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Abstract:

This article is an exploration of contemporary Turkish and Chinese-Indonesian literatures with regards to a mid to late 18th Century literary niche: the it-narrative. *Thinking (noesis)* back and forth between centuries and different literary genres *makes (poiesis)* the conversation possible, which addresses the socio-literary imagination of the last four centuries. The authors re-examine the genre of it-narrative outside 18th Century studies and reassess the encounter of Turkish author Orhan Pamuk and Chinese-Indonesian author Alberta Natasia Adji within the socio-cultural and historico-political context of modern Turkey and Indonesia. The question is how Pamuk's use of *prosopopoeia* in his 1998 novel *Benim Adım Kırmızı* [My Name is Red] influences Adji's decision to use the 18th Century it-narratives in her 2019 short story *I am Her Bracelet*.

Biographical note:

Sebnem Nazli Karali (BA (Dist.), MA (Dist.), CertLing, CertEd) is an internationally published literary scholar, critic, and writer. She is currently a PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University, Australia. Her research interest centres on the interdisciplinary dialogue between literary and cultural studies, theatre and performance studies, and (post)memory of traumatic violence in minority-ethnic/migrant communities. Her published works include *The Case of Einar Wegener Revisited* (2016); *Musical Affect and the Emotion-Cognition Interaction in the Phantom of the Opera* (2020); and *Masculine Uses of the Womb in the Renaissance* (2020).

Alberta Natasia Adji is currently a PhD candidate in creative writing at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. In 2020, she published a short story in *Meniscus* and a piece of flash fiction in *TEXT* Special Issue 58. She has also published refereed articles in *Women: A Cultural Review*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Life Writing*, *Prose Studies*, and others.

Keywords:

It-narratives, Orhan Pamuk, contemporary Turkish literature, contemporary Chinese-Indonesian literature, creative collaboration

Introduction: How to bring modern Turkish and Chinese-Indonesian literatures together

‘Critique is itself a *poiesis*, a making’ (Threadgold, 1997, p. 1)

Set in 16th Century Istanbul, during the reign of Sultan Murat III, Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* is a detective and love story, starting with a murder and gradually unravelling the mystery. Pamuk became the first Turkish author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature 2006 for his 1998 novel, *My Name is Red*. Translated from Turkish into more than sixty different languages, the novel was first published in English in the US in 2001. Later it won the French Prix Du Meilleur Livre Étranger (2001), the Italian Grinzane Cavour (2002), and the prestigious International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (2003).

The novel is set over the course of nine snowy winter days in 1591. The Caliph-Sultan of the Ottoman Empire commissions an art aficionado, Enishte Effendi, to prepare a secret manuscript to celebrate the glories of the Ottoman Empire on the thousand-year anniversary of the *Hegira*, the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his followers' journey from Mecca to Medina. The Sultan requests the manuscript's images be rendered in Renaissance styles of perspective and portraiture. Sultan's request, however, forces the Ottoman miniaturists to alternate between adhering to the traditional rules of Islamic art, which essentially bans figuration, and obeying the wishes of the Sultan-Caliph, the protector of Islam. In the meantime, the Sultan 'maintains the secrecy of the book project because it threatens Islamic orthodoxy through its potentially sacrilegious figural representations' (Göknar, 2012, p. 316). Inherited from Judaism, the iconoclastic tradition of Islam requires the avoidance and absence of material representation of living creatures or religious figures. Islam's approach to idols in religious art arguably leads the Eastern painters to view the world from the idealistic and infinite perspective of God, which 'constitutes the universal truth' (Lekesizalin, 2009, p. 99). Creation of living forms is exclusive to God; that is, 'there is only one way of seeing: from Allah's [timeless and absolute] perspective' (Ali & Hagood, 2012, p. 508). Thus, miniaturists are not allowed to breathe new life into their creations. If they transgress against divine law, their worldly misconduct would be severely punished in the afterlife.

