

When the Subaltern Speaks in Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*

Ashutosh Manohar Popate Assistant Professor in English, Rashtrasant Tukdoji College, Chimur, India.*

Email: popte.ashu87@gmail.com

DOI:

Abstract

Popular myths of human civilisation are written as allegories of grave warning for all mankind, cautioning them, ultimately, of the probable consequences of particular actions that are socially forbidden. Surprisingly, in almost all these cautionary mythical narratives, female characters, exalted or lowly, are presented with relatively substantial roles to play compared to their male counterparts. However, their characters are often portrayed as inactive and submissive; they carry malevolent power that indirectly brings disaster and misfortune for the heroes in myths. The popular myths of Sohrab and Rostam, as well as Oedipus, equally portray women as significantly responsible for the tragedies of their respective male protagonists. The very presence of female characters in such myths indirectly hints at the possible hardship the protagonists are destined to face. Such narratives categorically create and normalise the negative images of women. Surprisingly, almost all the female characters in such popular myths are not allowed to speak for themselves or defend themselves. Orhan Pamuk's *The Red-Haired Woman*, in its spectacular amalgamation of popular Eastern and Western myths, gives an ironic twist to the technique and perception about women in popular mythical narratives when the diabolical female character, the red-haired woman, speaks for herself, defending herself as a lover, wife, and mother. She represents the modern Jocasta from the tragedy of Oedipus and the modern Tahmina from the story of Sohrab and Rostam, and she speaks for both. The novel thus criticises and ridicules the biased male attitude, in both Eastern and Western myths, toward women.

Keywords: Myths, patriarchy, women in Turkey, Gülcihan, and fiery feminism..

Introduction

Orhan Pamuk is a post-modern Turkish novelist whose novels extraordinarily give voice to disturbing cultural and religious controversies and political encounters, both from the past and the present of Turkey. His novels ironically bridge the past of his nation with its conflicting present in a way that the boundaries between them are often erased, and the past, generally heinous and disturbing, worsens the present conflict. For Pamuk, the past can never be forgotten; it remains repressed in the national subconscious. However, the past is a key to comprehending and resolving conflicts. Pamuk presents Turkey as a culturally hybrid place where diverse ideologies intermingle or clash. The past, like some alien skin, sticks to the faces of Turkish people who are obsessed with Western modernity and who feel ashamed of being Turks. The past also determines identity and hybridity. His novels give us insight into the soul of his nation, which is troubled by internal conflicts and cultural and political wars. If seen in this particular context, Pamuk appears as a powerful political novelist, though he himself disproves the charge. Yet, Pamuk calls Snow his first and last political novel.

One of his typical novels dealing with the themes of political anarchy and internal clashes that distress the soul of his ancient nation is *The Red-Haired Woman*. Additionally, the novel

Article History : Received: 08 Nov. 2025. Accepted: 23 January. 2026. Available online: 25 Jan. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Copyright:** © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing :** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License **Conflict of Interest:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

raises a question about the portrayal of submissive and silent female protagonists in popular myths by presenting, deliberately, in its narrative, the character of a frivolous red-haired woman, Gülcihan, whose monologue counters and resists the patriarchal act of silencing women in myths by the male writers. Gülcihan refuses to be a bearer of meaning; rather, she asserts herself as an independent woman by controlling powerfully how the readers interpret her. She justifies her candid choices and liberties as a human being. She sarcastically glorifies her roles as a lover, wife and mother and, thereby, refuses to be a submissive woman like other female protagonists in popular myths. The monologue, like a feminist mythical manifesto, defends her both as a woman and a human being.

1. Feminism and Feminist Movement in Turkey

Women in Turkey, as part of a conservative society, did not have rights like men. During the Ottoman period, the need to educate them was felt, but only as wives and mothers. Under the modern Turkish Republic, which restricted the authority of religion, women's rights were prioritised (Sirman 4). Moreover, the establishment of the modern republic in 1925 opened the doors of liberty for women in Turkey. In the wake of Kemalist reforms and the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code, women received several rights in familial domains. Moreover, women received the right to vote in the 1930s municipal elections and in the 1934 general elections, thanks to the efforts of Türk Kadınlar Birliği, a Turkish women's organisation. It was founded by Nezihe Muhittin, a female rights activist, who helped women gain the right to vote. Turkish feminism evolved in the following periods. According to Leake, the second wave of Turkish feminism came about in the 1980s, particularly as a major consequence of the 1980 military coup. The period after the 1980s saw women become more aggressive about their rights. Islam found its resurgence after the 1980s military coup, and simultaneously, debate over the right to wear the veil in public institutions similarly gave rise to Islamist feminism. The third wave of Turkish feminism came in the 1990s (Leake 1-2).

