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Overview of “The White Castle”

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Abstract

The White Castle is a novel by the renowned Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, originally written in Turkish under the title Beyaz Kale and published in 1985. It was later translated into English The White Castle. A subsequent Urdu translation, titled "سفید قلعہ", was published from Karachi. The novel consists of eleven chapters, each weaving together threads of history, science, identity, and cultural introspection. In this article we overview of the story of white castle.

Keywords: white castle Turkish life. historical . philosophical . boundaries identity.

INTRODUCTION

The narrative revolves around a young Venetian scholar, captured and brought to Istanbul, where he is enslaved and handed over to a curious and ambitious Ottoman master, known simply as Hoja (meaning "Master" or "Teacher"). The Venetian is well-versed in astronomy, physics, and the arts, and his intellectual prowess quickly earns him a place not just as a servant, but as a vital companion in Hoja's quest for knowledge and recognition.

In the opening chapter, the young man's medical knowledge—particularly in diagnosis and treatment—wins him recognition, even curing several patients, including the Pasha, who is both a powerful figure and Hoja's mentor. It is the Pasha who assigns the Venetian as Hoja's slave.

The novel richly portrays Ottoman customs and courtly rituals, particularly during lavish events like weddings, giving readers a vivid depiction of 17th-century Turkish life. But more than a historical account, the novel is deeply philosophical, dealing with themes of selfhood, duality, and the clash between East and West.

Throughout the chapters, the relationship between Hoja and his slave evolves from one of hierarchy to mutual fascination, then rivalry. The master seeks to surpass the knowledge of the European slave, and in doing so, a strange mirroring begins to take place—not only in intellect but even in physical appearance. The two men become reflections of each other, blurring the boundaries of identity.

Hoja, eager to rise in status and gain favor with the Sultan—a mere child of eight—seeks to construct a mighty weapon of war. With the assistance of the Venetian slave, who possesses superior knowledge of Western science, he embarks on experiments and scientific inquiries, culminating in the creation of a massive war machine.

In the novel's final chapters, the Sultan commands them to bring the weapon to the battlefield to conquer the fabled White Castle. Despite their efforts and the scale of the invention, the assault on the castle does not lead to a straightforward victory, suggesting that knowledge, no matter how vast, cannot always command destiny.

The novel is narrated in the first person, giving us direct access to the Venetian's inner world. His reflections capture the essence of a captive scholar, transported from the familiar world of Venice to the exotic and complex empire of the Ottomans. As he recounts his journey, we witness a transformation not just in location, but in identity, philosophy, and purpose.

The White Castle is a masterful novel by Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, one that has earned international acclaim and a prominent place in world literature. As previously mentioned, the novel comprises eleven chapters, each contributing to its richly woven narrative.

The story opens with a dramatic and fateful encounter at sea. A young man, journeying from Venice to Naples, finds his life forever altered when the ships he travels on fall into Ottoman hands. Thus begins the tale—with a moment of disruption, captivity, and transformation.

The novel's first lines set the tone for the narrative:

"We were aboard a ship, sailing from Venice to Naples, when the Turkish fleet appeared. Altogether, there were three ships in our convoy." [1]

The novel's first chapter begins with the young man's capture by the Turkish forces, who seize the ship and lead the prisoners to a dark, confined cell. Among these captives is a young Venetian, distinguished from the others by his demeanor and intellect. Unlike the rest, he is treated with a certain degree of respect—perhaps due to his scholarly bearing and refined manners.

This young man is not only a prisoner; he is also a writer and thinker, a man of knowledge and imagination. Once in Turkey, he finds himself drifting into memories of his past—his mother, his fiancée, and his friends—all of whom seem like distant figures from another life. As time passes, he gradually forms relationships with his captors, learning the Turkish language and adapting to the rhythms of this new world.

Gifted in science and the arts, he is particularly knowledgeable in astronomy and the natural sciences. He views his experiences through the lens of his education and memory, as if piecing together fragments of identity and meaning from his former life.

As he reflects on his youth, the narrative tells us:

"At the age of twenty-three, he had studied science and art in Florence and Venice. He took pride in his knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, physics, and painting, and imagined himself well-versed in all these disciplines." [2]

Thus begins a journey not only of physical captivity, but of intellectual and emotional transformation—a journey where memory, identity, and knowledge become tools for survival and, perhaps, self-reinvention.

