

Museum as the Site of Reconstructing Memory in Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*

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Abstract: The present paper seeks to demonstrate how Orhan Pamuk contests the idea of totalisation in a Postmodernist sense by constructing a museum as a textual site in the novel *The Museum of Innocence*. The relation between the past and the present has been represented by turning to the museum and critiquing its authority. Through the use of the museum as a setting, Pamuk 'de-doxifies' and 'destabilises' (à la Linda Hutcheon) the conventional establishment of museums in literature and challenges the universalising history and memory inscribed about the nation and human civilisation. The ideas propounded by Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Jan Assmann about collective memory, sites of memory, and cultural memory will also be pressed into service during the textual analysis of the novel. The novel is replete with various innovative digressions as Pamuk powerfully portrays the issues concerning the sense of alienation, love, and nostalgic emotions. Upon analysing the text, one comes across a parody of classical museums, self-referentiality, ambiguity, and blurring of the distinction between art and artefact. The collection and illustration of objects is an act of reconstruction of memory. Moreover, the display of the map at the threshold and the image of the ticket to enter the museum are very crucial in our understanding of the symbolic construct called the museum in the novel.

Keywords: Museum, Memory, Representation, Reconstruction.

Introduction

Memories are innocent as they can pop up now and then, whenever in dreams or any moment lively or distressing, without any barrier and privileges. They can make the person sway from present to past in a very different manner. What if those memories are preserved to replicate the past and adored

and visited by everyone so that they can relate to them with the same tenderness, innocence, and passion? Orhan Pamuk has made it possible in his novel *The Museum of Innocence* (2008) by making memory intelligible rather than elusive. He has always envisaged bringing the museum into being so that he can put ‘collectables’ on display that he has gathered for years, and that was actualised in 2012 with the “Museum of Innocence”, which has been granted the highest accolade *European Museum of the Year* in 2014. The re-presentation of representation through reconstruction is perceptible in a catalogue he published titled *The Innocence of Objects* in 2012 for the museum, in which he describes and retells the objects on display in the museum regarding his life and his city, Istanbul. He has made the memories alive in this novel as well as in the museum by substantially reconstructing them into eighty- three chapters and depicts the politics and materialisation of memory by calling them innocent. Some things stay with a person and turn up unexpectedly to remind a precious moment in time. It has been decided very sagaciously which memories have to be erased and retrieved, which memories have to be encoded and preserved, and which memories have to be consolidated and accentuated. Sometimes fluid and sometimes fixed, memory is a complex cognitive activity that is connected to the sequence of excitement, representation, and recollection. Here, the museum becomes a site where the lover inscribes his memories and associations with his beloved. During the narrative, Pamuk intervenes and tells the readers about the politics of the memory by throwing light on his tactics of making and creating the museum, “The pictures the museum visitor will view are ones I bought many years later from Hifzi Bey, during days whiled away conversing with shivering and miserable collectors in various crowded rooms” (61). He branches out the concept of a museum in an unconventional manner and contests the long-established notions of memory. He dismantles the homogenised conception of memory that can be stored and communicated to the generations eventually. Memory is double-edged and attains a fluid stance here.

Customarily, a museum is a locale in which tangible objects and concrete artefacts from the testimonies of the past are displayed, which, in a sense, is the representation of the grand reality or the absolute truth. The representation of history and memory in traditional museums is merely the act

of transmission of the things to the present completely devoid of the environment and the sentiments in which they were formed. Conversely, the Museum of Pamuk gains its agency from fiction, which is an imaginative reconstruction of reality through memory and acts against forgetting. The disruptive narrative style used by Pamuk, which emphasises individual emotions, is the overriding instance of debunking metanarratives. Besides, the museum visitors are not at all detached visitors or observers because they are connected with the narrative and can even see their own story and relate to the memories displayed in the boxes. The fictional world of the novel becomes lively and tangible in the factual world of the museum.

