

## Languages as Obsession: Deciphering Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories of a City*

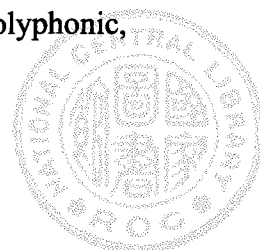
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### Abstract

Diversity in a narrative represents the multitude of narrative perspectives and similarities that co-exist in different dimensions of a single story. Orhan Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, encompasses not only narrative diversity but also collective mixtures of narrative techniques. Pamuk's remembrance of things past ranges from an obsessive language full of incessant repetition of words, images, and phrases, to a kind of polyphonic representation of a variety of voices symbolizing the revelation of synchronic and diachronic events, and to visual illustrations of more than one hundred photographs. All these three features provide a new way of thinking about differences between the art of traditional autobiographies and Pamuk's highlighting narrative technique. While the memoir focuses on deciphering historical Ottoman Empire and individual melancholy, readers can encounter an unaccustomed reading experience by examining the barriers and challenges associated with different language-related descriptions.

**Key words:** *Istanbul*, Orhan Pamuk, narrative perspective, polyphonic, memoir, autobiography, obsession



# 語言的縈繞妄想——解讀奧罕巴木克的 《伊斯坦堡：都市的回憶》

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## 中文摘要

敘述文體的多樣性代表著單一故事中不同範疇所共存的敘事觀點與同質性。奧罕巴木克的回憶錄《伊斯坦堡：都市的回憶》有著複雜的敘述與多重的敘述技巧。在此回憶錄中，從相同的語言文字、意象、片語不斷的重覆出現，到對於同時性與共時性事件本身所擁有的多元聲音，到超過百張照片所展現的視覺描繪，樣樣都表現出奧罕巴木克對於語言的縈繞妄想。這樣的敘述特點提供了一種新的視野來解決傳統的自傳與奧罕巴木克的自傳其中的差異。雖然回憶錄偏重歷史上的鄂圖曼帝國與個人的憂愁，讀者可由其中重新體會不同的語言模式所呈現的非傳統閱讀經驗。

**關鍵詞：**《伊斯坦堡》、奧罕巴木克、敘事觀點、多元聲音、回憶錄、自傳、縈繞妄想



## Languages as Obsession: Deciphering Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories of a City*

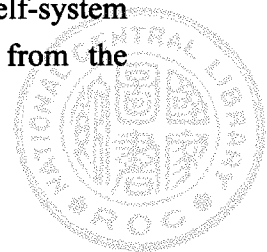
In a narrative, some of the vital elements usually occur in the beginning chapter. As the narrative has progressed, various narrative components have taken over particular functions. In a traditional first-person narrative, the narrator usually depicts events by way of a systematic and chronological order to coordinate and integrate the readability of his relevant experiences and traumas. Pertinent aspects of the interactions between similar and different episodes are included to weave a delicate web, trapping and arousing interests of readers at the same time. The results of this narrative activity can be arranged on a continuum of different events and episodes. Since much has been written and said about first-person narratives, simplistic typologies and exaggerated claims about them seem unnecessary. In contrast, a language-oriented technique tends to call for readers' special attentions and Orhan Pamuk can be regarded as one of the initiators of new narrative techniques.

Orhan Pamuk, the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 2006, published *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, a both autobiography-like and historical book, in 2005. In the first chapter, he begins his memoir with a philosophical meditation upon his identity problem—his “ghostly other”—and then constantly offers us a vision of the city Istanbul that has lost its capacity to maintain its past glory of an empire and has continued to collapse and fall into pieces in many fields of its existence. Pamuk applies a first-person narrator to provide us a panorama of different delineations of individual history, geographical authenticity, cultural transformations, aesthetic evaluations, and above all, the inevitable nostalgia of traumatic memories.



The language of his reminiscences and confessions is full of obsessions of various kinds of physical, mental, historical, familial, and literary pathological depictions, and all these interlacing and intertwining episodes collaborate to reflect his mental state—being haunted by unforgettable and inescapable incidents. Haunted obsession is one of the dominating techniques used by Pamuk. The incessant repetition of many individual emotional retrospections as well as introspections and continuous referral to many similar images weave this narrative but at the same time give it narrative defects; that is, the first reading of Pamuk's masterpiece tends to arouse a feeling of redundancy. It seems that the narrator is deeply trapped in his own narrative and cannot get rid of it and then uncoil himself. However, this overamplification, if it is intentional, can be treated as Pamuk's post-traumatic stress syndrome, and then writing his life story turns out to be a healing process.