The young man soon earned respect as a physician, having successfully treated numerous patients—including the Pasha himself. When the Pasha questioned him about his background and knowledge, the young captive responded with composed confidence:

"The principal subjects of my study are astronomy and mathematics, and to a lesser degree, engineering. Yet I also possess knowledge of medicine, and I have treated many patients." [3]

This admission not only established his intellectual authority, but also deepened his role within the Ottoman world—not merely as a captive, but as a man whose mind and skill commanded recognition, even in a foreign land.

It is at this point in the story that the young captive is formally introduced to Hoja, in the presence of the Pasha, who is preoccupied with the lavish arrangements for an impending wedding celebration. Eager to stage a spectacle worthy of the occasion, the Pasha entrusts both Hoja and the young scholar with the responsibility of orchestrating a grand fireworks display—a dazzling performance that would showcase both ingenuity and wonder.

Together, the two men begin working side by side, combining their knowledge and skill. Though Hoja is well-versed in science, he does not possess the same depth of understanding as the young Venetian, who, despite being a slave, surpasses his master in intellect.

The narrative captures their dedication and scientific precision as they plan their experiments:

"The entire problem lies in discovering the right compound for ignition. Thus, our task will be to measure and mix the components with care, prepare the experimental formulas meticulously, and by night, launch them near the Sar Debi under the shadow of the city's high walls—observing carefully and drawing conclusions from what we witness." [4]

Their collaboration—part rivalry, part partnership—reveals the novel's deeper themes: the transfer of knowledge, the fragile boundary between power and subservience, and the desire to prove one's worth through science, spectacle, and intellect.

The young man lived in a narrow, dim cell, while Hoja resided in a modest house. Despite their differing circumstances, the two spent long hours together, conducting scientific experiments. After each session, the young captive would carefully record his observations and results in a small notebook. Their conversations were frequent and probing, often revolving around science, astronomy, and the natural order of the universe.

Though Hoja was nominally the master, he secretly believed that his slave surpassed him in knowledge. He shared his thoughts openly with the young man and eagerly absorbed all that he could about Western science. Their exchanges took the form of questions and debates, especially on matters concerning the moon, planets, and celestial bodies—subjects that stirred both curiosity and rivalry.

After weeks of meticulous preparation, the two finally realized their vision of a grand fireworks display for the Pasha's wedding celebration. The performance was a triumph of science and spectacle, witnessed even by the young Sultan himself. The Pasha, too, was deeply pleased.

The scene is described with vivid imagery:

"We launched colorless rockets into the sky. Moments later, we displayed the circular pattern we had named 'The Millstone.' In the blink of an eye, the sky burst into hues of red, yellow, and green, echoing with thunderous blasts that overwhelmed the senses." [5]

This dazzling moment not only marked a turning point in their relationship but also symbolized the fusion of Eastern curiosity and Western knowledge—a central theme of the novel.

Thus, their efforts bore fruit. The young man—still a slave to Hoja, and notably, not a Muslim—soon found himself at a moral crossroads. In the second chapter, the Pasha demands that he convert to Islam, threatening him with execution should he refuse. Yet, despite the danger to his life, the young man stands firm in his faith, refusing to change his religion simply to save himself.

This act of quiet defiance does not go unnoticed. The Sultan, upon hearing of it, is surprisingly pleased by his integrity. The

Pasha, too, acknowledges his courage:

"The Pasha treated me kindly and said he admired the fact that I had not abandoned my faith to save my life." [6]

From that moment onward, the young man and Hoja began to live together more closely. The Pasha formally places the young scholar in Hoja's care, making him his personal slave. Although he yearns for freedom and dreams of returning to his homeland, the young man becomes increasingly bound—not by chains, but by intellectual and existential ties.

Hoja, aware of his servant's brilliance, becomes determined to learn from him—to absorb his knowledge, his methods, and perhaps even his sense of identity. Their shared inquiry, particularly into the mysteries of the universe, reflects a deeper search for meaning.

“And so, we spent the first year immersed in astronomy, seeking proof—either for or against—the existence of that imagined planet.” [7]

This shared pursuit of cosmic truths becomes symbolic of their inner exploration—a journey not just through science, but through selfhood, belief, and the shifting boundaries of master and servant.

Afterwards, the two journeyed to the Turkish city of Gehnare, where they remained for three months. During this period, Hoja conceived the idea of constructing a window specifically to mark the times for prayer. He was also preoccupied with the design of a clock whose mechanism would use a large pendulum, so precise that it would only need adjustment once every month, instead of every week:

“In those days, he was engrossed in the idea of crafting a clock with a heavy pendulum mechanism that would require correction not weekly, but merely once a month.” [8]

As the story unfolds, the figure of the young ruling Sultan emerges—a boy of eight years old who commands the lives of Hoja and his servant. Both serve under his authority, obedient to his every command:

“The ruler was a sweet, ruddy-cheeked child, whose stature was fitting for his tender age.” [9]

The Sultan entrusted Hoja with the task of composing tales that would glorify the young sovereign. Together, Hoja and his servant forged weapons and carried out various duties to support the Sultan's mythical world. Despite Hoja's elevated status, he deferred much to his servant's wisdom, and it was through this humble acknowledgment that he earned respect.

