



ART, IDENTITY, AND THE EAST–WEST DIALOGUE IN ORHAN PAMUK’S MY NAME IS RED

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Abstract

This article examines Orhan Pamuk’s novel *My Name Is Red* as a postmodern historical narrative that explores the dialogue between Eastern and Western artistic traditions, cultural identity, and the aesthetics of representation. The study analyzes the novel’s polyphonic narrative structure, metafictional strategies, Ottoman miniature painting, and the conflict between Islamic and Renaissance artistic worldviews. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which Pamuk transforms the historical setting of sixteenth-century Istanbul into a symbolic space where questions of memory, artistic individuality, faith, and cultural hybridity are negotiated. The article argues that *My Name Is Red* transcends the binary opposition of East and West and instead proposes a dynamic model of intercultural interaction. Through its innovative narrative techniques and philosophical reflections on art, the novel emerges as one of the most significant examples of contemporary world literature.

Keywords: Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red*, East–West dialogue, postmodernism, Ottoman miniature, cultural identity, metafiction, polyphony.

Introduction

Among contemporary novelists who have shaped the global literary landscape, Orhan Pamuk occupies a distinctive position. His fiction consistently engages with questions of cultural memory, identity, history, and the complex relationship between Eastern and Western civilizations. Published in 1998, *My Name Is Red*



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(Benim Adım Kırmızı) became one of the most influential novels in modern Turkish literature and significantly contributed to Pamuk's international recognition, eventually culminating in the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature. The novel established Pamuk's reputation as a writer capable of transforming local historical experiences into universally relevant literary narratives.

Set in Istanbul during the reign of Sultan Murad III, the novel combines elements of detective fiction, historical narrative, philosophical inquiry, romance, and artistic discourse. At its center lies the mysterious murder of a miniature painter involved in a secret imperial manuscript commissioned by the Sultan. Yet the murder investigation functions primarily as a narrative framework through which deeper questions concerning art, religion, identity, and cultural transformation are explored.

The significance of *My Name Is Red* extends beyond its historical setting. The novel addresses one of the most persistent questions in Turkish intellectual history: the relationship between Eastern tradition and Western modernity. Rather than presenting these concepts as fixed and mutually exclusive categories, Pamuk constructs a multilayered narrative space where different artistic, philosophical, and cultural perspectives coexist and interact. Scholars have therefore frequently interpreted the novel as a literary meditation on transculturality, hybridity, and the deconstruction of binary oppositions.

This article investigates how Pamuk employs postmodern narrative strategies, artistic symbolism, and historical reconstruction to represent the dialogue between Eastern and Western civilizations. The study further explores the novel's treatment of artistic identity, narrative multiplicity, and cultural memory within the broader framework of contemporary literary theory.

One of the most remarkable features of *My Name Is Red* is its ability to reconstruct the intellectual atmosphere of sixteenth-century Ottoman Istanbul while simultaneously addressing contemporary concerns. The novel is situated within a historical period marked by increasing encounters between the Ottoman Empire and Renaissance Europe. These encounters created not only political and economic exchanges but also artistic and philosophical tensions. Pamuk carefully recreates the world of Ottoman miniature painting, an artistic tradition deeply rooted in Islamic aesthetics. Ottoman miniaturists sought to depict reality not



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from an individual human perspective but from a divine viewpoint that reflected spiritual rather than material truth. The purpose of art was not self-expression but the faithful continuation of an established tradition. The arrival of Renaissance artistic techniques introduced a fundamentally different understanding of representation. Western painters emphasized perspective, realism, individuality, and the uniqueness of artistic vision. This difference generated a profound philosophical conflict because it challenged established assumptions about the relationship between the artist, reality, and the divine. The central artistic debate in the novel therefore transcends technical questions and becomes a reflection on competing worldviews.

Pamuk's reconstruction of Ottoman artistic culture is not merely historical. Through the fictionalized depiction of miniature painters, he creates a symbolic representation of broader cultural transformations. The artistic conflict becomes a metaphor for the larger question of how societies negotiate external influences while preserving their own traditions. Recent scholarship has emphasized the novel's engagement with New Historicism, noting that Pamuk blurs the boundaries between historical fact and fictional invention. Historical figures and events are interwoven with imaginative narratives, creating a textual space in which history itself becomes subject to interpretation. Perhaps the most celebrated aspect of *My Name Is Red* is its narrative structure. The novel consists of fifty-nine chapters narrated by multiple voices, including painters, lovers, murder victims, animals, objects, colors, and abstract concepts. This extraordinary multiplicity of perspectives challenges traditional assumptions regarding narrative authority and truth. Each narrator contributes a unique interpretation of events, preventing readers from establishing a single definitive perspective. Such narrative fragmentation reflects one of the central principles of postmodern literature: the rejection of absolute truth and the recognition of multiple competing realities. The novel's structure demonstrates that identity, history, and meaning are always constructed through discourse and interpretation. The use of nonhuman narrators is particularly significant. When colors, corpses, coins, and animals become storytellers, the novel destabilizes conventional hierarchies of representation. This narrative strategy encourages readers to question the boundaries between subject and object, reality and fiction, art and



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life. The novel's polyphonic design has often been interpreted as an expression of cultural pluralism. Just as multiple narrators coexist within the text, multiple cultural perspectives coexist within Ottoman society. Narrative multiplicity thus becomes a literary embodiment of intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, many narrators appear aware of their own fictional existence. Such self-consciousness transforms the novel into a metafictional text that continuously reflects upon its own narrative processes. The result is a work that not only tells a story but also examines the very nature of storytelling itself. The central philosophical conflict in *My Name Is Red* concerns the nature and purpose of art. Throughout the novel, artistic representation is closely connected to questions of faith, morality, and identity.