For example, Pamuk's verbosity of obsession is ubiquitous and then can be easily found in every chapter. A detailed analysis of chapter one titled "Another Orhan" serves as a general prologue to the whole novel. The repeated use of "my" in "my twin," "my double," "my ghostly other," and "my pillow, my house, my street, my place in the world" (4) intentionally or unintentionally exposes the narrator's obsession with identity, entangled with the intrusion of his imagined other self and with his desire to undergo a process of identification with this haunted other. Reuben Fine points out that the lack of a sense of identity sometimes results in a kind of alienation. Harry S. Sullivan in his interpretation of *The interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* reiterates the fact that when we mention "I" or "me" or "my," our self-system constructs itself to avoid or minimize anxiety, deriving from the



conflict of images of good-me and bad-me. If a child is threatened by anxiety and aggression from the death instinct, it is inevitable for him to defend the self from the horror of annihilation. Jill S. Scharff also argues in detail that mental mechanisms, such as splitting, projection, and introjective identification, will be constantly applied under crucial moments and circumstances in our daily lives. Pamuk's written account of his memory of events and people about Istanbul is both an unconscious incorporation of external ideas into his mind and reflects his mental workings.

Moreover, his parents' "many stormy separations" (3) and his residence in "separate places" (3) also juxtapose his identity crisis. The three pictures in chapter one—his childhood, the Istanbul, and his mother embracing him—intensify the main and major topic in his novel: his involvement with himself, his city, and his close relationship with his mother and his father's absence. When he calls Istanbul "an ageing and an impoverished city," (6) when he says that "Istanbul's fate is my fate" (6) and "this book is about fate," (7) when he calls Istanbul "a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy," (6) when he says that the present Istanbul is "poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been in its two-thousand-year history," (7) this textual overstatement becomes an intentional cliché with a view to interlocking Istanbul with fate, history, and collapse.

Very different from readers' anticipation is his way to escape from the secular world—sexual images. He mentions that "masturbation is a fearful habit, once you start you can never stop" (273) and that "the only way I knew to escape from the world's duplicity and my own hypocrisy was to masturbate" (289). Masturbation is no longer an unmentionable taboo. It seems to provide

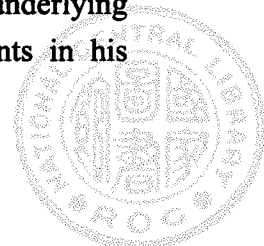


a legitimate expansion of restricted sexuality and it is shown as a subsidiary form of pleasure. The masturbation episode, like Bloom's masturbation episode in "Nausicaa" in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, exposes the frustrations of sexuality, the lack of love, individual alienation, and identity crisis. In this memoir, the absence of Pamuk's lovers and his infatuation and preoccupation with his mother intensify this situation. He is overshadowed by the psychological turmoil of his father's absence and his mother's loneliness. In the final chapter "A conversation with my mother: patience, caution and art," Pamuk says

For many long years, my mother spent her evenings alone in the sitting room, waiting for my father. My father spent his evenings at his bridge club, and from there he would go on to other places, returning so late that my mother would have already tired of waiting and gone to bed. (321)

The juxtaposition of his father's absence and his mother's useless and solitary waiting inevitably arouses his Oedipus complex and vividly dramatizes the psychic conflicts of his mind. The only chapter mentioning his love affair is chapter 35, entitled "first love." This abortive love affair ends with "I wrote her nine long letters, seven of which I put into envelopes and five of which I posted. I never received an answer" (308). His emotional and sexual isolation, seclusion, and crippling are one version of Pamuk's reality.

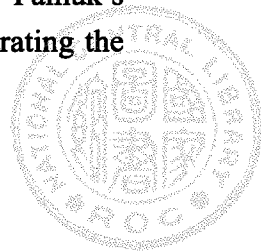
Besides masturbation, the narrative is filled with countless phrases such as "never-ending sexual fantasies," "sexual fantasy," "sexual dream," "silent lovemaking," "homosexual," "syphilis," and "dreaming of the great sexual adventures." These sex-related urges demonstrate a perpetual state of mental conflict in his mind, reflecting underlying assumptions that sex is one of the indispensable ingredients in his



personality development. Thus, as an indicator of the subtle development of Pamuk's personality, variations in sexuality are evaluated with reference to Freud's discussions of mental structure.

