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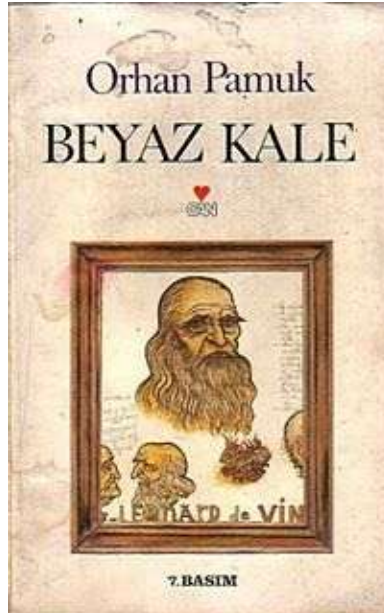
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## “Why am I what I am?”: Hoja’s Impatience at Turkish Identity in Orhan Pamuk’s *The White Castle*

Abdur Rahman Shahin, M.A. in English



### Abstract

The quest for identity is a human predicament in this universe which is also pervasive in Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The White Castle*. Hoja, the protagonist of this novel, was searching for Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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a stable identity and finally he exchanged his vulnerable identity with the Italian scholar who was captured as a slave in the hand of Turkish Ottoman sultan. In Pamuk's other novels, this change of identity takes place for romantic notion or getting a new life but in *The White Castle* Hoja changed his identity being impatient at the foolish activities of Ottoman pashas and sultans. Hoja was the imperial astrologer who had to answer of many questions about science and the world. However, with his European slave, Hoja designed an enormous iron weapon for the sultan that eventually failed and consequently he was going to face execution. As, he shares the strong physical resemblance with the European captive scholar, finally he accepts his slave's identity to get rid of this execution order of the Ottoman sultan. But the mystery is that Hoja and the slave were capable of knowing the thought of each other, even the intimate secret of their lives and finally they easily succeeded to change their identity. Michael McGaha, a prominent critic of Pamuk's novels, says in his book *Autobiographies of Orhan Pamuk* that the master in *The White Castle* could not tolerate being himself, or being Turkish, so he exchanged identities with his Italian slave. The aim of this paper is to explore the reasons of Hoja's intolerance to his Turkish identity that finally compelled him to change it. In fact, the gloomy oppressive relationship with the sultan during the Ottoman Empire in 17<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul impelled this imperial astrologer to exploit his slave's identity.

**Key words:** Identity changing, Ottoman Legacy, Westerner, Turkish intelligentsia, Sultan, Pasha.



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## Introduction:

Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* (1985), tells us the story of a young Italian scholar who was imprisoned by pirates and brought to the Istanbul slave market for auction. He is bought by a Turkish pasha who gives him to Hoja who wanted to learn Western technological developments and at one stage, their relationship becomes more complex than master and slave because both of them were engaged by the sultan and in this way they faced the interrogation of identity in this novella. From the very beginning, Hoja was showing his disliking towards the activities of the Pashas and the Sultans for their too much depending on the astrology and the illogical interpretation of the dream. He also disliked them because they showed very little interest in science and scientific research for inventing different wonders by which they could upgrade their life styles. He thought of them to be foolish and childish as they used to spend much time on hunting and gossiping. As he was a Turk, he did not like all these imperial meaningless activities though Hoja spent a long period there for getting appreciation from the sultan by doing many unnecessary activities. The events of this story take place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Turkey and at that time, Hoja wanted to learn Western science and technology from the Western slave. But the Ottoman sultan didn't show interest to establish the observatory or the house of the science rather he used to remain busy with silly ideas in a playful manner.

Consequently, Hoja faced the most fundamental and individual question of his life- "Why am I what I am?" From then he started suffering from identity crisis. That is why, Hoja could not tolerate his being a Turkish and when he got the opportunity to change his identity, he did it spontaneously. Through this novella, allegorically, Orhan Pamuk highlights the evil of oppression during the Ottoman Empire for which Turkish scholars preferred to flee from that territory. In the hand of Ottoman sultan, Hoja lost his own identity and to regain this lost self, he ran away to Italy with a changed identity.

