was why Master Mahmut wound up stuck at the bottom of a well: it was all owing to a story, a myth.” (109).

Nonetheless, he strives to digress and divert from the storyline traversed by the classical hero. He gathers the incidents in the life of Oedipus, taking precautions to overcome the prospects of the soothsayer and fleeing the land. “I had to do the opposite of what Oedipus did and act as if nothing bad had happened” (109). The stronger his instinct was to run away from the myth, the myth chased him towards destiny. He attempts to forget and forbid Oedipus on several occasions only to find himself proximal to the forbade. “...The Brothers Karamazov as a birthday gift for my fiancée, but I saw that the introduction was by Freud, a text on Dostoyevsky and patricide” (112). He was haunted by the days spent with his master, the storytelling nights, the night walks under the street lamp, his having Raki in the restaurant and his fall for the Red-Haired Woman ending up in a night sexual encounter, where he loses his virginity.

“Remembrance is a matter of emotional ties, cultural shaping, and a conscious reference to the past that overcomes

the rupture between life and death. These are the elements that characterize cultural memory and take it far beyond the reaches of tradition.” (Assman, 28)

Mnemonics, Turkish history and cultural memory are marked inevitably in Orhan Pamuk’s works. Mnemonics is the field of study that defines how the incidents are remembered by associating with what is known to one. The whole narration of Cem and the Red-Haired Woman can be closely associated with the plot of Oedipus Rex and Sohrab and Rustam.

“I felt as if I were simultaneously the hero and the author of some of these accounts. Ferdowsi had suffered the death of a child, and this imbued the passages about the father’s loss of his son with a particularly moving depth and honesty.” (27)

Cem gives an account of the thoughts that run across his mind on his way back home after Master Mahmut was left inside the well, mysteriously. He makes efforts to find refuge by penning down his memories with the Master. He was a geologist by the day and a writer by night. The story teller in him persuaded to have his painted thoughts take place on the canvas.

I had wanted to be a writer. But after the events I am not about to describe, I studied engineering geology and became a building contractor. Even so, readers shouldn’t conclude from my telling the story now that it is over, that I have put it all behind me. The more I remember, the deeper I fall into you”. (1)

He was torn in between the myths of Greek Oedipus and Sohrab Rostum. He debated on finding parallels between them but comes to the conclusion that there is a fundamental difference, too: “Oedipus murdered his father, while Sohrab was murdered by his father. One is a story of patricide, the other a story of filicide” (125). There are a variety of incidents in the narrative wherein the protagonist is caught between past and present and fastened to the myth without any deliberate attempt.

“All individual remembering, that is, takes place with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues. Even when we do it alone, we do so as social beings with reference to our social identities” (Olick, 156)

The narrator constantly shared his haunted memories with his wife Ayse, rewinding and recreating his life at Ongoren with Master Mahmut, digging the well, and believing strongly that the tragic end of Oedipus shall befall and shroud his life. And “sometimes he entered my dreams in other guises and told me stories” (134), Cem reflects. He even had the strong intuitive thought that he will be beckoned back to Ongoren like Oedipus was to Thebes.

“I lingered on this scene for a long time, describing how father and son could fail to recognize each other and start fighting, as if in some scene from a melodramatic Turkish movie.” (47)

Even after repeated warning from Ayse, he decides to visit the well after knowing the whole trail of Master Mahmut’s miraculous escape out of the well, his maiming the left collar bone and his fame in digging more sources of water at Ongoren, consequently his death. But his visit was only to meet his own death with the hands of his son, Enver. Here fatalism pulls Cem towards his destiny similar to Oedipus who looks for the murderer of his father.

“King Oedipus himself leads the search like a detective, unaware that he is the culprit. Step by step, he discovers the bitter truth until finally, racked by guilt, he carves out his own eyes.” (108)

The revelation that Cem was blinded with the bullet from the pistol also indicates how fiction, life and cultural memory are inexplicably co-related. “Ferdowsi describes at length how father and son grapple, their fight lasting for days until finally, the father slays the son” (27). Fears took shape when Cem encountered with death in the form of Enver. Cem’s anticipated their meeting and his son getting killed by his hands. He relates his life with history and myth.

