

Orhan Pamuk'un Beyaz Kale Romanında Doğu ve Batı İlişkisinin Lévi-Strauss'un İkili Karşıtlıklar Yöntemiyle Analizi

The Analysis of the Relationship Between East and West in Orhan Pamuk's *White Castle* Through Lévi-Strauss's Method of Binary Oppositions

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Özet

İkili karşıtlık, ayrımları tüm dil ve düşüncenin temeli olarak gören yapısalcılığın temel kavramlarından biridir. Fransız antropolog Claude Lévi-Strauss, insan zihnini, toplumu iyi ve kötü açısından tanımlayan iki karşıt kavram arasındaki ayrımları ifade eden ikili karşıtlık kullanarak sınıflandırır. Bu yapısalcı teori, belirli sözcükleri anlamamızın, içerdikleri anlamdan ziyade sözcük ile karşıtı arasındaki farka bağlı olduğunu belirtir. Orhan Pamuk'un en ünlü romanı Beyaz Kale, ikili karşıtlıkları dünya dengeleyicileri olarak kullanır. Post-modern bir masal olarak kabul edilen Beyaz Kale, ikili karşıtlık açısından zengindir. Roman, doğu-batı ikiliğine, kültürel kimliğe ve farklılıklara odaklanır. Yazar, özellikle zıt kültürlerden iki benzer karakteri ve bu karakterler arasındaki diğer karşıtlıkları aktaran doğu ve batı sentezi olmak üzere evrensel ve tarihsel sorunları ele alır. Bu çalışma, doğu ve batıyı ikili karşıtlıklar açısından yorumlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Roman boyunca, iki zıt karakter birbirlerinin kimliklerini 'ben' ve 'öteki', 'doğu-batı' ve 'efendi-köle' gibi ikiliklere odaklanarak anlamaya çalışır. Bu makale, Pamuk'un Lévi Strauss'un ikili karşıtlıklar yöntemi doğrultusunda *White Castle*'da bu ikiliklerin benzerliklerini ve farklılıklarını nasıl incelediğini açıklamaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Doğu-Batı İkili Karşıtlıkları, Beyaz Kale, Orhan Pamuk, Postmodern Roman, Lévi Strauss.

Abstract

Binary opposition is a major concept in structuralism, which posits that distinctions form the basis of all language and thought. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss classifies the human mind using binary opposition, which refers to the distinctions between two opposing concepts that define society in terms of good and evil. This structuralist theory indicates that our understanding of certain words depends on the difference between the word and its opposite rather than the meaning they contain. Orhan Pamuk's most famous novel, *White Castle*, uses binary oppositions as world balancers. *White Castle*, considered a post-modern tale, is rich in binary opposition. The novel

focuses on the east-west binary, cultural identity, and differences. The author addresses universal and historical issues, particularly the synthesis of East and West, which conveys two similar characters from opposite cultures, as well as other oppositions between these characters. This study aims to interpret East and West in terms of binary oppositions. Throughout the novel, the two contrasting characters attempt to understand each other's identities by focusing on binaries such as 'me' and 'other', 'east-west', and 'master-slave'. This article aims to explain how Pamuk examines the differences and similarities of these binaries in *White Castle*, in line with Levi Strauss' method of binary oppositions.

Keywords: East-West Binary Oppositions, White Castle, Orhan Pamuk, Post-modern Novel, Levi Strauss.

Introduction

Binary opposition is one of the fundamental concepts of structuralism, a theory that asserts that human language and thought are constructed upon distinctions. For structuralists, meaning is never self-contained; it emerges through relationships of difference. Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century anthropology, argued that the human mind tends to classify experience by contrasting opposites such as good and evil, life and death, nature and culture, or self and other. According to him, societies and cultures organize their myths, narratives, and symbolic systems around these pairs. Meaning, therefore, is produced not directly from a word or concept itself, but through the difference it holds in relation to its opposite.

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This insight was crucial for the development of semiotics in the second half of the twentieth century. Semiotics, the science of signs and meanings, is found in Lévi-Strauss's theory, a method for explaining how cultural structures function through binary relations. As Rifat (2013: 154) points out, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach shaped the intellectual landscape of the period by showing that oppositions are not only linguistic but also cultural and social categories that balance and define human thought. In this respect, binary oppositions serve as both organizing principles and interpretive tools.

