

REVISITING THE MYTHS IN ORHAN PAMUK'S THE RED HAired WOMAN

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ABSTRACT-- *The novel The Red Haired Woman tells the story of Cem, an Istanbul boy whose life is turned upside-down when his father, a pharmacist, abandons the boy and his mother and disappears, offering no clues about where he's headed. Without his father's income, the family's finances are doomed, and Cem must find work wherever he can to pay for his education. He soon lands on a temporary job as an apprentice to Mahmut, a well-digger, and just as quickly casts the older man as a replacement for his missing father, which leads to some mixed feelings. The adult Cem becomes obsessed with the story of Oedipus, who famously killed his father and married his mother, and the Persian story of, about a warrior who kills his son during a battle. Pamuk waxes Freudian theory and it will not be a problem if Cem's obsession are not so repetitively alluded to.*

Key Words--Revisiting Popular Myths of Europe and Persia, Infatuation, Apprentice, replacement,

I. INTRODUCTION

Orhan Pamuk's novel *The Red Haired Woman* (TRHW) translated into English by Ekin Oklap gives a new dimension to revisit the popular myths of Europe and Persia (Iran). *The Booklist* certifies the novelist thus: "Pamuk masterfully contrasts East with West, tradition with modernity and the power of fables with the inevitability of realism" (no.p.).

The novel tells the story of Cem, an Istanbul boy, his father, and his whereabouts. Çimen Günay-Erkol in his "Insidious Trauma and Traumatized Masculinities in Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*" briefs the mental condition of Cem:

Cem grows into manhood without a close role model, and Pamuk provides fragments of his memories about the disruption of his family, and his being pushed into the position of breadwinning, as Cem's middle-class Istanbulite family falls into an economic crisis in the absence of the father. (175 Web)

Without his father's income, the family's finances are doomed, and Cem must find work wherever he can to pay for his education and financial expenditures incurred by the family. He gets a temporary job as an apprentice to Mahmut, an old well-digger. Cem casts the older man as a replacement for his missing father, which leads to some mixed feelings. "That's when I first became aware of the sway Master Mahmut now held over me," he reflects, "and so even as I enjoyed the affection and intimacy he showed me (such as I'd never felt from my father), I began resenting him for it" (TRHW 18).

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On his visits to a nearby town, Cem develops an instant infatuation with an older, red-haired actress, to whom he loses his virginity. But after Mahmut goes silent while working at the bottom of a well, Cem flees the scene and the town. He is determined to not see Mahmut, whom he presumes to be dead, or Gulcihan (the red-haired woman) again. He goes to college, gets married and finds a successful building business. Decades after the incident with Mahmut, he is forced to reckon with his decision when he considers a land deal at the site of the well.

The adult Cem becomes obsessed with the myth of Oedipus, who infamously killed his father and married his mother, and the Persian story of Rostam and Sohrab, about a warrior who kills his son during a battle. Pamuk waxes Freudian theory, Oedipus Complex, and it will not be a problem if Cem's obsessions are not so repetitively alluded to. "It seems we would all like a strong, decisive father telling us what to do and what not to do" (TRHW147). Cem broods: "Is the need for a father always there, or do we feel it only when we are confused, or anguished, when our world is falling apart?" (TRHW147). It is not an uninteresting question, but Pamuk's exploration of the theme does not break new ground; it feels like a retread of subject matter that has been written about for decades.

The myths have been taken from Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* and Ferdowsi's Persian epic, the *Shahnameh* by Pamuk for the plot construction of the novel *The Red Haired Woman*. Usually the myth stories travel from generation to generation orally. These myth stories of the past are stored in the minds of people as unconscious common collective memory and it stimulates to take identical decisions abruptly when a similar situation occurs as in the past history. The present paper speaks of how humans tend to identify themselves with myth stories by constant hearing and thinking about the same. It also explores how the novel is uniquely evolved as a new story by comparing and reinforcing the myths.

