

# Feminist Existentialism in Orhan Pamuk's *the Museum of Innocence*: Criticism in the Modern Era Literature

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence, of feminist existentialist criticism in literature, has become one of the major developments in literary studies, since mid-twentieth century. It is not only reflected in feminist writings, but also in those of many male writers. Orhan Pamuk's the 'Museum of Innocence' can best exemplify, how a male writer can touch on large scale issues of feminist existentialism. This bestselling Turkish author, and the 2006 Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, has shown great skills in evoking the attention of his readers, while at the same time instilling his thoughts and critical views, on the complexities of political and social issues, particularly those on feminist existentialism in the Turkish society. Through a story about memory, desperate love, and obsession, Pamuk has meticulously unfolded every single concern in the feminist existentialist criticism, ranging from objectification, sexual harassment, suppression, freedom, equality of rights, prostitution, patriarchy, and suicide. He has brilliantly conceived every character, the relationships between male and female characters, and intriguing events in the novel, to represent and voice his outcry extensively on all these sensitive issues.

**Keywords:** feminist existentialism, objectification, suppression, harassment, museum, patriarchy.

## 1. Introduction

People construct their ways of understanding life and world around, through senses and cognition as life experiences. They explore ways of living, and express ideas and thoughts, on diverse aspects of life, through many forms of communication, one of which is the form of literature. Thus, philosophical insights, and perspectives of the authors, are communicated and conveyed through literary works. The writers communicate their theoretical meanings in subtle and expressive fashions. In terms of the association between philosophy and literature, Olusegun (2006) contends that both are linked on two common levels. In his opinion, both are types of social perceptions and linguistic structuring. Originating from individual experiences, they frequently touch on conceptual matters, which stem from contemplations on the realities of life. Philosophy and literature both strive for better insights, with regards to the issues related to human life. In the context of language construction, while philosophy generates ideas and explains them, literature utilizes words, to deliver thoughts and information related to moral values, to the public.

The relationship, between philosophy and literature, demonstrates that literary works should not be looked upon as simply for entertainment purposes. Budi Darma (1983) states, that people usually forget that literature is an expression of the problems of human life, philosophy, and psychology. Apart from its artistic values for enjoyment and entertainment, readers can examine and study, the major themes, and contents of philosophical and psychological views of human life. Therefore, good literary works must have both beauty and utility. Over two thousand years ago, Horace, the Roman poet, in reference to these two traits, opined that literature is ‘dulce et utile’, which translates as ‘sweet and useful’. From then on, literature has been considered a provider of both entertainment and education (Green, 2009). The engaging and pleasing qualities of literary masterpieces, serve to enhance their influence and appeal, in the context of human life improvement.

## 2. Existentialism as a Spirit of the Present Age

Making its appearance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, existentialism is looked upon as a philosophical campaign. According to Panza and Gale (2008), existentialism has to do with the thinking in relation to existence in general, as well as the value and meaning associated with human existence. Existentialism focuses on two fundamental areas: the scrutiny of human life, and the significance of human choice. Philosophy attempts to find answers, to the question of how to assign values and meanings to human life, without being trapped in any form of conventional norms, social traditions, rules of religions, and other societal systems. Existentialism posits that every individual must have freedom of choice, in creating a meaningful life, without being dictated by others, and by breaking free from traditional man-made rules, and even by rejecting all ethical and traditional, as well as religious systems. The principal nature of

existentialism is to seek absolute freedom against everything else, and to bring meaning to human life. Solomon (2005) defines existentialism as a philosophy of rebellion. It is deemed the categorical abstract expression of an existential stance, and the viewpoint of the current era. Additionally, is the coming to terms with subsisting in a fragmented world (Marcel), an indistinct world (de Beauvoir), a disjointed world (Merleau-Ponty), a world into which individuals are hurled and denounced, at the same time forsaken and unhindered (Heidegger and Sartre), and a world which seems uncaring and even preposterous (Camus). Existentialism is also a way of thinking, that distinguishes the human inclination to make sense of disorder, by clutching on to anything that seems reliable or recognizable, including good sense, a higher being, country, experts, the past, willpower, customs or other earthly discourse originating from Plato, Christianity, or a Utopian fantasy. Hence, the beliefs associated to existentialism, develop within individuals, through issues related to self-consciousness and self-realization. It starts with individuals, who are confronted with despairing life problems, which gradually lead them to question and reason about their existence, the meanings and purposes of life, and the indifferent world and realities, in which human beings struggle for their real essence of life.