Orhan Pamuk, one of the most internationally renowned authors of Turkish literature, employs such oppositions to explore cultural identity and historical experience. His works, translated into more than sixty languages, frequently deal with the synthesis and tension between East and West. Among them, *The White Castle* stands out as a novel that vividly illustrates how binary oppositions shape narrative and identity. Written as a historical fiction and set in seventeenth-century Ottoman Istanbul, the novel situates its plot within the encounters between a Venetian slave and an Ottoman scholar (the hodja). Through their relationship, Pamuk presents not only the East–West dichotomy but also other oppositions such as master–slave, self–other, and reason–faith, all of which become central to the meaning of the text.

Initially, the differences between the two characters are presented in sharp contrast: the Venetian slave embodies the Western ideals of individuality, freedom, and rationality, while the Ottoman

tutor symbolizes Eastern authority, tradition, and religious wisdom. Yet as the narrative progresses, these oppositions gradually collapse. The characters grow increasingly alike, their identities intermingle, and the boundaries between master and slave, East and West, self and other blur. This transformation demonstrates what Lévi-Strauss emphasized: binary oppositions are not immutable structures but relational categories that shift and redefine one another over time. Beyond its narrative, *The White Castle* reflects the broader cultural and intellectual atmosphere of the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire, particularly the tensions of the period often described as the ‘stagnation era’ of the Ottoman Empire. Pamuk uses this historical context not only to depict everyday life, including aspects of Islamic and Ottoman culture, but also to explore questions of science, belief, and knowledge. The juxtaposition of scientific inquiry and religious tradition, freedom and submission, identity and alterity, enriches the text with multiple layers of meaning and situates it within a universal human struggle for self-definition.

The master–slave relationship at the center of the novel also resonates with Hegel’s master–slave dialectic, which describes the struggle for recognition between two consciousnesses. In Pamuk’s novel, the Venetian slave and the hodja reflect this dialectical struggle: although they appear as opposites, each requires the other to define himself. Over time, the distinction between who commands and who obeys, who belongs to the East and who to the West, becomes unstable. This dialectic of self and other destabilizes binary categories and reveals identity as a fluid and contested construct.

Ultimately, *The White Castle* not only dramatizes East–West tensions in a historical context but also interrogates the very logic of binary oppositions. By showing how categories such as self/other and master/slave can be reversed, blurred, or dissolved, Pamuk illustrates that cultural identity is not fixed but rather dynamic, relational, and pluralistic. The novel thus provides fertile ground for analysis through Lévi-Strauss’s method of binary oppositions, while also engaging with philosophical concerns about recognition, difference, and cultural hybridity. This study, therefore, will examine how *The White Castle* embodies and complicates binary oppositions, with particular focus on the dialectics of East/West, self/other, and master/slave.

White Castle with the East-West Binary

Orhan Pamuk is the most well-known and prominent Turkish writer in world literature. In 2006, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature and made history as the first Turkish literary figure. After he won the Nobel Prize in Literature, some people think that Turkey should be proud of him, while some also suspect it has something to do with complicated political interests. Pamuk, with great effort, has achieved perfect success both abroad and in Turkey through his contribution to literature. Since Orhan Pamuk knows Istanbul very well, it is possible to see Istanbul from all aspects in many of her works. He left his mark on the Turkish literary world by writing many important novels. Orhan Pamuk, who is an insider to Turkish-Islamic culture, reflects the image of the Turk for both national and international readers. Orhan Pamuk is known for his post-modern novels in Turkey.

He expresses his passion for painting with long and realistic descriptions he has made. He states that he frequently uses colors in his novels and that his understanding of the novel is based on the sense of sight. The frequent use of colors and depictions by the author can be attributed to his previous interest in painting. In his novels, he generally uses metafiction techniques. In *White Castle* and some other novels, he uses this method. Orhan Pamuk, in this novel, shows the characters themselves as the authors of the novel. This is his kind of technique that he uses in his novels as a metafiction. Complex plot structure in metafictional texts, which is one of the aims of Postmodern works, is also discussed in *White Castle*. Orhan Pamuk is regarded as a postmodern writer by handling metafiction, intertextual relations, history, and travel to the inner world in his works. Writing a novel is the most valuable thing for Orhan Pamuk. *White Castle* is his first postmodern novel.