Sigmund Freud in his two books, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* and *The Ego and the Id*, expounds his anatomy of personality. His analysis of human personality and mental diseases is based on his discussion of three basic elements of mental structure: id, ego, and superego. Traces of these three ingredients of personality can be found in almost all his works because he finds it important that individual minds are consciously and unconsciously constructed and operate simultaneously at different ways. The structural model of mental fluctuations is dominated by these three arbitrary divisions of personality, which encompass the conscious and the unconscious. Freud's id refers to the primitive and instinctive aspects of personality. It is biologically instead of culturally or socially constructed. Id is raw, chaotic, disordered, impulsive, irrational, and unlawful. It follows pleasure principle. Sex, one of human biologically rooted drives, belongs to this category of human mental structure. Besides, Freud's analysis of libidinal energy and erogenous zone lays much emphasis on the discussions of human psychic energy, which pursues gratification from sexual activities. The genitals are regarded as a way to relieve tension and to create pleasurable sensations. Sexual drive and instinct dangle between its increasing buildup and its decreasing excitement.

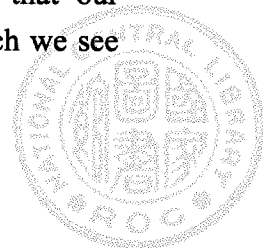
Freud's theory is as important as it is inspiring, with exciting breakthroughs changing and reshaping our perspective on sexual problems. How sex is woven into the fabric of Pamuk's narrative interacts continuously with his autobiographical reality. Pamuk's repeated masturbation is a method to produce pleasure, illustrating the



connections between his excessive id and his solitary existence.

Besides sexual linkage, some repeated phrases link the relationship between language and mental state. Pamuk likes the word “obsession,” such as “our obsession with urban renewal” (132), “obsessive collectors” (319), and “my love, slowly discovering my obsessions” (304). He uses the word “melancholy” more than one hundred times and reiterates the same words such as “escape,” “illusion,” “dream,” “solitude,” “defeat,” “destruction,” “deprivation,” and “poverty” more than readers’ expectations. These negative words reflect Pamuk’s sense of guilt. Both Gerhart Piers and Milton Singer treat guilt as a painful internal tension generated whenever the emotionally highly charged barrier erected by the superego is being touched or transgressed. Consequently, these words are not mutually exclusive; instead, they create a general narrative atmosphere. They haunt the narrative, producing redundant linguistic verbosity. In other words, the narrative turns out to be a neurotic patient, mumbling monotonous frustrations and complaints.

Contrary to Freud’s unconscious theory, in which unconscious thoughts appear very unexpectedly, Pamuk exposes his interior monologue very frankly without any hesitation. According to Freud, the unconscious keeps hidden away and it appears only in dreams or in fantasies. It seems that the only way to uncover the feature of the unconscious is to analyze the content of our dreams or fantasies. Pamuk intentionally reveals his unconscious thoughts in the context by way of his delicate applications of language and recapitulates them on purpose. Freud, in many of his works and lectures, makes a famous comparison between human minds of icebergs. He thinks that our minds work like an iceberg. The tiny part of the iceberg which we see



above the sea surface is our conscious mind. The other enormous half hidden under the sea belongs to the unconscious. The unconscious represents as a typical example of our passions and urges, epitomizing our authentic self. Similarly, the textual content of Pamuk's narrative is like the unconscious of an individual, so this autobiography becomes an interpretation of a dream.

In spite of negative words of remorse and sadness of the id, another category of repetition is the discussions of works by many famous literary figures. For example, while Pamuk's childhood identity is agitated by his imaginary other self, his adulthood identity is influenced by the existence of other novelists. He makes a contrast and comparison between himself and writers such as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, and V. S. Naipaul. Pamuk is a native writer, spending his whole life in the same city and home and on the same street, but those three writers "migrate between languages, cultures, countries, continents, even civilizations" (6). While he analyzes Istanbul's melancholy, *Huzun*, he juxtaposes Calude Levi-Strauss's *Triste Tropiques*, Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and perspectives shared by writers such as Dostoyevsky, Gerard de Nerval, Montaigne, Flaubert, and Thoreau. The ubiquity of these canonical writers and the pervasiveness of Pamuk's critical differentiation against them not only expose Pamuk's erudition and his inner mental anxiety, driving him to challenge them, but also accentuate the importance of his canon-like narrative.