Time passed with the Sultan engaging Hoja in learned discourse, posing questions tailored to his own intelligence. He eagerly listened to Hoja's stories and sought answers on matters of science—questions which Hoja often answered with the help of his servant:

“How do stars remain suspended in the air? They hang by transparent strings. What are they made of? They are invisible, yet they never collide, each occupying its own space, layered like the model we discussed. There are countless stars, so why don't they crash into each other? Because they are so far apart—how far, so very far. Other stars even have 'bells' that ring with their rotation. Will it rain today? Observations of the sky indicate so. What does the sky reveal about the Sultan's sick lion?” [10]

Such were the inquiries the young ruler frequently posed. The Sultan's affection extended to animals as well, prompting him to ask questions about them and their future—demonstrating a precocious knowledge of prophecy. In this way, Hoja earned the Sultan's esteem.

Yet, beyond this learned exchange, the novel reveals a more psychological portrait of Hoja. His servant notices a change in his temperament, observing:

“His first impression was merely irritation, but now, unable to focus long on any subject, he wasted his time in petty affections, like a spoiled child who knew no method to amuse his heart.” [11]

Hoja began to ask himself troubling questions, the most haunting being:

“Why am I the person I am?” [12]

Restless and burdened by this question, Hoja would sit with his servant late into the night, attempting to unravel its meaning. His servant, too, would write down his recollections and reflections, while Hoja wrestled with his sense of self-worth.

At times, Hoja appeared weakened by self-doubt, viewing himself as inferior to his servant. During one night of anguish, he tried to learn new knowledge in a desperate attempt to become more like the young man he served:

“He would write critiques of himself, tearing them up without showing me, losing a little more of his confidence and self-respect with each passing day.” [13]

His self-confidence was gradually fading away. Hoja would go to school where he narrated stories to the children, and at night he spent his time sitting beside me. Hoja was deeply fearful of the plague spreading through Istanbul, witnessing thousands of people being swallowed by death. A pervasive atmosphere of fear enveloped him, which also affected his servant. Stricken by the plague, Hoja grew envious of his servant—whose nature was transparent and pure—because the servant absorbed Hoja's knowledge as his own. Since Hoja desired either to become like his servant or to shape his servant into a reflection of himself, he subjected him to various forms of torment:

“In his relentless attempts to infect me with the disease, he kept repeating that I am him and he is me. He did this because he derived pleasure from stepping outside his own self, from observing himself from a distance.” [14]

The plague had sown panic and chaos among the people, but gradually its grip on the city weakened.

“After the plague's force waned, within a few weeks not only was Hoja granted the esteemed title of royal astrologer, but he also developed such close relations with the Sultan—relations beyond anything we could have ever imagined.” [15]

However, tension began to grow between the master and his servant. Hoja was no longer the same as before, yet the servant wished to see him as he once was. Hoja put the young man to the test with his words:

“He wanted to test me. I was a sinner. There are two kinds of men: the righteous and the wicked—like him and like me, respectively.” [16]

The servant, who had been captured in Venice and imprisoned in Turkey, now contemplated never returning home. Toward the novel's conclusion, the young servant develops a relationship with the ruling Sultan, eventually replacing Hoja. The Sultan recognized that the knowledge Hoja possessed was imparted by this very servant. Just as Hoja had told stories and answered questions for the Sultan, so too did the servant take his place. The Sultan grew deeply interested in Hoja's servant, appearing very pleased with him.

Hoja commanded the creation of a weapon:

"Thus, according to Hoja, we were entering a new phase—one that required reimagining everything from scratch. But since I had now stripped myself of his coarseness and his dreams, I had nothing left except to become acquainted with the ruler." [17]

Hoja became engrossed in weapon-making as ordered by the Sultan, while the servant remained close to the young ruler, earning the same respect that Hoja had once commanded. Spending time with the Sultan, the servant felt as if he was still serving Hoja, answering the Sultan's questions with the very knowledge Hoja had imparted to him. The likeness between Hoja and his servant was so striking that they not only appeared identical but also shared the same knowledge and interests. Because of this, the Sultan ceased to distinguish between the two.

