

# Cultural Amnesia and the Paradox of Modernity: Memory, Forgetting, and Urban Transformation in Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories of the City*

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## ABSTRACT

This study engages with Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003) to explore cultural amnesia in light of memory studies. Drawing on Andreas Huyssen, Paul Connerton, and Assmann, it argues that modernity produces a paradoxical configuration in which an obsession with memory coexists with structurally and politically supported mechanisms of forgetting. The research analyzes the memoir to articulate four interrelated domains of cultural forgetting: urban reformation as topographical erasure, selected reclamation of history, loss through representation, and the way *hüzün* opens a productive space for concession to the future. These results show Istanbul represented as a space where memory survives in scattered pieces while historical continuity dissolves. This study contributes to memory studies and literary scholarship on Pamuk by demonstrating how his memoir figures the emblematic twinning of memory and forgetting as a defining trait of modern cultural experience.

**Keywords:** Cultural amnesia; Modernity; Collective memory; Strategic forgetting; Orhan Pamuk; Istanbul; Urban memory

## INTRODUCTION

Examinations of culture and literature are often conducted in parallel. This reflects the importance of literature within cultural studies. More broadly, human life is integral to culture itself. Within life, people can practice their lives, actions, thinking, and feelings, in addition to their possessions, as outcomes of the society in which they live. This paper discusses a newly created notion known as cultural amnesia, using Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003) as a source for data collection and analysis.

Cultural amnesia describes the progressive erasure or selective forgetting of collective cultural memories, often tied to historical and social changes. It also refers to "the diagnosis of a condition that occurs due to external or traumatic damage. This can be a cause for society to forget their roots, culture, and relationships with landscapes" (Jerlei, 2015, p. 4). This theme is prevalent in *Istanbul: Memories of the City* by Orhan Pamuk. In his book, Pamuk is well known for his strong bond with Istanbul and for capturing the city's depressive spirit, which lies between East and West. This feeling, known in Turkish as *hüzün*, captures the general anguish and sense of loss as Istanbul changes and elements of its cultural legacy disappear.

Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, is a profoundly depressing, mostly autobiographical work. It examines the profound cultural shift that has shaken Turkey and the ongoing conflict between the present and the fading past. It also serves as a tribute to vanished shared family customs. Pamuk's memoir is a representation of the cultural amnesia he confronts with his motherland at one point and to protest the norms set by

Islam or the authorities that ruled Turkey. This cultural and religious clash is well set in Pamuk's semi-novel at the same geographical point.

The memory boom in contemporary culture, which has recently attracted attention, has become an important thematic dimension across the humanities and social sciences. The proliferation of archives, museums, and commemorative practices indicates a deepened relationship with the past. However, as Andreas Huyssen notes, this expansion of memory culture carries constitutive irony. Modern societies show a growing concern with recalling the past yet are simultaneously losing awareness of it. Our culture is obsessed with memory and, paradoxically, may be losing its own (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3).

Such a paradox stems from the fact that memory is a social and institutional matter. For Maurice Halbwachs (1992), memory is socially constructed, and its survival depends on collective frameworks that order and preserve the past. Aleida Assmann (2011) makes a related point, arguing that cultural memory relies on institutional mediation through texts, symbols, and practices. In the human mind, memory is remapped as these templates are adapted, and some pasts are forgotten or downgraded. The visibility of this process, as Pierre Nora (1989) has argued, is heightened in modernity by the profusion of sites of memory today, which indicate the disappearance of environments of lived memory.

Though Huyssen pinpoints the cultural contradiction of memory vs. forgetting, other scholars have likewise shown how modernity generates forgetting—both structurally and politically. From a memory theoretical standpoint, Paul Connerton (2009) even categorizes modernity as an “age of forgetting” (p. 2): urban transformation and –mobility torpedoes the spatial continuity supporting collective memory. Meanwhile, Aleida Assmann (2011) argues that forgetting is also active and strategic, constructing national identity through selective remembering and exclusion.