His desire to undergo a metamorphosis in comparison with others is quite obvious. Indeed, he admires life experiences of these writers who are known for

having managed to migrate between languages, culture, countries,



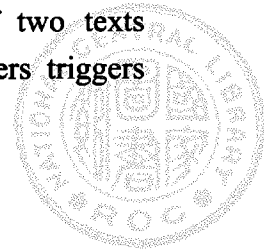
continent, even civilizations. Their imaginations were fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness; mine, however, requires that I stay in the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view. (6)

Through textual interaction with other writers, the narrator's superego continues to distort his self-esteem. His sense of inferiority and interior anxiety, exposed through his repetitious names of many literary figures, is transformed into his linguistic representation. Other discussions about dozens of writers such as Virginia Woolf, Sartre, Mann, William Faulkner, James Joyce, Brecht, Hugo, Zola, Coleridge, Proust, Shakespeare and so on pervade from the very beginning to the end of the narrative.

The allusions to canonical writers also exert a tremendous impact on readers' minds. Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* regards allusions as an imaginative stimulus which can fill in gaps between the narrative and readers:

The participation of the reader could not be stimulated if everything were laid out in front of him. This means that the formulated text must shade off, through allusions and suggestions, into a text that is unformulated though nonetheless intended. Only in this way can the reader's imagination be given the scope it needs; the written text furnishes it with indications which enable it to conjure up what the text does not reveal. (31)

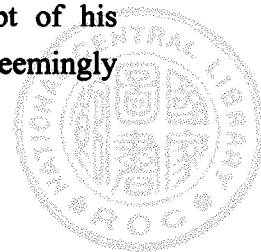
In this way, the mention of different writers can conjure up diversified versions of reading experience from readers' minds and can easily enlarge the scope of his narrative. Since Ziva Ben-Porat regards allusion as a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts (106-28), Pamuk's paralleling technique of different writers triggers



readers' memories of literary works and shows his obsessive desire to rival other writers. Pamuk's memoir, in these intertextual interrogations, also functions as an attempt to differentiate itself from other cultural and literary representations both in his individually held views and his grotesque memoir.

Since it is quite obvious to acknowledge that our perspectives of the world and of fields of studies are strongly influenced by the culture in which we grow up, the landscapes in Istanbul place decisive emphasis upon how Pamuk perceives various events and relationships and on how he explains these perceptions. In this narrative, Pamuk inserts about two hundred pictures, occupying one third of the whole book. These pictures play an indispensable role, serving as his remembrance of past things and men. Pictures narrate and talk a lot. Sometimes pictures are constant reworking of underlying trauma and happiness. Pictures can be viewed as what Earl Hopper calls a kind of encapsulation of trauma to defend against the fear of annihilation (607-24). Pictures, that is to say, become a kind of linguistic representations in the sense that past events can exist between visible photographs and invisible memories.

Nevertheless, crucial as these pictures appear, their existence reflects the consistence with Pamuk's narrative and at the same time symbolizes its authenticity. Of special interest in a narrative is the stress on understanding a particular sequence of events rather than on a single one. However, in spite of Pamuk's clear statement of his story, these pictures also function as another narrator, interlinking causes and effects of diversity and uniqueness of what happened both in Pamuk's family and his country. Thus, essential to readers' concept of his narrative are visual representations that a number of seemingly

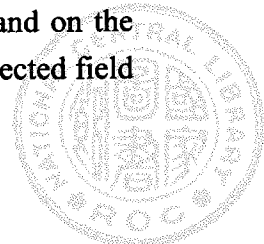


different and independent events are bound together by the accumulations of various aspects of events in different times and places. In other words, spatial and temporal images linger in readers' minds during this reading experience. The corroboration of textual stories and visual narrations decodes and offers threads of Istanbul and Pamuk.

The best hope for understanding the workings of a culture comes from an interdisciplinary approach, a combination of diversified fields of studies to yield a new synthesis, a new perspective; that is, understanding how culture works requires knowledge about many things, from the structure of a society, from its language, from its literature, from its infrastructure, from its arts, and from its people. Pamuk explores the culture in Istanbul with this broad perspective. Pamuk's archeological unearthing of Istanbul is rife with examples of signs of cultural verisimilitude. From his narrative, the mysteries of Istanbul are unraveled.