"When we interpreted his dreams or discussed the new weapon, and at those moments when all we had were dreams to rely on, the ruler would suddenly pause, turn to one of us, and say, 'No—that is his idea, not yours.'" [18]

In other words, the Sultan saw Hoja in the servant's thoughts and ideas.

"The ruler said, 'I am Hoja who stays at home. His mental playfulness deeply pollutes my mind, yet it no longer surprises me. When he says, 'I am Hoja,' I find it better neither to continue his logic nor to follow it, because who knows—he might even claim that I was the one who taught Hoja all of this.'" [19]

Hoja, who was busy crafting the weapon, was gradually being overshadowed in the palace and city by his own servant, who appeared to take his place. The weapon Hoja had designed was a massive creation that required many hands to operate and ignite. Hoja's deepest desire was to see this weapon tested in battle.

"At that time, when Hoja's weapon was ready for trial, it demanded brave men capable of entering the terrifying heaps of the village and turning the rusty iron tail and flying wheels in the town's forge." [20]

The ruler, who had already advanced toward Andria, kept Hoja and his servant in suspense, waiting for the moment when the war would begin and their weapon would be deployed. When they finally received news that their weapon was being taken to the river, they set out with it.

"During the ten-day journey to Andria, we felt ourselves drawing closer to each other, though never quite as close as in the old days." [21]

The friendship between Hoja and his servant had its origins in Hoja's early lessons of Western knowledge. Initially, their relationship was marked by genuine loyalty, but gradually Hoja's temperament changed. The servant often found himself recalling his past and yearning for freedom. Yet, now was the day when they had once again grown close, just as before. Together, they tested the great machine they had created—a formidable weapon that made a grand entrance on the battlefield.

They introduced the weapon in the war, which the ruling Sultan was waging to seize the fortress. Both stood side by side on the battlefield with their creation. People came to meet them, and many looked upon their weapon with envy. Though they earned respect from the Sultan, others envied the closeness between Hoja and his servant.

The day the battle began, rain poured heavily, but they managed to advance with their weapon, gaining access to the White Fortress. Because their weapon was so massive, it eventually enabled them to reach the fortress.

"After sunset, we heard not only that the golden-haired, handsome Pasha had failed but also that Sternes, Angrens, and Krak, who were policing during the siege of the two daughters-in-law, had been involved. At last, we saw the fortress: it was perched atop a lofty mountain peak. Flags fluttered from its towers, and the fading light of the setting sun illuminated it with a soft glow. The fortress was pure white—the purest white—and beautifully splendid." [22]

Their weapon could not reach the top of the fortress, for near the castle lay a dark forest and a steep incline. Ultimately, Khawaja and his slave were separated, and Khawaja departed on a journey. In the final chapter of the novel, the author, who has been chronicling the story, shares his reflections:

"Today, I realize that among all my books, this is the one most dear to me. I shall bring it to its rightful conclusion." [23]

This is the astonishing tale of Khan Hamid, and as the author intended, the moral of this story is:

"We ought to seek not in familiar or bewildering worlds outside, but within ourselves. For endless and profound self-reflection can only bring sorrow—and this was precisely what happened to the characters in my tale." [24]

Indeed, Khan Hamid's masterpiece elegantly explores the intricate relationship between master and slave, showing how the master can become the slave, and the slave the master. The author imparts this cautionary lesson:

"We must not allow ourselves to be misled by the hopes of a one-handed Spanish slave, for if we do, gradually, by composing such stories and searching for the unfamiliar and astonishing within ourselves, we too may become someone else." [25]

In this novel, questions arise about who is the master and who the slave, who is the scholar and who the prisoner. It probes where I end and the other begins—the very struggle witnessed between Khawaja and his slave. Khawaja expresses keen interest in the knowledge of his slave to acquire Western sciences.

This is a historical and scientific novel that, alongside the themes of war, explores the forging and use of weapons, drawing on astronomy, science, and art. Through the questions it raises, Khan Hamid completes his narrative. The novel beautifully portrays the fusion of East and West, issues of identity, and the complex interrelations of human bonds.

The author employs a remarkable style: a tale drawn from the sands of ancient history. Though the story is old, the author's style has brought it renown. These writings are the very reason for Khan Hamid's fame, which has garnered worldwide popularity. His novels have been translated into all the major languages of the world, and in 2006, Khan Hamid was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Because his works exist in many languages, they are read internationally, and his stories—like this one, *The White Fortress*—are deeply connected to human relationships. It is for this reason that readers engage with his stories with great interest.

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