

## ‘Economics’ in Orhan Pamuk’s *A strangeness in my mind*

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**Abstract:** *The protagonists are small scale vendors who are left helpless in the new economic scenario. The sad part of the whole thing is that people in general are so weak that they get adapted to every push and shove without much resistance. This article is an attempt to study the impact of the new economic policies on the uneducated street vendors like Mevlut. They are ignorant and it is disturbing to note that the administration takes up the massive changes without proper deliberation and dissemination. The Zigzag movement of time does not disturb the structure of the plot, but makes the readers empathize with Mevlut. The author’s statement about the true nature of the novel bereft of exaggeration makes a clear case of support for the purpose of this article.*

**Key Words:** *Economics, helpless, movement, policies.*

The world keeps changing not just due to the tick of the time, but due to the economic policies that are borne in the executive minds. Though wealth has multiplied, the impact of economic policies is such that it erases the habits and practices of the past quite easily. For aesthetes like Orhan Pamuk, the transformation that wipes the past is rather an unacceptable one and his novels have always stood between the new and the old Turkey. As a writer, he never makes any sweeping statements, but the sad tune that flows in the remnants of the past is an ample proof of his intent. He tries not to criticize the new changes, nor does he want to go back to the past, but often makes his characters a victim of the rapid changes. ‘Economics’ has always been an indispensable part of Orhan Pamuk’s novels, as the urbanization drive initiated by the Government occupies a major chunk of his works. An aggressive transition throws his characters in a challenging ground, for they are often caught up in the past, oblivious of the new changes. ‘Time’ keeps ticking at a faster pace in his novels, and seldom could there be another novelist who makes his story take rapid strides with time. Mostly, the protagonists are small scale vendors who are left helpless in the new economic scenario. The sad part of the whole thing is that people in general are so weak that they get adapted to every push and shove without much resistance. This article is an attempt to study the impact of the new economic policies on the uneducated street vendors like Mevlut. They are ignorant and it is disturbing to note that the administration takes up the massive changes without proper deliberation and dissemination. The Zigzag movement of time does not disturb the structure of the plot, but makes the readers empathize with Mevlut. The author’s statement about the true nature of the novel bereft of exaggeration makes a clear case of support for the purpose of this article.

The novel begins optimistically with the elopement of Rayiha with Mevlut, an uneducated small scale vendor. Even while waiting for the train, his mind reverts back to the history lessons that he could not remember properly. It makes him repent, but his optimism remains intact as he is very young and has a long career ahead. The author gives a glimpse of the old economy in villages and towns through the pictures that he unleashes in the course of the narration. The protagonist feels happy for his lady love who watches the tractors, the horse carts, the kids playing football and the vendors who sell snacks in the train. It may be a lackluster scene, but the native economy was intact without any foreign influence in the rural sides. The presence of horse cart clearly denotes the ruralised nature of economy that was highly dependent on agriculture. By beginning the work with a mention of the nationalized ‘closed’ economy, the author makes enough space to highlight the western intrusion. But as the train moves into the Istanbul area, they witness big factories spewing smoke, big freight ships, transmission towers, asphalt roads, concrete bridges. So, all these sights are traces of the new economy that is being born in Istanbul. One fact that strikes the readers hard is the partiality of the development. The writer makes a picture of urbanization in Istanbul City alone, leaving other places to the reader’s imagination. The unequal distribution of wealth is blatantly shown by the author and the malnourished education of his characters is an instance of the sick economy. Mevlut was a school dropout, while his Rayiha had gone to the elementary school. Despite the weak educational background, Mevlut nurtures high hopes as the economy was just in a transitional stage.