My Name is Red has a frame narrative that centres on the love story between Black and Shekure, which echoes the Persian romance of *Khosrow and Shirin* by Nizami. The romantic narrative poem is illustrated by seven miniature paintings by Persian court poet, Hatifi. His paintings demonstrate the abovementioned differences between Ottoman miniature tradition and Italian Renaissance painting. While European Renaissance painting supports the 'autonomy of the artistic imagination,' in Islamic art, 'the art of illustration serves as a supplement to texts' (Lekesizalin, 2009, p. 99). Hatifi's illustration of *Khosrow and Shirin* tells a love story, emphasising the absence of multiple perspectives of individual styles as well as other illustrating techniques of Ottoman miniature that differ from those of European Renaissance painting. Religious conservatism, in this context, takes over the story when an orthodox preacher, Nusret Hodja of Erzurum, arouses the public against this artistic enterprise on the

grounds of blasphemy. First, one fraternity artist and then Enishte Effendi are murdered and left to rot in a well. *My Name is Red* opens with the former character *telling* the reader his story: 'I am nothing but a corpse now, a body at the bottom of a well' (Pamuk, 2002, p. 3). The following double murder investigation 'breaks up the account of the project into the disparate genres of a murder mystery, a philosophical treatise on Islamic book arts, a romance, an autobiography, and an allegorical tale of modern Turkey' (Gökner, 2012, p. 316).

Told from multiple viewpoints, *My Name is Red* narrates a blend of mystery, romance, and philosophy, from the viewpoint of humans, animated inanimates, and anthropomorphised animals: 'Objects and images speak their memories. Operating much like characters, items from an Ottoman coin, to the colour, red tell their stories' (Gökner, 2012, p. 316). These speaking inanimate characters or abstractions are an example of *prosopopoeia*, a figure of speech in which an object narrator communicates to the reader. It is almost as if Pamuk set various cameras *who* recount the story from their angles, frames, and focal lengths. Further, Pamuk (2002, p. 117) reflects on the use of multi-perspectives in *My Name is Red* through Enishte's voice: 'Using perspectival techniques is like regarding the world from a window'. Pamuk's 'multivoiced canvas' (Ali & Hagood, 2012, p. 512) echoes 'the story of Western art as we know of it today, taking its references from antiquity in building up a preoccupation with sight, point of view, and perspective' (Çiçekoglu, 2003a, p. 4). Indeed, the presence of multiple perspectives and layers in the novel is very similar to the realism of the European Renaissance and Western-style painting where 'animals and objects acquire presence and colour and voice' (Ali & Hagood, 2012, p. 506).

Each voice in the novel speaks 'with intricate particularities of style suggestive of the individuality of the 'portraiture' in visual terms points to a maturation of Pamuk's own style, well-suited to a novel where the main theme is the individualisation of style' (Çiçekoglu, 2003b, p. 126). Çiçekoglu states that 'Western art until the 19th Century is a history of the preoccupation with the illusion of vision' (2003a, p. 10). It would be accurate to claim that vision has strongly been 'bound up with truth and authenticity in the Western imaginary since the Renaissance' (van Alphen, 2005, p. 165). Western naturalism of Renaissance continues into the 20th Century during which images of the camera were perceived 'as proof of the way things really are' (Çiçekoglu, 2003a, p. 11). In this respect, individualised images/objects in *My Name is Red* convey the sense of truth and authenticity from a visual standpoint, echoing the centrality of the vision. As a 'symphony of stories' (Çiçekoglu, 2003b, p. 126), the narrative investigates the trajectory of some narrators more than once: Black; Murderer; Beloved Uncle; Esther; Shekure; Butterfly; Stork; Olive; and Master Osman. Eleven characters, on the other hand, are used only once throughout: Corpse; Dog; Orhan; Tree; Gold Coin; Death; Red; Horse; Satan; Two Dervishes; and Woman. Each section is titled 'I am (a)...'. For example, *I am a Corpse* or *I am Red*.

