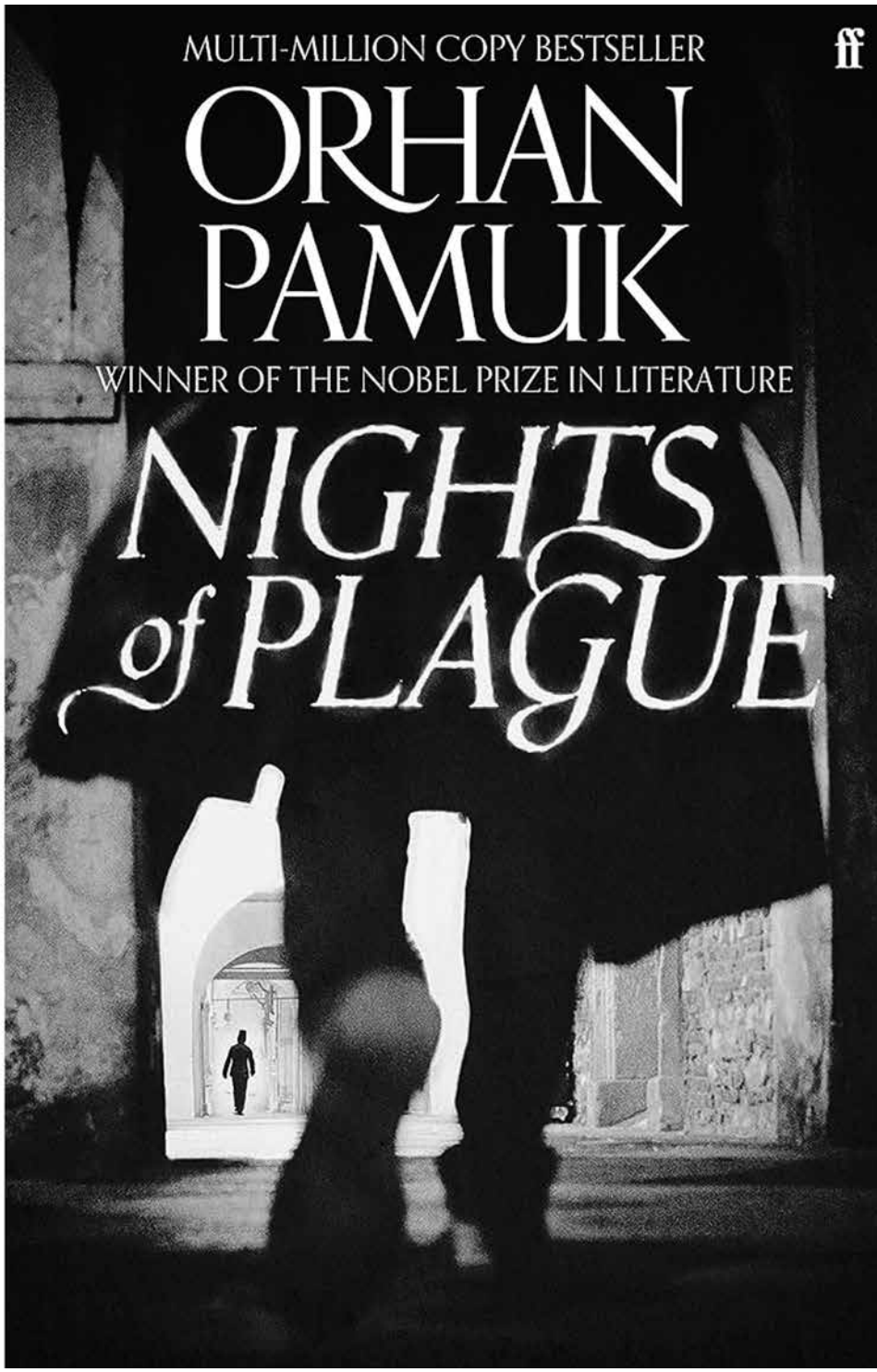

Cover of *Nights of Plague*.

Review:
A Look from the Levant at our Fragile Mediterranean Island

OHRAN PAMUK, *Las noches de la peste*, translated by Xavier Gaillard and Miguel Ángel Romero, Barcelona, Penguin Random House Mondadori, 2022 / *Nits de pesta*, translated by Xavier Gaillard, Barcelona, Més Llibres, 2022.

Gemma Aubarell

In *Nights of Plague*, Pamuk gives us an historical perspective imagined in the full decadence of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th-century. The place is an island, Minguer, and the reality is made up of religious sectarianisms, political conflicts and foreign interferences. The trigger will be an extreme situation caused by the eastern bubonic plague, a pandemic that devastated this part of the world at the time. This book caused the author quite a few problems in his country, because of his critical look at the dismemberment of imperial Turkey and the supposed parallels between the fictional and historical messianic leaders. As for the context of the story told in the book, its publication coincided with the pandemic, a circumstance that helps the contemporary approach to situations that are close to us. The story told and the reality that surrounds it go hand in hand in a reading full of nuances and suggestions, although it is certainly quite a challenge for the reader to decipher which is which.