### 3. Feminist Existentialism and Criticism in Modern Literature

Feminism alludes to the campaigns and beliefs of women, in their efforts to identify, authenticate, and uphold equality, with regards to their political, economic, and social rights, regardless of nationality. Feminism is based on the conviction that men and women are born equal, and as such, women should be accorded equal treatment, when it comes to prospects and entitlements, in every area. When viewed from an existential perspective, the oppression of women by men, over the ages, has enslaved women, and deprived them of their rights as human beings, to actualize their human existence as men do. In the face of despairing unjust treatment by men, and out of women's self-realization of their equal rights, women across different countries and throughout different periods of time, have demanded and fought for the equality of rights, as the rights of every human being, to achieve the fulfilment of their human existence. Thus, the movement of feminism, as the advocacy of the rights and equality of women, in their revolt to liberate themselves from male oppression, is known as feminist existentialism. Feminist existentialism strives for the liberation of women from oppression, and the assurance of their freedom, to bring values and meanings to their lives at their free will, without any constraints. Freedom and free-choice in the quest for the values and meanings of life are the central themes in existentialism. Feminism is therefore closely intertwined and inseparable from the philosophy of existentialism.

Feminist existentialism is rooted in the ideology of Simone de Beauvoir. A French writer and reviewer, she was deeply involved in the promotion of feminism and existentialism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her contributions towards existentialism were significantly influenced, by the inclinations of Jean Paul Sartre. In her work, ‘The ethics of ambiguity’, she crafted a scheme of existentialist principles that are rooted in the Sartrean perception of fundamental human liberty, that is receptive to all impending opportunities, while simultaneously obligated to accepting accountability, for one’s every decision. Beauvoir’s perception of feminism is founded unequivocally, on existentialist philosophies. She is of the opinion that the restrictions women endure, stem from the notion that masculinity is the accepted standard, while femininity is somewhat dissimilar and inadequate.

Simone de Beauvoir opines that the dilemma, facing women, stems partly from the standings of men and women, determined by a society dominated by men. There is the suggestion that the personalities of men and women are inherent, and thus unalterable. According to Beauvoir, women were brought up accepting their downgraded status, which led them to consider their situation pre-determined. She asserts that women should rebuff this out-dated attitude, and take control of their own destinies (Austin, 2013). Similarly, O’Flynn (2013) observed that in the opinion of Beauvoir, the responsibility, for putting an end to their exploitation, lies in the hands of women themselves. The realization of freedom for women should not come by way of pleas, but through struggles for their rights. Beauvoir states that to achieve liberation, women need to (a) be knowledgeable about global situations, and (b) identify the distinctive ways in which they can be involved in these situations. Advancements for women in the domains of economy and politics will be stymied, if the falsehoods associated to femininity are not removed. In the opinion of Beauvoir, the objective of liberation, is the mutual acceptance of each other (men and women), as free and equal individuals.

Feminist existentialism has given birth to various forms of criticism, against male suppression of women’s rights, through literary works. The emergence, of feminist existentialist criticism in literature, has become one of the major developments in literary studies, since the middle of the twentieth century. Feminist existentialism is associated to the theory of feminism, or in a more general sense, to the politics of feminism. It strives to eradicate the rituals and principles of the philosophy, which considers the supremacy and authority of men over women, normal. It refuses to go along with the male perception, which relegates women to the level of mere objects. Several significant issues are taken into consideration, during the practice of feminist existentialist criticism, for works of literature. Among these issues are, the roles of the female personalities and the circumstances under which they are performed, the relationships among the female personalities, the role of the female personalities in relation to their male equivalents (women set against men), the occupational part



played by women, the mind-set of the personalities, and the way their opinions influence, the conclusion to the work of literature.

Feminist existentialist criticism in literary works is not only reflected in feminist writings, but also in those of many male writers. In her effort, 'Ecriture Feminine', Helene Cixous, a renowned French feminist critic, declares that ecriture feminine is applicable not only by female authors, but also by their male counterparts. While it is common for women to reap the benefits of masculine writing, Cixous is of the opinion, that male authors can enhance their works, through the exploitation of feminine writing.