For her unpublished short story, *I am Her Bracelet* (hereafter abbreviated to *Bracelet*), Alberta Natasia Adji provides the trajectory of a Monel bracelet. Adji chooses four images/objects out of the eleven characters used only once in *My Name is Red*: Corpse, Tree, Gold Coin, and Red. It is no coincidence that Adji has chosen only these four objects out of a multitude of

viewpoints. Meticulous descriptions of these four it-characters connect Adji's bracelet to Pamuk's corpse, coin, red, and tree. Pamuk's characters offer a close-up view of the late 16th Century murder in a 21st Century novel; however, these '16th Century heroes do not alienate [the readers] as artificial constructions' (Çiçekoglu, 2003a, p. 3). Rather, the readers 'feel that [they] identify with them as if [they] were accomplices of the writer in dramatizing an episode that might have taken place today' (Çiçekoglu, 2003a, p. 3). In similar fashion, Adji's *Bracelet* uses an individualised voice that makes the reader see the story from the bracelet's point of view.

The reader can easily identify with the bracelet, which addresses us from its immediate environment in the present (continuous) tense: 'I'm still with her now, right at this minute. I mean, just look at her. I wish that you, readers, could look at her just like what I am doing now' (Adji, 2019). Readers are even informed about exact time and place settings, such as '[t]oday is Sunday, August 31, 2014' or '[i]t will start from today, October 30 to November 5, 2014, in Semarang, Central Java' (Adji, 2019). Here, the use of present tense proves effective, putting the reader and the narrator in the same space as well as in the same moment. The story hooks readers into the narrative because it *shows* rather than *tells*.

It is worth noting that the word-image opposition in the Islamic iconoclastic tradition, which treats an image as an extension of text that *tells* a story rather than *shows* how things are, is reversed in *Bracelet*. The bracelet, a thing-in-itself, *shows* its impression of truth/authenticity rather than *tells*. What the reader sees is bound by the frame captured by the bracelet shot, which is (considered to be) identical with the camera shot. Instead of summarising what is happening, the bracelet uses description, action, and dialogues to help the reader experience the story from their own perspective:

[Way of telling] Tilda is a good daughter.

[Way of showing] Like any typical good daughter, my Tilda has been achieving straight-As in her English literature courses, but she has been feeling stuck for quite some time, going only to her classes, having smack talks with her peers at the faculty's cafeteria during lunch hours, visiting the uni library to check out some novels or autobiographies to be read at home, watching DVDs, reading some course materials, and that's it. (Adji, 2019)

Using rhetoric devices, *Bracelet* provides the reader with a *here-and-now* feel of engrossing fiction, as well as including a reference to *then*. This reference evokes a cognitive-linguistic phenomenon in which the name of a thing, concept, or event is replaced with a word closely associated with, or suggested by, the original: metonymy. Trajectories of objects and images are investigated as they address *here-and-now* and then subsequent situations. The question is: how do it-characters hook the reader? What is the history behind them?

It-narratives: Objects in circulation

As a literary form, the practice of narrating events from the perspective of inanimate objects, usually in the first person singular, came into fashion in mid to late 18th Century England and its importance continued into the 19th Century. The idea first stemmed from the debate against George Berkeley's idealism of an object's nonentity among fellow writers James Boswell and Samuel Johnson. It was later reinforced by William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769), in which Blackstone investigated the genealogy of property and made multiple categorisations of the ownership of objects, from moveable and immovable to 'corporeal' and 'incorporeal' materials (Blackwell, 2007, p. 10). His interest in the relations between people and things led to the notion that people have been affected by their dynamic relationships with the things possessed. This concept gradually grew into an unusual subgenre of the novel, strictly speaking 'a type of prose fiction in which inanimate objects (coins, waistcoats, pins, corkscrews, coaches) or animals (dogs, fleas, cats, ponies) serve as the central characters' in what are known as 'it-narratives,' 'novels of circulation,' 'object tales,' and 'spy novels' (Blackwell, 2007, p. 10). Many well-received novels of this subgenre were Francis Coventry's *The History of Pompey the Little; Or The Life and Adventures of a Lap-Dog* (1751), and Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal, Or the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760-1765).

