

Mnemonic Narratives: Orhan Pamuk and the Pedagogical Function of Memory

Philip N. J.

Research Scholar, Srinivas University, Mangalore, Karnataka, India.
pnechikkattil@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9587-8622>

Bhuvana Ramachandran

Research Professor, School of Social Sciences & Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore, Karnataka, India.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8103-1789>

  <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613524>

Reviewed and accepted version first published on August 5, 2026

Abstract: This paper explores the purpose and evolving nature of historical representation, emphasizing the necessity for accurate depictions of the past consistent with factual integrity. Despite the increasing popularity of historical novels in contemporary society, the genre remains complex, blending factualism and imagination, and reflecting ongoing debates surrounding veracity, prejudice, and the construction of historical truth. Originating in 17th- and 18th-century Europe as Gothic novels, the genre has continually adapted through various literary movements such as realism, modernism, and postmodernism, addressing themes including war, social reform, and political upheaval. The study examines the role of historical fiction in shaping societal understanding of the past and its capacity to provoke critical reflection on representational issues, especially for authors like Orhan Pamuk. Analyzing the literary components of historical narratives and their connection to historical context, the research critically engages with questions of historiography, truth, and narrative construction. This investigation underscores the literariness inherent in historical storytelling and its significance for reconstructing both individual and collective memories.

Keywords: History, Gothic Novel, Truth, Fiction, Discourses

Introduction

The literary scene in Turkey in the 1980s, when Pamuk began writing, was characterized by a shift away from political realism and towards reworking themes of the Ottoman past. This shift occurred as a result of a neoliberal worldview that emerged in the country after the 1980s, according to an essay by Sevinc Turkkan, a professor at the State University of New York College, who analyzed the various English translations of *The Black Book*. Readers in Turkey once again embraced the "Romanesque" style. During the Kemalist era, it was not perceived as a danger to national identity. Thus, amid Turkey's altered literary landscape, Pamuk could fearlessly recreate history while using Ottoman themes. However, for Pamuk, this reworking was more than simply an adaptation of history; it was an endeavor to reimagine modern social life while simultaneously attempting to restore the splendor of the old world. In Istanbul, this is most evident in the writer's earnest and purposeful efforts to draw parallels between the author's modern life and that of others, as well as the glory days of the Ottoman Empire. Not only does this work conceptually and stylistically differ from Pamuk's other works, but it is also impossible to classify it according to current genre classifications, such as fiction/memoir. There is a continual shift in the literary style, and it refuses to be categorized by any commonly held definitions of the work.

"After all, isn't the purpose of the novel, or a museum, for that matter, to relate our memories with such sincerity as to transform individual happiness into a happiness all can share?" (Pamuk, 2009, p. 252). An alternative perspective on the author's role as a character in Pamuk's novels sheds light on the unfolding of the concept of intertextuality throughout his work. Above, we mentioned that the author often appears as a character in the story, either directly or indirectly. Careful readers can also benefit from this idea of a writer's unique "style" by spotting unusual repetitions of themes and ideas across the author's canon. Therefore, when discussing Pamuk's use of Turkish Ottoman history, autobiographical elements, multiple narrative voices, the presentation of conflicting human life situations across different historical contexts, the author's mysterious self-reflective structure, and similar concepts or incidents seen from different angles, among other things, are crucial to understanding the concept of intertextuality. Fiction writing involves more than merely recycling old ideas; rather, it is an artistic investigation of many structures united by a strong Turkish cultural and historical identity. This may be one reason why Pamuk became such a divisive writer in Turkey. Being one of the most controversial Turkish writers of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Pamuk boldly discusses the political Turk, attracting anger from his fellow Turks, in contrast to other contemporary writers.

When comparing Turkish with English, one notable difference is the significantly larger number of words in English compared to Turkish. Thus, it is normal, and even admired, to repeat words when speaking Turkish. Although widely read all across the globe, critical analyses of the author were scarce in English. Essays primarily focused on Pamuk's political stances and his meddling in Turkish affairs. Still, many Turkish readers are hesitant to warm up to Orhan Pamuk due to his political views. There has always been a mystery around his role in Turkey. Cultural historiography and

memory are two concepts that require clear definitions and explanations to avoid misunderstandings. This argument relies on these terms; therefore, it is essential to understand them comprehensively. It could be challenging to pin down precisely what cultural history and memory are at first glance. Still, delving into the boundaries of these concepts would help shed light on their literary meanings.