The Red-Haired Woman resonates the power of women in Turkey after their empowerment by the republican authority. Pamuk exposes and simultaneously satirises the conservative mindset that Turkish society still maintains about the roles and status of women. He exposes the hypocrisy of even the most progressive social groups. Despite all the reformations, the society remains an institution dominated by patriarchy in which women like Gülcihan are still sex objects.

2. Gülcihan, a Human Character

Orhan Pamuk's Gülcihan is a more human character. Disproving the greatness of both Jocasta and Tahmina, she satirically flaunts her identity by embracing and celebrating her narrative

fate, unlike the other two mythological female protagonists. She openly reveals her sexual choices and desires as a woman. She violates the social codes of morality, perhaps intentionally, and challenges the portrayal of female protagonists in Eastern and Western myths. Gülcihan secretly nurtures a desire, like any Freudian character, to perform Jocasta on the stage. Her wish, however, is never fulfilled, but in the novel, she becomes what she has secretly yearned for years. Like an independent woman, she determines her fate when, to justify not being naturally redhead, she proclaims and thereby defends herself by saying, "...I chose to become one" (Pamuk 228). Throughout the narrative, she refuses to be a puppet of society. What is more extraordinary about Gülcihan is that she controls the entire narrative, dominates the male characters in the novel, and also bridges the Eastern and Western myths. Her rebellion to colour her hair red is a threat to the conservative patriarchal society, which does not allow women similar freedom. In other words, the society cannot control or determine her identity. Gülcihan's satirical craving to perform Jocasta for the Turkish audiences is understood as a powerful attack on the citadel of conservative society. In the novel, her performance infuriates the audience and is met with violence and anger. Ironically, even the so-called most modern Turks are hostile to the roles that Gülcihan longs to play. Gülcihan's other roles, especially those that are not recognised by society as taboos, sexually excite the audiences, contrary to the role of Sohrab's mother, which brings tears into their eyes. The reason is that women in both Eastern and Western societies have fixed gender roles to play. As mothers, they are respected and revered, but are humiliated and abused as the objects of male desire, and women are generally seen as either of them. They are the victims of the male gaze; the gaze determines who they are or who they will be. Gülcihan's desire to play Jocasta in a society that forbids a mother-son relationship, therefore, sparks a controversy. Her open confessions, through her monologue, tore the moral fabric of hypocritical society. Her monologue empowers her character with authority and power as a woman. Analysing the monologue of Gülcihan, Erdağ Göknar appropriately says:

Her concluding narration echoes the way she would finish theatrical reenactments in her youth with monologues. Ostensibly, this is a novel that explores father/son themes, but Pamuk insightfully ends by including what's missing from both Eastern and Western accounts — a woman's voice. Switching to the triangulating narrative voice of Gülcihan allows Pamuk to sustain both foundational myths at the same time. In the end, Pamuk's revision gives authority (and authorial voice) to the woman, who usurps the place of the father. (Göknar)

The narrative also debates the social taboos of patricide and filicide. Often, the attacks on social hypocrisy are so blunt as to tear mercilessly the moral veil of society, which normalises and glorifies, especially in the arts, the act of filicide and forbids the act of patricide. The narrator is amazed at the double-standard morality of popular artists in their attitude towards

both. Gülcihan's glorification of Jocasta as both the mother and wife of Oedipus criticises the attitude of the writers of popular myths.

3. Gülcihan and Jocasta

The narrative in *The Red-Haired Woman* is itself dwindling, much like Turkey's own trapped identity, caught between the two opposing poles of East and West. The plot introduced attributes to the myth of Sohrab and Rostam and of Oedipus. The narrative fates of characters are to be determined by either of the myths. However, the narrative suspense is maintained until the accidental murder of Cem Çelik by his bastard son, in a fit of rage, similar to Oedipus' own act of patricide. The secret desire of Gülcihan is accordingly fulfilled: she acquires the identity of Jocasta in her real life.