#### 4. Feminist Existentialist Criticism in *The Museum of Innocence*

One of Orhan Pamuk's great fictional works, *The Museum of Innocence*, originally published in Turkish (2008), and translated into English (2009) by Maureen Freelay, can best exemplify, how a male writer can touch upon the issues of feminist existentialism, on a large scale. The following discussion will focus on the analysis of these issues, and examine how women are represented, through the Turkish author and the 2006 Literature Nobel Prize Winner's bestselling novel, *The Museum of Innocence*.

While analysing the issues of feminist existentialist criticism in the novel, it is essential that an examination be conducted, on the way female characters are represented in the novel, through their roles and situations, as well as the relationship among female characters, and their relationship with their male counterparts. Among the many female characters in *The Museum of Innocence*, such as Sibel, Nurcihan, Papatya, Ceyda and others, Fusun is the central female character, through whom most issues of feminism are brought up. Even though Fusun is not characterized as a feminist icon, her role and situation portray the victimization of a Turkish woman of her era. In fact, from the beginning to the end of her vulnerable characterization (when she dies in the car accident), she has always suffered from mistreatment by the men in her life, and has been a constant casualty of sexist suppression by not only male strangers, but also by the men that she loves.

Objectification is the first issue of feminism that the writer tries to bring up, in the early chapters of the novel. In the context of the feminism theory, objectification alludes to sexual objectification, which has to do with the perception of another person as simply an object, to be taken advantage of for sexual gratification. Generally, objectification refers to the way of thinking, in which an individual is looked upon as an object to be used, with scant or no consideration for the individual's personality. The issue of sexual objectification, particularly the sexual objectification of women, is a crucial component of the feminist theory, as well as several other psychological theories. The main character in *The Museum of*

*Innocence*, Kemal Basmaci, treats Fusun, the ordinary shop girl and his distant relation, as his object of sexual gratification both in his mind, and through his acts. Starting from the very first time Kemal sees Fusun at the Sanzelize boutique, his heart and mind are filled with nothing more than sexual passion or lust, which is very clear from the way he describes the way she looks (Chapter 2, Page 6 – 7).

In the sexist description of a woman's body, the writer does not only describe the way Kemal looks at Fusun, but he tells us how men in general would look at women, and fantasize about them as sexual objects (page 15, Chapter 6). Sexual objectification of women is the universal nature of men. Fusun is also portrayed as a person who recognizes this nature of men, as can be observed on Page 23 of Chapter 7. The narrator presents Fusun's perception of the situation as follows:

“With a look to suggest that men, alas, were alike, she cast her eyes around the room one last time, eyeing the furniture, and the bed with blue sheets in the corner, which, with evil intentions, I had contrived to leave half made. She had sized up the situation, but I perhaps out of shame could think of no way to keep the game going.”

The selfishness of Kemal's sexual desire for Fusun, does not leave any room for any sort of sincerity and care, about her success in her education and future career, but instead he keeps using her as his sex object (sexual objectification), and the mathematics lessons are only the mask to hide his ulterior motives. In fact, every time he pretends to teach her mathematics, his mind is filled with sexual fantasies (Chapter 12 on Pages 47 and 48).

The novel also shows how the other men treat and objectify women as simply sex objects. Kemal, as a narrator, talks about his two close friends, Zaim and Mehmet. Zaim is regarded as a show-off, too much a playboy and rather coarse. Zaim often gets involved in sexual trysts, with actors and models of little consequence (a recent leisure activity in Turkey), with the conviction that he would never consider them marriage options, due to their somewhat unsavoury sexual history (Chapter 8, Page 26). Kemal's other friend, Mehmet, is described as having an even worse personality. Kemal sees Mehmet as an incorrigible patron of whorehouses and brothels. In these two chapters (8 and 24), the writer touches on the issue of prostitution, in which men use women as sex objects. Anti-prostitution feminists frown upon this activity, and view it as brutality against women, as well as an indication of male exploitation of, and dominance over, women.

In the feminist theory, there is also the indication self-objectification by avant-garde women, for the purpose of securing authority over men. Additionally, the rise in female sexual freedom, as well as sexual activity involving homosexual and bisexual men, has contributed towards an escalation in objectification. In terms of the sexual escapade involving Kemal and Fusun, it is Fusun who exploits her sexuality, to take

advantage of Kemal, for her own clandestine objectives. She wants to win a university place, and expects Kemal to help her become a popular actor, as Kemal has all the riches, power, and business relations, to pave the way towards her ambitions. This is the reason, she appears so determined to give herself to Kemal, in their first lovemaking session, when she comes to the Merhamet Apartment for the second time (Page 28 and 29).

