



A Prismatic View of Pamuk's Turkey in Snow: A critical study Omkar Roy

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This paper undertakes a critical study of the Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (2004) to picture Turkey's contemporary socio-political issues. I have endeavored to show the modes and methods by which Pamuk brings contentious issues of religion which has largely been about women wearing the headscarf and the works of secular state in mitigating all the problems affecting the image of Turkey in the western world. *Snow* is a political novel and it explores the politics that is played in the daylight. Orhan Pamuk's writings take place where Islam and secularism confront each other in a dramatic way. He is a globally acknowledged writer and he writes for global audience.

Snow is a novel in which Pamuk takes Islamic and secularist clash whose roots go before the secularizing project of Turkey. It records socio-political condition of Turkey in the early 1990s. The hijab or headscarf adopted by many Muslim women across the world in accordance with their local rules has been a fertile issue for discussion all over the world. It signifies women's subordinate status in Muslim societies in the vast body of literature on the topic. Turkey is the only country with a Muslim majority population that has been practicing a ban on hijab. This is the main point of contention between the secularists and the Islamists. In this novel, this issue is presented through many characters who bring out multiple responses to the question of headscarf. There are liberals who view the ban on the headscarf as a liberating one. On the other hand, followers of political Islam take it as an insult. They correlate it with religion and think that their religion is in danger. The main protagonist of the novel Ka finds himself in the middle of these things. He has come to Turkey after twelve years. The city of Kars unfolds a new world which he has never seen before. Thus, my paper will seek to explore Orhan Pamuk's engagement with the contemporary Islam in Turkey.

Key words: Turkey, modernists, political Islam. Secular, Ottoman.

The object of study for a new historicist critic is the way in which a culture represents itself. For new historicists, written texts are the products of social, cultural and political forces, not solely the creation of an individual author, and so texts reflect and engage with the prevailing values and ideologies of their own time.¹

Pamuk started composing *Snow* two years before 9/11, yet shockingly the issues of the post 9/11 found a reverberation in the pages of the novel. "With *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk walks a fine line between reality and fiction. With a novelist's astuteness, he presents some of the dire political and social realities of Turkey, illuminating the underlying themes of the domestic threats to the state edifice in Turkey, namely, Islam and Kurdish nationalism"²

Indeed, the conversation of different thoughts and philosophies in *Snow* centers around the political decision of Turkey whether it would pick the personality of an Islamic country dependent on Sharia or decides on an enrolment in the Western Union. In any case, the individuals of Turkey don't respect Pamuk's exertion of building a bridge between Turkey and Europe. For example, Kemal Kerincsiz, the pioneer of the Ultra-Nationalist Lawyers responded in the following way after Pamuk was given the Nobel Prize: "as a Turkish citizen I am ashamed ... I

don't believe this prize was given for his books or for his literary identity. It was given because he belittled our national values for his recognition of the Armenian genocide."³

"Muslim" is not synonymous with "Islamist," in the sense that the first expresses a religious identity and the latter implies a political consciousness and social action. Accordingly, Islamist counter-elites can be both actors in the Islamist movements and professionals and intellectuals aspiring for political power. Islamism, however, does not only denote membership in an Islamist political organization, but also suggests a sense of belonging and a group identity.⁴

