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Knitting the Past and the Present : A Study of Myth in Orhan Pamuk's My Name Is Red

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Abstract:

Orhan Pamuk, the world renowned Turkish novelist and the Nobel Laureate (2006) is the author of much acclaimed novels like My Name Red, The Museum of Innocence and so on. As a Post modernist writer who was born in the second half of the twentieth century (1952) and a leading figure of the twenty first century world literature has blurred the boundaries of cultural forms and literature by adopting popular cultural forms as literary techniques. Myth which can be regarded as a cultural reservoir of the past is reworked into the present by making itself tangible in various human endeavors and aspirations. My Name is Red makes use of many a myth from Persian mythology which are presented as a basis for the cultural and ideological life of the characters reflected in their behavior and in their very thought process. Myth here guides the people's life in the present.

Key words: *Myth, legend, Husrev, Shirin, Leyla, Mejnun, Nizami, Shahanameh, Firdousi*

Orhan Pamuk, the celebrated Turkish writer who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2006, through his novel unlocks a treasure house of cultural legacy of the East Palpable in the form of myths and legends. *My Name is Red* which is the most widely read and acclaimed novel of Pamuk is but an artistic intension into the Ottoman Istanbul where myths and legends form the basis for human activities; sacred or blasphemous.

The term myth has gained considerable importance in literary studies and it has undergone changes in its implication that, present day meaning and definition of myth is miles apart from its traditional meaning. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines myth as "A story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people; something that many people believe but that does not exist or is false" (Wehmeier ed. 842). *Webster's Universal Dictionary* tells about myth as "word, speech, tale, legend, etymol. . . Generally, an imaginary fictitious person, event or thing" (Wyld, Eric and Patridge eds. 920).

M.H.Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* makes a distinction between the classical and modern conception of the term myth:

In classical Greek, "mythos" signified any story or plot whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions of the rules by which people conduct their lives.

(Abrams vol.122)

In all these definitions and explanations of the term 'myth' we find it being interpreted in relation to tradition and as a sort of narrative or storytelling. But with the works of Linguists like Levi Strauss and theorist Roland Barthes myth has gained new colour and shift in focus. Levi Strauss in *The Savage Mind* considers myth as a kind of thought, one as he puts it, based on element that is "half way between percepts and concepts" (18). This shift of emphasis from myth as a sort of plot to myth as a way of thinking can also be found in Roland Barthes' highly original *Mythologies*.

Legend is used generally in relation to myth and the line of difference between 'legend' and 'myth' is narrow and sometimes they are used synonymously or at other times one term is enlarged to include the other. The difference between myth and legend according to John J. White has become difficult to uphold as he considers the word "legend" as elusive as myth (67). William Trevor in his review of John Bowen's *A World Elsewhere* mentions: "wise old legends of the Greeks" (345). Here he uses the term "legend" to mean nothing but myth.

Myth is one of the oldest elements of the human heritage. All societies rest on myths. This relates to the social function of myth. Myth is regarded as a sanction to various social behavior and customs. William Righter in *Myth and Literature* cites Peter Calvocoressi as, "To justify a particular view of a particular society one needs to identify its basic myths and to reflect upon their impact on the current generations" (Qtd. In Righter 9)

Myth has always had a very significant position in human psychology and society from its beginning as primitive religious narrative to its recent adoption as an aid in the exploration of the unconscious mind. As a type of story, Northrop Frye regards myth

as a form of verbal art, and considers it to belong to the world of art. Fry observes in *Fables of Identity* that myth provides “the man’s outlines and the circumference” of a verbal universe which is later occupied by literature as well “(33).

All imaginative literature cannot be mythical, nor can all myths be literature. It is by virtue of myths that the literature created throughout the world for centuries has gained into permanent value and significance.

My Name is Red though variously interpreted as a murder mystery, or as concerned with East West conflict, a major thematic concern seems to be Persian miniatures. The style of painting that developed in pre-Islamic Persia that tended towards the stylized and symbolic rather than the realistic where figures in court seems, hunts and battles more against ornate, panoramic backgrounds, such illustrated secular book came to be known as the Persian miniatures. They include medical treatises, books about animals, volumes of lyrical poetry and so on. The volume of lyrical poetry and stories have the basis in Persian mythology.

Persian mythology are traditional tales and stories of ancient origin, all involving extraordinary or supernatural beings drawn from the legendary past of Iran, they reflect the attitudes of the society to which they first belonged.

(Encyclopaedia Britannica 9)

The most prominent themes of Persian miniatures that are frequently referred in the novel are the stories of Rustem and Sohrab, Husrev and Shirin, Leyla and Mejnun and that of Alexander the Great. In an interview given to *The Independent* in August 2001 Pamuk testifies that it was painting which produced

... the first seed of *My Name is Red*. When I was 13, 14, I used to copy reproductions of Ottoman and Persian miniatures.