In the town of Güdül, Gülcihan performed *Jocasta* on the stage in 1986, and her troupe was threatened. After the second performance, the protestors set her tent on fire in the middle of the night. Perplexed, Gülcihan is unable to understand the reason for the violent reaction to the play in "...a country where every man's favourite curse starts with "your mother"" (Pamuk 234). In the novel, the murder of Cem Çelik, the father of her son Enver, indirectly bestows upon her a socially stigmatised identity of Jocasta, which, however, she feels no shame in embracing and celebrating happily. For her, it is indeed a matter of great pride to give voice to the grief of Jocasta, who is purposely silenced. The epic battle between Cem Çelik and Enver is presented like the duels between Rostam and Sohrab and Laius and Oedipus. Cem Çelik, the eastern father, is portrayed as overconfident in slaying his bastard son, Enver. He boastfully claimed, "If he tries anything, then I'll be the authoritarian Asian father, like Rostam, and kill the brat myself" (Pamuk 213). Ayşe, however, is more cautious as Enver is no better than "...a textbook case of the rebellious Western individualist..." (Pamuk 213). In the narrative, Cem Çelik, emboldened by the gun in his pocket, does not hesitate to argue with Enver. Soon after a heated debate, the father and the son, representatives of the two generations, engage in a duel. The narrative, then, acquires the status of a grand national epic similar to Sohrab and Rostam or Oedipus Rex. The modernist father fights against the traditionalist and conservative son and is killed by him in the end. The father-son conflict in the novel, therefore, has a sinister shadow of the Freudian Oedipus complex. Cem Çelik, the son of Akin Çelik, sleeps with Gülcihan, the former mistress of his father. On the other hand, the son of Cem Çelik, Enver, is shown to be reluctant to marry any other woman due to his mother, Gülcihan. Gülcihan is thus the main culprit in the whole narrative, who is also accountable for the tragedies of the male characters. She brings calamity and death to male protagonists. Readers understand her identity when Enver murders his father, Cem Çelik. The narrative ironically fulfils her wish, bestowing upon her the grander of Jocasta.

4. Jocasta Complex in Gülcihan

Gülcihan openly confesses the sin of sleeping with Cem Çelik, the son of her former lover Akin Çelik. She says:

To be honest, I was eager to forget how I'd slept with a high-school boy there one night in a moment of theatrical abandon, not to mention having been in love with that same boy's father before him, only for that flame to burn out. I wasn't yet thirty-five, and already I'd discovered how proud and fragile men could be, the sense of self that courses through their veins. I knew that fathers and sons were capable of killing each other. Whether it was fathers killing their sons, or sons killing the fathers, men always emerged victorious, and all that was left for me to do was weep. (Pamuk 236)

The speaker in this passage is unquestionably Gülcihan, but here she voices not only her own grief but also that of Jocasta and Tahmina. She repudiates the way women's voices are historically silenced in myths written by men. The wickedness of men is venerated by the artists who have little concern for the female characters. She protests through her monologue, which proclaims her freedom and also enables her to represent both Jocasta and Tahmina. The emotional state of Jocasta and Tahmina is perfectly verbalised in Gülcihan's monologue. Jocasta's grief, as a mother whose own son assassinates her husband, is ironically analogous to the pain of Gülcihan. Often, the narrative hints at the intimate relationship between the mother and the son, particularly when Gülcihan said, "So Enver and I became very close" (Pamuk 238). Gülcihan is obsessed with the physical transformation of her son from boy to man, and also of his 'delicate soul and sensibility'. His intellect grows, and so grows his wisdom. As a cautious mother, Gülcihan is, however, anxious: she is nervous that one day her son will abuse women sexually, or he may become like one of those loathsome men who used to jeer at her in the theatre tent. She is panicked by the thought of her brilliant son embracing the patriarchal perception about women like Gülcihan. In a conservative society, women are merely sex objects. The patriarchy dishonours and humiliates them as sex slaves. They are treated as secondary human beings. Gülcihan's fear that one day her talented son may similarly adopt this view about women haunts her like a nightmare.