Within the second half of the century, many literary critics belittled this rising trend of object-narrated novels, calling it a subgenre, which is convenient for writers belonging to the inferior class. Indeed, 'in their subjection to literary fashion and market demand' (Festa, 2015, p. 347), these hackwriters were 'cast as literary scavengers' (Englert, 2008, p. 261) who picked up random objects, private characters, stories past and present, or public interaction, and employed them in narratives. Englert (2008, p. 261) states that a literary reviewer calls this technique 'making up a book,' which means that the subgenre brings to light questions regarding issues of literary production, property, and value. Indeed, these questions were significant since they had been publicly contested for decades. Put differently, despite the criticism against its emergence, peculiarities of this subgenre raised critical questions about the factors that affected the literary tradition.

In the 21st Century Western literary tradition, the use of non-human narration serves as a satiric strategy. In children's literature, it often holds didactic values, 'reinforcing good behaviour and existing social structures' (McRobbie, 2016) such as *The Adventures of a Pincushion, Designed Chiefly for the Use of Young Ladies* (1780) by Mary Ann Kilner. Usually, an animal narrator reflects how people relate to their physical surrounding and other fellow beings, inviting the readers to enter the 'what it is like' dimension, which is to *feel like* an animal under certain circumstances (Bernaerts et al., 2014, p. 70). Yet, these circulation novels imply that 'people may conceive the other (person, animal) as an object in order to cope with reality and to maintain one's own subjectivity or superiority,' often materialised in the form of 'animating the inanimate and anthropomorphizing animals' (p. 70). This phenomenon is foregrounded by two significant features of a narrative device, with the first being 'character-narrators and/or homodiegetic narrators [as] part of the storyworld they are conjuring up in their tales' (pp. 70-

71). The second feature is that narrators operate through blending the human and non-human traits, like talking animals in folktales.

It is worth noting that it-narratives can also blur the boundaries between representations of power and agency, ‘focus[ing] on the life of the abused and significant protagonist as predictive of the attention given to ordinary human characters in the nineteenth century’ (Lupton, 2014, p. 606). Blackwell suggests that it-narratives are most concerned about women’s bodies, since they highlight the relationships between humans who use objects and their limited mobility as narrators, and therefore talking objects tend to speak for ‘successfully socialized women’ (2007, p. 268). Further, she suggests that the essentiality of it-narratives is that a woman should commit herself to one man if she wishes to maintain her ‘longevity and safekeeping’ (Blackwell, 2007, p. 269). Lupton (2014, p. 607) draws from the metaphorical notion that pens, despite their stereotype as phallic masculine symbols, can pose as ‘metaphorical victims of rape,’ making writing appear on paper as a symbolic triumph over adversity. This went on with the way 18th Century quills and pens told their stories of coming into being, which rebuked the concept of the deadly material world that people associated with them. Resonating with the traumatic experiences of the rape victims, 18th Century pens are eager to narrate ‘how they were sourced, how they have been handled, and of the physical price both writer and bird have paid in making them work’ (Lupton, 2014, pp. 608-609). These narrated accounts can work similarly with women writers who use object-narrator devices to tell their stories or experiences of marginalisation and discrimination.

Chinese-Indonesian *Bracelet of circulation: literature and material culture*

Karali: Why did you write a short story from the perspective of a bracelet?

Adji: There is safety in its voice. If I narrate through a human character, I imagine that readers will generally attribute it to the author’s voice and intention. They will think it’s me speaking, not a portrayal or a made-up representation the author might have come up with. Meanwhile, objects are seen as childish or nostalgic subjects, thus making them non-threatening.



Image 1: Alberta Natasia Adji and her bracelet

As a 'memento', an 'extension' of Adji's presence, and a 'part' of her, the bracelet in the image becomes as 'mobile' and 'human' as Adji is (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). Adji's emotional connection to the bracelet lends a Monel bangle historico-cultural connotations: 'Chinese-Indonesian culture circulates and is distilled into an object that circulates through words' (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). Accordingly, Adji illustrates the divided soul of a Chinese-Indonesian female author through the voice of her bracelet:

I am plain, rigid, and smooth to the touch, although I have had endured a million tiny scratches here and there for years of brushing table edges, washing cutlery, crockery, and glassware grazing against stone floors, and other countless things my keeper has eagerly set herself to do. (Adji, 2019)

Here are the traces of the speaking objects/images in *My Name is Red* in which the 'most insignificant things – from a coin to a tree or a dog – consequently have become metonyms for alternative or forgotten cultural histories [of] Republican material culture' (Gökner, 2012, p. 316). In both *Red* and *Bracelet*, these metonyms are means of exploring and revisiting the double-consciousness of Turkish and Indonesian literature.