When viewed from different perspectives, the relationship between Fusun and Feridun, are in the context of another instance of mutual objectification, in which Fusun plays with Feridun's emotions, by making him love her, so that he will do what she wants, and help her become an actor. Feridun knows her mind well enough, and desires to marry her, by promising her that he will make her a star. Aunt Nesibe mentions this, when spilling family secrets to Kemal in Chapter 53 on Page 280, when she says "He wants to make his wife a movie star". In this two-way objectification, both Fusun and Feridun make use of each other, for their own ulterior motives.

Orhan Pamuk, the writer of *The Museum of Innocence*, describes how severely manipulative men or women can be, in their social interactions, for gratification of their own desires and ambitions, when he tells his readers about the characters of men and women at the Pelur Bar. It is no secret that the film industry is full of sex scandals, and that ambitious female stars often resort to the shortest route to popularity, by sleeping with male film actors, directors, and producers, or becoming mistresses to sugar daddies who can help them win a role in a movie. (Chapter 57, Page 315).

When Fusun suddenly writes a letter to Kemal letting him know where she lives, and invites him to join her at supper on May 19, her real intention is questionable. Though vaguely, Kemal can notice their real intention for inviting him, when he finds out that Feridun is looking for a fund backer to produce his film (Chapter 49, Page 243):

Amazing films can be produced, if only one could secure a backer who is serious, resolute, and not overly greedy; he had written a screenplay in which he intended to cast Fusun, but unfortunately, he failed to engage a producer for the project.

While on the way home, Kemal's mind is filled with an even stronger suspicion, about the evil intentions of Fusun and Feridun (Chapter 49, Page 244):

...there was a moment of sudden recognition, and I understood that Fusun and her husband saw me as a rich relative, who might help with their dreams of making movies. This was why they had invited me to supper.

The other women, like Aunt Nesibe, are also seen as responsible for objectifying women. When Aunt Nesibe tells Kemal to help Fusun by saying "If you love my

daughter, you will help them”, she is in fact manipulating and exploiting Kemal, for the sake of her daughter’s ambition, in the name of “love”. And when she continues to remind Kemal of her daughter’s-stained virtue, she implies that it is Kemal’s fault that Fusun’s life is ruined. This is an indication that she is taking advantage of his feelings of guilt. This is an obvious instance, of how she objectifies Fusun as well as Kemal emotionally (objectification of men), as portrayed in Chapter 53 on Page 280.

Sexual harassment, another issue of feminism, is viewed as violence perpetrated by men against women. The author of *The Museum of Innocence*, attempts to inform his readers, about how Turkish men in general, sexually harass and violate women, through the experience of Fusun in Chapter 14, and through what Sibel tells Kemal, regarding the men from the provinces (Chapter 61, Page 348).

One of the most important issues, which led to the establishment of the feminist existentialist movement, is female suppression. Female suppression is defined as the dominance of malevolent authority and power, which oppress women, and deprive them of equal opportunities and rights. Orhan Pamuk, the author, has skilfully highlighted this issue, through Fusun’s failed attempt to become a film star, due to jealousy and fear. The men around her deliberately try to deprive her of every opportunity. And again, this is what Pamuk conveys when he speaks to Sameer Rahim of *The Daily Telegraph*, that through the novel, he intends to capture how a man suppresses a woman he is in love with, and the deeper in love he is, the more he suppresses her. It dawns on Kemal, that the fulfilment of Fusun’s aspiration, will render her a celebrity, and lead to her ill-treatment of not only him, but Feridun as well. Furthermore, the possibility, of her walking out on both, cannot be discounted (Chapter 59, Page 335). So, the more he fears losing her, the more resolute he is to find ways to keep her away from the film world, and thus, he suppresses her by removing all opportunities for her to realize her dream.

After attending Kemal’s engagement to Sibel, Fusun suddenly leaves Kemal and marries Feridun. Her husband, Feridun is also a great disappointment to her. He has decided not to offer the main female role in his screenplay to Fusun, but to cast a new actor named Papatya. He believes the plot is too suggestive and a discredit to Fusun. It gets even more disconcerting when the lead actor selected is Tahir Tan, a young handsome actor, who is greatly taken up by Fusun’s beauty (Chapter 67, Page 383). To Fusun, Feridun has broken his promise and lied. He has also suppressed her and taken away her opportunity to become a star, and this caused her to undergo great pain, frustration, and resentment.