5. Patricide versus Filicide

In *The Red-Haired Woman*, the narrator, Cem Çelik, happens to come across a book about dreams. The book, he thinks, is going to change his life forever. His meeting with Gülcihan ironically awakens in him some ancient memory. Cem Çelik is, thereafter, a modern Oedipus who unknowingly slays his father-like master Mahmut, and also fathers a bastard son from Gülcihan, the modern Jocasta in the novel. The narrative simultaneously blends the tragedy of Oedipus with the *Shahnameh* myth of Sohrab and Rostam, in which father Rostam accidentally kills his son Sohrab. The plot dwindle between these two tragedies, debating,

rather ironically, the ideas of patricide and filicide. The narrator announces his determination to rectify the error of the writers of myths, who do not find it necessary to adjudge an equivalent punishment for the act of filicide as that of patricide. Men like Rostam must never go unpunished. Rostam sires a son but abandons the responsibility of a father. He is a symbol of male authority and power, who sees women as inanimate objects of male gratification, and society justifies his perception. So there is no punishment for him in the Eastern myth. The myth merely shows him repenting over his irresponsible murder of his only son. Offering any severe punishment to Rostam might have gone against a society which allows men to ignore their duties as fathers. This is incredibly opposite to the terrible fates Oedipus and Laius are subjected to. While Laius receives a merciless death for the negligence of fatherly duties, surprisingly, in the Shahnameh myth, the authoritarian father Rostam is left unpunished. Cem Çelik, who represents the authoritarian father Rostam in the narrative, must, therefore, undergo severe punishment. Cem escapes, leaving Master Mahmut to die in the well; Gülcihan and Enver were socially humiliated because of him. Because of all these unforgivable mistakes, the narrative has subjected him to the fate of Laius

The narrative echoes the Freudian theory. After the first encounter with the red-haired woman, Cem Çelik falls for the bewitching influence of Gülcihan. He repeatedly gets lost in reveries and dreams, and is also scared of Master Mahmut, his adopted father and a possible competitor for his love for Gülcihan. The well represented in the novel, according to Erdağ Göknar, is akin to “the archeological metaphor that Freud relied on in explaining his model of the psyche” (Göknar).

6. The Fiery Feminism of Gülcihan

Erdağ Göknar believes the prime structure of the novel typically corresponds to a case of Turkish Oedipus complex, revealing internal ideological skirmishes in the contemporary Turkish society. Göknar said:

The Red-Haired Woman is structured in three parts. Each part corresponds in turn to one of the main characters of a symbolic Turkish Oedipal complex: the Islamic father (Mahmut/Part One), the secular son (Cem/Part Two), and the feminist woman (Gülcihan/Part Three). In this way, Pamuk qualifies the clichéd Islam versus secularism binary by giving narrative voice to the silenced woman/mother. (Göknar)

The narrative presents Gülcihan as a fiery icon of feminism: she willingly colours her hair red, renouncing the social stigma of being categorised as a woman with easy virtue. It is all about being true to oneself, as Gülcihan said, “After becoming a red-head, I spent the rest of my days trying to stay true to my choice” (Pamuk 228). Gülcihan thus asserts her identity both as a human being and a woman. The narrative in The Red-Haired Woman uses the

colour red with multiple meanings. Pamuk's usage of the colour red metaphorically produces these meanings. Karaca appropriately categorises the different metaphorical meanings that Pamuk presents as she said:

Orhan Pamuk, in his The Red-Haired Woman, has made use of various metaphorical meanings of red color: love, hatred, sexuality, blood, and death. Pamuk reinforced the fiction with the red color's world of connotation, which begins from the cover of the novel and ends with death, starting with symbolic implications related to love and eroticism. (123)

The fiery character of Gülcihan embodies all the qualities. She is a man-eating monster who tempts men to misery and death. Her former lover was arrested and tortured to death, and so was the case with Cem Çelik, who was seduced in a night of passion, and was later similarly strangulated to death by Enver. The character of Gülcihan is shown as diabolical, and she has the malevolent power to overpower men. Her single glimpse infatuates Cem Çelik, who is, then, often lost in reveries, even at work. In the narrative, he seems to be under some magical spell. Gülcihan's theatrical performances cast a similar spell over men in the theatre: they are helpless and docile before her. Her erotic appealing beauty is presented 'through her fly-away hair' that is as vicious and devilish as a 'femme fatale/devil type woman.' (Karaca 124). Karaca calls Gülcihan a mythological evil woman, similar to Lilith. She is like a woman who "...burns the world and turns it into cinder. That the cinder's color is red and burning is identical to the fatal influence of Gülcihan's destroying around through her red hair" (124). This monstrous power of Gülcihan makes her the most powerful character in the novel, and also the one who challenges the social and sexist standards established by patriarchy. According to E.M. Achachelooei, "Resisting the suggestion for blonde hair, Gülcihan refuses to idealize herself as an object of desire before social, sexist standards" (187).

