

The Center of the World

Mikhail Bakhtin and Orhan Pamuk, Heteroglossia in My Name is Red

Katie Janson

In Mikhail Bakhtin's essay, "Discourse in the Novel," from his book *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin claims that traditional stylistics are inadequate as mediums to analyze the novel, as novels are a conglomeration of heterogeneous linguistic unities and do not follow one singular archetype of prose. These unities present in many different ways, such as dialogue from individual characters, the retelling of history or fable, shifting perspectives, or ekphrasis, and additionally are made up of different jargons, narration styles, dialects, and more. These variations in identity are referred to as genres of discourse by Bakhtin, and continually pendulum swing between the instinct to unify and self stratify. Heteroglossia is described as this dynamic relationship between parts of a whole, its intersecting, contrasting, overlapping, and supporting fabric the foundation of language, and successively, novelistic prose. Bakhtin states in brief, "the language of the novel is the system of its languages (Bakhtin 262)."

My Name is Red (2001) by Orhan Pamuk, translated from Turkish by Erdağ Göknar, is an excellent example of Mikhail Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" in action, using stylistic unities to showcase layers of both literary and geopolitical allegory. Unveiled at the height of the 16th century Ottoman Empire, *My Name is Red* places Istanbul at the center of a vibrant and dynamic world. The city is brought to life and bathed in full color through the many voices of the novel, developing under the backdrop of cultural change as the city's inhabitants grapple with Western influence and witness murders that ultimately expose unsavory truths about each other, bringing into question the validity and efficacy of religious fundamentalism. The carriers of this metaphor in the novel are the collective of miniaturist painters under commission of the Sultan, tasked with completing a controversial book rumored to display sacrilegious content and Venetian art inspiration. The consequences of the resulting dissension are the murder and maiming of each character. The desperate effort to catch the villain reveals the miniaturists all as imperfect followers of Islam, unable to halt the shifting cultural tides. As the novel comes to a close, the killer's capture seems nearly trivial as no one is able to escape some facet of guilt. The richness of the novel, the translation of time period, and its nuanced and provocative play with culture and religion is in part shaped by the tapestry of characters and literary tools of heteroglossia.

University of Oregon

Academic Journal

My Name is Red's system of languages is exhibited in its multitude of stylistic unities as every chapter is told from a different first-person perspective, and within the chapter's text, Pamuk often employs alternative narrative and descriptive elements as well. Each character in their telling of events and in their relation of the plot adds their own nuanced layers of understanding. The first section of the novel is narrated by a ghost, the first victim of the murderer and the collateral of cultural controversy. The ghost's unique position in the afterlife gives him the ability to set the scene before any of the other characters know what has transpired, and lays out the foundation of the novel, hinting at its grander motifs. He says that his death "conceals an appalling conspiracy against our religion, our traditions, and the way we see the world" (Pamuk 5). He also immediately provides a tantalizing challenge: to "find (his) murderer" (Pamuk 5). The ghost is able to incite what others in the story cannot, and has the insight only a ghost or the writer may have. With this capability, the ghost makes a personal and passionate plea that resonates with the early reader, taking advantage of the his unique voice as a device for narrative development.

The first character introduced in My Name is Red, besides the yet unknown murderer, is Eshinte. His narration displays his sympathy and awe of the Venetian art style as he takes on the responsibility of putting together the Sultan's potentially blasphemous book. He says that he has chosen several subjects for illustration by the other miniaturists, one subject being a dog, an animal with negative connotations in Islam. Eshinte says, "I wanted... the vulgarity of a dog to represent His Excellency Our Sultan and His Worldly realm" (Pamuk 25). His controversial inclusion of this subject matter is just one of the many indicators that Eshinte is the voice of Western affinity. His narration in the novel showcases just one facet of voice and presence in the tapestry of heteroglossia and our understanding of discourse in Pamuk's Istanbul.

Seemingly the antithesis to Eshinte is Master Osman, the head miniaturist of the royal workshop and someone with a very different view on the presence of Western influence and sacredness of tradition. Master Osman's perspective reflects the views of those in opposition to the Venetian art style and the Sultan's book, and his chapters are illuminating in describing the relationship Islam and history play in the community's relationships with art and other forms of culture. When looking at the secret book, Master Osman said the work aroused "violent disgust and hatred" (Pamuk 249). Having his insight as another narrative voice is the contrast to Eshinte, the push to his pull, a stratifying and unifying force of heteroglossia.

Pamuk's clever characters also do more than simply bringing forth alternative opinions,

University of Oregon

Academic Journal

many of them engage with further sub-stratifications of stylistic unities. For example, the ghost in the opening pages of *My Name is Red* uses the trope of breaking the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader saying, “I’ve ended up in the depths of this deplorable well! It could happen to you, be wary” (Pamuk 6). Addressing the reader is a literary device and just one of the many layers of stratification.