Orhan Pamuk delved into the serious issue of female suppression, in the first film of Feridun, called “Broken Lives”. Pamuk’s film is well-received by audiences in Istanbul and the provinces. Women in the audience were brought to tears, during the closing scenes, with Papatya’s delivery of two sorrowful songs portraying her demise.



However, the death of the devious and wicked wealthy man, at the hands of Papatya, brought about jubilation, among female members of the audience. Pamuk has successfully exposed his readers, to the general condition of women who suffer from extreme suppression, caused by men in the Turkish society of that era. Through the story of “Broken Lives”, Pamuk intends to incite public outcry, with regards to the suppression of Turkish women (Chapter 70, Page 407).

Helplessness, depression, and suicide, are the dire consequences one may face, during constant suppression. The issue of suicide is a controversial subject, which has been discussed by several prominent scholars in the feminist movement, including Virginia Woolf and Carolyn Heilbrun. Heilbrun believes that suicide is a drastic attempt at achieving freedom, and represents an escape route from the patriarchal structure. This is the situation Fusun finds herself in, as all her efforts and sacrifices eventually amount to nothing. Orhan Pamuk uses his craft to bring the love story in *The Museum of Innocence* to a tragic end, when Fusun finally decides to end her life, due to depression stemming from her suppression by men, and her loss of hope with regards to her dream (Chapter 79, Page 486).

Suppression is closely related to the issues of freedom and equality of rights which always become the common issues that women fight for in both feminism and existentialism. Pamuk has also covered all these issues as he writes his story across this novel. He fingers the censorship board as an example for the suppression of freedom, lamenting their unrestricted capacity for deletions, ranging from news articles to local and foreign films (Chapter 59, Page 329). He also regrets the board’s propensity, for the inexplicable removal, of certain captivating and imaginative scenes from films (Chapter 67, Page 383). Papatya’s record (her song “Broken Lives”) also fails to draw the attention of television and radio stations, as the Turkish censorship board considered the song lacking in moral fibre (Chapter 70, Page 409). Pamuk touches on the issue of women’s equal rights, when he discusses Ceyda’s strict and conservative boyfriend, who forbids her from working as a model, after they got married (Chapter 20, Page 84). Pamuk also delves into this issue, when during a cultural discussion, Papatya is thrown the question “Should a modern Turkish Kemalist girl think about her job, or a husband first?” (Chapter 70, Page 410). Pamuk throws this question, to all his readers, and to the Turkish people in general, so that they can determine their stance, on the issue of equal rights, for all women in Turkish society.

Pamuk highlights the issue of patriarchy, through the relationship between the male and female characters in *The Museum of Innocence*. Every man in the novel plays a patriarchal role. Ataturk, described as the founding father of Turkey, and a leading political figure, exerts great dominance and influence over the social and cultural structure of the Turkish people (Chapter 7, Page 20). Hayal Hayati Bey, who is on the censorship board, has the moral authority and power, to permit or ban films, based on

his own personal beliefs. (Chapter 59, Page 329). All business enterprises are also chaired by male figures such as Kemal, Osman, Turgay Bey, and Zaim. Ceyda is controlled by her boyfriend, who dictates and suppresses her freedom and rights. Fusun's whole life is also been ruled and dominated by the patriarchal figure of her father, Tarik Bey, who she obeys, highly respects and fears. Pamuk covers this issue of patriarchy throughout his novel, to describe the Turkish social structure, in which male authority entails female subordination in all aspects of life.

## 5. Conclusion

On the surface, some readers of *The Museum of Innocence* may see it as only an inconsequential novel, depicting a story about memory, desperate love, and obsession. However, a deeper study will reveal it as the work of a true genius. Orhan Pamuk, the writer of the novel, displays great skills in evoking the attention of his readers. At the same time, he shares his thoughts and ideas on a variety of political and social issues, particularly those related to feminism, which are well presented through all the characters, and the chronicles or events, within the love story. He delves into the submission of women, and the suppression of their social and political ambitions. Every issue pertaining to the feminist existentialist movement, ranging from sexual objectification (objectification of women by men and vice versa), suppression, suicide, freedom, equality of rights and patriarchy, is meticulously covered. Orhan Pamuk has brilliantly conceived, contemplated on, imagined, and created each character, as well as the intriguing incidents in his novel, to convey his stance on the sensitive issues associated to feminist existentialism in Turkish society. It comes as no surprise, that this masterpiece was well-received, by those of the feminist movement.

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