

Pallavi Narayan, *Pamuk's Istanbul: The Self and The City* (London Routledge, 2022)

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There is a proliferation of books on Orhan Pamuk, and over the past ten years or so – in the wake of his Nobel Prize win – a growing movement within Turkey to concentrate on writers who have not enjoyed anywhere near the same level of international prestige (Ahmed Hamdi Tanpınar, Sevgi Soysal, Sait Faik, Tezer Özlü, to name but a handful). Nevertheless, Pallavi Narayan's monograph chooses Pamuk and the urban as its central theme, and to some extent succeeds in finding something new to say about the Nobel laureate, even if some approaches are left unadopted.

Pamuk's Istanbul focuses, as Narayan says at the outset, on how the writer “reshapes the way his fiction is understood through the work his fiction does” (17). This involves a fundamentally deconstructive (forgive the oxymoron) view of Pamuk's goals, which Narayan says involves an investigation “not only of the loss of meaning but the repetition of meaning, until meaning itself becomes duplicitous” (17), along with a project to take fiction, via the urban, beyond “postmodernism” through a consideration of some key postmodern terms – simulacra, autopoiesis and heterotopia – and how they apply to Pamuk's fiction. What follows – and, if I'm not mistaken, this seems to be the central idea of Narayan's interesting book – is that there is some kind of profound analogy, or even relationship, between the way individuals develop their own identities through a panoply of alternative ones, and the way a city engages with multiple versions of itself as it moves beyond to explore its own urban identity.

Narayan's extremely deconstructive view of Pamuk is crucial to this idea. She sees Pamuk's texts as intervening at “crucial interstices” of modern/parochial views of the city (8), and this means that Pamuk gets given the very Joycean quality of “articulating the dissonance between national and cerebral boundaries and, indeed, the in-betweenness of the urban experience” (8). What follows is a primarily semantic treatment of the city – she says, very early on, that she is not as interested in the “historical” context of Istanbul, as much as in how Pamuk uses the “postmodern” city to move beyond the “postmodern” context (5). Because of this primacy of the textual, reading Narayan's book is a somewhat ghostly experience – we experience the city, through her analyses and repeated invocations of Benjamin, Bakhtin, Foucault, Lefebvre – as a constantly shifting array of different shapes and half-formed impressions, untrustworthy memories and Protean images that find themselves constantly transforming depending not just on the citizen who has them, but also the regime that the city is under at that moment.

In doing this, she negotiates an uneasy relationship with Jameson, whom on the one hand she criticizes by pointing out how his analysis of post-war capitalism and urban construction “cannot be applied wholesale to Istanbul” (13), whilst at the same time allowing Istanbul a cautious entrance into World Systems theory, seeing the city as part of a “long twentieth-century” (14), in a transition from the urban to the social that ends (as Jameson puts it) in a “new kind of infinity” (cit. in Narayan, 14). Narayan employs the term “rooted cosmopolitanism” for Pamuk, and it is an apt one, when we consider the various ways books like *White Castle* and *Black Book* have internationalized and reconfigured Istanbul for a global audience. However, it is the way cities imagine for themselves various heterotopic possibilities (utopian, dystopian) that intrigues Narayan (51) – and offers an analogy for how we, as individuals, enable our own development by constantly encountering different imagined versions of who we are. I have to admit, I did find myself wondering whether there wasn’t already a straightforward term for this – dialectic. Narayan uses the word herself just once (113 – really more of a comment on a moment in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*), and it did raise the bigger issue (which, to be fair to Narayan, many literary theorists exhibit) of what to say when a text cites Foucault, Freud, Benjamin, Bakhtin and Jameson approvingly, when many of these thinkers openly contradict one another.

In the end, the strengths of the book, for me, were three: there is a relentless focus on the city in Pamuk, one which results in some interesting reflections on the relationship between city and self in the Turkish writer, even if a final, conclusive statement is elusive; there was also a massive range of references, academically speaking, as Narayan makes sure she has interacted with and noted a lot more of her contemporaries and predecessors than the average scholar does. Critics might say this makes it a very academic book – and it is true that some pages which really only list long sequences of secondary reading (such as page 31) could have been more usefully assigned to the footnotes – but it does show a determination to engage with the scholarship. Finally, there is an internationalizing of Pamuk’s fiction with regards to the city – not just the names that Narayan lists as fellow travellers in cataloguing the experience of the urban – Murakami, Rushdie, Joyce, Sebald, Naipaul – but also the bringing of continental theory to what Pamuk does with these urban fictions, and showing what is at stake when Pamuk exposes the kind of myths and self-delusions we are all prey to when we ask for something from the cities we live in.

Reservations? Class is more or less skipped over in the book, even though it has been a central component of many criticisms of Pamuk (Kader Konuk, perhaps most insistently, has pointed out the bourgeois subtexts of Pamuk’s nostalgia for the lost Istanbul). There is very little treatment of Armenians – whilst Narayan does mention them half a dozen times, the centrality they play (not just their historical involvement in the architecture of Istanbul, but also – via Ara Güler – their part in Pamuk’s own envisaging of his city) is not really credited at all. And finally, whilst the interview with Maureen Freely (one of Pamuk’s many translators) at the end of the book is fascinating, it was difficult for me to see a clear connection between Freely’s biographically interesting remarks and the argument of the monograph it was an appendix to. Freely is very frank in her remarks on Pamuk – she mentions a certain deafness to women’s thoughts she is convinced Pamuk has (190), and (somewhat uncharitably) describes Pamuk as “covering his tracks” (185) when it comes to

hiding his influence from Borges. The interview gives great insights into what it means to be a translator, and to translate an internationally famous novel (the English translation, Freely claims with some validity, will have been a help and perhaps even the source of its translations into many other languages), but doesn't seem to fit obviously in the scheme of the book.