Furthermore, there is an intertwining of the settled museum with a mobile novel that can be read wherever one wants and which, in one sense, becomes the window to the museum. The love story is set in Istanbul, Kemal asserts while thinking about Füsün how her memories come to his mind and even how he remembers her, “Then I made out Füsün’s shadow through a screen and between the leaves of a huge vase of cyclamens” (18). Kemal is experiencing the sluicing of love pains and the *hüzün* (Turkish word for Melancholy), which is a feeling of pain and pleasure at the same time, and the memories of Füsün are constantly present in his heart and mind wherever he goes, “As a soft, sweet, melody . . . played in the background” (179). Smitten Kemal transpires things by collecting objects and personal possessions of his lost beloved Füsün. The vantage point of Füsün is also revealed to the visitors through the objects and artefacts. In chapter 23, “The Consolation of Objects”, Kemal says that the collection of objects of common memories works as a palliative to relieve this new kind of obsessive pain. Pamuk mentions in an interview that “for Kemal, memory is voluntary [as] he plans to remember it” (“Çukurcuma” 63) so that he can commemorate “the happiest moment of [his] life” (1) by establishing a museum in the memory of his beloved. His way of expressing his love and the present life through the collection of objects and the memories and emotions attached to them have propinquity to Lyotardian’s aesthetics of postmodern “sentiment of the sublime” (77), which is “a strong and equivocal emotion. . . . [having] pleasure and pain” (77). Forgetting Füsün is not easy for Kemal. The more he tries to forget her, the more his mind becomes constantly busy

daydreaming and building an imaginary argument and situation with her. The time he is inundated with love, pain, and agony, he manages to sort them through the “bundle of memories” (214).

The memory is owned by a lover through his rendition of his love story, which is coalesced in objects and his fictional museum by sorting and sifting the things through his mental map. While considering this as “a prelapsarian ideal” (190), Stewart argues that whilst creating his museum, Kemal “simultaneously deconstructs and reconstructs his personal past” (qtd. in “Bridging the Gap between People and Things: The Politics of Collecting in Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence*”, 190). The individualised memories of Kemal also encapsulate the cultural values of Istanbul. The cultural artefacts, consumer products, and the daily objects that were used in Istanbul in the second half of the twentieth century, such as receipts, salt shakers, lottery tickets, phone tokens, newspaper cuttings, china dogs, postcards, etc., hint at the ‘collective’ and ‘cultural memory.’ The borderline between the fictional and the real museums becomes indistinct by imparting the ticket and map for the readers to enter the real museum from the realm of the fictional museum. Even the projection of Orhan Pamuk, as well as the manuscript of the novel in the exhibition of Kemal’s museum, becomes objectified, which in itself hints at self-referentiality. By employing it, Pamuk subverts a conventional narrative structure and authoritative truth that cannot depict the complexity, diversity, and fragmentation of the postmodern world. He explores the dynamism and diversity of personal and collective memory.

Moreover, Pamuk’s real museum allows the reader a process of meaning-making and doesn’t control the presentation of history through the exhibition of the objects. There is a de-doxification of the fixed meaning-making and representation associated with the collectables and their connotations. He imbues the narrative with ambiguity. Pamuk, being the creator and curator, presents and represents the objects to the readers and the museum visitors. He is engaged with the museum visitors as throughout the novel, he talks to them and provides hints and directions to the visitors, “Visitors to the museum might wish to press down on the button alongside this exhibit to hear the sound of a chirping bird” (221). The predilection to challenge preexisting convictions towards museums and

everything about absolutism is evident throughout the novel. Kemal, in fiction, also wants to establish a museum like Pamuk, and the antithesis of the so-called conventional or Western Museum has been his project. Likewise, he also visits 5,732 museums in Paris, for instance, the Edith Piaf Museum and Musée de la Poste, to name a few, after the death of his beloved, and strides into the streets of Istanbul to get an insight into the fusion of the past and the present. He concludes that Western museums are based on power and pride, not on emotional intimacy, and “What Turks should be viewing in their own museums are not bad imitations of Western art but their own lives” (524). He also remarks that museums are not meant for savaging and strolling but for living through the collections that are demonstrative of the lived experience and moment. Yin Xing rightly asserts that “[i]n Pamuk’s hands, the novel-as-museum becomes a privileged space for contemplating the real value of trivial objects in everyday life” (198). The fictional museum of the fictional character Kemal and the real museum of Pamuk, created from fiction, keep the past and memory alive.