“Our character is forged not just by our freedoms, but also by the forces of history and memory. This well is history and memory to me. I am grateful to you for bringing me here, Mr. Enver” (221).

Throughout the narrative, Cem finds himself in the guise of Sohrab who is constantly in search of his father, “When my father left me (as Rostam left Sohrab) and went to prison, later to make a new life for himself, I sought out father figures to replace him and guide me” (133). He tirelessly sought-after Master Mahmut as Sohrab and Oedipus did. Cem is consistently in pursuit of aligning his real life with the plot of classical tragedies. There had been times when Cem regretted his being delved into the past in the memories of Master Mahmut. When, on the day of his father’s funeral, Mr. Sirri turns up all of a sudden and shockingly reveals that Master Mahmut is alive and has discovered water in the well, he muses:

“Why had I spent almost thirty years believing that I might have accidentally killed Master Mahmut? It was probably because I’d read Oedipus the King and relied on its truths. At least that’s what I wanted to think. From Master Mahmut I’d learned to believe in the force of old stories. And like Oedipus, I couldn’t resist investigating my ancient crime” (152).

The days spent with the Master was recollected and picturised in front of Sirri. The moral stories and parables from Koran told by the Master during their stay at Onegeron did not entertain Cem. He recalls his clinging to the classical tragedy of the son killing his father and having children with his mother.

“I had told him the story of Prince Oedipus only to upset him, but then somehow, I had ended up retracing the actions of the protagonist whose story I’d chosen. That was why Master Mahmut wound up stuck at the bottom of a well: it was all, owing to a story, a myth”. (109)

The text echoes the character’s constant contact with myth. Mrs. Fikriye talks at length to Cem about the eternal existence of the narrative despite the untimely death of a text. Museum as a monument of history and memories is a resort to Cem. His frequent visit to the museum echoes his being ensnared in the hold of past memories. Mrs. Fikriya, during one of their meetings reflects on the inevitability of existence of myth.

“In Turkey, we’ve let the Shahnameh fall by the wayside. I suppose this is no longer a world in which to read and savor old epics of warring heroes. But even though Ferdowsi’s book has been forgotten, the tales in the Shahnameh haven’t (133).

Cem’s and Ayse’ visit to the museums, the monuments of history and memory, revealed to them that the painstaking details of the miniatures are mere ephemeral and intriguing. The couple has concerns regarding forgetfulness of men. The quest for past and it’s link with the present is often a matter of thought for Cem.

“...all those ancient lives had been, how quickly they’d all been forgotten, and how vain we were to think that we could grasp the meaning of life and history by learning a handful of facts” (138).

The moving theatre troupe is the reminiscence of the early modern age and the characters are often found juxtaposing with the classical tragedies of the East and the West. The Red-Haired woman in whom Cem had his son was ideally his father’s lover and it clearly depicts the overlapping of history and fiction. Nonetheless, the Red-Haired woman, to overcome her agony of having an illegitimate son and the harassment from her husband Turgay, stages Oedipus in her theatre, they were welcomed with threats and ultimately the tent was “ablaze in the middle of the night” (233). The same play was performed and the result was:

“... where we had set up near the shanties on the coast, and the next morning, local kids pelted our tent with rocks. In Ezurum, angry young nationalists accused us of peddling Greek Plays; cowed by their threats or hotel while troops of brave and honourable policemen stood guard around our tent”. (240).

Cem whose physical existence is on the earth, dwells inside the well. The Geologist by profession, leads the path of the mythical character and meets his end announcing his readiness to accept the fate similar to Oedipus. Enver and his mother enacted Sohrab and Rustam, not on the stage, but in real life. No matter what, as long as human beings exist, they live in the collective past. Cultural memory is, nonetheless, unavoidable and fiction and myth are carried forward through the living. The plethora of incidents mentioned in the narratives echo juxtaposing of life and myth, present and past, and existence and Cultural memory.

2. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of Remembrance of Things Past: Intertwining of Mnemonics and Cultural Memory in Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*.

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