"The power of things inheres in the memories they gather up inside them, and also in the vicissitudes of our imagination, and our memory – of this there is no doubt." Pamuk, 2009, p. 92. A central concern in historical scholarship is how some events are elevated to the status of historical landmarks, while others remain more obscure. In doing so, it challenges the foundational assumptions that support presenting a specific dataset as gospel. In this way, a body of writing is assembled based on a scholarly topic. Nevertheless, historiography faces a challenge in dealing with the vast volume of written material about historical works. His unwavering faith in literature and the great art of the book is Pamuk's greatest strength. Pamuk is unfazed by the extreme patience this adherence to art demands. His meticulous work in novelistic cartography, which exquisitely portrays life's wonders and riches, is on full display in his works. In all its historic vitality, Pamuk's native Istanbul has encapsulated the ideals of his work. Who he is now as a renowned writer owes a great deal to his early years. His Westernized upbringing in Istanbul, close quarters with the effects of the Kemalist cultural revolution, the end-of-empire gloom, the isolation he felt from his fellow citizens who were either too Western or too Eastern, and his pain at not being at the center of the world all played a role in shaping his worldview. Overall, his life experiences have enhanced the quality of his writing. His enormous study of Eastern and Western literature, his affection for the city of his birth, and his passion for painting all combine to make him an exceptionally gifted writer. His novels also have a visual component thanks to his extensive painting practice.

The organic fusion of Eastern and Western literary traditions is evident in Pamuk's work, which reflects his profound interest in his cultural history and his desire to establish a national and cultural identity that incorporates both modern and ancient traditions. Throughout her work, Pamuk emphasizes the importance of remembering, which is precisely what Turkey's modern, secular, westernized republic had aimed to ignore. To challenge the post-Kemalist nationalist discourse and history, combat induced cultural amnesia, and reject imposed monolithic identities, the author has employed the cultural historiographical model to summon communal cultural memory. A recurring theme in Pamuk's work, dating back to his debut novel, cultural historiography offers an innovative and illuminating approach to documenting the complex fabric of Istanbul's past. Cultural historiography and memory, in Pamuk's view, facilitate identity negotiations. The creation of historical memory is mediated through literature. The rebirth of long-lost identities and the birth of novel perspectives are significant themes in his writing. Pamuk's interest in the past manifests itself in numerous ways across his works.

Metahistory and historiographic metafiction, which refer to fictional representations of historical events, gained traction in the 1980s, coinciding with a shift

in historical scholarship. Previous work has noted that the cultural shift and the era of new cultural history were ushered in when cultural history expanded to encompass the anthropological concerns of everyday life. Although his later works are more permeated with a "sense" of history, Pamuk's earlier works belonged to the classic historical fiction genre. During an interview with Erkut Tokman and Kate Ferguson, Pamuk said that, out of the two forces that inspire him to write, the second is his inner "documentarist, sociologist, anthropologist, and realist"—the first being his romantic imagination. These traits are complemented by his encyclopedic nature, which allows him to hone in on a particular subject until he becomes an expert in the field and then expands its coverage. He can satisfy both his amorous side and his analytical side through writing, which allows him to "chronicle, count, understand, analyze, categorize, and make lists."

Rather than writing in the conventional sense of historical fiction, Pamuk's latter works are heavily infused with a "sense" of the past. Together with Erkut Tokman and Kate Ferguson, Pamuk revealed in an interview that, out of the two characters, both the romantic imagination and the "documentarist, sociologist, anthropologist, and realist" aspects of his personality drive him to write. On top of all that, he possesses the encyclopedic qualities of someone who roots themselves deeply in a topic and then expands their knowledge in all directions. He may combine his romantic imagination with his analytical, list-making, counting, understanding, and classifying sides through writing. His work is woven with numerous cultural and historical details, which may explain its complex tapestry. Cultural objects, shared cultural texts, and everyday practices are crucial to cultural memory in literary fiction, as Pamuk demonstrates. This particular combination consequently gives rise to cultural shifts. One of the best examples of how cultural history and memory have been absorbed is in Pamuk's *The Black Book*, which is a cultural change. The nebulous pursuit of Galip's ideal causes him to doubt not only his own identity but also his nation's. Along the way, his travels become a history lesson about modern Turkey, complete with descriptions of its buildings, streets, people, and local shops. Celâl's columns offer a glimpse into ancient Turkish culture. Achieving the shift requires extensive discussions about the cultural system that has been forgotten and how this system is evident in every part of daily life. Without it, the city and its inhabitants become amnesic. When the "new" people do not know who they are, they act like the old Hollywood films that play in the theatre. All of these thoughts serve as a call to action for the revitalization of Turkish identity and awareness.

Although cultural history is a contentious topic among modern historians, it is undeniable that the field's significance expanded when it began to address ordinary anthropological problems, a phase known as the cultural turn. A new era in cultural history, marked by a greater emphasis on empathy, emerged during the cultural turn. Consequently, it discussed the archives' contents, but it also explored the hopes, desires, pain, and wishes that were just as significant for understanding the past. Writing allows Pamuk to document cultural history through real-life elements; he finds it in places like streets, stores, display windows, rooms, interiors, furniture, and commonplace objects. It is now the individual actions of humans, rather than the conquerors, that are shaping history. To achieve this goal of cultural history, which is to

make the "otherness" of the past more apparent and understandable, a linguistic and conceptual cultural translation is necessary.