Orhan Pamuk's persistent use of this metafiction application that is included in all his Postmodern novels; It is because he gives him the opportunity to share the formation process, problems, and ideas of the novel with his reader and sees the novel as a means of entertainment (Yaprak, 2013: 4).

This quote reveals one of the cornerstones of Pamuk's literary approach. Through metafiction, the author not only tells a story; he also involves the reader in how this story is constructed, the layers of the narrative, and the author's mental processes. This understanding is also evident in his novel *The White Castle*. While dealing with themes such as East and West, self and other, the author creates a multi-layered fiction both among the characters and within the narrative structure. In this way, the reader is not only forced to follow the events but is also encouraged to think about the nature of the narrative. Pamuk's novel goes beyond presenting an entertaining fiction and turns the act of writing itself into a theme. In this respect, *The White Castle* is valuable as an early reflection of both postmodern techniques and Pamuk's literary philosophy.

In an interview with *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, Orhan Pamuk described the function of the novel as "to give meaning to our lives and to strongly embed that meaning into the essence of life" (*Other Colors*, 1999). This statement reveals that Pamuk sees literature not only as a storytelling tool but also as a philosophical and existential tool. According to him, the novel is a medium that allows individuals to make sense of their personal and social experiences. History is a prominent motif in his novels, and Pamuk describes it as a source of creative inspiration: "History is like a treasury that offers the imagination many fresh and untouched possibilities" (*Other Colors*, 1999). This metaphorical understanding of history also reflects Pamuk's postmodern literary attitude. By blurring the boundaries between past and present, reality and fiction, it transforms history from being merely information to be remembered or conveyed into an opportunity to be reinterpreted and reconstructed in a fictional world.

The introduction part of the book was written by Faruk Darvinoğlu, a young historian. Darvinoğlu is one of the protagonists of *Silent House*, which is Orhan Pamuk's second book. After the

introduction of the *White Castle* novel, there is a story consisting of 11 chapters. Faruk Darvinoğlu begins the narration of the capture of a Venetian by Turkish pirates beginning of the novel. He begins the book by dedicating it to his sister, Nilgün Darvinoğlu, who died at the age of 19. Published in 1985, *The White Castle* is one of Pamuk's early and most widely recognized novels. It is a work of historical fiction that narrates the relationship between a Venetian slave and an Ottoman scholar during the 17th-century Ottoman Empire. *White Castle* is a frame tale that explains the two different cultures. "*Pamuk started to write Beyaz Kale [The White Castle] and finished it in a year. It was published in 1985, again by Can Yayınları, and sold sixteen thousand copies in the first year. The White Castle is a frame tale*" (Hashemipour, 2017, p.30). *White Castle* is the third novel of the author, which is also his first Ottoman novel. And for some readers, this novel is the most complex work to read among his works. "*Orhan Pamuk's third novel, The White Castle (1985), is also his first novel referred to as "hard to read" and "incomprehensible"*" (Yıldırım, 2011:7). This interpretation shows that *The White Castle* creates difficulties for the reader not only because of its fictional structure, but also because of its multi-layered narrative, philosophical references, and its treatment of abstract concepts such as the self-other dichotomy. The novel's use of postmodern narrative techniques shakes traditional narrative expectations and demands a more careful, analytical reading from the reader. In particular, the discussion of the issues of subject and identity within the framework of the East-West opposition intensifies the text both culturally and intellectually. For this reason, *The White Castle* is considered one of Pamuk's early works in which he foregrounds his intellectual identity and uses literature as an intellectual ground. Orhan Pamuk's international recognition gained momentum in the early 1990s, especially with the publication of *The White Castle*. Jay Parini is quoted as describing Pamuk in The New York Times in 1991 as "*a new star rising from the East—Orhan Pamuk, a Turkish writer*" (Parini, 1991, cited in Yıldırım, 2011). This statement shows that Pamuk has become a writer who attracts attention not only nationally but also globally. Orhan Pamuk's success started to become known in the European and American literature world with *The White Castle* in 1990. The book is the shortest and most gainful novel of his. Although known as a short novel, it is an intense novel with topics ranging from mathematics to astronomy, medicine to engineering, and even dream interpretation. It is translated into dozens of languages and read widely in the international literature world. Pamuk mentioned the relationship between "civilized Western" and "underdeveloped Eastern" cultures in this novel, as he has expressed many times. This dilemma is the main subject of this book. Orhan Pamuk wants to reach the main theme of the book with contrasts by using Strauss's binary opposition theory for a better understanding of the words and the subject of the book. Although it is a historical novel, Pamuk, as a Turk, reflects the interaction between the Ottoman Empire and Europe in his novel.