## Analysis

The story begins with the Venetian slave and the Ottoman Hoja who at last adopted the slave's identity for rescuing himself. In fact, this Venetian was an Italian scholar who was given to Hoja so that he could teach him everything he knew. But very soon they began to despise one another and they try to establish them as distinct by making use of different

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hierarchies. In this attempt, Hoja faced a fundamental question of life: “Why am I what I am?” (Pamuk 48) This basic question about one’s own identity reflects the notion of a fatal dissatisfaction which finally leads him to the thought of changing his identity. Mysteriously Hoja and the Italian slave were very similar to look at. But their physical similarity is a crucial question that must be solved to get them as individual. So, their gradual learning from each other proves that they are getting changed slowly. Hande Gurses states in an article that “ the interchangeability of the Venetian and Hoja not only illustrates the fragility of the identity, but also shows how the East and the West cannot be defined through binary oppositions due to the blurriness of the line that separates them” (JTL-114).

However, in the first paragraph of this novella, Pamuk utters his obsession with the term ‘change’. We hear the slave says that, “In later years I often thought that this moment of cowardice changed my whole life.” (Pamuk 5) So, the demon of inevitable perception of the changing identity came to his mind just after being captured by the pirates. The slave thinks that, “Many people believe that no life is determined in advance, that all stories are essentially a chain of coincidences, when they look back, that events they once took for chance were really inevitable.” (Pamuk 5) In this way, the issue of identity changing under different crucial moments of life is considered unavoidable in the novels of Orhan Pamuk.

In *The White Castle*, the sultan and the pashas are depicted in a way that they are far away from the European scientific advancement and they only depend on the foretelling for their policy making and they utterly depend upon the comment of the imperial astrologers. The slave arriving at Istanbul says that “Istanbul was indeed a beautiful city, but that here one must be a master, not a slave” (Pamuk 9). As a slave, he could understand that being a master, not a slave, is more important to enjoy the beauty of Istanbul. His consciousness of being a slave shakes the perception of identity when he is in a new country. He cannot but think to be happy there and he could feel that only the master would be happy there, not the slave. So, the question of identity is linked to the sense of happiness. It also can be said that with the identity of a slave, the Venetian scholar was not satisfied there. In this way, both of them were searching for the meaning of their identity but not within themselves but somewhere else. The narrator says at the end of the novel:

But we should search for the strange and surprising in the world, not

within ourselves! To search within, to think so long and hard about our own

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selves, would only make us unhappy. This is what had happened to the characters of my story: for this reason heroes could never tolerate being themselves, for this reason they always wanted to be someone else. (Pamuk 139)

The same thing happened to Hoja who was searching happiness being with the sultans and getting favor from them but finally he could realize his mistake and changed the identity with his slave and moved towards Italy. The slave was afraid of losing his own identity after seeing his master Hoja who physically alike him and the slave thought that Hoja may steal his identity. What was important to Hoja is the ‘Westernness’ of his slave and he “desperately wants to understand the secret of the slave’s identity as a Westerner.” (Mcgaha 95) Hoja could feel the difference between Turkish people and the Western and he was searching to know in which way they are different from them. Hoja asked the slave a very fundamental question about his identity saying, “Why am I what I am?” To give the answer of this question, the slave took time and finally he could not give his master any satisfactory reply. Mcgaha writes in his book:

Historians have often argued that the development of a confident sense of personal identity, based on self-awareness and introspection, was concomitant with the rise of individualism, which occurred in Western Europe during the Renaissance but only much later- perhaps as late as the mid-nineteenth century-in the backward Orient. (95)

So, Orhan Pamuk in this novella focuses the question of identity of the Turkish people which is not only a contemporary issue rather since the Ottoman Empire; they had to face this interrogation concerned with identity. Through the character of Hoja and his Venetian slave, Pamuk shows us the predicament of the Ottoman Turks who were searching their identity in the satisfaction of the pashas and sultans. Failing to do that, they started thinking about the Western values rendered by the scientific inventions. That’s why at the end of the novella, Hoja interchanged his identity with the slave who was more knowledgeable and educated than Hoja. Hoja ordered the slave to write down why he was what he was and the Italian slave simply wrote down that because of his good and bad experiences of life. This dissatisfied the master. But later he would use the information ‘to usurp the slave’s identity’ (Mcgaha 95).