Istanbul, as a locale is used by the author to drive home the point that the urbanization is not a positive thing as it has robbed many a precious practices and scenes of the olden day Turkey. In the narration, the author suddenly moves twenty five years ahead and the protagonist is all set to sell his Boza on a cold night. ‘Boza’ is a fermented drink that is popular in the middle east countries and there were street vendors who traversed the silent streets to sell their produce. The year is 1994 and Mevlut is pursuing the same business in the same way as he had done a quarter of the century

back. Modernization had not touched him and he still walks alone in the night with the wares making a shrill sound to tempt the would-be customers. Two reasons could be attributed to the status quo, while the first one could be his inability to learn new ways of earning money and second one could be due to an inherent passion he has towards Boza selling. If the second reason is taken up, some readers could feel the reflection of the author's characteristics on the protagonist. Mevlut remembers the days when he used to assist his father in yoghurt and boza selling. They were then pouring the drink in an enameled pot that was dropped down from the top in a basket. A similar circumstance opens up after twenty five years with a customer practicing the same method and it enthralls the seller who pours more than the sought quantity. This is how the author shows the glimpses of the past in the novel. The protagonist began his profession in the year 1969 and he recounts the bell that was dropped along with the basket by some lonely housewives. The passing vendor usually struck the bell to alert the customers. But the author says, "But Istanbul had changed so much over the past twenty five years that these memories now seemed like fairy tales to Mevlut" (*Strangeness* 19).

The writer also subtly speaks against the modernization of Turkey which naturally means 'westernization'. He mentions about the cobblestone streets that had paved way for the asphalt one. It is another sign of modernization that is being harped upon by the article. The mention of Beyoglu, a place in the City outskirts that was once famous for cabaret bars, nightclubs and hidden brothels had a lot of tourists from different parts of the world who were ever ready to spend money from their pockets for Boz drink. The protagonist made a rich business then, but the scene has changed pretty much that currently only kebab shops are there and the younger generation do not show much interest in the fermented drink. This is the painful change that the article delves upon. It is not only the loss of business that pricks Mevlut, but the very change of the Istanbul's nature. The 'nature' is the thought process of the city and the protagonist being a person who is tied to his traditions, it is impossible for him to alter his mind quite easily. This makes him hang on to his boza selling business even after years of pain and pleasure, loss and gain. There is no doubt that the impact of new policies has wreaked havoc for vendors as persons like Mevlut has lost a large chunk of his business. Already yoghurt selling has become a history as new packed products have erased the practice of buying yoghurt from the vendors.

The shrill night "Bozza-zaa" call given by the vendors sends a thrill to many middle aged residents of Istanbul. It is not just a business, but a sign of the human bondage that was existent long back. The author uses the activity to bridge the past with the present. It is a century old practice that has a weightage of tradition in it. There was no such thing as urban rural divide and everything was natural then. The author's nostalgic memories keep shading the pages of the novel though it is an implied one. The novel makes a realistic picture of the lifestyle of the poor dwellers who make a living in the changing city.

The buildings and abodes of the city dwellers is one facet that shows the proliferation of the urban mindset. The buildings in 1970s did not have any elevators and the inmates were gracious enough to allow him into the kitchen with soothing words. They enquired if he felt cold and also asked about his schooling and such other things. All these hospitality and affection had changed, and now in 1990s even robbery has become a common practice. The gift of urbanization is greed and the boza seller who had never been threatened and robbed in these many years, has suddenly lost his watch and money to the robbers who waylaid him. The robbery did not take place on individuals alone, for it was practiced on the customers of Istanbul too, by the branded companies that forcibly tempted the minds to purchase the items like yoghurt, The author spends enough words to highlight the slow fall of yoghurt business in the streets as the grocery shop started selling the branded yoghurts in glass bowls with a cow picture in it. This is the change that is being dealt by the article. No doubt, it took a heavy toll on the street vendors like Mevlut who literally lost a lot of money due to the invasion.

But as the novel veers to the past, it is understood that in late 1970s there was a slight revival of Boza drink business as the political skirmishes had disturbed the peace in the city and the residents were more comfortable to stay in their homes and order a boza drink from their living room than venturing out. A lot many things were taking place in the City, and privatization zeal of the Government is one interesting thing that need to be noted. The privatization of Electricity board is specifically pinpointed by the author and Ferhat, a close friend of the Protagonist takes advantage of the opportunity and makes a lot of illegal money despite his professed communistic leanings. Mevlut goes through various jobs, of which his role in the Electricity board is an important one. Although his friend teaches the nitty gritty of the business, still he does not survive here for long. Likewise, his job as a manager in Binbom Café is equally interesting as he struggles to resist the corruption that takes place in the eatery. He is at crossroads as he is neither able to become an accomplice in the crime nor is able to betray his fellow employees. After the managerial episode, he indulges in rice with chickpeas sales for a duration after which opens up a boza shop along with his friend. All his businesses were for a short duration except for the boza selling that takes place in the night. Even after getting a

comfortable apartment by foregoing his land, he is restless as many others with a craving for the old Istanbul. He resumes his profession once again at the end of the novel stating in clear terms that, "I will sell boza until the day the world ends" (*Strangeness* 584).