These theoretical lenses can be used to analyze Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, a text that investigates memory (and loss) in the regard of a modernizing urban space. The memoir by Pamuk is full of memories, historical references and visual suggestions that show a deep preoccupation with the past. Simultaneously, it highlights again and again the loss of those social and spatial conditions without which memory cannot survive. As Pamuk remarks, “the past I write about does not belong only to me; it belongs to the city” (Pamuk 2005: p.6), reflecting how memory becomes both collective and the failures of that collectivity in its fragmented unreliability.

Even in the large corpus already addressing memory and Pamuk's work, little has been done to juxtapose theory with literary analysis of his text. While the existing literature often explores nostalgia and identity, it is rarely framed by modernity's memory–amnesia paradox at a macro-level of urban change such as Istanbul. Especially the specific functions of urban transformation and politically institutionalized oblivion that Pamuk assigns to the city have not been thoroughly analyzed yet.

This research bridges this gap by exploring how *Istanbul: Memories and the City* inscribes cultural amnesia in terms of modernity, or disorganized forgetting. But it also posits that the memoir is not above simply saving the past but rather exposes a state in which memory continues to exist as mediated and dispersed even while the infrastructures enabling it crumble. Istanbul thus becomes a palimpsestic space of memory and forgetting, releasing the complexities of modern cultural experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Orhan Pamuk is one of the Turkey's most acclaimed modern authors, renowned for using his work to reflect on the struggles and considerations of Turkish cultural identity collapsing between tradition and modernity. Pamuk, born in Istanbul in 1952 and a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature some years later (in 2006), has shaped a literary world while chronicling many of the tumultuous historical and cultural shifts that define contemporary Turkey. His writings confront intellectual and emotional predicaments faced in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, alongside Turkey's modernization. His autobiographical work *Istanbul: Memories of the City* (2005) exemplifies these differences by juxtaposing childhood memories with observations about the city's communal culture and history.

Pamuk's works have been studied by many scholars in the light of issues relating to identity, modernization, and the perceived clash between the cultural traditions of the East and the West. In this sense, Sapkota (2018) even suggests that the characters in Pamuk's works can be perceived as residing between two violent historical and cultural periods: the Islamic period (Islam) and anthropocentric modernism. This tension between two cultural standards creates an ambivalence of national and personal identity, and according to this view, it is a critical feature of postmodernity. Following the same logic, Tucker (2019) argues that Pamuk's novels embody the emotional and intellectual consequences of the meeting and clash of East and West, something that has gained prominence in numerous readings of his literary output.

Other scholars have examined depictions of religion and secularism in Pamuk's work. For instance, Pandikasala (2014) analyzes Pamuk's novel *Snow* (2002) in relation to contemporary discussions surrounding Islam, secularism, and liberal ideology in modern Turkey. The study persuasively maintains that Pamuk's works commonly confront the ideological fault lines around which contemporary Turkish society coalesces (combines, merges). Likewise, Purnama (2017) examines the representation of Islam in *Snow* (2002) and discusses how the novel captures the clash between traditional religious values and secular modernity within Turkey.

While these analyses provide important insights into Pamuk's interrogation of identity and modernity, the most prominent scholarship showcases his fiction but overlooks his autobiographical work. The idea of cultural memory and forgetting in Pamuk's memoir, *Istanbul: Memories of the City* (2005), has been touched on but not widely discussed. The memoir has been repeatedly approached within the theoretical constructs of nostalgia, urban melancholy, and Istanbul's cultural atmosphere; yet relatively few scholarly articles have studied this literary work through the lens of cultural amnesia.

In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent how contemporary societies handle the relation between memory and forgetfulness. As contemporary cultures appear to be increasingly drawn into a desire for remembering, driven by cultural amnesia (Huysen 1995), Andreas Heussen argues that we are now on some level used to this Janus-headed nature of collective memory. Huysen argues that "it is often through cultural narratives, museums and literature that social memory establishes itself, particularly at a moment when historical consciousness seems threatened in rapidly changing and uncertain societies" (1995: 4). Or indeed, when fast-changing and precarious societies remain threats to historical consciousness, cultural narratives, museums and literature provide the social memory that keeps the past alive.