The narrative of *Snow* is set during the 1990s in Kars in north-eastern Turkey, once a fringe city between the Ottoman and the Russian empires. Kars is displayed as microcosm of Turkey in the novel. The novel opens with the poet cum-hero Ka's (Kerim Alakusoglu) venture from Erzurum to Kars by transport in the midst of 'the silence of snow'.⁵ Kars is a secluded city in Anatolia a long way from Istanbul. Ka's companion Taner has given him a proposition (who has shortly came back to his local Istanbul to go to his mother's burial service following twelve years of political outcast in Germany) to visit Kars. This trip of Ka to Kars is the outcome of that proposal. Taner provides 'Ka with a valid press card'.⁶ and asks him to write an article 'about the municipal elections coming up and how—just as in the city of Batman—an extraordinary number of girls in Kars had succumbed to a suicide epidemic'.⁷ Ka a "single and never married"⁸ middle-aged man cannot but accept the offer because his beautiful 'old classmate'⁹Ipek, whom he wants to marry, is now living in Kars with her father and sister. Pamuk has exposed the character of Ka as an indecisive one. Ka is in dilemma as to whether he is an atheist or a believer in God. It is so because "he had grown up in a secular, republican family."¹⁰ In addition, he has never taken any religious education other than school. Whatever he may be but he doesn't support any enemy of secularism in a mainstream nation like Turkey. It is obvious from the reality when Ipek requests Ka to meet with Sheik Saadettin who influences Muhtar to join political Islam; Ka gets disturbed and says, "Am I supposed to pay my respects to every lunatic in Kars?"¹¹ Ka's swaying nature in regards to his confidence in God is reflected as he experiences his excursion from adolescence to adulthood. During his youth, Ka used to go to the 'Tevikiye Mosque' alongside their house cleaner and play with different kids rather than revere. However, "at school, I memorized all the prayers very well, to ingratiate myself with the teacher. He helped us memorise the *fatiha* by hitting us ... but then I forgot it all."¹² He reveals his inner thought as: "I'm very happy right now. I have no need for religion."¹³ It clearly reflects his inclination towards secularism.

The headscarves issue which is the topic of much conversation and disarray, particularly in the European nations is a significant issue in Pamuk's *Snow*: "Women and the veil is a topic of great contemporary currency and political urgency. From the controversial headscarf ban in French schools to Orhan Pamuk's new novel *Snow*, the veil is a potent visual symbol of political Islam and the 'clash of civilizations'."¹⁴This tussle among Islamism and secularism happens because of the extremity of perspectives between the two societies that is the way of life of the West and the way of life of the 'other'. Most definitely, *Snow* has comparable sort of treatment as there is in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* as well as in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

The feminist movement, which started in 1920s, got its force in Turkey after the military coup of 1980. The feminists had the chance to maintain their development with extraordinary opportunity. In any case, Pamuk has portrayed various Muslim women characters in *Snow* who would prefer not to bargain with whatever divides them and their strict confidence to accomplish opportunity. In the novel, it is obviously clear through the death of the "suicide girls" after the inconvenience of imposition of ban on veil by the secular government of Turkey. Along these lines, the Muslim people protested against this ban as it harms the strict opinions of their locale. Pamuk has caught this impulse of the contention between Islamism and secularism reasonably in the novel. Ka, who plays "the intrepid reporter"¹⁵ and addressing the families, is stunned while listening to the tales of wretchedness and destitution of the individuals of Kars. "But the suicide stories he heard that day would haunt him for the rest of his life."¹⁶ The "headscarves girls" make such a stride as they are suspended from wearing headscarves in schools. It is a motion of opposition against by the common government's structure. Ka is perplexed to realize that a few young ladies have committed suicide not in light of any physical torment or any sort of strict 'conservatism' by their parents or spouses or the issue of money however, they did so out of nowhere during the hour of their day by day work, with no earlier notice. It excites greater interest in Ka to dive deep into the core of the issue through his meetings with the guardians of the victims. Since, it is the solitary issue of 'suicide' by the 'covered girl', which brings Ka at this isolated part of Turkey; his essential concern is to examine it first. While carrying out his responsibility by meeting with the father of the same 'headscarf girl' Teslime, who committed suicide, Ka comes to know about the suicide.

To be sure, one of the few explanations for the suicide plague at Kars is the prohibition on headscarves in strict organizations by the mainstream administration of Turkey. Be that as it may, the devotees of political Islam have not energized this episode as ending it all is prohibited in Islam. It has unquestionably extended the break between the two. So as to beat the issue of suicide by headscarf girls, the government has made various strides. "As a preliminary measure, the Department of Religious Affairs had plastered the city with the posters Ka had seen the day before. They proclaimed: 'Human beings are God's masterpieces and suicide is blasphemy.'