Therefore, *The Museum of Innocence* has become an “archive” to use Pamuk’s statement, “Novels also form a rich and powerful archive- of common human feelings, our perceptions of ordinary things, our gestures, utterances, and attitudes” (130). By evoking and rejuvenating the instantaneous whirlpool of memories of the physical and psychological world of Kemal that he has restored in his mind, the museum becomes the “*lieux de memoire*” or the site of memory, the space of imagination and representation to draw upon Pierre Nora’s idea, where “memory crystallises and secretes itself” (7). The collections of the museum include not only the possessions and objects touched by Füsün but also the objects and things used by his fiancée Sibel, things abandoned by his mother, belongings of Füsün’s father, Turgey Bey, and aunt Nesibe along with the sample of Meltem soda bottle produced by Kemal’s friend Zaim. Through this consolidated stock of memory, he has depicted and illustrated the distinct attributes and conventions of a particular period/point of time, which hints at a ‘cultural memory’ that has been defined by Jan Assman as related to “memory (contemporised past), culture, and the group (society)” (“The Cultural Memory” 129).

This novel also presents “frozen moments” (97) that publicise the everyday lifestyle of the Turkish people that, according to Halbwachs, create a link between memory and group, “Our physical surroundings bear our and others’ imprint” (1). Some of the political and historical moments that are collective are also mentioned here by the subjective experiences of Kemal, which also correspond to the philosophy of Halbwachs that “the individual as a group member” (2), is subjected to material nature not “the isolated individual” (2). Pamuk’s museum at Çukurcuma is the embodiment of the localised narratives of the Turks, and it functions as “a prosthesis-memory” (Nora 14) to preserve the mini-narratives, the past or the lived experience that has been retrieved through the eternising of the personal objects. Pamuk mentions that the museum set up by the European rulers had been the channel to extol their “power, taste, and sophistication through the medium of objects and paintings” (129). Through this collection and display of objects, he challenges the existence of memory in commodities by contrasting it with the preservation of personal memory through the artefacts in the museum.

To cope with the extreme sufferings Kemal endures because of his parting from Füsün and the guilt he feels for her tragedy, the memory becomes an inescapable condition to operate his desires and aspirations, and as a consequence, he evolves into an obsessive collector. He reconstructs an imaginative present and reimagines certain situations and moments from his memory, reflecting the Lyotardian notion of indeterminacy, connected to the idea of the presence of the past, which is untrammelled and perpetually present. In chapter 68, there is the description of 4,213 Samsun cigarette stubs smoked by Füsün between 1978 and 1984. Some are smeared with lipstick, coffee, and Füsün’s favourite sour cherry ice cream. Each stub has been labelled with a moment of memory and meticulously dated. He even restores the various mementoes of their lovemaking in the Merhamet Apartments. Yağcıoğlu rightly calls it “a museum of the mind” (189) as it displays an emotional memory and a lived experience, thus becoming unique.

By depicting this museum as a museum of memory, Pamuk provides the validation of the fictional world of characters and objects with one’s senses and the mind map through the novel (the verbal imagination) and the museum (the visual imagination). He emphasises the role of museums

“about preservation, conservation, and the resistance to being forgotten” (135) for safeguarding the past and yielding pleasure in his book *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*. In reality, he collected these objects from second-hand shops, flea markets, and homes of acquaintances during the six years he spent writing the novel. He has in mind while finding, studying, and describing objects “the feeling of insufficiency” that, according to him, demands the “willing participation of the reader’s imagination” (*The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist* 123). The postmodern fiction is being employed with shrewd wit by deliberately blurring the distinction between fact, fiction, and imagination. Pamuk intensifies the notion of unattainable and unrepresentable in the narration and repudiates “the solace of good forms” (Lyotard 81).

