

Voices from the Margin: Narrative Multiplicity and the Construction of Social Identity in Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* employs a radical narrative strategy—giving voice to humans, objects, and even colors—to interrogate the complex interplay between culture, belief, and social identity in 16th-century Ottoman Istanbul. This article, “Voices from the Margin: Narrative Multiplicity and the Construction of Social Identity in Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*,” explores how Pamuk's polyphonic structure dismantles hierarchical epistemologies and challenges monologic constructions of identity. By granting narrative agency to marginal entities—a murdered miniaturist, a gold coin, a tree, and the color red itself—Pamuk foregrounds the instability and multiplicity inherent in social and cultural selfhood. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and postcolonial critiques of center-periphery dynamics, the study argues that narrative multiplicity in the novel functions as a subversive tool that decenters dominant ideologies, particularly those surrounding Islamic orthodoxy, artistic representation, and Ottoman cosmopolitanism. The tension between Persian miniature tradition and Western portraiture becomes a metaphor for competing modes of seeing and being, reflecting broader anxieties about cultural authenticity and external influence. Through this kaleidoscopic narration, Pamuk reveals identity not as a fixed essence but as a contested, performative, and dialogic process shaped by history, art, and power. The article further contends that marginalized voices in the novel symbolize the silenced pluralities within Ottoman society, offering an alternative historiography that resists singular narratives of nation or faith. Ultimately, *My Name Is Red* emerges as a profound meditation on how social identity is constructed, fractured, and reimaged through storytelling itself.

Keywords: Narrative multiplicity, Social identity, Heteroglossia, Ottoman culture, Marginality, Postcolonial literature.

1. Introduction

Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* (1998) is a masterful synthesis of historical fiction, philosophical inquiry, and postmodern narrative experimentation. Set in Istanbul during the final years of Sultan Murat III's reign (1591), the novel unfolds as a murder mystery among a community of Ottoman miniaturists commissioned to produce a secret illustrated manuscript in the Venetian style. What distinguishes the novel, however, is not merely its plot but its radical narrative structure: the story is told through a chorus of voices—human, non-human, and even metaphysical—including a murdered miniaturist, the color red, a gold coin, a tree, Satan, and the Islamic concept of *nazar* (the evil eye) (Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* 23, 39, 87). This polyphonic form challenges the conventions of Western realism and reconfigures the very act of storytelling within an Islamic aesthetic framework.

In Pamuk's literary trajectory, *My Name Is Red* represents a pivotal moment. Following the introspective modernism of *The Black Book* and preceding the global reach of *Snow* and *Museum of Innocence*, this novel crystallizes his enduring preoccupations: the tension between Eastern and Western artistic traditions, the melancholic legacy of Ottoman modernity, and the ethical dimensions of representation. As Erdag Göknar observes, Pamuk “transforms the historical novel into a site of epistemological contestation, where voice itself becomes a political act” (*Orhan Pamuk and the Good Word* 78).

The central problem this article addresses is the erasure of marginal perspectives in dominant historiographies—particularly those shaped by both Ottoman imperial ideology and Western Orientalist discourse. Pamuk counters this exclusion by deploying narrative multiplicity as a decolonial strategy. His granting of narrative agency to ostensibly “silent” or “inanimate” entities disrupts the anthropocentric and hierarchical logic of traditional historiography, revealing social identity not as a fixed essence but as a contested and dialogic construct.

This article argues that *My Name Is Red* deconstructs fixed notions of cultural and social identity by centering voices from the epistemic margins. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*—the coexistence of multiple social languages within a single text—and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, the study interprets Pamuk's polyphony as an ethical intervention in cultural memory. As Bakhtin notes, the novel “becomes a stage for the struggle of social forces,” where no single voice holds final authority (*Dialogic Imagination* 263). Pamuk amplifies this struggle by allowing objects, colors, and corpses to speak, thereby subverting both the Orientalist gaze and the unitary voice of state-sanctioned history.

The article's original contribution lies in demonstrating how Pamuk's narrative form enacts a postcolonial politics of voice. Rather than treating multiplicity as mere stylistic play, the analysis shows how it functions as a mode of historical reparation—one that restores agency to the silenced and reimagines identity as plural, relational, and perpetually in dialogue. The paper first establishes the theoretical framework, then examines non-human narrators as sites of cultural critique, followed by an analysis of human marginals (Shekure, Black, the murdered Elegant Effendi), and concludes by situating the novel within contemporary debates on decolonizing knowledge and narrative justice.