Double consciousness, Turkish modernism, and Chinese-Indonesian identity

In *My Name is Red*, Orhan Pamuk's skill as a novelist lies in projecting a contemporary story into 16th Century Istanbul, then the capital of the Ottoman Empire. A local story takes on a universal tone in a hub with universal assets and themes, well-suited to the 'politically-strained atmosphere of 16th Century Istanbul' (Lekesizalin, 2009, p. 92). In *Red*, Pamuk provides a universal framework for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of images.

In most of his works, Orhan Pamuk presents a dual articulation of religion (*din*) and state (*devlet*) 'in terms of the mutual dependency of Islam and state as an authorising discourse' (Gökner, 2012, p. 308). Pamuk calls the attention to Turkish literary modernity, defined by the 'positive or negative relation of representations of *din* to *devlet*' (Gökner, 2012, p. 309), hence his frequent invocation of Turkey's link to the Islamic-Ottoman past. His work essentially:

belongs to the post-1980 third republic, a period characterised by Turkey's gradual neoliberal integration into global networks; he began writing in the early 1970s, during the heyday of social realism and political unrest between the 1960 and 1980 military coups. (Gökner, 2012, p. 306)

In this sense, Pamuk's oeuvre describes a conflict between the secular authority of modernisation and the traditional influence of religion. *My Name is Red*, in particular, expresses this double consciousness of Turkey caught between past and present; European modernity and Islamic traditionalism; secular authority and religious conservatism. The translator of *My Name is Red* notes that the novel's 'historiographic postmodernism revise[s]

Turkish literary modernity and redefine[s] Turkishness while in the process putting the Turkish novel into an international constellation' (Gökner, 2012, p. 306). There, Pamuk 'contrasts Eastern and Western artistic characteristics, and the irreconcilable religious and cultural differences that lie beneath them' (Daglier, 2012, p. 154) through symbolic characters stuck between East-West conflict.

In *My Name is Red*, East-West dichotomy is embodied by the westernising moderniser Enishte Effendi who 'suffers violent death at the hands of a guilt-ridden Islamic disciple, and his reformist project withers away' (Daglier, 2012, p. 156). In his youth, Enishte Effendi visited Venice on diplomatic grounds and got 'deeply moved by his impression of European culture and civilisation' (Daglier, 2012, p. 155). Being the instigator of artistic reform, Enishte Effendi characterises 'an oriental modernist who rejects his Eastern identity due to an implicit sense of inferiority or a strong yearning for the Western civilization' (Daglier, 2012, p. 156). Through Enishte, the reader gets a glimpse into the 'modernising Turkish elites' emotional and psychological state in their dealings with the West' (Daglier, 2012, p. 155). For instance, having been profoundly affected by European culture, Enishte 'convinced the Ottoman sultan to sponsor a series of Occidental style paintings by royal Islamic calligraphers, [which] were to be placed in an Oriental style book of calligraphies and gifted to the Venetian Doge (chief magistrate)' (Daglier, 2012, p. 155).

When gifted with the Occidental style paintings, the European Doge 'might say to himself, '[j]ust as the Ottoman miniaturists have come to see the world like us, so have the Ottomans themselves come to resemble us,' in turn accepting Our Sultan's power and friendship' (Pamuk, 2002, p. 266). Yet, Enishte's dream of getting involved in Renaissance art was frustrated when 'the murderous conflict between the reformist and traditionalist Ottoman miniaturists led to the art of painting to be abandoned' (Daglier, 2012, p. 155).