Recent studies have addressed the interplay between technological and cultural transformations and present-day memory practices. For instance, according to Stainforth (2022), contemporary social orders are increasingly the invention of digital regimes that engage in memory keeping but also enable new kinds of amnesia. In line with this perspective, Rigney (2021) highlights the importance of understanding collective memory as an ongoing cultural process through which societies constantly reinvent the past in light of contemporary issues.

In addition to these new avenues of memory studies, recent work has explored the relationship between urban space and collective memory. Cities, historically, have acted as vessels for feeling history in the walls or monuments or urban plans. Pamuk's nonliterary perspective of his beloved city is distilled by Deriu (2020) as a "city of collective melancholy" with Ottoman architectural ghosts that continue to loom over a people molded by their remnants. They point out that cities are one of those powerful symbolic arenas through which society can effectively face up to its processes of change.

Most recent scholarship on post-imperial societies shows that nostalgia takes root when such societies seek a return to imperial strength. Nostalgic narratives often arise in metropolitan settings that are marked by the material traces of empire and the social realities of modernization (Legg, 2023, p. 462). In this regard, literature plays a central role in articulating the emotional and cultural repercussions of historical change.

Although the idea of cultural amnesia already brings a lot to the table, it has not yet gained traction in readings of Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories of the City*. Much past scholarship has engaged with nostalgia, identity and modernization in Pamuk's writing, but few have explored how the narrative mirrors discourses of cultural forgetting at the intersections between late Ottoman collapse and twentieth-century reformulation of Istanbul.

To fill this gap, this article examines the double-bind of memory and forgetting in a post-imperial urban landscape outlined in Pamuk's memoir, and its implications for cultural identity formation.

## Theoretical Framework

Utilizing a framework that juxtaposes memory studies and cultural theory, this article approaches Istanbul: Memories and the City (2003) as an instance of cultural amnesia. Cultural amnesia is framed as a malaise of modernity, one that is rooted in new spatial orders and imbued with political and ideological content — drawing largely on the work of Andreas Huyssen, Paul Connerton and Aleida Assmann. These insights form the basis for an interpretation of Orhan Pamuk's portrait of Istanbul as a place where memory lives by contrast with processes of forgetting.

## Modernity and the Memory–Amnesia Paradox

The focal point of this framework is Huyssen's analysis of contemporary culture as constituted in a paradoxical relationship between memory and forgetting. As Huyssen puts it in *Twilight Memories*, “our culture is obsessed with memory and yet it is in danger of losing its ability to remember” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3). This formulation illuminates one of the defining characteristics of late modernity that the sheer increase in memory practices does not state automatically that historical consciousness is maintained. Instead, the growth of archives, museums and forms of commemoration are often an expression of deep anxiety about losing touch with the past.

Huyssen goes on to observe that “the current memory boom... is accompanied by a sense of crisis in the stability of time and the permanence of the past” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 7), which seems therefore logical when thinking about a recollection from an unsettled past. In this context, increasingly mediated memory is constructed through images, texts and representations rather than held together by the continuity of what is lived. He notes, for instance, that “The more we are asked to remember, the more we seem in danger of forgetting” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 12). This paradox serves as a focal hermeneutical framework for reading Pamuk's memoir, which is saturated with memories and images of the past and is simultaneously concerned with its loss.

## Structural Forgetting and Urban Transformation

While Huyssen identifies the cultural condition of memory and amnesia, Paul Connerton provides a framework for understanding how modernity produces forgetting at a structural level. In *How Modernity Forgets*, Connerton argues that “modernity has a particular problem with memory” (Connerton, 2009, p. 1), rooted in the social and spatial transformations that characterize modern life. He describes modernity as an “age of forgetting” (Connerton, 2009, p. 2), in which rapid urban change, mobility, and the short-lived nature of built environments disrupt the continuity necessary for collective memory.