The novel begins and ends in boza selling. In between, the economic and social world has transformed in the City. The growth has been unequal and ruthless that has been confined to the urban area alone. The plight of villages is brazenly shown by the writer in the beginning of the novel and there is hardly any hope for modernity touching it in the later times. Had it been so, Mevlut would have returned back to his village at the end, instead of caging himself in the multi storied apartment. The characters including the protagonist were intent in surviving than settling down and it leaves them in tatters despite their hardwork for years together. None of them tried to elevate their status through education and the pathetic truth that not even a single character in the novel qualifies to be a graduate or a high school candidate. The only one who appears to be the last light in the tunnel is the boza seller's elder daughter Fatima. It is unknown if the author purportedly avoids education from the scheme of things or if he was indulging in a subtle criticism of the state of affairs. Economy has a direct connection with education, and it is the vital parameter to measure the prosperity of the nation. Mevlut becomes a victim of change that happens around him though he was unaffected mentally due to the lack of understanding of the economic policies. Capitalism was close to him from his early days in the form of Vural group of businesses. But the character realizes the group's intent only at the end.

'Boza selling' was a symbol of the past as in the olden days, it was a profitable trade for the street vendor who minted money by selling boza in the dark nights. The street vendors themselves are a part of the conservative economy that prevailed in the past. The author does not take sides by defending one against the other, but nevertheless uses his book as a mirror to highlight the economic transformation that wiped away the precious remnants of the past. Boza selling is one fragment of the old economy that was more a self sufficient one. Economics is the base of any story, and the author is the one who has taken a complete hold of transformational issues to plant the seeds of nostalgia in the minds of the readers. Whenever the protagonist shouts "Bozzz aaa", it is not only the inmates of the apartment who felt nostalgic, but also the readers. Boza is not just a drink, but a symbol of the Turkish past and an ancient economy that thrived through this drink. But gradually, the German breweries replaced boza shops that were omnipresent in the Turkish streets. Still, the street vendors survived to carry the loads of the past, and to continue making money through this ancient drink. But the mode of selling changed, and people like Mevlut had to walk the Istanbul streets to sell boza to survive. Thus the author gives an ancient colour to the ordinary economic activity which left to it would not have caught anyone's attention. The solemnity that is bestowed on the inane activity shows the author's sensitivity towards certain economic activities that connected the past with the present. Mevlut's attitude towards Boza selling is not just a small scale vendor business, but a passionate one that made him continue the act throughout his life. Literally, in the novel, nothing stopped Mevlut from selling Boza.

It is an indirect implication on the part of the author to carry forward the proposition that the ancient economy was a peaceful one that disturbed none. It was done out of love and passion without the crass mentality of minting money alone. Moreover the act also underlines the fact that quality was a priority for ordinary street vendors as they need to satisfy their customers. But this does not continue for long as Mevlut who was involved in yoghurt selling had to forget it due to the entry of capitalism. Packed yoghurt became a fashion and the street vendors of yoghurt slowly vanished. Orhan Pamuk always seem to regret the transition by the ordinary forms of economic activity, and his mind's heaviness is visible when he records,

"But Istanbul has changed so much over  
The past twenty-five years that these memories  
Now deemed like fairy tales to Mevlut. Most of the  
Streets had been paved with cobble stones when he  
First arrived in the city, but now they were asphalt.  
The three story building, surrounded by their own  
Gardens, which had made up most of the city had been  
Razed to the ground and replaced with taller apartment  
Blocks" (*Strangeness* 19)

The novel is crafted in a manner that places it at a cusp of change. The relaxed, sentimental life took a turn to the worse that things became mechanical and cruel. It is not just the road that has changed, it is not just the apartment that has come up, but beyond the superficial economic changes that is presented, there lies a deeper change in the psyche of the inhabitants. A large influx of villagers into Istanbul seeking economic opportunity spiralled the price of residential quarters. The ruthless way in which the empty lands were occupied by the outsiders, who thereafter made it as their own

goes on to show how much was the scramble for the economic pie. Every story has a heft in it based on the economic influence, and Orhan Pamuk makes it clear in the present work that economic survival is very important for the narrative purposes.