Every sound mind in the world has lived the moment of listening to the myth story. According to Cambridge Dictionary, Myth is "an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts". Collins Dictionary defines myth as "a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs." As the child/adult listens to the myth story from parents or grandparents, it delves deep into the heart of them unconsciously. These stories are usually constructed, and prevail in society to control the social and moral behaviour. Nusret in his "Life follows myth!" A Jungian Reading of Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman* quotes the statement of Pamuk told in an interview. Pamuk asserts thus:

Myths, literature, philosophy and the theory of morality have a quality that shape societies. I (Pamuk) am close to the ideas of Jung, who is a disciple of Freud. Jung tells about archetypes. He says that man is born with some cultural structures with which he moves in the depths of his soul and the back of his mind. (183 Web)

So, these stories are created to keep history informed and also nurture the social values among the people of the forthcoming generation.

II. DISCUSSION

The European and Persian myths are intertwined with the plot construction of the novel *The Red Haired Woman*. In the European Greek play *Oedipus the King* the protagonist Oedipus murders his own father unknowingly and marries his mother, and begets children. In the Persian epic poem *Shahnameh* which means “The Book of Kings”, the great Persian warrior Rostam kills his own son Sohrab unknowingly in a battle field. In the former son kills his father and in the later father kills his son. The theme of patricide and filicide is projected through these stories of myth. This idea is a parallel with experience of the protagonist while reading the novel *The Red Haired Woman*. The themes resonate beyond acts of accidental or mindless murder. *The Spectator* in its review tells: “They explore the loss of connection between generations -- which are tragic, yet also necessary. The shifts between generations are beautifully shown through the often hideous changes wrought in Istanbul itself by modernisation” (no.p.).

In *The Red Haired Woman*, Akin, the father of the protagonist Cem Celik, disappears and leaves his family and his pharmacy shop. Cem starts to work in a book store and gets a chance to read many books. He also has a dream to become a writer. After his high school, he joins as an apprentice to a well-digger in order to earn money for his higher studies. Master Mahmut cares for him with fatherly concern. Cem considers Mahmut as his father and he is happy being with Mahmut. Master Mahmut usually tells old moral stories to Cem to strengthen him morally and when one day

Master asks Cem to tell one story. Cem narrates a story from his memory thus:

I began to tell him the story of the Greek king Oedipus. I had never read the original... I'd come across a summary... which I'd found in an anthology called *Dreams and Life*, had been lurking in some corner of my mind for the past year, like the genie in Aladdin's lamp. Now here I was telling that same story, not as I'd learned it -- secondhand and abridged -- but with all the intensity of a real memory. (TRHW 43-44)

One evening, Cem goes to a nearby town to meet a beautiful Gulchihan without the knowledge of Master Mahmut. She is a drama actress of “The Theater of Morality Tales.” She and Akin are once the members of leftist group, the National Revolutionaries. Akin and Gulchihan have an affair but Akin leaves her soon without marrying her. Gulchihan knows that Cem is the son of her ex-lover but Cem is ignorant of the past life of his father. Cem has a conversation with the Red Haired Woman after seeing the drama and her enacting as the mother of Rostam, a mythical character in the Persian epic poem. Cem in the drama sees how, out of ignorance, Sohrab (son) is killed by his own father Rostam. Cem is tempted by the beauty of Gulchihan and says: I fell in love with an amazing woman, a theater actress twice my age. I didn't even know who she was. I just saw her on the street. She took me to her apartment. (TRHW 117) And Cem has sexual intercourse with her who is old enough to be his mother.

When Master Mahmut is inside the well and digging the soil, Cem drops the bucket into the well accidentally. Cem hears a wail of the master for one time and there is no sound from the well further. Without helping Master, Cem leaves the town and goes back to his home. Cem feels guilty of killing his (father-like) Master throughout his life. He decides to forget the fatal accident and move further in his life and diverts his guilty feeling by thinking: I was also gradually coming to realize that what had happened at the well would always bar me from the joys of an ordinary life. I kept telling myself. *The best thing to do is to act as if nothing happened.* (TRHW 117) Cem becomes a successful business man in the construction field and marries Ayse who studies in the same university where Cem does his engineering in Geology. The married couple do not have an heir but consider their business company as their child and named it as “Sohrab”.