Recognizing the previously unnoticed cultural, economic, or political shifts is also part of this broader cultural perspective. Snow highlights these shifts as a result of the Islamic fundamentalist movement, political and military abuses of power, and the European Enlightenment. Identity emerges in such a setting. In cultural history, the reversal of previously held beliefs regarding the interaction between society and culture is also significant. Throughout her work, Pamuk challenges the prescribed identities of the republican secular state.

Cultural memory is like a foundation that cultural history rests on. Through its role as a repository of shared experiences, cultural memory sheds light on the group's shared identity. The identification function is a crucial component of cultural memory. In his dogged exploration of Istanbul's complex past, Pamuk seeks to conceive a new perspective on the conventional notions of East and West, as well as tradition and modernity. Pamuk's brilliance lies in bringing this power to life through fiction. Cultural historiography and memory permit the negotiation of cultural memory and, by extension, identity. Traditional Islam, traditional Sufi literature, traditional form, and traditional ways of looking at things are all themes that Pamuk explores in his early books, which anticipate his art and mind. The combination of traditional themes with Western creative techniques gives his stories a distinct air of mystery.

In his works, memory is defined in a larger sense, encompassing not just the manuscript but also the act of writing itself and the physical transfer of this memory, as seen in mirror gazing. A person can gain 'self-other' knowledge on both a psychological and physiological level. While the psychological form of self-awareness occurs through writing, the physiological form requires reflection on the self-other binary. When we write, or *ecriture*, we engage in a form of historiography that allows us to enlarge our understanding of the self and the other. For Pamuk, the answer to the highly politicized concepts of "self" and "other," "enslaver" and "slave," or "east" and "west" is the manuscript's impossibility. Therefore, he rejected any hope of a secure solution to these terms. The Eastern tradition is being rescued time and time again by Pamuk. The imperial treasures serve to both reawaken and reinforce memories of the once-proud Islamic and Ottoman art that was gradually lost to the ages. The author alludes to the Sufist school of thought to argue that the endless reproduction of these paintings over the years is an effort to establish a connection to God or some other divine truth, or at least a higher level of meaning and reality. The three pillars of Ottoman art style —time, space, and blindness — are highlighted. The creative process of Islamic art was based on mimicry and reiteration. This is in stark contrast to the shallow imagination of contemporary art.

Orhan Pamuk painstakingly dismantles the Western concept of art, originality, style, and signature; the historiographic imperative is ever-present. The beautiful Ottoman miniature painting serves as a medium through which the novel's "form" and "meaning" combine as Pamuk shows, through tiny art, that the Eastern creative heritage places a higher priority on "meaning" than on "form," in contrast to the European

portraiture approach, which stresses form above meaning. The narrative's concept of "signature/style" is made clear through discussions on Eastern and Western concepts of art and, by extension, "individuality." Because it depicts God's perspective on the world, Islamic art possesses depth and does not require a signature, as identity is intrinsic to the art. In this tradition, a signature is seen as lacking. The Western artists of the Renaissance and later invented the concepts of signature and style to mask the shallowness of their work. Contradictions are Pamuk's strong suit. He uses the Eastern figure, Elegant, and the Western figure, Enishte, to illustrate the two competing understandings of tradition. This puts a stop to both of these extreme examples of art.

Works Cited

- Assmann, J. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Bozdoğan, S., and R. Kasaba, editors. *Rethinking Modernity and Nationalism in Turkey*. U of Washington P, 1997.
- Dufft, C. *Turkish Literature and Cultural Memory: "Multiculturalism" as a Literary Theme after 1980*. Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009.
- Erdag Göknar, E. "Translating Orhan Pamuk: Temporal Fragmentation and the Archive of Modernity." *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2007, pp. 321-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14752620701633931>.
- Göknar, E. *Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel*. Routledge, 2013.
- . *Literature and Cultural Memory*. Brill, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004346350>.
- Pamuk, O. *The Black Book*. Translated by M. Freely, Penguin UK, 2015.
- . *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. Faber & Faber, 2011.
- . *The Museum of Innocence*. Translated by M. Freely, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.
- . *The Museum of Innocence: A Novel*. Vintage, 2010.
- . *My Name Is Red*. Translated by E. M. Göknar, Vintage International, 2001.
- . *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*. Penguin UK, 2012.
- Rehm, D. "Orhan Pamuk." *Conversations with Orhan Pamuk*, 2024, pp. 112-16.
- Smith, A. "Nobel Foundation Telephone Interview with Orhan Pamuk." *Conversations with Orhan Pamuk*, 2024, pp. 71-74.
- White, H. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1980, pp. 5-27.