2. Theoretical Framework

Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* deploys a radical narrative architecture that demands interpretation not as postmodern play alone, but as a deliberate epistemological and ethical intervention. Central to understanding this strategy is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of **heteroglossia**—the coexistence of multiple social languages, worldviews, and ideological positions within a single literary text. For Bakhtin, the novel is “a dialogic arena where no single voice holds final authority,” and meaning emerges through the tension between competing discourses (*Dialogic Imagination* 263). Pamuk's novel—narrated by fourteen distinct voices, including a murdered miniaturist, the color red, a gold coin, a dog, a tree, Satan, and even Death itself—exemplifies this heteroglossic principle. These narrators are not mere stylistic flourishes; they are autonomous, unfinalized subjects whose perspectives resist consolidation into a singular, authoritative account. This **polyphony**—another key Bakhtinian term—challenges the monologic tradition of Western realism, wherein the authorial voice dominates and marginalizes alternative ontologies (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 60–63). In *My Name Is Red*, even inanimate objects speak with interiority, reflecting an Islamic aesthetic tradition in which the material world is imbued with spiritual and narrative potential. This polyphonic form directly counters the reductive logic of **Orientalism**, as articulated by Edward Said. Said argues that Western discourse constructed the “Orient” as a silent, static, and monolithic Other, stripped of internal complexity and historical agency (*Orientalism* 3–6). Pamuk subverts this by presenting sixteenth-century Ottoman Istanbul not as a passive object of Western gaze but as a vibrant, self-interrogating society embroiled in debates over art, faith, sovereignty, and cultural identity. As Erdag Göknar observes, Pamuk “refuses the position of native informant and instead offers a world narrated from within, by its own constituents—human and non-human alike” (*Orhan Pamuk and the Good Word* 82). The miniature workshop becomes a microcosm of this internal heterogeneity, where master illustrators argue over the morality of Venetian portraiture, the nature of divine vision, and the soul of artistic tradition.

Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the “**third space**” of cultural hybridity further illuminates the novel's thematic core. The miniature itself—particularly the contested act of depicting the human face—functions as a hybrid site where Islamic abstraction and European realism collide, producing what Bhabha calls “a discursive condition of enunciation that is not fixed in the past” (*Location of Culture* 37). The murderer's identity—revealed as Olive, torn between devotion to tradition and fascination with Western individualism—emerges from this ambivalent interstice.

Finally, scholars such as Aamir Mufti and Göknar position Pamuk within “world literature” not as a universalist but as a decolonial voice who re-centers non-Western epistemologies through form. For Mufti, Pamuk's narrative multiplicity enacts a “refusal of epistemic subordination” (*Enlightenment in the Colony* 214), while Göknar argues that Pamuk “restores voice to the silenced not through content but through the very structure of narration” (*Orhan Pamuk and the Good Word* 85). Together, these theories frame *My Name Is Red* as a literary project that decolonizes the novel itself—making multiplicity not an aesthetic choice, but a politics of representation.

3. Discussion

3.1 De-Centering the Human: Non-Human Narrators as Agents of Cultural Critique

Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* radically destabilizes anthropocentric and imperial narratives by granting narrative agency to entities traditionally deemed inert or voiceless: colors, trees, coins, dogs, and even Satan. Among the novel's most arresting narrators are “Red,” “The Tree,” and “The Coin”—figures that speak not only as witnesses but as philosophical subjects with interiority, memory, and affect. Through this narrative strategy, Pamuk critiques both the Western humanist tradition, which locates meaning exclusively in the rational human subject, and imperial historiography, which silences non-dominant ontologies. As the color Red declares: “I'm so fortunate to be red! I'm fiery. I'm strong. I know men take notice of me and that I cannot be resisted” (Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* 40). This assertion of selfhood transcends metaphor; it enacts an epistemological shift wherein objects possess *nafs*—a concept from Islamic thought denoting the soul or inner life.