Cem has a habit of reading the myth story of Oedipus, and Sohrab and Rostam. Enver files a suit on Cem that Cem is his biological father and claims his paternity right. After investigation Cem comes to know that Enver is born to Gulchihan and him. Cem is eager to meet his son but Enver though converses with his father hides his identity as Cem’s son and deceives his father in the beginning. Enver has a verbal dispute with his father as he impregnated his mother and left Enver all these years. Later, Cem takes his gun to threaten Enver in defense. Unfortunately, Enver shoots Cem on his left eye and Cem falls down into the same well where he worked as a digger apprentice in his boyhood.

The Red Haired Woman is the narrator of the last section of the novel and she reveals that her son is imprisoned. Later, she asks her son to write a novel about her life. She gives him the required details about her past. Enver pens her experience and writes a novel titled *The Red Haired Woman*. In that novel Cem, Enver’s father is the narrator and the story is written as if Cem was narrating his whole life. The novel is published and read by the public. At last, the desire of Cem to become a writer is fulfilled by his son Enver.

The story of Oedipus and Rostam is narrated by the protagonist of the novel. The reader is able to understand the mythical story through the lens of Cem’s point of view. He gets a chance to read the story books and he also shares the stories with others. The readers could revisit the old stories and be able to seek how the protagonist conceives it and then relates it with his own life. The narrator confides that one of the books he read has changed his life completely. As he puts it:

I read a lot that summer: children’s books, Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Edgar Allan Poe’s stories, poetry books, historical novels about the adventures of Ottoman warriors, and a book about dreams. One passage in this latter book would change my life forever. (TRHW 6)

The protagonist sees a painting in Iran, which depicts the battle field scene where Rostam cradles Sohrab. When Cem “looked at this image, what I saw resembled an idea of fatherhood that I carried deep in me”(TRHW 135). Later he wishes to read the mythical story and he also recognizes that it is once enacted by the drama travelling troop where he goes to see Gulchihan. Cem begins to narrate the story of Sohrab and Rostam to the readers:

There was one story that I read so often after my wife went to sleep that I knew I would remember it forever, like a nursery rhyme, a recurring nightmare, or some other indelible experience: Once upon a time, there was a man named Rostam, one of Persia’s matchless heroes, an indefatigable warrior. (TRHW 139)

Cem happens to lift and drop the heavy bucket in the well without anyone's support, earlier Ali, another apprentice, helps him. Accidently, he drops the bucket into the well and flees the place. When he resumes back, he compares his action of dropping the bucket with the pre-existing myth of Oedipus who kills his father. The narrator proclaims that the reading and sharing the myth affects his own life. As he explains:

I had told him the story of Prince Oedipus only to upset him, but then somehow I had ended up retracing the actions of the protagonist whose story I'd chosen. That was why Master Mahmut wound up stuck at the bottom of a well: it was all owing to a story, a myth. (TRHW 121)

Cem begins to believe that his life is being followed by myth. Because of the old myths, Cem is being affected by Carl Jung's idea of common collective unconsciousness which is universally present in every mind. Nusret in his "Life follows myth!": A Jungian reading of Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman* says that "It is precisely the predetermined 'cultural structures.' What puts the characters in *The Red-Haired Woman* into a particular mould and regulates the way Cem Çelik moves, feels and thinks" (183Web). Cem devotes his time to read the myth "as if expecting to find therein some secret truth about my own life." (TRHW 121). His life progresses and he becomes a successful business man. He is so happy about it and says: "I had no real concerns in life, apart from my inability to produce an heir" (TRHW 137). Cem believes that his life is very much akin to the myth story and as he suffers from sleeplessness he starts to read *Shahnameh* and *Oedipus*. His feeling of complacent is revealed in his following speech:

Eventually, I discovered that reading the *Shahnameh* or *Oedipus the King* purged my thoughts of money and figures and helped me sleep better - like hearing an old fairy tale. Though they were both stories about terrible guilt, my own guilt seemed to subside when I read them again. (TRHW 148)

Cem comes to know that a child is born between him and Gulchihan when he is a young boy. Cem and his wife Ayşe always relate their life with the myth as if their life had been followed by myth. Ayşe reinforces their bondage with myth and their life to Cem when they come to know that there is an heir for Cem's property. She indicates that being a father he might be killed by his son as happened in Oedipus Myth. Cem replies that in such a situation he will kill his son like Rostam. The following conversation over phone exemplifies their intense bondage with myth in their life.