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As, the Western nation shows a tremendous fascination towards science, Hoja felt inclined to know more about them from his slave. Because Hoja could realize working with the sultan that “Esaterners are fatalistic, resigned to what they view as God’s will, whereas Westerners struggle relentlessly to stave off the inevitability of death”, and consequently he became more dissatisfied with the childish activities of the sultans and pashas. (Mcgaha 96) Hoja’s need to change his identity with the Western slave was his interest to know the West more closely. And at the same time, he had no way to save himself except changing the identity as he knew the measurable fate of the former Imperial Astrologer in that typical situation like him; they had been murdered.

Once Hoja was afraid of being affected by the plague and when his slave told him that plague is a contagious disease and not to go outside of the house, Hoja then replied that:

He didn’t fear the plague; disease was God’s will, if a man was fated to die he would die; for this reason it was useless to talk cowardly nonsense as I did about shutting oneself up in one’s house and serving relations with the outside or trying to escape from Istanbul. If it was written, so it would come to pass, death would find us. (Pamuk 61)

For the Oriental setting, Hoja who knows about scientific explanation of disease, asserted the traditional belief like other Turkish people who don’t believe in preventive caution. Later, he admitted all of his shortcomings in his knowledge of science and modern medical approaches that were in Europe more advanced. Gradually, Hoja tried to know so many things from his slave and he tried to have courage from him. Spending a long time together, Hoja succeeded to understand what his slave was thinking about him. Changing of the identity began to take place from then when Hoja was dependent on his slave for the consolation of getting rid of the plague. Pamuk describes that “he said he had taken possession of my spirit; just as a moment before he’d mirrored my movements, whatever I was thinking now, he knew it, and whatever I knew, he was thinking it.” (Pamuk 71) From Hoja’s part the spiritual transformation started here when he says, “Now I am like you...I knew your fear. I have become you!”(Pamuk 72)

The idea of identity changing started in Hoja when he thought himself very wick and became tired of the meaningless treaties with the sultans. Being affected with the fear of plague, he

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started living in the house and spent time with his slave and concentrated on their physical similarities looking in the mirror together and he could perceive that the previous life of the slave was more happier in Italy than Hoja's life here and still a better life is waiting for the slave in his native land if he can go back there. But considering his miserable and dissatisfied relationship with the sultan, he thought of changing his identity with the slave. In the sixth chapter of *The White Castle*, The Venetian slave talks about the Hoja's thought of changing his identity:

He spoke for a while about how he wanted to pick up from where I had left off. We were still standing half-naked in front of the mirror. He was going to take my place, I his, and to accomplish this it would be enough for us to exchange clothes and for him to cut his beard while I left mine to grow. This thought made our resemblance in the mirror even more horrible, and my nerves grew taut as I heard him say that I would then make a freedman of him: he spoke exultantly of what he would do when he returned to my country in my place. I was terrified to realize he remembered everything I had told him about my childhood and youth, down to the smallest detail, and from these details had constructed an odd and fantastical land to his own taste. My life was beyond my control, it was being dragged elsewhere in his hands, and I felt there was nothing for me to do but passively watch what happened to me from the outside, as if I were dreaming. But the trip he was going to make to my country as me and the life he was going to live there had a strangeness and naïveté that prevented me from believing it completely (Pamuk 72-73)

In fact, during the illness of Hoja, he found no alternative except changing his identity. Moreover, he was exhausted about his "false predictions, the sultan's stupidity and worse, his ingratitude, about his own beloved fools, 'us' and 'them', about how he wanted to be someone else." (Pamuk 74) So, all these complexities compelled Hoja to like the identity of his slave whose life was more peaceful in Europe where people don't depend on prediction and interpretation of the dream and stars. The slave says that, "he kept repeating that I was he and he was I. He's doing this because he enjoys going outside himself, observing himself

from a distance.” (Pamuk 74) So, Hoja was obsessed on his identity changing by which he wanted to live in happiness in Italy with the disguise of the Venetian slave.

