

## Orhan Pamuk's prize: for Turkey not against it

By Anthony Barnett,  
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Orhan Pamuk gets the Nobel prize for literature. Most commentators will take their cue from the politics of the [award](#) [1], Pamuk being among the first writers to be put on trial for mentioning the Armenian massacres of 1915. Others will discuss his novels. I'd like to reflect on his compelling memoir *Istanbul* and how it illuminates his distinction.

It presents itself as an early biographical reflection. It opens with his strange sense of himself created by deeply feuding parents and takes the reader through to the loss of his first love and his turn from painting to writing - all woven through a careful mapping of his fascination with his native city.

But *Istanbul* [2] is also a justification for Pamuk's profound decision to become a writer who writes in the same family building in which he grew up.

Ours is the age of migration. To stay or to leave is the question that dominates adolescence. Often it expands to a choice of country - or more often the dream of that choice. The pain, necessities and consequences of migration have become one of the great themes of the literature of our time. Never more explicitly than in *The Satanic Verses*.

Alas, that novel is not famous for its commanding theme and Salman [Rushdie's](#) [3] insistence on its long history. Should we back Lucretius or Ovid, he has his characters ask. Do you break from yourself by leaving the boundaries of your birth, or is moving a vital act of freedom that leads to the discovery of who you are? To stay, or to go, and what then happens?

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Also in openDemocracy on Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul and Turkey's writers:

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Orhan Pamuk (with Margaret Atwood and Salman Rushdie), "Freedom to write [10]" (28 April 2006) – an audio feature from the PEN World Voices festival in New York

Elif Shafak, "Turkey's home truths [11]"  
(25 July 2006)

Daria Vaisman, "Turkey's restriction, Europe's problem [12]"  
(29 September 2006)

Salman celebrates movement. Without the death of the old how can the new be born, is his theme. His laureate doubtless awaits the time when the old ceases to take mass offence at such apostasy.

Orhan Pamuk stayed [13]. But what a way to remain! He reclaims one of the world's great cities for itself. His memoir is not an indulgence. It records the loss of "old Istanbul" with just the right amount of sentiment. At the same time it replaces its definition, taking it from the hands of 19th-century literary travellers.

In a neat passage laced with subdued patriotism for Turkish women, Pamuk gently turns the tables on Edward Said [14]. In his pathbreaking study *Orientalism*, Said makes much of Gustave Flaubert and notes Flaubert's description of an Egyptian doctor in Cairo ordering his patients to show off their cases of syphilis to the visiting French writer. It is presented as a vivid literary moment in the 19th-century projection of the orient as a combination of beastly revulsion and sexual allure waiting to be "known" by the western mind.

What a pity, Pamuk writes, that Said did not continue the story to Istanbul where Flaubert, himself now suffering the genital disfigurement of syphilis, manages to get into bed with the reluctant young daughter of a brothel-owner who then, in Italian, demands that he uncovers himself first so she can make sure he is not contagious. Faced with humiliation, Flaubert wrote: "I acted the Monsieur and jumped down from the bed, saying loudly that she was insulting me".

She demanded to see him. She did not have the intellectual authority, the network of interests or the external power to "define" Flaubert, who ran away rather than expose himself before Turkish eyes. But the story tells a lot about what Pamuk is doing with his own learning and fluency. He reassesses the western painters and writers who "told the world" about Ottoman Istanbul. He surpasses the Turkish westernisers who were in thrall to them. Pamuk speaks with a world voice, not a local or Istanbul one. Neither unduly modest nor overly boastful, he says "we live here".

To do this he makes much of *hüzün*, a word broadly translated as melancholia. For Pamuk this state of feeling, between anguish and resignation, inhabits the city and its inhabitants, including himself. He suggests [15] that its origins go back to the decline of the Ottoman empire followed by its brutal replacement by a Turkey which in the name of nation-building moved the capital to Ankara, depriving the ancient heart of empire of its ruling functions.

The Turks I know do indeed share an exceptional, I can only say civilised, sense of *hüzün*. Yet I have always found it strange, because Istanbul fills me with energy and as I got to know it, a feeling that Europe has a New York, a city of hope.

Orhan Pamuk's achievement is considerably more [16] than writing some bestsellers followed by an interview about the massacres of the Armenians. His Nobel prize is bound to be

patronised as further evidence of the need for solidarity with Turkey's human-rights movement, and thus as a sign of Turkish backwardness and its problems, as if he were a Shirin Ebadi [17] in Iran up against an overwhelmingly fundamentalist regime.

In fact, he deserves to take the same pedestal as Toni Morrison [18]. Her government in Washington is undoubtedly parochial and in the hands of nationalist zealots if not fundamentalists. But her achievement is not defined by the obvious quality of her opposition to them. She brought the black experience in America to universal stature. Pamuk has helped make Turkey a world country, despite the *hüzün*-inducing fleabites of rightwing jurists and nationalists. Oh yes, and Europe should be proud.

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