
More than a Murder Mystery

My Name is Red, By Orhan Pamuk, Translated by Erdag M. Goknar, 508 pp. London: Faber, £39.99

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Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, lucidly translated by Erdag Goknar, is a *dastan* being told by an artful *dastango*, surrounded by a group of people, weaving a yarn in a winter's night illuminated by the yellowish glow of a warming fire. Set in Istanbul where two civilisations and two continents meet and part, the novel probes paradoxes emanating from the constant tensions between appearance and reality, seeing and 'blindness', 'sin' and 'virtue', asserting identity and surrendering individuality, the incapacitating power of fear and liberation through freedom from fear. These issues are threaded together in a debate about Islamic tradition of miniature painting and European concepts of art.

During nine snowy December days in 1591, the preparation of a secret book of miniature paintings commissioned by Ottoman Sultan Murat III, becomes a perilous project when two miniaturists, Elegant and Enishte, are murdered. The Sultan wants Black, Enishte's nephew, to apprehend the murderer within three days. He had left Istanbul twelve years ago after Enishte's daughter, Shekure, rejected his love. Enishte persuades him to return and help him finish the book. Black succeeds in marrying Shekure, now a widow, but she will consummate the marriage only when he finds her father's murderer.

The Sultan wants the book of miniatures in European style to celebrate one thousand years of the Prophet of Islam's Hegira from Mecca to Medina. Enishte, the master miniaturist at the Sultan's court and in-charge of the project, is preparing the book with the help of four of the finest artists of the time. In Islamic tradition, a story accompanies a miniature painting. Contrarily, a European painting maintains its individual character and reflects that of the painter's. A painting not subservient to a written text condones figuration, which orthodox interpretations of Islam forbid. This heretical possibility of the project results in the two murders. The narrative opens when Elegant, a gilder, now a dead body at the bottom of a well, relates the story of his death.

The novel hints at the insidious arrival of colonisation of the mind through art and scepticism about invincibility of the Ottoman Empire. Counterfeit coins, being smuggled from Venice, and European influence in art are creeping in. The challenge is twofold: rising inflation and imperceptible control over cultural patterns of thinking. This forebodes the beginning of a slow end of the Empire. Religious leaders blame everything on forgetting the teachings of Islam, the acceptance of wine and music, and relations with Christians. Three centuries later, Kamal Atatürk breaks from the Arab/Persian past and chooses complete Westernisation. The past does not die, the novel suggests, and one cannot reconnect with it in a constructive way as is evident from the current political scenario in Turkey.

The novel blends mystic, romantic ideas with postmodern techniques of narrating a story. In fifty-nine chapters, multiple narrators (twelve in all) give diverse perspectives. Each chapter has an individual narrator, except one, when the storyteller in a coffeehouse assumes the persona of two dervishes. One perspective issues forth from the previous like Scheherazade's tales. Embedded in this intertwining of the traditional and the modern is the age-old emphasis on the paradoxical nature of apparent reality. Blindness becomes an important trope and we repeatedly hear that miniaturists go blind. Blindness, as a symbol within a broader literary tradition, signifies higher wisdom, the 'divine blackness', like that of Tiresias and Oedipus. In miniature painting, 'true talent reside[s] in a sighted miniaturist who could regard the world like a blind man.' Only a blind artist 'could see the true pictures, scenery and essential and flawless [objects] that Allah commanded be seen.' In Kantian terms, art goes beyond 'the limited world of appearances' and attempts to grasp 'reality itself.' Art, thus, explores the underlying drama of existence and becomes more than a mundane vocation.

Blindness makes an artist rely on his memory, the other important trope. For an artist, blindness is metaphorical and not literal. It is refusing to see the world as it is but rather imagining it, using memory, in an ideal form, the 'vision of Allah.' A. N. Whitehead's comment that the Western philosophical tradition is a 'series of footnotes to Plato' echoes in Pamuk's treatment of the idea of knowing reality as well. Memory, according to Pamuk, is visualising the way Allah perceived the world. If 'a miniaturist' has sketched 'horses unceasingly for fifty years' only then he would be 'able to truly depict the horse that Allah envisioned and desired.' In the process, he 'would go blind' but 'his hand would memorize the horse.' Consequently, 'looking at the drawing of a tree' becomes 'more 'pleasant than looking at a tree.' In the drawing, one not only encounters the depiction of an object but also the truth that emerges from an artist's imagination. This makes a work of art, in John Keats's words, '[a] thing of beauty' whose 'loveliness' refuses to '[p]ass into nothingness.'

An artist who can see the meaning of an 'object' is on a par with the Creator. Art comes dangerously close to deciphering the secrets of creation. The artist does what God does by saying 'to 'Be', and when he draws a horse or uses a colour, each transforms into a character. Satan, another persona that the storyteller assumes, decides not to name a preacher, lest it might become a character and 'bother' the reader 'later on'. This unnerving potential of art worries many miniaturists who fear violence from religious fanatics and yet yearn to experience this artistic/ Divine prerogative. Olive, Stork, and Butterfly, three other artists working with Enishte, struggle to reconcile with this possibility. One of them becomes so troubled that he murders Elegant and Enishte. In the European tradition, an artist has individuality while in the Eastern tradition, in imitation of the great masters, self-identity must be surrendered. Any deviation is disrespectful to tradition and sacrilege to religion. An artist must be 'discover[ed]' by his 'choice of words and colors (sic) ... like [people] examine the footsteps to catch a thief.' Art and crime are merged and give away the murderer, who maintains an individual 'style.' This unconscious desire, a 'flaw', reveals 'the guilty hand.'

Pamuk, who aspired to be a painter in his younger days, understands that 'words and color (sic) ... are brothers to each other' and uses the art of painting to explain how all art forms explore truth and complement each other. Master Osman, Enishte's rival for the Sultan's favours and his critic for being influenced by the European approach, laments the fact that traditional miniaturist paintings will be forgotten; towards the end, both are. Religious fanatics kill the storyteller.

Tragically, the space for artistic expression has shrunk.

In a postmodern vein, Orhan Pamuk consistently reminds us that this is a work of fiction. Characters are self-aware and often talk directly to the reader. By the end, we learn that Orhan, a character, has created the story with the help of his mother, Shekure and for ‘the sake of a delightful and convincing story, there isn’t a lie Orhan wouldn’t deign to tell.’