(Pamuk 2)

Set in the late 16th C Istanbul when the Ottoman empire has already begun to experience the bitter taste of setbacks, *My Name is Red* presents a society that faces a dangerous threat to its artistic expression. As Pamuk is the chronology appended to *My Name is Red* States, the events of the novel takes place in 1591 during the reign of Sultan Meerat III. He was the most interested among all the Ottoman Sultans in miniatures. The novel depicts how the secular flight of art is curtailed by religious orthodoxy and tradition on the one hand and how the blind imitation of the western art proves fatal to the very existence of not only traditional art form of Istanbul but its very cultural life.

Myths and legends are not mere fantasy, but rather stories which reflect a culture’s deepest values and ideals; they emerge from, get shape, society; they are the foundations of ritual and ideologies.

(Hinnells 307)

The Sultan has commissioned Enishte Effendi a former ambassador of Istanbul to create a book that depicts glories of his reign. Enishte Effendi who has been exposed to Italian Renaissance art during his official visit to Venice influences the Sultan to get the book illustrated in the European style of art. This seems to be a dangerous feat as Turkish cultural tradition prohibits any kind of figurative art and miniature painting has only a subordinate position of beautification and ornamentation in their world view. The situation becomes tense when one of the miniaturists involved in Enishte’s project gets murdered and later Enishte himself gets killed.

Black who is Enishte’s nephew returns after twelve years to Istanbul at this crucial juncture. His earlier love towards Shekure, Enishte’s daughter who is now widowed with two sons, gets rekindled. The sudden death of Enishte leads to a hasty marriage between Black and Shekure but Shekure insists on Black to find out her father’s murderer before leading a normal married life.

Hence Black is forced to investigate into the matter. Along with Master Osman, the chief illuminator, he spends three days in the treasured library of the Sultan surrounding the rare masterpieces in order to identify the murderer. As the murderer appeared to be one among the three surviving miniatures namely Butterfly, Stork and Olive that method followed to identify the murderer is to find out the hidden flow or style of the culprit miniaturist by surveying their works and the old masterpieces from which they copied and illustrated. A horse illustrated on a piece of paper happened to be seen near the dead body of Elegent Effendi which is taken as a clue to the murder. Hence this illustration formed the basis of the investigation. The horse’s nose was illustrated in a peculiar style which Master Osman could identify as a style influenced by the Mongol and Chinese tradition. Hence Olive who had an earlier training in this traditions was soon identified as the culprit. His attempt to escape to Hindustan failed as he gets murdered on the way.

The story is broken up into fifty nine short chapters told from a multitude of perspectives. In addition to the most prominent characters like Black, Uncle (Eneshte), Shekure and the miniaturists from whose first person perspectives the novel is told, we also hear from Esther, a Jewish Pedlar, who carries letters between Black and Shekure, Orhan, Shekure’s son and the subjects of the illustrated book – a dog, a gold coin, a horse, satan and so forth – The novel ends with Shekure revealing the fact that the writing of the novel is entrusted with her younger son Orhan. Shekure is named after his mother and her two sons Shevkel and Orhan after he and his real brother. Here Pamuk blends fact with fiction which is a narrative technique in mythical stories of Persian mythology.

The mythical and legendary stories that form the subject matter of many of the miniatures discussed in the novel are taken from Nizami. Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209) was a renowned Persian poet who lived during the reign of Sultan Arsalam Shah. Nizami’s version of the story of Husrev and Shirin was known before him. He wrote the tragic romance as a fictional version of the story of the love of the sassanian king Khosrow II for the Armean or Armenians Princess Shirin whom he later marries and becomes his queen. It is based on a love story of Persian origin which is well known from the great epic – historical poem *Shahanamah* by Ferdowsi. The central collection of Persian mythology is the *Shahnamah* (*Book of Kings*) written over a thousand years ago. Encyclopaedia Iranica testifies that Ferdowsi draws these stories and characters from Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism.

Pamuk uses the Turkish spelling ‘Husrev’ of Khosrow, Khosrow is also spelled Khosrau, Chosroes, Husraw and Khosru. Shirin also is variantly spelt as Shireen. Nizami’s version which Pamuk resorts to in *My Name is Red* begins with Khosrow’s birth and education. Khosrow in a dream sees his grand father who tells him about Shirin who would be his wife, Shabdez, the steed and about Persia where he would be the king of that great kingdom. Shapur, Khosrow’s close friend who is also a painter informs him about the Armenian queen Mehin Banu and her niece Shirin. Hearing his descriptions of her Khesrow immediately falls in love

with her. Shapur goes to Armenia, finds Shirin and her companions walking in a forest. Shapur draws the image of Khosrow and hands it on a branch of a tree. Shirin gazes at the image and immediately falls in love. Shapur tells Shirin about Khosrow. Shirin flees from Armenia to Khosrow's capital, Madiain. At the same time Khosrow sets out to see Shirin in Armenia.