Shekure and Black also utilize the concept of stylistic unities in the chapters they narrate. Shekure in her position as a woman and as unacquainted with miniaturist art provides an additional, alternative system of language in contrast with her educated, respected male counterparts. She also mentions in the last chapter, “restless dreams... (of) strange creatures and women whose arms and legs had been severed”(Pamuk 405). Descriptions of dreams are yet another stratified layer and is one more component of the ubiquitous translation of story. Black, who seems to be a relatively neutral party recounted with very little emotion, uses ekphrasis as a linguistic tool to narrate. In one scene Black describes looking at “the legendary pages of the *The Book of Festivities*, which recounted the circumcision ceremonies of our Sultan’s prince” (Pamuk 56). Over the course of one page he uses the words “I saw” six times, and through his ekphrasis of the painting we see Christian infidels represented as pigs and Islam represented by the lion. Though Black himself isn’t particularly extremist, his translation of the painting still manages to convey the themes of the novel and his ekphrasis takes its place in the sub genres of heteroglossia. As Bakhtin says, “the world does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language but rather exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s interests” (Bakhtin 294). Every character and every perspective is a part of the crafting of this world.

Beyond individual voices, sub genres of language such as fable and history are also littered throughout Pamuk’s text. These mediums, while all under the same language, differ greatly in both syntax and reception by readers. In *My Name is Red*, the infamous story of Hüsrev and Shirin is referenced repeatedly, in which after wooing Shirin, Hüsrev is killed by his son and Shirin takes her own life. This tragedy’s inclusion in the novel adds to the mysterious and historical tone and when paralleled with Black and Shekure, depicted “in the same manner and color,” it further accentuates and foreshadows the two character’s destiny and misfortune (Pamuk 40).

Several times throughout *My Name is Red*, Pamuk breaks up his prose to incorporate fables and speeches delivered by his characters. Similarly to the story of Hüsrev and Shirin, these moments are also linguistic unities and are wielded as literary tools in

University of Oregon
Academic Journal

translating the narrative. Early on in the novel, the miniaturists are questioned by Black in his investigation of the murder. Black visits Olive last and prompts him to talk of painters and their connection to blindness. Olive launches into “Three Stories on Blindness and Memory,” in which Pamuk diverts from Olive’s usual speaking voice to take on an introspective quality associated with parables. Heteroglossia is at work in this scene as well, as between the pages of novelistic prose there lay a new speech pattern. This moment in the text is critical on two accounts, one, the reader is introduced to the idea of blindness as a form of religious effect, and second, before launching into the fable, Olive introduces a metaphor on the color black. Both of these reasons are important prefigurations of later events, namely Master Osman’s shocking ritualistic blinding and the connection of blackness with death before Olive is outed as the killer. Using the fable as method of delivery, the foreshadowing isn’t too on the nose, and the necessary concepts can be introduced in an aesthetic way that elicits contemplation and is evocative of the time period.

My Name is Red, while conceptually unified, is a heteroglot, comprising of an “expansive system” of stylistic unities (Bakhtin 288). Nothing represents this idea as concisely and effectively as the storyteller. The storyteller appears many times throughout the narrative at the coffeehouse, a location scandalous in and of itself as the Hoja of Erzurum has denounced the practice of drinking coffee. The storyteller delivers monologues impersonating various beings and objects such as a counterfeit coin, a dog, and Satan. Each monologue is introduced as if the narration is genuine, and the accompanying language and whims feel absurdly realistic. Each of these roles with their own unique stories and voices are all told by one person and all ultimately reflect a similar sentiment. Under the roof of the coffeehouse, poking fun at Islam’s “animosity towards dogs,” and playing a likable and humorous Satan, the story teller weaves a subversion of Islamic beliefs (Pamuk 13). The storyteller manages to incorporate many different stylistic unities all to centralize in the novel’s overall questioning of religious fundamentalism.

All of these examples, the dynamic facets of the whole, are seen in the many character voices, perspectives, fables, histories, ekphrases, dreams, and monologues, and combined are what directly comprises the text of My Name is Red. All of these heterogeneous linguistic unities conglomerated are the language of novelistic prose. Together they tell the story of Pamuk’s 16th century Istanbul, “all of the people and streets, objects and buildings (seeming)... to talk among themselves, interacting...a city of mosques and minarets, a medley of houses, streets, hills, bridges, and slopes- an entire world”

University of Oregon
Academic Journal

(Pamuk 2006). Bakhtin states that “actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of worlds” (Bakhtin 288). It’s difficult to separate these notions, to not see Pamuk’s visualization of Istanbul as the components of genre and subgenre intermingling within heteroglossia. Perhaps Pamuk’s Istanbul is a kind of metaphorical geographical heteroglossia, the streets alive with the many unities that define its identity. Heteroglossia is a centralizing process, and it is centralized in the body of a text. The novel *My Name is Red* recons with centralizing the ideals of Fundamentality and Secularity, and Western and Eastern influence. At the center of the West and East is the center of the world. Pamuk says that to him, “the center of the world is Istanbul” (Pamuk 2006).

.....

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. 1934-8. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, U of Texas P, 1981.

Pamuk, Orhan. *My Father’s Suitcase*. 2006. Translated by Maureen Freely, The New Yorker.

Pamuk, Orhan. *My Name is Red*. 2001. Translated by Erdağ Gökner, Random House.

.....