Topographical forgetting is one of the main arguments that Connerton makes about this subject: that urban spatial restructuring both supports and undermines informal asymmetries in mnemonic functions (Connerton, 1996, p. 60). A place is deeply entwined with memory when places are destroyed or irrevocably transformed; all that helps constitute the phenomenon we call memory is disrupted. This perspective is particularly well suited to Pamuk's vision of Istanbul, in which the loss of Ottoman mansions and district landmarks presages a deeper historical break.

Pamuk himself cannot express this spatially rooted loss more evocatively when he writes that “the past I write about is not only mine; it belongs to the city” (Pamuk, 2005, p. 6), indicating the extent to which memory and built environment are inevitably conflated. Yet as the city changes, this collective memory slips further out of reach, re-traumatizing the wounds of cultural amnesia.

## Political and Strategic Forgetting

Aleida Assmann builds on this framework by distinguishing between passive and active forgetting, showing that forgetting is not only a passive but also an active, and at times even aggressive, act. As Assmann puts it, “To

forget can be an act' (Assmann, 2011, p. 97). This viewpoint adds a political dimension to cultural amnesia and explains how some histories reach us, either purposefully forgotten or repressed.

In the mentality of modernization, such processes are usually associated with nation-building. This penchant for selective memory and forgetting ensures that societies can tell coherent stories about their particular pasts, omitting the uncomfortable elements they see as antithetical to present ideological paradigms. These observations reinforce broader theories of memory as a locus of power, in which ownership of collective history becomes instrumental to what constitutes cultural identity.

This dynamic is evident in Pamuk's memoir, which depicts the shift from the Ottoman Empire to a new Turkish Republic. The Ottoman past now exists in ruins, photographs, and remembrances. It has not been incorporated as a whole into contemporary identity. Rather, it is often positioned as a site of forlornness or cultural fatalism, which assumes that its relegation is intentional, and checks notes structurally against modernization itself.

### **Affective Memory and Pamuk's Cultural Amnesia**

Pamuk explores this tension between memory and forgetting not simply politically or structurally but affectively. *Hüzün* is a kind of collective sadness that epitomizes the city's connection to its past. Pamuk characterizes *hüzün* as "the melancholy which the whole city shares" (Pamuk, 2005, p. 92).

### **Synthesis**

These three theoretical approaches collectively form a basic foundation for discussing Pamuk's Istanbul, but I will elaborate in more detail afterward. With the hyper-production of memory in modernity, as well as amnesia and forgetting, both are at their peaks with requests for recollections (Huysen 1995). Connerton's comments on structural forgetting point to the possibilities for memory disruption arising from urban transformation. The notion of selective memory and the political dimension of forgetting builds on Aleida Assmann's theory of strategic forgetting. On the other hand, Pamuk's memoir offers a literary expression of these processes, showing how memory, space, and identity are redefined in a modernizing society. With this integrated framework, the study views cultural amnesia not merely as a void of memory but rather as a multifaceted, multiscalar outcome forged by cultural, spatial, and political forces.

## **RESULTS**

In this part, the results of the text analysis of *Istanbul: Memories and the City* by Orhan Pamuk will be presented. The analysis identifies four dimensions through which the memoir embodies cultural amnesia in relation to modernity.

### **Urban Transformation as Topographical Forgetting**

Pamuk's analysis indicates that Istanbul's representation prioritizes the diminishment of historical space. The memoir notes the vanishing of wooden Ottoman mansions, recorded in a history of fires, and the old neighborhoods being supplanted by tall modern apartment buildings. Not as isolated events but rather continuous processes that reform the city's spatial identity.

Pamuk's musings indicate that the city has ceased to serve as a reliable archive of memory. In his own words, "the past I write about is not just mine; it is the city's" (Pamuk, 2005a, p. 6). Collective memory becomes increasingly inaccessible in a city that has undergone such a profound transformation. Spatial continuity, fundamental to the relationship of both memory and place, has suffered a universal loss, contributing to a state of collective amnesia.

### **Republican Modernization and Selective Memory**

The second result highlights the understanding of modernization as a process that engages with select aspects of the past. The shift from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey is represented as a cultural rupture, and the elements introduced by that period are crowded out.