When sultan asked him “when this plague would end, how many more lives it would take, whether or not his own life was in danger” (Pamuk 77), Hoja was very much excited and he took time saying that it would take time to work from the stars. He danced home wildly and was thinking “how to manipulate the sultan’s interest to his own advantages”. (Pamuk 77) Because Hoja knew it very well “prediction is buffoonery, but it can be well used to influence fools” (Pamuk 78), he tried to know from his slave about what to do for stopping the plague. The entire city was divided into two groups on the issue of whether lifting the health caution or not to eradicate the plague from the city. After one month, Hoja was appointed as Imperial Astrologer when the former Imperial Astrologer Sitki Efenfi was found dead. After this, there developed a more close relationship between the sultan and Hoja. He told that “he’d soon have the sultan in the palm of his hand” and he described to his slave how, “he had seduced the sovereign’s mind while interpreting his dream.” (Pamuk 91) In this way, they wanted the sultan “to be interested in our science after he took control of the government...exploited his nightmares towards this end.” (Pamuk 91) Moreover, they were trying to influence the sultan to make a weapon or establish an observatory or a house of science in the kingdom. Then the slave observed closely the inactivity of the sultan with his dreams and his hunting excursion. But they wanted to help the sultan by making him more active by increasing his interest in science and scientific explanation of everything. They had a great plan to save the kingdom from the ruin but the most important task is to motivate sultan and his other people around him. Unfortunately they found that “the idiots here don’t even realize this.” (ibid 94) Then Hoja, finally, raised the question that “was it mere coincidence that so many fools were collected together in one place or was it inevitable? Why are they so stupid?” (ibid 94)

Following these meaningless activities of the sultan, Hoja became frustrated. He just could not bear the burden of all these meaningless questions and ridiculous replies from the interpreters. Sultan asked questions to Hoja that:

“Whether or not animals had souls, if so which ones, and which would go to heaven and which to hell, whether mussels were male or female, whether the sun that rises each morning is a new sun or simply the same sun that sets in the morning on the other side?” (ibid 96)

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These entire primitive questions prove that the sultan's knowledge of science is so poor and misleading.

To rescue the sultan and the Ottoman Empire from its fall, both Hoja and his slave collaboratively wrote down a book that tells the story of defeat and its fatal consequences. After reading the book, the sultan ordered Hoja to start work on that incredible weapon. And at last, the sultan discovered it that the slave was teaching everything to his master Hoja. From then till to the end of this novella, sultan concentrated on the Venetian slave and he always used to keep the slave beside him. This gave Hoja the opportunity to work devotedly on super weapon project but simultaneously it brought the gap between Hoja and the sultan. In this way, the Italian slave occupied the place of the Hoja in the palace. When they, finally moved towards the white castle and sultan ordered Hoja to use the weapon in the war, that canon proved to be useless. This massacre made the sultan furious and ordered to kill Hoja for his failure. Hoja, somehow, managed to come to his home where he met his slave and then they finally exchanged their identity and Hoja ran away towards Italy. Hoja "was rushing about like someone about to leave on a journey". (Pamuk 129) At last, they changed their clothes and Hoja became the Italian slave. The slave describes:

We exchanged clothes without haste and without speaking. I gave him my ring and the medallion I'd managed to keep from him all these years. Inside it there was a picture of my grand-mother's mother and a lock of my fiancée's hair that had gone white; I believed he liked it; he put it around his neck. Then he left the tent and was gone. I watched him slowly disappear in the silent fog. It was getting light. Exhausted, I lay down in his bed and slept peacefully. (Pamuk 130)

In the midst of thick fog, Hoja escaped to Italy where he was pretending the role of Venetian slave successfully. Later the Italian slave could know that Hoja is doing there very well. He was delivering lectures, writing books and leading a happy life over there. And now it was the Venetian's part to play the role of Hoja and to convince the sultan that he was the real Hoja.