Mevlut as a character seem to be more benign compared to the characters who are all around. Even his uncle's sons Suleiman and Korkut were ones who were after money, and their life is a solid proof to showcase the change that can happen for ones who are ambitious. The author is very particular in showcasing the microscopic impact of the economy, and the one roomed house at Dutepe is an ample proof for the same. Though no regrets on the part of the protagonist, the author's recording of the difficulty that was involved in the yoghurt selling shows the complex life of a street vendor. The author clearly states that life of a yoghurt seller was almost akin to a porter who had to lift heavy loads for survival. But the irony of the whole thing is that the villages in Turkey knew nothing about Boza as it was specifically a city drink. Throughout the novel, Mevlut seem to manifest a yogic satisfaction that probably stalls his progress. While people around him were buzzing around, he was performing the same deed. His uncle who descended in Istanbul as an yoghurt seller ended up being a provisional store owner. Above all, the one person who uses the economic opportunity to fullest extent is Hadji Hamit Vural, whose entry though is spirit. But slowly, he uses every chance to grow constantly that at one stage his firm becomes a leading one in the city of Istanbul. Thus while people like Mevlut keep thriving on their small business, there were land sharks who were just wallowing in wealth. Indeed, the birth of communism in Istanbul is a valid proof of the looming economic inequality caused by the expanding capitalism. The sale of yoghurts in shops, in different quantities, neatly packed, can be an attestation of the change in people's mind caused by the intrusion of mass production that was contemptuous of the street vendors. The change noticed and mentioned by the author is the intrusion of capitalism in food and other retail products. In one stroke, the capitalism could uproot the century old trade and the stoppage of yoghurt sale in Istanbul streets by street vendor is an ample proof of the intent of the former. The westernization of Turkey by 'Ataturk' is one reason for the massive changes that were taking place. Being a staunch admirer of the west, the above mentioned premiere practiced secularism and opened up the economic borders for the western onslaught. Added to this, the prolonged cold war between USA and USSR is another reason for the transformation of rudimentary economy in Istanbul. Mevlut and his passion for Boza selling is not a just an economic aspect, but as stated earlier is a passion for the past.

Boza selling softened the protagonist's mind and made him accept the disappointments with equanimity. Mevlut never loses his joy and balance for life. His marriage with Rayiha in itself is a disappointment as he was in love with Samiha, and it is Suleiman, his cousin who misleads by pointing out the wrong person. But still, the Boza seller leads a happy life without feeling for the loss. When the same situation happens to Suleiman, he become literally insane and is all out to take revenge on Ferhat, the husband of Samiha. The reason for the protagonist's balance is his trust on the olden economy. The emotional bond that he builds with his customers takes him a bit longer, for capitalist economy is a cutthroat one that squeezes the consumer. The economic distress is throughout the novel, and Ferhat, the protagonist's friend who struggles a lot for living sends his wife for servant maid's work. But fortune smiles at him, and he becomes an employee of the electricity department which in course of time becomes privatized. He takes complete advantage of the same, and indulges in corruption despite his communist beliefs. Thus economy plays a pivotal role in the novel, and the final nail is hit when the small buildings are taken up by the apartment builders who construct massive apartments. Eventually, it is an wrong to say that none of the characters including the capitalistic Korkut and Sulerman who are happy. The novel ends with an emptiness in the minds of the characters who long for the ancient Turkey. The Turkey that had wooden buildings, the country that was full of street vendors.

It needs a lot of courage for an author to take up an economically lower class person as his hero. Having a hold over the massive changes that were wrought in the twentieth century Istanbul, the author touches upon the raw nerves of economy. Though characters have their own importance, it is their profession and money making abilities that count a lot. So, Pamuk has made his story sail on the whirlpool of economic changes that provides him a right platform to bring out the emotions of sympathy and empathy, without which economy would have been literally null.

#### Works Consulted:

1. Pamuk. Orhan. *A Strangeness in a Mind*, Penguin, 2016.