The narrative explores the personal failures and losses that Gülcihan has experienced. Her love affair with Akin Çelik lasted merely for a short span of three years and ended abruptly. In 1980, the shadow of a military coup forced her and other comrades into exile. Akin Çelik returned to his wife and son, and so Turhan and Gülcihan married. Unfortunately, Turhan was detained and killed in Malatya. Broken and traumatised, Gülcihan decided to return, but her dreams and acting career forced her to stay with the organisation. Later, she married Turgay, the younger brother of Turhan. The couple spent their winter roaming and performing for the left-wing organisation in cities like Istanbul and Ankara. During the summers, they travelled to provincial towns, holiday resorts and military garrisons. As a result of the emotional dryness in their relationship, Gülcihan sought love, often from high school boys, university students and soldiers. They were better than disgusting old men. The meeting with Cem Celik delighted her as Cem had already fallen in love with her and also began to chase her. What is most pleasant for her is that Cem looked exactly like his father, Akin Celik.

Meanwhile, the rising fear of military intervention and persecution forced the theatre troupe to write and perform for the wild audiences. It was then that she was tempted by the character of Tahmina, the mother of Sohrab, and her power to produce 'a ponderous, unnerving silence' among lecherous men in the audience, who, in the early performances, abused and humiliated her as a sexual object. Gülcihan appropriately said:

As I wept, I would revel in my power over them and rejoice in having devoted my life to the theatre. Standing onstage in my long, revealing red dress, the costume jewellery, the broad military sash around my waist, and an antique bracelet on my arm, I cried with a grief only mothers can know, and looking at those men seated before me, feeling their souls tremble, seeing their eyes well up, I'd recognize the guilt stirring in them all. (Pamuk 232)

The guilt here refers to all the crimes of patriarchy against women, from imposing on them stigmatised identities to silencing and subjugating them. The monologue reminds men of their sinister acts, producing a feeling of repentance in their hearts. Gülcihan is thus a spokesperson for all womankind.

Conclusion

The character of Gülcihan provides a voice to the suppressed female voices in the popular myths by celebrating her identity; She is no longer a subaltern mythical woman character like Jocasta or Tahmina. Her claim over her body and character make her the most independent woman in the novel and more powerful than the male protagonists. The entire novel centres on Gülcihan, who controls the narrative. Her monologue is a manifesto of her freedom to speak and justify her case, and also of other mythical female characters. Her acts are acts of protest against the socially constrained and biased interpretation that female characters in myths are subjected to. She becomes a voice for all such female protagonists whose voices are silenced and who never speak for themselves.

Works Cited:

Achachelooei, Elham Mohammadi. "The Red-Haired Woman: An Ecofeminist Analysis." *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances*, vol. 12, no.1, 2024, pp. 175-191. <https://doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2024.28731.1564>.

Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*. Infobase Publishing, 2007.

Ferdowsi, Abolqasem. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Penguin Books, 2016.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by A.A.Brill, Wordsworth Edition Limited, 1997.

Göknar, Erdağ. "A Turkish Woman in the Oedipus Complex: Orhan Pamuk's 'The Red-Haired Woman.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 August 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-turkish-woman-in-the-oedipus-complex-orhan-pamuks-the-red-haired-woman>.

Karaca, Şahika. "My Red Hair is My Freedom: Image of Lilith in Orhan Pamuk's Novel, The Red Haired Woman." *Türklük Bilimi Araştırmaları*, vol. 45, 2019, pp.119-134. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/744837>.

Leake, Adam. "A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey." *E-International Relations*, Dec. 2011, www.e-ir.info/2012/08/29/a-brief-history-of-the-feminist-movements-in-turkey/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter.

Pamuk, Orhan. *The Red-Haired Woman*. Penguin Random House India, 2017.

Sirman, Nüket. "Turkish feminism: A short history." *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1989, pp. 1-34. <https://www.wluml.org/wp-content/uploads/1989/05/D5-6-09-turk-feminism.pdf>.

Sophocles. *Sophocles: The Theban Plays: Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone*. Translated by Sir G. Young, Dover Publications, 2006.