It is a historical novel situated in the classical age of the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing interactions among the Ottoman Turks and Europe. It reveals how Pamuk, one of the most prominent figures of the liberal Turkish intelligentsia for the last quarter of a century, who is thus

an “insider” to Turkish-Islamic culture, reflects the image of the Turk for both national and international audiences (Akman, 2018: 62).

Orhan Pamuk has revealed a historical work in this book, as in his many works. Even at the beginning of the book, begins with Faruk Darvinoğlu's finding and extracting an Ottoman manuscript from the archive. “After reading a couple of sentences from the manuscript I kept on one table, I'd go to another table in the other room where I kept my papers and try to narrate in today's idiom the sense of what remained in my mind” (*White Castle*, 7). In his *White Castle*, he writes about Ottoman, which is his first ‘Ottoman’ novel.

Pamuk repeatedly returns to history as a leitmotif in his work, focusing on four major areas: Ottoman history in a European context, the transition from Ottoman Empire to modern Middle East, the early-twentieth-century Kemal-ist cultural revolution, and the legacy of all three on present-day Turkey (Göknar, 2014: 34)

Orhan Pamuk's understanding of the Ottoman Empire is not a historical explanation but a criticism of Turkish National culture and ideology. It is possible to see this in the East-West binary in the book. Pamuk has addressed historical issues in many of his novels, just like *White Castle*. With this framework, there are protagonists in his works, like Pamuk himself, who are both orientalized and nationalized subjects, and question their identities. *White Castle* is a novel that combines history and fiction. It has a subject that develops on the subject that discovery can take place in every frame of human life. It is a valuable work of Orhan Pamuk that tells about the journey of two people from different geographies. *White Castle* is known as a historical novel.

The novel's central characters—a Venetian slave representing the West and a Muslim scholar symbolizing the East—embody the East-West binary that structures the entire narrative. The self-aware master and the slave, who strives to establish a consciousness of his own, will come face to face at some point, and this binary opposition will start a war. *The White Castle* is a fine example of how intricately intertwined the binary opposition of East and West is. According to Pamuk, historical fictions and fantasies created and maintained by the East-West binary opposition are the elements that give color and flavor to his novel. Strauss believed that everything is defined by its opposite, just like the East-West binary opposition in this novel. As described with the characters, the East-West binary opposition experienced here, the West is neither a superior being nor is there any such thing as a West without East. The narrator in the novel is the Venetian slave himself. The events in the novel are narrated by the Venetian slave, that is, by the first person singular. The two protagonists reflect the Ottoman ‘master’ and the Italian ‘slave’. The name of the scholar is not mentioned in the novel. The young Venetian scholar is captured by Turkish pirates while sailing from Venice to Naples. The Venetian treats a few Turks by using his knowledge of anatomy. Astronomy is another field in which the Venetians’ knowledge surpasses many in Istanbul. Pasha states that the slave will be free on condition that he is a Muslim, but when the slave does not accept Islam, the Pasha gives him as a gift to the Hodja. The story begins with the meeting of the two

protagonists which a Venetian is sold as a slave to the young scholar Hodja, who finds in Hodja his own reflection. They are at the same age and resemble each other a lot. It is the beard that separates Hodja from the Venetian. One of the important details is their physical similarity to each other. This is explained in the book as follows. *Come, let us look in the mirror together. I looked, and under the raw light of the lamp saw once more how much we resembled one another . . . The two of us were one person! This now seemed to me an obvious truth*” (White Castle, 36)