In any case, every one of these measures demonstrate vain. With the expansion in the quantity of deaths because of suicide plague, the devotees of political Islam become increasingly angry. At first, they attempt to turn out from that crisis frantically by requesting from the government the withdrawal of the restriction on headscarves from the religious institutions. Finding no positive response, there occur a number of anti-Ataturk activities in the city of Kars such as:

... taking a hammer to the nose of the statue that stood in the garden of the Trade and Industry Lycee, writing ugly remarks on the poster hanging on the wall at the Gang of Fifteen Cafe, entering into a conspiracy to use hatchet to destroy the statue standing outside the government offices.¹⁸

The most deplorable of all the anti- Ataturk exercises that happens is the assassination of the local Director of the Institute of Education at the New Life Pastry Shop. Ka is the witness of this shooting (of the Director of Education). The assailant is none other than Blue, a radical Islamist whom ka immediately recognized during the latter's visit to a hiding spot to meet with the former. It is through the slaughtering of the Director of the Education Institute by an Islamist that the perusers come to know in actuality the presence of the contradicting idea of the standards of the

political Islam and the current laws of Turkey. Ka, who comes to visit Kars out of nowhere, winds up as the focal point of political conflicts. At the point when the local military at Kars stages a coup and executes many Islamic fundamentalists however, Ka by chance becomes mediator among Islamists and a Turkish government and the majority that has tendency towards the West. However, to the surprise of the Islamists, they hardly derive any benefits from their anti-Ataturk activities. Contrarily, their activities go against their own fate as the government is not ready to tolerate their protests. The task of handling the Islamists is well done by the military force of Turkey. In this clash between the secular government and Islamists, the former has controlled the latter in no time.

Although the people of Kars once lived side by side in happy harmony, in recent years outside forces have turned brother against brother, with disputes between the Islamists and the secularists, the Kurds, the Turks and the Azeris driving us asunder for specious reasons and reawakening old accusations about the Armenian massacre that should have been buried long ago.

Blue represents political Islam in *Snow* and remains against the common law of Turkey. He is known as the "master" among his followers for his being a political Islamist of some notoriety. Orhan Pamuk presents him as the 'brown haired' clean-shaved little man who has an 'acquiline nose' and 'breathtakingly pale skin' with dark blue eyes. In his childhood he was "a godless leftist" who was tagged along with the other young militants and stoned the sailors coming off the American aircraft carriers. But with the passage of time there arrives an extreme change in him. He is not any more adhering to the leftist philosophy as in the past. The discourse of Ayatollah Khomeini has impacted him extraordinarily and takes him back to Islam: "The most important thing today is not to pray or fast but to protect the Islamic faith."¹⁹ that point forward he never thinks back. Nor does he lose his confidence. Such a significant level of self-assurance empowers Blue to turn into the pioneer of the Islamists. There is no uncertainty that Blue is a functioning individual from political Islam. In every event, during his days in Germany, he has visited every possible Muslim association. The sole design was to advance the belief system of political Islam. Not at all like numerous different Islamists who become famous for their contributions in murders. Blue's got fame after killing a TV personality named Guner Bener on the grounds that he uttered an inappropriate remark about the Prophet Mohammed. The episode occurred while Guner Bener was presenting a quiz show on a minor TV channel. The young Islamists of Kars are in the grip of Blue. That is the reason the police don't capture Blue notwithstanding their insight about the last's appearance in Kars. In any case, one of the reasons behind Blue's remaining hidden is to get himself far from the press which 'had made sure' his 'part' in the execution of Guner Bener. This occurrence is known all through the nation and is generally censured. It has made such an impression in Blue's mind that he joined Muslim organization together with a plan to incorporate the expressions of Khomeini. While the greater part of the characters in *Snow* are pulled in toward the West, Blue objects it. As per him the embarrassment of the Muslim world lies in the way that it has fallen under the spell of the West. Be that as it may, he stays severe in his philosophy. He wouldn't like to copy the European culture since that would imply that you'll always be groveling. His disapproval of the slavery of the Turkish press to the Western press and subsequently his hatred for the West is further revealed during the time of his conversation with Ka shows the real debatable point in Turkish history.

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