

Orhan Pamuk's Reflections on the Impact of Renaissance on Islamic Miniature Painting: A Re-reading of My Name is Red

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In the last decade, an impressive quantity of academic publications, particularly questioning the primacy and uniqueness of European Renaissance, and how Renaissance, that has been considered to be foundational to the history of Europe and the West, cannot be understood and conceptualized without examining its relation to the Islamic world and the Muslim Mediterranean, have been published. *Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton in their book Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West, explore cultural currents that flowed between the East and West during the Renaissance. The front cover of the book carries an epigraph, 'East and West fixed each other with an equal reciprocal gaze'. This clearly signals that the book attempts to recycle the deficiency in the West's view of the East and its influence on the Renaissance which is broadly minimized and erased since the nineteenth century. In a way all these critical works broadly emphasize how Europe was influenced by the Muslim Mediterranean. Several important studies and critical editions, such as Clarence Dana Rouillard's French History: Thought and Literature 1520- 1660 and Norman Daniel's Islam and the West: The Making of an Image, try to explore the old, multilayered and complex relations between the Christian and the Islamic worlds. The aforementioned critical works broadly emphasize how Europe was influenced by the Muslim Mediterranean; their primary concern is to reveal crucial but unfamiliar aspects of Renaissance societies and culture.*

Whereas the scholars are enthralled by the exchanges between these two cultural spheres, the novelist, Orhan Pamuk is appalled by the tension that such exchanges can create in a Muslim country. Orhan Pamuk through his novel *My Name Is Red*, originally written in Turkey as *Benim Adim Kirimizi*, explores how such cultural exchanges can create an atmosphere of trauma in a Muslim country. In this magnificent novel Pamuk takes the reader into the strange (to the Western eye) and beautiful world of Islamic art in which Western notions does not make sense. He is one of the most acclaimed writers of today. In 2005 he received the Nobel Prize in literature. He probed deeper and shows how fear fed violence and violence fuelled more fear – a cycle that he sees as repeating itself to this day. Pamuk's focus is on the recuperation of dismissed historical narratives based in Ottoman culture. For many Pamuk in his *My Name is Red* is revising official perspectives on the Ottoman legacy, a kind of challenge to the European Orientalist perspective.

His novel captures the true greatness of Islamic art of painting in its purest forms. Erdag Goknar rightly calls the novel a ‘philosophical treatise of painting’ (*Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy* 41). The novel starts with the murder of the royal miniaturist, Elegant Effendi. The murdered miniaturist was one of the four miniaturists who were secretly working under Enishte on a book which was commissioned by the Sultan. This book would not contain any of the usual scenes to which their eyes are accustomed; on the contrary the book would display a peculiar method of drawing, half Venetian and half Persian. Enishte would also paint a portrait of the Sultan in the style of the Frankish masters. That portrait would be concealed within the pages of the book because they are well aware of the fact that portrait making is strictly forbidden in Islamic faith. Enishte conceptualized the idea of the book while acting as an ambassador of the Sultan. He visited quite a number of pallazos, churches in Venice. He saw thousands of framed faces, painted directly on the walls. He was mesmerized by the art of portraiture and upon returning to Istanbul he convinced the Sultan about the book. The Sultan disclosed his desires to Enishte and told him to prepare the book as a present for the Venetian Doge: “once the book was completed, it would become a symbol of vanquishing power of the Islamic Caliph Our Exalted Sultan, in the thousandth year of the Hegira” (*My Name is Red* 176). He ordered Enishte that it ought to be prepared in utmost secrecy_ “primarily to conceal its purpose as an olive branch extended to the Venetian” (*My Name is Red* 176). Another major reason for such secrecy was that they would be accused of blasphemy for mixing foreign methods with traditional forms of miniature painting. They are subverting the normative behavioral and rhetorical boundaries of the acceptable and the illicit.

In the art of Islamic painting there is a kind of hostility towards naturalistic presentation. On the contrary Western Renaissance painting has a pre-occupation with sight, point of view and perspective. They enjoy a kind of independence from narrativity. James Elkins in his book *The Poetics of Perspective* has observed that sometime around the mid-1470 in Venice it began to be possible to make pictures from which all narratives has been cleared (11). On the other hand in the Mediterranean, the tradition of miniature painting, the illumination and illustration of narrative, is treated as the extension of text rather than an independent art form. Though those exquisite pictures dominate the written words on the page, they are treated as footnotes. The art form of miniature began during the Timurid dynasty (1370-1526). The schools of miniature painting at Shiraz, Tabriz and Herat flourished under the Timurids. Herat was the centre of the Islamic art of painting and home to the great master Bihzad. To be influenced by the Western ways of painting is a dilemma for the traditional Islamic painter who is devoted to repetition. The more you repeat and imitate the more perfect you are. They remained barred from signing their works. Traditional view was that personal stylistic touches are nothing but imperfection. In the novel *Butterfly*, one of the miniaturists of royal atelier recounts three parables and advices Black: ‘Signature’ and ‘style’ are but means of being brazenly and stupidly self congratulatory about flawed work (*My Name is Red* 105). In a different cultural sphere (western hemisphere), the notion is somewhat different. To European painters individual style is very important. The Renaissance painters depict the faces of kings, priests, nobleman and women in such a manner that after gazing upon the portrait, one would be able to identify that person on the street. In chapter 10 of the novel, the narrator is a tree,

painted on page, who relates a story of a European master miniaturist and another master artist. The more expert of them advised the other to paint a particular tree from a forest in such a way that one can locate the same tree from the forest. The narrator concludes: “I thank Allah that I, the humble tree before you, have not been drawn with such intent. And not because I fear that if I’d been thus depicted all the dogs in Istanbul would assume I was a real tree and piss on me: I don’t want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning” (*My Name is Red* 80). This clearly suggests that Western and Islamic arts of painting are two different fields. Thomas Walker Arnold in his pioneering work *Painting in Islam, A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* attributes the importance of calligraphy in Islamic religious painting because Muslim theologians severely condemned pictorial art or painting of living figure.