It is an immersive novel in which both characters try to learn something from each other and continue their new lives by replacing each other in this context. Hodja tries to learn the knowledge about astronomy, medicine, geography, and animals from his slave. In the novel, he describes how the Venetian merchant was captured, how he met the Hodja, the fireworks display they made, how they tried to prevent the plague epidemic in the city, their speeches at a table, and their scientific speeches. It is seen that the hodja, one of the characters, has an identity conflict. The Hodja, who has identity conflict, is constantly asking himself, ‘Why me, me?’ It can also be understood by asking this question. Asking this question constantly indicates that he is experiencing an identity conflict or crisis. With this question, he expresses situations such as self-acceptance, an inferiority complex, and dissatisfaction with the ‘I’. Orhan Pamuk fictionalized the protagonists in the novel *White Castle* through contrasts and dualities. It is possible to see them in the characters of East-West, slave-owner, and Hodja-Sultan. An Ottoman educator eager to learn the science of the West but embarrassed by it, and on the other hand, a Venetian slave who was interested in astronomy before he was captured. There are distinct differences between the two characters at the beginning of the book, but as the interaction between the characters increases, the similarity of the characters emerges. The conversations they have to find their differences bring them closer and make them look like they once again. The main purpose of Orhan Pamuk's use of these two different characters is to show the difference between East and West, in all in one way or another. The East is full of traditions and customs, while the West is full of science, experiments, and development. While Pamuk showed these contrasts, he tried to show that there may be similarities within them. The Venetian in the slave character, with his knowledge, has removed himself from being an ordinary slave and has become a needed slave. After sitting at the same desk in the same house and starting to work, they will start to know and know each other without questioning either the master of the master or the slave slavery. This adventure of the slave, which begins with fear, will make him different from other slaves by using his intelligence. The Venetian slave gradually moves from submission to dominance by integrating himself into Ottoman intellectual life, ultimately taking the Hodja's place. The opportunity to learn the Western knowledge that the Hodja wanted to learn until now from the slave has emerged. They learn more than they expected from each other in the 11 years they spent together. After a while, the Hodja will be in the business of questioning his own existence and will constantly ask the question of why me and me. They start to work hard after they decide to make weapons. Hence, the weapon failed in the white castle, the teacher believes that he cannot stay in the empire with this shame, and exchanges all his belongings with the slave, who is very similar to him. Thus, the Hodja goes to live in Italy, like the appearance of the slave

the slave continues to live in Istanbul with the appearance of the Hodja. Living in İstanbul like the Hodja, a slave, meets Evliya Çelebi, who wants to learn the knowledge of Italy. He tries to explain information to Evliya Çelebi. Then he understands that writing something is impressive for him. Orhan Pamuk explains why his book was written in the 17th century so that the writings of scholars such as Naima, Evliya Çelebi, and Katip Çelebi could be used. At the end of the book, Evliya Çelebi asks the slave who is disguised as the Hodja to tell him about Italy. It is understood that the location of İstanbul as a venue is also effective in terms of serving as a bridge between the East and West of Istanbul. Besides, Istanbul was one of the cities where scientific studies were best in the Ottoman period. Orientalism is remarkably seen in the book. Scientific studies that started with the Renaissance, the East and the West competing with each other scientifically, apart from orientalism, can also be seen in the novel. The Hodja and the slave are written as two characters that complement each other but also contradict each other. There are three narrators in *White Castle*. According to Yıldırım (2011), the presence of three narrators—Faruk Darvinoğlu, the Hoja-slave, and Orhan Pamuk himself—establishes a narrative complexity in *The White Castle*, wherein “conscious readers are not so special and extraordinary readers; but they take their place in the structure of the *White Castle* as readers who are patient, wise, who love literature, who reflect on literature, who have a certain literary background and enjoy reading” (Yıldırım, 2011).