We are warned that it is a fictional story in the prologue, which we discover is invented, and which introduces both the narrator and the purpose of the novel: a history book about the East and the Levant region, the East and the Eastern Mediterranean. With the help of a historian, who will turn out to be the granddaughter of the protagonists, we are made part of the literary exercise itself: it is a fictionalisation of a situation that happened, using historical sources, notably the correspondence maintained by one of the characters. The narrator, the writer's alter ego, takes on particular importance as we reach the end of the novel.

The story told transports us to the beginning of the last century, to an island of the Ottoman Empire where populations of diverse origins, languages and beliefs coexist: Christian Greeks, Muslim Turks, soldiers, scientists, governors, and European consuls. Complex realities that may seem very familiar to us… The crisis following a deadly outbreak of plague will become

the backdrop, as detailed as is necessary, to explain the process towards what seems the inevitable independence of the island and the shaping of a new nation. The second part of the novel is a journey outside of history, which contextualises everything narrated and provides many tools for the reader to interpret the events from a contemporary perspective.

And this novel can be interpreted as a game of mirrors. Thus, the political restrictions and interference described during the pandemic situation can be extrapolated to the current Turkish political context. The journey of the first part, which faithfully describes the events, provides us with the objective view that will contrast with the second part of the novel, in which the reader will see how those events have been interpreted years later, how the symbols have been idealised, and memory has been artificially reconstructed. The novel is a journey through contemporary narratives and their manipulation, but also an intimate, personal, genuine experience of the characters.

On another level, Pamuk is an author who continually plays with the dialogue between East and West. This can be seen when he turns to an English diplomat and scholar to compile the historical narrative that is to sustain and justify the national identity of the island, because only he has studied its language and customs. Another example of this dialogue is the resolution of a murder case central to the story, for which the aim is to apply a new rational method following the detective Sherlock Holmes and his author, Conan Doyle, admired by the sultan and in vogue at the time. Another example is the narrative that requires the account of an adventurous hero's escape that emulates the Count of Monte Cristo. The truth is that, in this mirror of entertainment with poisonings and murders, political intrigues, cultural conflicts and religious confrontations, it is worth asking: what is the East and what is the West in this tangle of interlinked and irremediably intertwined cultures?

Pamuk is part of the tradition of exceptional observers of both realities, who reveal to us the reality from East to West through their literature. If Tolstoy, a Pamuk reference, begins this perspective with his novel *Hadji Murat*, Amin Maalouf is closer to him, coinciding in reminding us of the taste for the dissemination of the history and culture that connect with the West. Both authors make this a self-conscious and intended connection. With all its nuances, the truth is that this complex presentation of reality itself could well be interpreted as a deliberate overcoming of imaginative geographies, the term used by Edward Said to name the myth of the division between East and West. Perhaps, with all the nuances, we are talking about the representation of a Westernised East.

But what we can agree on is that, above all, this is an exercise in literary geography, and its space is an island, a literary universe in itself deeply rooted in the Mediterranean historiographic and literary tradition. During the 19th-century, present-day Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon, with their port cities Smyrna, Alexandria and Beirut, formed the border between the Ottoman world and Europe, East and West. They were perceived as Levant cities, although today they are clearly surpassed by their postcolonial and postmodern condition; cities that Philippe Mansel (2011) defines as "mixed", which challenged the difficult dialogue between

cosmopolitanism and nationalism, the origin of nationalisms and also the context of multiple identities and expressions at the beginning of the 20th-century. A Levant character not free from confrontational and dramatic situations in all three cases. And in this historical context, we find Minguer, depicting this reality because it is an island, a reality in itself. Each street, each character, each spoken or imagined language, each symbol, each story takes place in a recognised space, with paths that enhance its meaning. In this gallery of characters in situ, the use of historical perspective, critical touches and the deliberate modernising literary exercise recall the drift of the cities of the Greek writer Stratis Tsircas. The model of the city jealously kept by the first and last queen of Minguer provides a detailed reproduction of symbolic value and great tension. The settings of the book also recall in their invisible condition, the cities of Italo Calvino. And from there we meet another universal Alexandrian, Cavafy, when he reminds us: "You won't find a new country, won't find another shore. This city will always pursue you." Pamuk, the Levant writer, gives us a great museum open to today's reader, an opportunity to understand our surroundings, ennoble them, humanise them, return them to those permanent mental geographies.

And perhaps the greatest value of this book is that, like any good novel, it reminds us of what is essential. *Nights of Plague* provides us with good literature and, through its range of characters and situations, with a critical look at cultural conflicts, political impositions, the exploitation of identities, and manipulated prejudices. With the impressive description of its characters, all passengers of a choral novel, we are given a vision of humanity and simplicity that transcends our immediate circumstances. And after learning a little history – without knowing whether it is entirely real –, walking through the streets of Minguer, learning in detail words from languages that do not exist, discovering the origin of rose production, searching for murderers in endless plots… we are left with the Levant and modernist feeling, as we turn the final page, that there is still room to overcome the ignorance, prejudices and essentialisms of our fragile Mediterranean Minguers.

References

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