The voice of Red is particularly emblematic of the novel's cultural tensions. Red describes itself as both “shy” and “proud,” a duality that mirrors the aesthetic and theological conflict central to the novel: the Islamic preference for abstraction versus the Venetian obsession with individualized realism. In Ottoman miniature painting, color is not merely decorative but ontological—it conveys spiritual essence rather than mimetic appearance. Red's lament—“Color is the touch of the eye, music to the deaf, a word out of the darkness” (41)—invokes a Sufi-inflected worldview in which sensory perception is a path to divine knowledge. This stands in stark contrast to the Frankish method, which, as Enishte observes, “depicts what's seen at street level... taking in his bed, quilt, desk, mirror” (248), thereby centering the human ego as the measure of all things. By allowing Red to articulate its own metaphysics, Pamuk decenters the human gaze and affirms an aesthetic tradition in which meaning inheres in the object itself, not in its resemblance to reality.

Similarly, “The Tree” speaks not as a botanical specimen but as a symbol yearning for transcendence: “I don't want to be a tree, I want to be its meaning” (25). This aspiration reflects the miniature tradition's emphasis on *ma'na* (meaning) over *sura* (form)—a principle rooted in Islamic iconography that privileges spiritual essence over physical likeness. The Tree's voice echoes Sufi notions of *tajalli* (divine manifestation), wherein creation is a mirror of divine attributes. In this framework, even inanimate things participate in a cosmic dialogue with the Creator. Pamuk's inclusion of such voices thus recuperates an indigenous Ottoman-Islamic epistemology that modernity and Westernization have rendered marginal.

This ontological pluralism directly challenges the Western humanist subject, whose sovereignty depends on the silencing of non-human agency. As Bill Brown argues in his formulation of “thing theory,” objects become visible as “things” only when

they disrupt human instrumentalization and assert their own presence (“*Thing Theory*” 4–5). Pamuk anticipates this insight by dramatizing moments when objects refuse to remain passive: the Coin boasts of its “twenty-two-carat” Ottoman purity (128); the Dog defends its moral intelligence against human irrationality (89); and even Death narrates with lyrical authority (221). These voices collectively dismantle the Cartesian hierarchy that positions man as the sole bearer of reason and narrative. Critically, Pamuk does not treat this multiplicity as mere postmodern play. As Erdag Göknar observes, “Pamuk’s polyphony is an ethical gesture—it restores voice to what imperial and Orientalist discourses have rendered mute” (*Orhan Pamuk and the Good Word* 84). By centering non-human narrators, the novel enacts a postcolonial historiography from within, one that refuses the Orientalist trope of the silent, static East. Instead, Istanbul emerges as a world alive with talking things—a cosmology where agency is distributed, identity is relational, and meaning is never the monopoly of man.

3.2. Marginalized Voices and the Politics of Representation

Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* constructs a polyphonic Istanbul not through a centralized historical narrative but through the competing testimonies of socially and ideologically marginal figures: Black, the returning exile; Shekure, the twice-widowed woman navigating patriarchal constraint; and Elegant Effendi, the murdered gilder whose voice opens the novel from beyond the grave. Each narrator speaks from a position of vulnerability, yet their voices collectively dismantle the illusion of a monolithic Ottoman society, revealing instead a world riven by internal debate over art, faith, gender, and cultural identity. In doing so, Pamuk demonstrates that identity in this context is not inherited but *narrated*—and fiercely contested—through the very act of storytelling.

Shekure’s chapters are among the novel’s most subversive. As a woman whose social existence depends on the legal fiction of marriage—first to a soldier presumed dead, and later to Black—she operates within a system that treats her as property. Yet her narrative voice is strikingly pragmatic, emotionally nuanced, and self-consciously strategic. She recounts how she “played the grieving daughter” after her father’s murder to manipulate public perception (Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* 142), and how she uses Esther, the Jewish matchmaker, as an emissary to control information flow. Unlike the male narrators who obsess over style or divine vision, Shekure focuses on survival: “What kind of living do you expect to earn? Will you be able to care for my fatherless children?” (138). Her questions expose the material realities obscured by metaphysical debates about art. As Erdag Göknar observes, “Shekure’s voice reclaims agency not through rebellion but through narrative cunning—a form of resistance embedded in the texture of everyday life” (*Orhan Pamuk and the Good Word* 88). In a literary tradition often dominated by male introspection, her chapters function as a feminist counter-discourse that insists: women, too, are authors of history.