Since photographic images provide variable gazes and are inseparable from time passing and visual reality involved, the multiple perspectives and angles in Pamuk's pictures harmonize a complex juxtaposition of a chronological representation of both individual and artistic images moving in different periods of time. These pictures can scoop out a hidden consciousness in different times and places, directly reflecting Pamuk's preoccupation with a lost past. Just as Walter Benjamin mentions

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film on the one hand extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives, and on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field

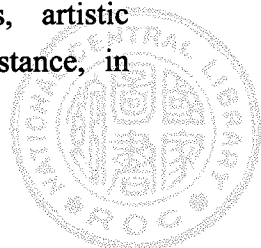


of action. (236)

Every picture records an essential event, reveals a special identity, and tells a story of the past. Every picture produces a momentary effect. Every picture is an ideology with its hierarchies of special meaning. Every picture is a silent narrator, permitting an analysis of different events. Since pictures are the repository of memories, the photographic instantaneity offered by more than one hundred pictures is a strategy of visual narration, intensifying what textual narration lacks.

As visual events in pictures extend discursive information, meaning, and pleasure, they provide an effect of multifaceted way of depictions: a renewed mode of a mixture of visual and textual representations. The involvement of pictures fortifies interpretations of events. The joint participation of obsessive languages and proliferations of obsessive pictures in Pamuk's memoir creates a deepening effect of decoding either past events or past selfhood. The visual subjects in pictures become the visual objects in the eyes of readers and both the narrator and readers can feel certain nostalgia in this well-designed structure of obsessive narration.

M. M. Bakhtin, in his analysis of Dostoyevsky's novels, creates the concept of polyphonic novels. In a polyphonic novel, narrators and characters always speak and readers can see things from many perspectives. The multi-voicedness is a way to achieve truth. Truth is not a single statement. Instead, it comes from a lot of mutually contradictory statements; that is, a multitude of different voices. Besides obsessive use of words, phrases, and pictures/paintings, as mentioned above, Pamuk recites his life story by way of a lot of irrelevant or redundant quotations, others' biographies, artistic criticisms, book reviews, and newspaper articles. For instance, in



chapter 7, “Melling’s Bosphorus,” he cites letters to unravel Melling’s paintings. In chapter 16, he begins with

I now present a random sampling of some of the most amusing advice, warnings, pearls of wisdom and invective I’ve culled from the hundreds of thousands of pages written by columnists of various persuasions over the past 130 years. (127)

This paragraph belongs to his own writing, and then twenty-eight paragraphs from newspapers are included in this chapter. He writes critical reviews of other writers and cites others’ critical reviews. In fact, in his memoir, he collects as many data and much information as possible. The enhancement of diversified materials with additional layers of information does not lead readers into seeing more, but only seeing differently. What he does is quite similar to Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and his analysis of human sciences. In other words, all these textual ingredients talk a lot. These encyclopedic voices, on the one hand, reflect Pamuk’s traumatic meditation on his historical and cultural past, and on the other hand link the present disappointed reality with the emotionally wounded past which cannot be completely and easily erased.

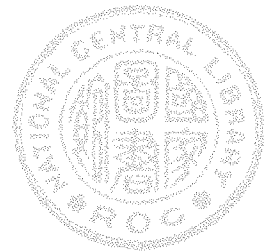
The polyphonic narration produces in the readers’ mind a set of conflicting as well as intensifying feelings and exemplifies the fact that this autobiography does not look like an autobiography. It is an accumulation of different data from different visual perceptions of the world. As a result, this multi-voiced, first-person narration is also presented in the third-person point of view. Just as Bakhtin describes in “Discourse in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination*,

In the novel a discourse of pathos is almost always a surrogate for some other genre that is no longer available to a given time or a given



social force—such pathos is the discourse of a preacher who has lost his pulpit, a dreaded judge who no longer has any judicial or punitive powers, the prophet without a mission, the politician without political power, the believer without a church and so forth—everywhere, the discourse of pathos is connected with orientations and positions that are unavailable to the author as authentic expression for the seriousness and determination of his purpose, but which he must, all the same, conditionally reproduce by using his own discourse. (394-95)

Pamuk's memoir reflects the "discourse of pathos" of his past life span. Not only does he vocalize his lost history of glory and personal identity, but he also prevents a chaos of disorientation of his social as well as idealized "position" of traumatized existence. The juxtaposition of his nostalgia narrative and images of diversified sources of literary representations conjures up a complicated network of related events happening around his discourse. Thus, Pamuk's autobiography is no longer regarded as an autobiography. Its discourse offers heterogeneous and multifarious panorama of Istanbul from different mindsets and vistas. In short, this memoir elaborates an analysis of diversified discourses, and an important breakthrough is the observation that the general pattern of an autobiography can be identified on the surface of a story-telling. This story-telling is the basis for speculation that different episodes might be centralized to the main idea and a new understanding can be achieved.



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