Both continue to go on opposite directions, without seeing each other. When they finally meet Shirin consents to marry Khosrow but on the condition that he should recover his country back from his enemies. Khosrow with the help of Caesar recovers his country but Caesar demands the price for his help by marrying his daughter Mariam to Khosrow.

A sculptor named Farhad falls in love with Shirin. Khosrow sends Farhad in exile and later sends a false news of Shirin's death. Farhad throws himself from the mountain top. In the mean while Mariam too dies paving the way for both the lover to marry. Kavadh who is referred in the novel by the name Shiruye, Khosrow's son from his wife Mariam, falls in love with Shirin. He finally murders his father and asks Shirin to marry him. Shirin to avoid marrying Shiruye kills herself. Khosrow and Shirin were buried together in one grave.

The most famous legendary character in the Persian epics and mythology is Rostem. Simorgh a large, beautiful and powerful bird guards and protects Rostem from his birth and throughout his life. Encyclopaedia Iranica records, "He (Firdausi) adopted many Nomadic Heroic Legends like Legend of Saka Folk making his original Hero Rostem" (22).

Rostem is a Khorasaan, in Iran, a hero favourite of king Kaykavous. He enters the kingdom of Samangan while searching for his lost horse. There he meets princess Tahnina and marries her. But he had to go in exile from there because of the fury of the king. Before he leaves he gives a necklace to her as a token of remembrance. But he was unaware that she bears his child. When born she names him Sohrab. In the mean while Rostam becomes a great warrior. When a new war begins Sohrab represents the hero fighter of the Turan army while Persia has the great Rostem. Both couldn't recognize each other in the battlefield. Rostem stabs Sohrab in the heart. It is then he sees the necklace which Tahnina had given Sohrab to save him in the battle field. Tahnina arrives in the battle field late to find her son in his grieving father's arms.

In Persian mythology Alexander is a legendary hero. Nizami's *Iskander-nameh* which he wrote inspired by Firdausi's *Shahnameh* narrates many fantastic feats of Alexander the Great who rose in Persian culture not as a historical figure but as a legendary national hero of Persia or even as a prophet. Joseph Fonten Rose observes in *The Ritual Theory of Myth* the possibility of legends becoming myths and heroes becoming gods and the reverse (57). Though Alexander conquered Iran, Persia and its fascinating culture soon conquered him and he became more a Persian than the Persians.

Another story that is a recurrent theme in Persian miniatures which Pamuk refers in the novel is the tale of Leyla and Mejnun. It is based on a simple Arab folk tale which was later adopted and embellished by Persians from whom different versions of the story got spread throughout the world. It originated as a short, anecdotal poem in ancient Arabia. Nizami included it as the third of his five long narrative poems called *Khamsa*. Nizami's work inspired many like Aru Khusrow, Jami and Hatifi. It is Hatifi's version that got popular in Ottoman Turkey.

The essential story line goes like this: Qays falls in love with Leyla. His love inspires him to compose poems about his love for her. His passionate and frank admission of his love without any inhibition made others call him 'Mejnun' or madman. Her father did not consent her marrying him as he thought it was improper for his daughter to marry a madman. She was soon married to another man. Qays hearing about her marriage left the tribe and wandered in the neighbouring desert where he would recite poetry to himself or write in the desert sand with a stick. Leyla went with her husband to live in some part of Arabia and died later. Leyla is depicted in some versions died of heartbreak for not being able to see Mejnun. Mejnun was later found dead near the grave of Leyla. He had carved three verses on a rock near the grave.

The crisis in the novel develops out of the clear cut distinction between western concept of art as represented by Italian Renaissance art and the Eastern concept of art as represented by Persian miniatures. The traditional approach of miniature paintings as Guy Manns has put it in his Books Interview in *The Independent* involves memory, an illustrated hierarchical world and idealizations free of individual style (2). Persian miniatures are illustrations from stories of Persian mythology which are drawn from memory. The miniatures are regarded as perfect when they are exact copies of the old masterpieces without any flaw. Hence the characters of these stories like Husrev, Shirin, Leyla or Rostem are ideal heroes imprinted in the memory of the miniaturists who draw them and the people who pursue them. Hence in the novel even the character called Esther who represents a common clothier cannot but help mentioning those legendary characters.