In an interview, Orhan Pamuk says, 'In *My Name is Red* I wanted to create a panorama, to look at the spirit of the nation to look at the cultural truth in art' (Pamuk, 2010). Turkey, as the successor nation-state of the Ottoman Empire, is the principal heir of the juxtaposition between Islamic religio-cultural tradition and European individuality. While Pamuk alludes to Western influence on Ottoman art, global cultural change, and secular modernity in *My Name is Red*, his focus lies on

the lack of individuality and its negative connotations in the East ... suggest[ing] that elitist modernization movements in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish republic are bound to fail in attaining their ends because of deep-seated religious and cultural values. (Daglier, 2012, p. 154)

The effects of this 'failure of modernisation' continued into the 21st Century and, as Meltem Ahiska aptly puts in her article *Occidentalism*, Europe has transformed into 'an object of desire as well as a source of frustration for Turkish national identity in a long and strained history' (2003, p. 351). Put differently, Pamuk's post-1970s writerly obsession with the concepts of

hybridity, double-consciousness, and in-betweenness, employed in his 1998 novel *My Name is Red*, derives from that of Turkey, hence modern Turkish identity:

Turkey ... a nation straddling Asia and Europe [is] divided between the progressive 'Kemalist' heritage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's radical reforms of 1924 – secularism in government, public education for all, voting rights for women, the replacement of the Arabic alphabet with the Roman one – and conservative Islam, now resurgent as a repressive, potentially violent fundamentalism from Morocco to Malaysia. (Updike, 2001)

Pamuk reveals the identity crisis that originates from Turkey's troubled experiment with secularism, that is Turkey's 'tension out of the clash of East and West-Europe' (McGrath, 2006). He communicates to both Western and Eastern world the modern Turkish identity, sitting between East and West, just like Turkey itself. As Pamuk 'explore[s] the soul of Turkey' in *My Name is Red* (Updike, 2001), he also reveals his own subconscious to the reader, as Çiçekoglu states:

His *personal dilemma* [emphasis added], unfolding in the story of nine days in the last decade of the 16th Century, is shared by most of us *raised in a divided culture* [emphasis added], where centuries of modernization have been squeezed into decades... Orhan Pamuk is the first writer from Turkey who has challenged the schizophrenic polarization of values between dogmatic secularization and fundamentalist religion by synthesizing the modern and the postmodern in his brilliant techniques of story-telling, "both avant-garde and best-selling". (Çiçekoglu 2003a, p. 16)

Orhan Pamuk's personal and professional interest in East-West dichotomy takes on a more universal aspect. Upon reading *My Name is Red*, Adji builds up a preoccupation with the material culture of family life and presents the centuries-long Chinese-Indonesian tradition and, perhaps the *soul* of Indonesia, just as *My Name is Red* explores the 'soul of Turkey' (Updike, 2001).

Pamuk's investigation of hybridity in Turkish cultural and national context evokes the lineage of Adji's hyphenated identity. Born and raised in Indonesia, Adji's resentment in 'tensions and conflicts between the Chinese and the Indonesians; [her] background as a part of Chinese minority in Indonesia, hence, a target of internalised racism' led Adji to use a bracelet to explore Chinese-Indonesian identity and culture (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). Adji acknowledges that she 'looks up to Orhan Pamuk and his sarcasm' to reveal 'the resemblances between the Islamic Ottomans and the Islamic Javanese' as well as to present a critique of the influence of Islamic extremism on Indonesian local culture (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). She takes up Pamuk's use of objects/images to reveal her writerly motivations as a Chinese-Indonesian female author who 'get[s] more self-conscious and paranoid under the gaze of others' (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020).

Adji's anthropomorphised main character, a Monel bracelet, is endowed with a type of subjectivity to address its keeper's lack of individual agency. Troubled human agency is the effect of the constraints imposed on Chinese culture in the Indonesian society where, as Adji argues, 'one can speak but one feels that they have never been heard or taken seriously unless they become a figure of authority, which is highly unlikely in the case of most Chinese-Indonesians' (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). That being said, Adji's speaking bracelet is a 'stand-in for the author, represent[ing] the fate of authorial voice' (Lupton, 2006, p. 411). As it operates, the narrating object is 'prostituted by being detached from the body, circulated, exchanged, and depersonalized' (Flint, 1998, p. 221). In *Bracelet*, Adji attempts to depict the Indonesian history, people, and traditions from the perspective of her own bracelet and 'reproduce[s] what it feels like to have [her] agency transferred to an [intellectual and physical property] over which [she has] lost control' (Lupton, 2006, p. 411). In doing this, *Bracelet* signals the overlaps between different worlds and epochs, drawing on 18th Century it-narratives and Pamuk's 1998 novel *My Name is Red*.