Elegant Effendi, though physically absent after the opening pages, haunts the novel as the embodiment of the conservative artisan class. A master gilder trained in the classical Ottoman miniature tradition, he fears that Enishte Effendi’s commission—illustrated in the Frankish style—“desecrates everything our Prophet forbade” (Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* 195). His murder is not merely a crime of passion but a literalization of the violence inherent in cultural transition. As Anna Kortepeter notes, “Elegant’s death marks the moment when aesthetic dissent becomes mortal—when the stakes of representation are no longer philosophical but existential” (124). His voice, speaking from the well as a corpse, introduces the novel’s central tension: Is innovation heresy or evolution? His marginality lies not in status—he is respected—but in his ideological rigidity, which renders him obsolete in a world shifting toward hybridity.

The novel’s murderer, Olive, occupies the most conflicted margin of all: that of the artist torn between collective tradition and individual desire. Trained by Master Osman in the Herat school, Olive secretly yearns for the Frankish emphasis on individual style—a longing he calls “a disease of the soul” (Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* 207). His confession reveals the psychological cost of this split: “After I killed that miserable excuse of a man... I drew better, I made use of brighter and bolder colors” (208). His violence is not born of fanaticism but of aesthetic despair—fear that in a world demanding individuality, he lacks the courage to be seen. As Levent Toker argues, “Olive represents the tragedy of the post-traditional artist: one who knows the old forms intimately but cannot believe in them, yet lacks the audacity to invent new ones” (205).

Together, these voices create what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a **dialogic** Istanbul—one where no single ideology holds sway. Black’s hybrid humanism (shaped by Tabriz and European prints), Shekure’s embodied pragmatism, Elegant’s orthodox conservatism, and Olive’s tormented individualism coexist in unresolved tension. This heterogeneity refutes both Orientalist portrayals of Ottoman society as static and nationalist myths of cultural purity. Instead, Pamuk presents identity as a *process of enunciation*, continuously shaped through narrative contestation.

Ultimately, *My Name Is Red* insists that who we are depends on who gets to speak—and how. In granting voice to the widow, the exile, the corpse, and the murderer, Pamuk performs an ethical act of historical reparation. Identity, in this vision, is never given. It is narrated, revised, and reclaimed—one voice at a time.

4. Conclusion

Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* ultimately redefines the boundaries of historical and literary representation by deploying narrative multiplicity as both an aesthetic innovation and an ethical imperative. Through a chorus of voices—human and non-human, living and dead—Pamuk dismantles epistemic hierarchies that have long privileged the rational, male, human subject as the sole arbiter of meaning. The color Red, the murdered Elegant Effendi, the widowed Shekure, and even a gold coin each claim narrative authority, transforming the novel into a democratized space where silenced perspectives are restored and

recentered. This polyphony does not merely diversify the cast of narrators; it challenges the very logic of Orientalist and imperial historiography, which reduces complex societies to monolithic, passive objects of Western scrutiny. Crucially, Pamuk resists the temptation to romanticize tradition or uncritically embrace modernity. Instead, he stages their collision as a generative—and often violent—site of identity formation. The miniature workshop becomes a microcosm of this tension: tradition is not static reverence but a living, contested practice; modernity is not liberation but a destabilizing force that fractures subjectivity. The murderer Olive, torn between loyalty to the Herat school and desire for individual style, embodies this crisis. His tragedy lies not in choosing one over the other, but in being unable to reconcile them within a world demanding allegiance to a single truth. In this light, *My Name Is Red* functions as a form of **postcolonial historiography**—one that decenters the state, the sultan, and the master artist to foreground the testimonies of the marginal: corpses whispering from wells, women navigating patriarchal constraint, colors voicing their spiritual essence. As Erdag Göknar observes, Pamuk “writes history from the inside out,” restoring agency to those rendered voiceless by both Ottoman orthodoxy and Western discourse (*Orhan Pamuk and the Good Word* 86).

This approach resonates powerfully in contemporary debates on the **decolonization of knowledge** and the **ethics of representation**. At a moment when global literary studies seeks to move beyond Eurocentric canons, Pamuk’s novel offers a model of narrative justice rooted in plurality and dialogue. In an era dominated by algorithmic narratives and curated digital identities—where selfhood is often reduced to data points and binary profiles—Pamuk’s polyphonic world stands as a vital reminder: identity is not singular, but plural; not fixed, but contested; not declared, but always in dialogue.

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