III. CONCLUSION

"Listen to me," said Ayşe. "If it's true, everything we've always believed about Oedipus and his father, and about Rostam and Sohrab...then if that young man is your son, he is going to kill you! He's a textbook case of the rebellious Western individualist...." "Don't worry. If he tries anything, then I'll be the authoritarian Asian father, Like Rostam, and kill the brat myself," I said lightheartedly. (TRHW 213)

The present life of the protagonist and his wife is very much controlled by past myth. Çimen Günay-Erkol in his "Insidious Trauma and Traumatized Masculinities in Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*" states the intense connection between Cem's life and myth as "Cem's attachment to the theme of fatherhood grows bigger and he engages his spouse Ayşe in exploring people's relationships with their fathers as well. They attempt to group people in their surroundings as Oedipus type or Sohrab type" (177 Web). Unconsciously they build a connection between their life and the mythical story. Pamuk through his plot construction tries to bring out the

social relevance between the history and Cem's own life. The readers could procure that the characters are affected by the myth and nowhere the author tries to repeat the past story again. Erdağ Gökner in an article titled "A Turkish Woman in the Oedipus Complex: Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*" describes how myth advanced in the couple's life:

Both husband and wife are uncannily interested in the Eastern and Western myths of Rostam/Sohrab and Oedipus. To the degree that they name their joint construction company Sohrab, the *Shahnameh* hero who is fated to be killed by his father. Ironically, Sohrab is given a kind of eternal life as a corporation in the neoliberal era of conservative Islamist politics. (The Los Angeles Review of Books no.p.)

When the characters are analysed there is no parallel reference between past story and the present novel. In *The Red Haired Woman*, Cem neither kills the Master (father) nor his son at the end and it deviates from the past myth stories. In *Oedipus*, the hero kills his own biological father, marries his biological mother and has sexual intercourse. No such events can be compared with the protagonist's life of *The Red Haired Woman*, and other myths. On the other hand the novel has partial reference to the Oedipus myth that at the end Enver the biological son of Cem kills his own father and Red Haired Woman is the mistress of Cem's biological father Akin with whom Cem has sexual intercourse. As Bettany Hughes in *Financial Times* avers:

Saturated with sympathy and sense of place, the book charts a boy's journey into manhood and Turkey's into irreversible change.... But it is above all a book of ideas. Pamuk's work promotes the fact that we should always interrogate the past but never deny or bury it. History -- personal, imagined, actual -- reminds us to remember, to think better. (no.p)

Pamuk by linking the European and Persian myth tries merging the west and east in his novel. Erdağ Gökner in The LA Review of Books purviews thus:

Pamuk skillfully intermingles textual traditions and historical time periods, establishing the trademark intertextuality and intertemporality of his fiction...*The Red-Haired Woman*, though it engages father-and-son conflict, is, importantly, a woman's story.... On one hand, it is a novel that celebrates characters who are Oedipalized into the modern neoliberal order. On the other hand, while that celebration exposes familial violence, it conceals a concomitant history of state violence that maintains the patriarchal order. (Web)

Also, Pamuk projects the different ideologies of eastern and western history in his novel. He revisits the old myths and avoids the repetition of myth in his plot construction meticulously. The story of Cem in the novel is different and less lined with past myth. Thus Pamuk collaboratively attempts to revisit the myths and his unique style of storytelling is ubiquitous in the novel.

The final section of the novel is narrated by the red haired woman to shine all the brighter against such a dull background. It is an extraordinary piece of writing, tying the loose threads of the earlier narratives tightly together, granting us surprising new perspectives on the events of the novel. The twist in the tail is not perhaps quite effective making the reader feel as if they emerge from the depths of a well into sudden and dazzling light. *Mail on Sunday* reviews the fiction thus:

Pamuk's tale of love and death draws heavily on the Oedipus myth, but such is his mastery of storytelling that every character feels fresh, while the vignettes of modern Turkey ring true. (Web)

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