The picture sent along with the letter depicts pretty Shirin gazing at handsome Husrev's image and falling in love, as told in the story that even I, Esther the Jewess, know well. All the love born ladies of Istanbul adore this story.

(MNR 38)

The love story of Black and Shekure that run parallel to the murder mystery is modeled on the legendary love of Husrev and Shirin. He declares his love by drawing a famous scene from the story of Husrev and Shirin but painting himself and Shekure in the place of the legendary lovers. Black and Shekure had to undergo long trails of waiting in love like their mythical counterparts. When she finally consents to marry, Shakure, like Shirin, puts forward some conditions. Like Farhad, the love rival in the mythical story, Hassan is there in between Black and Shekure.

The real attitude of the traditional artists towards miniature painting and how they perceive figures within the picture is expressed vividly by Master Osman, the head illuminator and a stubbornly mystical traditionalist. Lovingly he evokes a classic miniature that illustrates the legends of lovers Husrev and Shirin.

It is as if the lovers are to remain here eternally within the light emanating from the paintings texture, skin and subtle colours which applied lovingly by the miniaturist. You can see how their faces are turned ever so slightly toward one another while their bodies are half turned toward us for they know they are in a painting and thus visible to us. This is why they don't try to resemble exactly those figures which we see around us. (MNR 337)

Style which is a new intension into the traditional miniature painting becomes a controversial issue. Enishte Effendi asks Black to visit the three surviving miniaturists namely Butterfly, Stork and Olive to whom Black poses three pertinent questions which reveals the basic precepts of miniature art. All the three miniatures results to three parables to explain their view. Of the three parables each relates at least one is taken from Persian legend.

To Butterfly, Black raises the question on style and signature which Butterfly answers by narrating three parables under the titles 'Alif', 'Ba' and 'Djim'. Of the three parables two are taken from Persian folk lore where as the third from History by Rashidudhin of Kazvin. Butterfly concludes:

The first story established that style is imperfection. The second story established that a perfect picture needs no signature... (MNR 66)

Butterfly voices the traditional Eastern attitude towards style and signature which in turn is shaped by his belief in the mythical past. Here the stories from folklore and tradition mould his view of art and how he perceives the world.

The question that Black poses to stork is on painting and time. Stork responds to it by narrating three parables. He takes two parables from history while the third one belongs to the legend prevalent among the miniatures of Istanbul. Stork interprets the stories as:

The first story with the minaret demonstrates that no matter how talented a miniaturist might be, it is time that makes a picture perfect. But the second story with its harm and the library reveals that the only way to escape time is through skill and illustrating ... The third story units 'Alif' and 'Ba' to reveal how time ends for the one who forsakes the perfect life and perfect illuminating leaving nothing but death.

(MNR 75)

Olive answers Black's query on blindness and memory by narrating three stories of which third story is from Persian legend. He concludes by stating that the sublimity of the artists reaches its peak with his ability to draw from memory and in blindness. Here memory and not innovation that is regarded as superior. Memory is nothing but to relive the past by reviving the myth and legend.

The chapters where Master Osman and Black indulges in an intense study of the old and priceless master pieces, preserved in the royal treasury, to identify the murder include absorbing elaboration on Eastern concept of art that has its firm footing in the illustrated mythical stories. Master Osman's long and scrutinizing perusal of the classic Persian miniatures in the Sultan's library unveils the rich Persian legacy of art and painting. As Master Osman remarks:

We must revisit those glorious old days of legend, when Allah had a hand in the painting of miniatures.

(MNR 304)

In the Sultan's treasury time seems to come to a standstill loosing its specificities of present or past.

It was as if the unchanging frozen golden time revealed in the pictures and stories we viewed had thoroughly mingled with the damp and moldy time we experienced in the treasury.

(MNR 304)

The chapters in which the story teller gives voice to subjects of the illustrated book subtly signify the place of mythical story in miniature paintings. In the chapter "I am a tree" reflects on the identity of the figure in the painting which to the miniaturist has only symbolic existence. Hence the 'tree' as a picture wants to be the part of story otherwise its fears the picture would be nailed to a wall where "the likes of pagans and infidels will prostrate themselves before me and worship" (MNR 47).

At the end of the novel Pamuk identifies himself as the author which according to Eric J. Iannelli in his article "My Name is Red" is mimicking of a standard traditional narrative device (3). Hence the novel is interwoven with Persian folklore history, myth and legend. Thoughts are not 'thought' but narrated through stories. Even at the level of narration it has relied on traditional narrative device in such an incomprehensible way that they nurture and rupture mutually.

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