The “collectibles” (68) have the power to alleviate life’s miseries, as demonstrated in the novel with so many minute details. There is the depiction of a quince grater, a replica of the kinds of dishes and meals that Istanbul’s middle-class families used to eat back in the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Alexandra Coghlan calls Pamuk’s museum a “narrow house [that is] filled with the debris of civilization” where “intimacy rather than respectfulness is the prevailing sensibility, where universal truths and histories grow out of personal moments and discarded objects” (2012). The feeling of “imaginative labor” (139) is augmented by representing the life in the museum shared as a community, with all objects and images and having a sense of pride in the lives depicted. The rendition of the game of Tombala is an instance of ‘collective memory’, which is being played in Turkey during the New Year Party, in the upper class of Kemal and also in the class to which Füsün belongs, but which originated from Europe. Defining “collective memory”, Maurice Halbwachs states that each individual’s memory is socially mediated as each individual belongs to a particular circle and association that shapes one’s memory. Owing to this, the traditional concept of memory as linear and stable has been replaced by fragmented, scattered, disjointed, and subjective experiences.

Every object in the museum corresponds to a particular moment. Display of food that is redolent of real taste and odour is rarely seen in conventional museums. The photographs, ferries in the Bosphorus bridge, the ashtray, and the Ottoman crystal artefact are the components that are on

display in Pamuk's museum, contrary to the normal museums. According to Jean Francois Lyotard, postmodern writers are not restricted to adhering to any conventional rules and make a point that "it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (81). The fictional and real museum represents "a perfect combination of voluntary and involuntary memory" (Xing 204). The collection of objects is an act of voluntary memory, and the representation of those objects triggers involuntary memory.

On top of that, a powerful sense of *déjà vu* can be perceived in the museum as well as in the novel, where one can completely relate to the objects displayed and described as ". . .The Museum of Innocence functions as an enactment of the plot of *The Museum of Innocence*, but more than that, it is the embodiment of a feeling, a state of mind, a place created to convey the mood and atmosphere of the novel" (98). There is an appeal to the low-brow culture here, with the non-totalising mini-narratives and the celebration of fragmentation. In "A Novel and a Museum Are the Same Thing," Pamuk asserts that "Museums should no longer concern themselves with state histories, the sagas of kings and heroes, or the forging of national identities; they should be focus instead on the lives and belongings of ordinary people..." (ix). The traditional museum's claims to truth and universality are questioned here with a sceptical postmodern tool. He represents the museum as the 'site' of memory, where myriad standpoints intersect, a repository of innocent things that showcase knowledge and pride in the past and "contests mastery and totalisation" (Hutcheon 35).

Contrary to the linear time sequence, Pamuk resorts to celebrating the chunks of moments and fragments in his real museum, giving it a postmodern twist, and the collectables appear as a catalogue in the museum. The exhibition of a German-made wall clock does not represent the continuous progression of time but represents the linking of "indivisible moments" (283) and values cherished by Kemal with his beloved and with the other characters and group of people. Owing to his conception of time as in-consecutive, he treasures the various moments and emotions, his happiness during the 1,593 nights at Füsün's dinner table.

Finally, this museum also de-naturalises the predominant features of large, institutional, state-sponsored museums that tell merely the history of a nation and some influential persona of a particular time. Hutcheon's argument about the "de-doxifying impulse of postmodern art and culture" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 4) is discernible here. The feelings of nostalgia, agony, remorse, hope, impatience, aspirations, desires, emotional recovery, and desperation are all voiced by the objects as they possess "an emotional coloration" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 32) inherent in them to quote McHale's terms which make them more privileged ones in the fictional world.

Conclusion

Pamuk shows how human beings are blessed with the power and authenticity to remember, which builds and even shapes the person. With these mementoes from the past, he seems to urge the Turks to preserve every piece of cultural memory as an exigency. He has explored the ample trajectories of history, art, culture, and the perseverance of memory and tradition in everyday life. He breaks the mould by converting the local into the global in the museum. With the dynamics and interplay of remembering and forgetting, memory is as much about re-creating the past as about forging the future with manipulative imagination. Pamuk has delineated the embedded, enactive, and fabrication facets of memory. He has resisted the deliberate forgetting of cultural history and past by reconfiguring and reconstructing the forgotten past in the context of Turkey by blending history with memory. The reconstruction and fictionalisation of the past could be a way of embracing the present and celebrating the fragmentation unconditionally.

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