Pamuk depicts Westernization and secularization as a reframing of the city's cultural landscape, privileging progress narratives while reinventing Ottoman heritage as an artifact. This process of curated memory implies that the past does not disappear entirely but is reinterpreted to comply with the contemporaneous sense of national identity. It therefore describes a mechanism in which "remembering" and (the active process of) "forgetting" involving broader ideological shifts.

### **Mediated Memory and the Shattering of Historical Experience**

The analysis also demonstrates that memory in the memoir is increasingly mediated through representation. Pamuk often uses photographs, descriptions of visual images, and historical references to recreate the past. These things show that memory is accessed indirectly rather than through experience continuity. Dependence on representation changes how memory exists. The past becomes something to reflect on rather than an active factor in everyday life. Although memory remains present, it appears in fragmented and mediated forms, reinforcing a sense of distance between past and present.

### **Hüzün as Emotional Cultural Amnesia**

The third and final finding relates to the concept of *hüzün*, which Pamuk describes as "the melancholy that the entire city shares" (Pamuk, 2005, p. 92). This collective sentiment is an emotional reaction to the duality of memory and absence. *Hüzün* emerges from the awareness of Istanbul's imperial past and its decline, as well as from the visible traces of what has been lost. Ruins, neglected buildings, and fading cultural practices serve as reminders of discontinuity. This suggests that cultural amnesia is not only structural and political but also emotional, shaping how individuals experience their relationship with history.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that cultural amnesia in Pamuk's Istanbul stems from the transformation of urban space, the selective restructuring of historical narratives, the mediation of memory through representation, and the emergence of collective affective responses. Rather than depicting a complete loss of memory, the memoir reveals a condition in which memory persists in fragmented and reconfigured forms.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study indicate that *Istanbul: Memories and the City* reflects a complicated nexus between memory and forgetting that connects with wider relations of modernity. Through the prism of memory studies, an interpretation of these findings enables a discussion of Pamuk's theorization of Istanbul.

First, the analysis validates Andreas Huyssen's claim that modernity is marked by both memory fixation and an obsession with cultural forgetting. Pamuk's memoir shows memory, pictures, and history, but these elements only emerge because of the fracture in the continuity of lived memory. We can therefore read the profusion of memory in the text not as preservation but rather as instability.

Second, these results align with Paul Connerton's theory of structural forgetting. This is exemplified by the transformation of Istanbul's urban landscape—modernity dilutes the very spatial construction upon which memory lies. The eradication of historic spaces makes it apparent how it is impossible for people and communities to cultivate an engagement with the past when cultural amnesia itself has been materially generated.

Third, the analysis confirms Aleida Assmann's notion that forgetting may be politically shaped. Only the Ottoman past has been selectively marginalized, revealing an element of ideological reorientation in regard to Turkish modernization. Here, cultural amnesia serves as a tool to engineer national identity.

Lastly, *hüzün* serves as a theoretical framework because it expands on existing notions of cultural amnesia by retrospectively articulating its affective register. Pamuk describes the emotional experience of loss and how one particular memory simmers alongside absence, intimating that cultural amnesia does not operate solely at

structural and political levels but also in lived experiences. Cultural amnesia is seen as a multidimensional phenomenon produced by the interplay among modernity, spatial transformation, and ideological processes.

## CONCLUSION

This study engages with Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* as an expression of the cultural amnesia produced by modernity. This analysis shows that memory and forgetting are not antonyms, but mutually entangled movements conditioned by structural, spatial, and political dynamics. The results indicate that cultural amnesia in Istanbul is mediated by urban transformation, selective invocation of the past, and representational technologies. The concept of *hüzün*, in turn, reveals the affective dimension of this condition and emphasizes the emotional outcome of historical rupture. This work extends the field of memory studies by analyzing literature, offering deeper insight into cultural amnesia, conceived as part and parcel of a modern condition. This indicates that memory in Pamuk's memoir is not a line of continuity with the past but rather exposes its disjointedness and becoming. This framework can be extended to other literary and cultural contexts, as future research will explore how modernity alters the relationship among memory, identity, and history.

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