Identity issues have always been a problem for Orhan Pamuk. In his meeting with Judy Stone, he stated:

What I'm trying to do here is to make a game of it and to show that it doesn't matter whether you are an easterner or a westerner. The worst way of reading – or misreading – the book would be to take very seriously the ideologies, the false consciousness, the stupidities that one has about these notions. The problem of East and West has been a huge weight for Turkish intellectuals. (Stone 1994: 36-37)

While the novel is ongoing to read, the reader meets a historical story. However, in the last chapter, it is seen that the author of this story is also included in the story “I have come to the end of my book now. Perhaps my clever readers have already decided that my story is already over and threw it away” (*White Castle*, 163) With *White Castle*, Orhan Pamuk wins Britain's Independent Award for Foreign Fiction in 1990. *White Castle* is also his first novel translated into English. The *White Castle* also signifies identity. The fear of losing identity and the hopelessness of reaching the aim of success is a kind of loss of identity. The Hodja and the slave both live with this loss of identity.

Conclusion

According to Levi Strauss, the world moves with differences, such as good/bad, life/death, and real/unreal, and so on. Orhan Pamuk has also expressed these differences in his work with the Levi Strauss method by showing these differences with binary oppositions such as East-West and slave-master. Orhan Pamuk, who is thought of as a good representative of World literature, is an author who integrates different cultures. Orhan Pamuk, in his work titled *White Castle*, himself stated how

the novel came about at the end of the novel. Orhan Pamuk, the first and only author of Turkish literature to win the Nobel Prize, has brought new perspectives to Turkish literature with his works. Turkish literature has gained a much more important place in World Literature with him and the confidence it award. Reaching the global idea on which World literature focuses, he benefits from both the East and the West. His works have been translated into more than sixty languages, making him a world-renowned writer who also promotes his country. *White Castle* is his third novel; on the other hand, his first Postmodern novel. He wrote in *White Castle* by mixing historical events into a metafiction work. *White Castle* can be the only example in a postcolonial novel where Eastern and Western equality is created. In *White Castle*, Orhan Pamuk perfectly articulates intercultural communication between East and West. The cultural differences and similarities between the two civilizations are told in the form of an Ottoman scholar, Hodja, and a Venetian sailor, of two very similar but also very different cultures. In the novel, the East-West interaction and conflicts are the main theme. With the difference between the two characters, Orhan Pamuk tries to map the identity of his country, both similar to and different from the West. Another thing that is best expressed by Orhan Pamuk is that two cultures and two characters, which are so different from each other, can get along so well that they will replace each other over time. Orhan Pamuk expressed the curiosity of the West for the East and the interest of the East for the West in *White Castle*. In the book, it is possible to see the interaction of both communities with each other in an East-West conflict. As a result, Orhan Pamuk put forward the East-West synthesis in his work with the Hodja- slave duo. *White Castle* has a postmodern fiction with its various events and characters. It is given in the novel as an East-West comparison to explain the time of the 17th century with Italy, the place where scientific studies were left over and where the Renaissance began, and Istanbul, which was the most scientifically developed city of the East in the same century. Orhan Pamuk did not emphasize a single side while dealing with the subject of East and West, but chose to explain the concepts through plot and characters. These two protagonists, who are alike, are the representatives of the East and the West, who have been distanced from each other for various reasons. The *White Castle*, which is the first postmodern narrative of Turkish literature, is also important in the mention of the *Seyahatname* (Book of Travel) of Evliya Çelebi. In other words, the *White Castle* is an example of the blending of Postmodern with traditional writing and a good example of writing binary oppositions. Orhan Pamuk is a writer who brings together different cultures and expresses them in the best way possible in his works. It is also possible to see the East-West synthesis in the *White Castle* novel, where he examines it in the best way. While exhibiting cultural conflicts, he also included multiculturalism in his works, making his works accepted in the world literary scene in the best way. In this study, it is aimed to show that Orhan Pamuk uses intercultural interaction in his works in the most effective way. Orhan Pamuk's use of binary oppositions in this work is to make the narrative more understandable. According to the structuralists, if all words form their opposites, in this work, they complement each other by forming East-West, slave-master. Levi Strauss also saw cultures as systems of communication and interpreted their complementarity using structural linguistics. As a result, this transitivity

experienced by cultures affects the individuals living in the society and reflects on their lifestyles and literature.

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