Ottoman miniature painting is presented as an art form grounded in collective tradition. The ideal artist seeks anonymity and spiritual discipline. Individual style is often regarded as a form of vanity because it foregrounds human creativity over divine truth. Western Renaissance painting, by contrast, celebrates individuality and personal vision. The emergence of perspective transforms the artist into an autonomous creator whose unique viewpoint becomes central to the artistic process. Pamuk does not simply oppose these two traditions. Instead, he explores the anxieties generated by their encounter. The miniaturists are fascinated by Western artistic techniques even as they fear their theological implications. Their internal conflicts reveal the broader tensions experienced by societies undergoing cultural transformation.

The novel repeatedly raises questions concerning whether artistic innovation necessarily requires the abandonment of tradition. The painters are confronted with the possibility that adopting Western methods may simultaneously enrich and endanger their cultural heritage. Art thus becomes a site where competing visions of identity are negotiated. Recent studies have emphasized that the novel presents art as a heterotopic space in the Foucauldian sense—a domain where alternative social realities can be imagined and contested. Artistic creation becomes both a source of liberation and a source of conflict, enabling individuals to challenge dominant cultural narratives while exposing themselves to social and religious pressures. A superficial reading might suggest that *My Name Is Red* presents a straightforward conflict between Eastern and Western civilizations.



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However, a closer examination reveals that Pamuk consistently undermines such simplistic oppositions.

The novel demonstrates that cultural identities are neither fixed nor homogeneous. Eastern and Western traditions appear not as isolated entities but as dynamic systems engaged in continuous interaction. Characters frequently move between these cultural spheres, adopting, adapting, and transforming elements from both traditions.

Pamuk himself has emphasized that he rejects hierarchical interpretations of East and West. Rather than portraying one civilization as superior to the other, he explores the creative possibilities generated by their encounter. This perspective reflects Istanbul's historical position as a crossroads between continents, religions, and cultures. The novel's artistic debates therefore function as allegories for broader processes of cultural exchange. The question is not whether Eastern or Western art is superior but how traditions evolve through interaction. Such an approach resonates with contemporary theories of hybridity and transculturality, which emphasize the fluid and relational nature of cultural identity.

Through this framework, Pamuk transforms a historical narrative into a meditation on globalization, cultural memory, and the challenges of modernity. The concerns of sixteenth-century miniaturists become strikingly relevant to contemporary discussions of identity and cultural change. The title itself occupies a central place within the novel's symbolic structure. Red functions as a complex and multivalent sign that resists reduction to a single interpretation. At various moments, red signifies passion, desire, violence, creativity, blood, death, and artistic vitality. Its meanings shift according to narrative context, reflecting the novel's broader commitment to ambiguity and multiplicity. Scholars have observed that the symbolic richness of red mirrors the novel's refusal to privilege any single perspective or interpretation. The color also serves as a metaphor for artistic representation itself. Just as red cannot be confined to a single meaning, artistic truth cannot be reduced to a singular viewpoint. The symbolic complexity of the title therefore reinforces the novel's exploration of plurality and interpretation.



Moreover, red embodies the emotional intensity that permeates the narrative. Love, jealousy, obsession, artistic ambition, and violence all converge within its symbolic field. The title thus encapsulates the novel's fusion of aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological dimensions. *My Name Is Red* represents one of the most sophisticated achievements of contemporary world literature. By combining historical reconstruction, philosophical inquiry, artistic discourse, and postmodern narrative experimentation, Orhan Pamuk creates a text that transcends national and cultural boundaries.

The novel's exploration of Ottoman miniature painting provides a powerful framework for examining broader questions concerning identity, memory, and cultural transformation. Through its polyphonic narrative structure, metafictional strategies, and symbolic richness, the text challenges fixed notions of truth and encourages readers to embrace multiple perspectives. Most importantly, *My Name Is Red* redefines the relationship between East and West. Rather than presenting these concepts as mutually exclusive opposites, Pamuk portrays them as interconnected and constantly evolving cultural formations. The novel thus offers a vision of intercultural dialogue grounded not in conflict but in creative interaction. In an era increasingly shaped by globalization and cultural exchange, Pamuk's work remains profoundly relevant. Its enduring significance lies in its ability to demonstrate that identity is not a static inheritance but a dynamic process of negotiation, interpretation, and transformation.

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