Conclusion: How does a late 18th Century vogue have relevance in the early 21st Century?

It-narrative is a 'narrative gimmick,' Blackwell argues, 'an odd subgenre of the novel, a type of prose fiction in which inanimate objects or animals serve as central characters' (2007, p. 10). This consumable junk fiction 'offered writers a way of giving their readers access to stories from different social classes, or typically hidden professions, or other countries' (McRobbie, 2016). The 18th-Century style it-narratives differ from the modern ones in terms of the object's personhood. Sometimes the central characters 'enjoy a consciousness – and thus a perspective – of their own; [whereas] sometimes they are merely narrative hubs around which other people's stories accumulate, like the stick around which cotton candy winds' (Blackwell, 2007, p. 10). Modern circulation narratives, however, 'explore what it means to be an object in a world of humans, how objects come to have meaning, and how that meaning helps us make sense of our own history' (McRobbie, 2016).

This brings the discussion to contemporary Chinese-Indonesian literature in which Adji's personal, imaginative, and informative *Bracelet* addresses myriad characteristics of it-narratives. By 'enjoying a consciousness of its own,' the bracelet in the story provides safety for the author against 'cultural externalisation and targetisation by those who might feel attacked' (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). *Bracelet* offers us access to middle-class Chinese-Indonesian lifestyles; intergenerational conflict; and the cultural impacts of religion and Westernisation on Indonesia. From the perspective of the bracelet, the reader comes to know many things, including that the protagonist is the only Chinese student among masses of the Muslim Javanese, Indonesia's largest ethnic group. Imbued with humanistic traits, *Bracelet* not only informs the reader but also 'presents outside observation or criticism of human beings and society from a social perspective without introducing a main character's moralistic standpoint' (Carswell, n.d.). Lupton states that 'one of the main advantages of the speaking object as a narrator is that it can move unlimited by class, gender, character

development, or social affiliation through diverse spheres of the society' (Lupton, 2006, p. 403). In relation to Lupton's argument, outlined below are some quotations from *Bracelet* that demonstrate how the object communicates its thoughts and emotions to the reader:

The humid weather and the scorching sun only add to the discomfoting feeling we all feel as Surabaya's native people.

I can sympathise with her... I think I can understand her frustration well. (Adji, 2019)

Here, the bracelet acts like a social human being; it possesses the protagonist (*my* Tilda/keeper) as well as it feels, knows, thinks, understands, and sympathises. Put differently, the bracelet takes on 'sentimental value, sympathy, and self-consciousness' (Blackwell, 2004, p. 2). As an anthropomorphised object that carries historico-cultural connotations of family heritage and folklore, the bracelet conveys a sense of personhood. Nonetheless, it still enjoys being an ordinary object in the human world as it 'relieve[s] the reader of the assumptions and notions that a human character's class, gender or social standing carried along with it' (Carswell, n.d.). The bracelet does not necessarily lose its personal, cultural, and historical background as it exercises autonomy over the world that is external to the object itself. The story opens as follows:

I am a bracelet with balls on both ends – or – would you prefer to call me a ball end open cuff bangle? As far as I know, people usually call me 'baby bangle'... It is part of the general cultural tradition of the people, as they still strongly believe in the superstitious... Unlike my counterparts, who are typically either made of three-coloured gold or silver, I am made of an unusual material: Monel. Yes, you heard that right...