Considering the Ottoman sultan's childlike foolish treatment of everything, disinterest in science, and the whimsical order to interpret the dream, Hoja considered them as stupid and

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fool. During the beginning of his career, Hoja made endless effort to please the pasha with the hope of getting favor from him. But later the silly questions asked by the sultan made him tired and he thought that the sultan knows very little about the universe. In fact, Hoja showed his dissatisfaction on the total Turkish perception of the world. The child king began to ask questions, and Hoja to find answers for them. He asks:

How did the stars stay in the air? They hung from the transparent spheres!  
What were the spheres made of? Of an invisible material, so they were invisible too! Didn't they bump into one another? No, each had its own zone, layered as in the model. There were so many stars, why weren't there as many spheres? Because they are very far away! How far? Very, very! Did the other stars have bells that rang when they turned? No, we attached the bells to mark each complete revolution of the stars! Did thunder have any relation to this? None! What did it relate to? Rain! Was it going to rain tomorrow? Observation of the sky showed it would not! What did the sky reveal about the sultan's ailing lion? It was going to get better, but one must be patient, and so on. (Pamuk 32)

These questions made Hoja bored and he thought of the less knowledge of the sultan but he must answer of all these. Basically, the education of the Turkish people in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was not so update like the Europe; they depended for the bright future on the observation of the stars in the sky. They believed in many superstitions and didn't like the scientific explanation of the incidents. The sultan asked that, "How many cubs will this lion give birth to, how many will be male, how many female?" Hoja had to predict of all these questions without knowing what is going to happen really. Allegorically the sultan's poor knowledge and his foolishness represent the condition of the Turkish people of 17<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire. All these things motivated him to take the Identity of the Venetian slave who enlightened the dark world of Hoja with various new scientific and medical concepts that Hoja never knew before. Then Hoja tells him that, "it was necessary to build an observatory to watch the stars; like that observatory his grandfather Ahmet the First's grandfather, Murat the Third, had built for the late Takiyuddin Efendi ninety years ago, and which later fell into ruin from neglect". (Pamuk 34) This is how the Turks neglected the scientific study from many days ago and there started decline of the Ottoman Empire.

Then, Hoja explained why the sultan and his people in the palace were fool. He says:

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Because they were ‘fools’ they didn’t look at the stars moving over their heads and reflect on them, because they were fools they asked first what was the good of the thing they were about to learn, because they were fools they were interested not in details but in summaries, because they were fools they were all alike, and so on. (Pamuk 34-35)

Even, they killed the previous astrologer who was close to the sultan like Hoja. They came to know that the body of the Imperial Astrologer Huseyn Efendi had been found floating by the shores of Istinye. So, in this way some times the imperial astrologers engaged into disagreement with the pashas and they had to die in an inhuman way because the office of imperial astrologer was an “inauspicious one as was clear from the fact that all who occupied it were murdered sooner or later, or worse, vanished into thin air” (Pamuk 40). For all these meaningless heinous activities, Hoja was anxious about his own fate. And gradually Hoja decided to change his identity and finally, leaving his own country he went to Italy.

## Conclusion

This is how, Orhan Pamuk depicts the weakness of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire where the people of the harem were busy in different intrigues and they were deprived of the light of education which could enlighten their hearts. Haliloglu writes in her article that, “the uneasy relationship between a distrusting public and the Turkish scholar keeps surfacing throughout the novel with the Hoja referring to his pupils and staff repeatedly as fools”. ( 115) However, Hoja at one point of his utter despair runs away in the presence of the Italian slave and he frequently thought that “Was it mere coincidence that so many fools were collected together in one place or was it inevitable? Why were they so stupid?” (Pamuk 94) Thus, Orhan Pamuk portrays the forefathers of the westernizing republican intelligentsia of Turkey and their administrative weaknesses. At last, Hoja became impatient with these “backward people” around him and also at the cruelty of the “oppressive sultan”. For all these reasons, Hoja felt suffocated in his Turkish identity and being frustrated at the foolish metaphysics of the Ottoman Empire, he finally changed the identity with his European slave.

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