As it is mentioned earlier that the East exerts its influence on Western art, Pamuk’s novel shows how the East was also inspired by Italian perspective paintings and the art of portraiture. During pre-Renaissance and Renaissance period European architects, sculptors and painters demonstrated their own desire for new methods and knowledge. But trying something new in a Muslim country can only trigger shame and terror. A deep reading of the novel will reveal how the painters of the Muslim country are doubly threatened because the strict Islamist preachers believed their art form to be blasphemous and on the other hand with the advent of Renaissance, miniaturist rarely reach the sublime level of the masters of Persia. In this respect Thomas Walker Arnold reflects, “The Muslim painter must always have been hampered by a haunting sense of the disapproval, of the more devout minds among his co-religionists; he could never feel, like his Christian contemporary that earnest prayers would be offered before his handiwork” (Walker 103).

Though those early miniaturists, illuminators and calligraphers were courageous enough even to blind themselves to avoid being forced to paint in an uncongenial manner but they never received their due respect. In Muslim literature there has never been such a manual as that compiled in the eleventh century by Panselionos of Mount Athos for the guidance of the Byzantine painters. In the sixteenth century Russian church laid down some regulation for the painters. Renaissance painters of Italy tried to re-establish Western art according to the principles of Classical Greek art. In the novel the anonymity of the early miniaturists, who appear merely as ‘hands’ to the greater glory of god gives way to the drive to develop a personal style as a result of influence of Venetian painting on the art of Islamic miniaturists. This type of attitude on their part clearly signals that they were dissatisfied of the treatment they got from their contemporary society. In the novel the secret manuscript was commissioned by the Sultan Murat. Although the book has the patronage of the sultan himself, an orthodox cleric, Nusret Hoja targets the book for destruction on the ground of blasphemy.

The situation has not altered even in contemporary society. To many Pamuk is projecting a contemporary story into the sixteenth century. The sixteenth century heroes of *My Name is Red* do not appear as artificial construction. Rather their interaction with each other provides a rich framework where the author reconstructs two different traditions of painting or 'image making'. There is hostility towards naturalistic representation in Islam. In the absence of the text, the picture will turn into an object of worship. Such idolatry is inconceivable not only for Islam but also for medieval Christendom. But through Reformation painting has been secularized completely in West. That kind of reformation has still not occurred in Islam and in contemporary society, under the banner of religion, fundamentalists have made it more difficult than it was. In the novel the main axis of contradiction lies between the two art aficionados of royal atelier, Master Osman and Enishte Effendi. For Master Osman "meaning preceds form in the world of our art. As we begin to paint in imitation of the Frankish or Venetian masters ... the domain of meaning ends and the domain of form begin" (*My Name is Red* 318). In contrast to Master Osman, the artist of the secret book try to depict what is "seen by the eye" rather than what is "known to the mind". But in the novel Enishte resolves the mystery between these two contradictory views. He try to settle this *mano-a-mano* between East and West. In chapter 37 of the novel, after the death of Enishte, the soul Enishte felt that 'the omnipotent red within which all the images of the universe played' is approaching him. His guilt ridden and impatient soul asked Him:

Over the last twenty years of my life, I've been influenced by the infidel illustrations that I saw in Venice. There was a time when I wanted my own portrait painted in that method and style, but I was afraid. Instead, I later had You World, Your Subjects and Our Sultan, Your Shadow on Earth, depicted in the manner of the infidel Franks. I didn't remember his voice, but I recalled the answer He gave me in my thoughts.

"East and West belong to me". (*My Name is Red* 369)

The novel is a chronicle of the confrontation of two ways of seeing the world and how the quest for representation confused the miniaturists. The very power structure of the society also played a pivotal role behind such confusion. Under Sultan Murat's reign the art of miniature painting thrived but he never came to the fore to rescue the painters. He exerted a terrible level of trauma when he announced that every artists of the royal atelier would be punished for the guilt of one person. At the end of the novel Shekure relates how after the ascension of Ahmed I (1603-1617), the Sultan turned his back entirely from all artistry. She delineates how in the third year of Sultan's reign the Queen of England sent him a large clock with statuary. But one night he destroyed it. According to him it symbolized the power of the infidels and its display can mimic God's creation and thus it competes with Allah's creations. The Sultan ordered the calligraphers to prepare a book depicting this event. He totally forbade its illustration by miniaturists

Thus 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... painting itself was abandoned; artists painted neither like Easterners Nor Westerners. The miniaturists did not grow angry and revolt, but like old men who quietly succumb to an illness, they gradually accepted the situation with humble grief and resignation. (*My Name is Red* 663)

Thus it would be no exaggeration to comment that the main pivot of the novel is the juncture of the East and the West. The setting of almost all novels of Pamuk remains Istanbul, sprawling between these two continents. When scholarly editions are exalting the influence of the East on the Renaissance art, the novel *My Name is Red* seems to recommend that it's high time to brush aside the cringe inducing exotic depiction of the middle East, in order to reshape, restructure and recreate the other histories or 'mini narratives' of these groups of marginalized artists.

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