I may not be the most beautiful, bright, or gleaming metal in the world, but I am sure acknowledged for my unerring resistance to the highest level of corrosion, which is the fast-flowing seawater. And mind you, I am one of the most solid ones, compared to gold and silver. I think this is why my mother's keeper entrusted me to grace her eldest daughter's left wrist years ago, when she was only a child of ten. (Adji, 2019)

Here, the bracelet seems to be well-aware of the universe that surrounds it. It directly addresses the reader and attracts attention to its own perspective and (immediate) experience of the universe: 'I wish that you, readers, could look at her just like what I am doing now' (Adji, 2019). The bracelet also informs the reader about how it passed down the generations through cultural practices and how much it has suffered. Further, the bracelet comments on why it differs from other metals in the world, emphasising its consciousness of others as well as itself: 'Monel. Such a cheap metal, composed of nickel alloys, with mostly nickel, and then copper, and then completed with a slight mixture of iron, manganese, carbon, and silicon' (Adji, 2019).

Hayles argues that 'artifacts carry part of the cognitive load, operating in flexible configurations in which are embedded human thoughts, actions, and memories' (2006, p. 139). In this sense, the bracelet is 'capable of taking thought beyond the cognitive realm of any

individual' (Lupton, 2006, p. 402) by thinking and even thinking about itself. Although the object's cognition significantly differs from a human standard of self-awareness or self-consciousness, it-narratives can readily be considered as 'experiments in the consciousness of objects' (Lupton, 2006, p. 417).

As an 'extension' of its owner's presence, Adji's bracelet becomes sentient, 'standing and speaking up for Adji' (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). Noted elsewhere, Adji's concerns about her safety and well-being points to the comfort that she finds in it-narratives: 'if I narrate through a human character, I imagine that readers will generally attribute it to the real author's voice and intention... Meanwhile, objects are seen as childish or nostalgic subjects, thus making them non-threatening' (S.N. Karali, personal communication, July 20, 2020). Not surprisingly, it-narratives can create a safe space for storytelling, providing room for traumatic explorations and narrating exercises from the perspective of a *flâneur* or *saunterer*, and, at the same time, trying to present and narrate the truth within constraints of time and politics. Carswell (2021) states that:

Particularly in times of great social turmoil or upheaval, a narrator could be seen as unreliable merely by virtue of his or her station in life (particularly in relation to that of the reader or author). So, writers turned to non-human narrators and perspectives.

Accordingly, Adji's turn to a non-human character stems from her experience of ostracism by the native Indonesians, the *pribumi*. As Lupton argues, it-narratives 'make the sheer materiality of literature the occasion for their ability to comment on society' (2006, p. 409). While *Bracelet* re-presents a diversity of perspectives, customs, religious philosophies and practices, it also offers a somewhat satirical and definitely unflattering account of the Indonesian society:

It is part of the general cultural tradition of the people, as they still strongly believe in the superstitious...

I know for a fact that Tilda has always been secretly jealous with Christina, for the latter possesses benefits the former can never have. Christina is also a Catholic girl like Tilda, but she is a native girl. A Javanese. A member of the majority of people of Indonesian society. Meanwhile, Tilda is a Chinese descent. The fact that both young women go to a public university here means that Christina, being a member of the majority, certainly makes her more easily accepted by her peers. It is a universal fact, I think. (Adji, 2019)

The autobiographical account of the bracelet allows Adji a narrative position that is neither too close nor too distant from her own position. Adji's exercise of this specific literary subgenre repositions the bracelet between the writer's persona ('her-narrative') as well as its own persona (it-narrative). The critique of Adji's practice of creative resistance against the status quo, inspired and shaped by Turkey's best-known author at home and abroad, brings together different frames for world literature, extending over almost four centuries. To restate, the mid to late 18th Century vogue for it-narratives meets 21st Century Chinese-Indonesian literature, inspired by the late 20th Century Turkish fiction, which explores the 16th Century Ottoman miniature world in relation to threatening Westernisation/modernisation. While presenting a

'miniature mind-world wherein the reader's own experiences can frolic' (Ali & Hagood, 2012, p. 512), Pamuk's *Red* also goes back in time, to the 16th Century, and reaches out to the present, to contemporary Chinese-Indonesian fiction. The 'miniature mind-world' brings its signature to Chinese-Indonesian literature and its use of it-narratives.

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