

Religious Fundamentalism and Secularism: A Postmodern critique of Orhan Pamuk's *SNOW*

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Abstract: Postmodernism is of great interest to a wide range of people because it directs out attention to the changes, the major transformations taking place in contemporary society and culture. Pamuk's works are said to be a grab-bag of postmodernism. He handles the task of adapting postmodernist literary strategies to his non-western subjects. This paper is an analysis on Orhan Pamuk's seventh novel *Snow* from a postmodern perspective. This work is also concerned with cultural ethics.

Keywords: Postmodern, Secularism, fundamentalism, conflict, Islam, westernism, headscarf, suicided girls, Istanbul, ambivalence.

Postmodernism has originated out of modernity which has been wielding supreme with such an all-encompassing and totalizing 'meta-narrative' of universality, perennality and certainty – the unbridled power of reason. Postmodernism is of great interest to a wide range of people because it directs out attention to the changes, the major transformations taking place in contemporary society and culture. It is a celebration of 'plurality' as different from the all-embracing 'uniformity' of modernity – plurality in thinking and expression, culture and religion, truth and morality. Ferit Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish novelist. Pamuk's works are said to be a grab-bag of postmodernism. He handles the task of adapting postmodernist literary strategies to his non-western subjects. This paper is an analysis of Orhan Pamuk's seventh novel *Snow* from a postmodern perspective.

Snow is a postmodern literature in which the narrator tells a story from an omniscient point of view. The story is told in the third person from the protagonist's point of view. An omniscient narrator sometimes shows his presence known to the readers. He is a friend of Ka, the central character. He tells a story based on Ka's journals and correspondences. This novel explores the conflict between Islamism and Westernism in Modern Turkey. The story begins with the traveler (Kerim Alakusoglu) Ka's journey to Kars. He travels to Kars after many years to investigate the recent suicides of a number of young women, forbidden to wear headscarves in school, and to know about municipal elections. He narrates his experience in Kars and also brings out the histories of Kars. Ka gets caught up in the muddle of Islamist, headscarf advocates, secularists and number of people who die and kill in the name of highly contradictory ideals. The omniscient narrator identifies himself as a novelist named Orhan and plays a larger role in the story in the later

chapters of the novel, exploring the last hours of Ka in the city.

Subjectivism is explored in the delineation and development of characters. In this novel, when Ka investigates the allegations regarding the girls who have committed suicide, he turns from external reality to examine the inner state of consciousness of the girls who had killed themselves amidst their daily routines and he declares that the girls had been carrying their suicidal thoughts. When Ka examines the external reality, he understands that suicide has spread contagiously like the plague. A committee of suicide experts is formed to enquire the cause of suicides. The department of religious affairs proclaims, "Human Beings are God's masterpieces and suicide is blasphemy" (14). The narrator says that the girls have killed themselves because of their unhappiness. The deputy governor doesn't agree with Ka and he replies to Ka for this as, "But if unhappiness were a genuine reason for suicide, then half the women in Turkey would be committing suicide" (15). A man reveals Ka that his niece who was scolded by her mother-in-law for failing to conceive a child, copies the other women and kills herself. Another girl, who had been driven to suicide, is told that she did it because of her teacher's accusation of her not being a virgin. French and German newspapers publish stories. We understand this when Blue questions Ka as:

Girls who commit suicides are not even Muslims. And it's wrong to say they're taking a stand over headscarves. If you publish lies like this, you'll only spread more rumour – about quarrels among the headscarf girls, about the poor souls who have resorted to wearing wigs, about how they've been destroyed by the pressure put on them by the police and their parents. (77)

These lines state that press interest only pushed more girls over the edge. According to Ka, "suicides were a solemn ceremony with sleeping pills and whisky, a final act you performed alone and of your own free will" (16). Ka hears about a suicide of one of the famous headscarf girls. An educational institution decides to banish the covered women from the institute. She is taught to think by her friends that the headscarf is a symbol of 'political Islam'. She tells her father that life has no meaning and that she no longer wants to live. A girl named Teslime after finishing her daily prayer, ties her headscarf to the lamp hook and hangs herself. Hande another headscarf girl who suggests suicide to Teslime just to frighten her father says that Teslime struggles for her religion and for the word of God. For her, headscarf is not only for God's love; it also proclaims her faith and preserves her honour. It is said that she is forced to remove her scarf both at school and at home. It is said that, "when a girl has accepted the headscarf as the word of God and the symbol of faith, it's very difficult for her to take it off" (123). A stylish woman from Ankara serves as an "agent of persuasion". She questions all the girls who were wearing headscarves about their family, sort of clothes wore before adopting religious dress, etc. Hande confesses that she often dreams

herself to be like the Ankara woman. This has shown that the girl has desires to become stylish. She expresses her fear as: "Even if I did take off my headscarf, I don't think I'd become the kind of woman who flirts with men, or who can't think of anything about sex" (125). This thought hinders her concentration and it is the cause that she couldn't think herself without a headscarf. For all those girls who end up their lives by themselves, "suicide wish is a wish for innocence and purity"(126).

Throughout the book, the act of insisting upon wearing a head-scarf is the main issue. According to the girls, head-scarf symbolizes the love for God and virginity. So they refuse to remove the headscarf. They are stubborn to cover their heads and states that they will remove it by their own will and not by force. Though the girls die because of their personal affairs, both the religious party and the republican party exploit it and create a conflict and make it as an issue that, they died because of the fear that they would be thrown out from the school for covering their heads. Headscarf places these girls in a head-on collision with the state authorities and entails enormous pressures and sacrifices. It is described as an act of empowerment and assertion of their identity as women. Ka refers to them as 'Islamic Feminists'. The novel directs out attention of a wide range of people to the changes, the major transformations taking place in contemporary society and culture. The provincial custom of the forties is brought out in this novel when Ka with Serdar Bey visits Kasim Bey, the assistant chief of police while he enters the city. Ka brings out the history of Kars and also shows that the city had underwent a lot of changes. He utters: Ottoman Pashas who had once led happy, peaceful and even colourful lives here. Gone now were all the Armenians, Russians, Ottomans and early republican Turks who had made this city a modest centre of civilization; and since no one had come to replace them, the streets were deserted. (135) He also mentions that in the late forties, there was not even a single headscarf in Kars.

This work is also concerned with cultural ethics. It is an ethical response to the idea of a single pattern that characterizes the western thought. Ka is a westernized literary man; he is a representative of many individual in the Islamic society with western thoughts. Ka realizes that the westernized world that he had known as a child in Istanbul is dying. All the characters in the novel resemble the Chekhovian characters who never knew success in life and who are filled with melancholy. Ka encounters Muhtar Bey, the candidate of God's Party, who was non-religious before. He reveals his position to Ka as: "It's because we failed to find happiness in poetry that we have found ourselves hiding in the shadow of politics"(53). This states that people found politics as a place to hide. Like Muhtar, people yearn to get relieved from the misery of becoming westernized, modern and self-possessed individuals by seeking the blessings of God. A sort of loneliness is felt within each and every character. Kars is far away from the civilized world and according

to MuhtarBey all people there are unreal. People dream to be westernized, but they are not ready to break the strictures and mores of their religion. The characters are intriguing, but they are more representative of types than of individuals. They are taught that removing headscarf is like losing the virginity. Certain communities block the modernity and behead them for disobeying the so-called religious truth. Necip, a religious school student says Ka that the secularists gave them a name “political Islamists” who were ready to fight for religion. Blue, a radical Islamist meets Ka and asks about his visit with the Deputy Governor. He also says that the officials were pleased to hear the suicide of covered girls who were thrown out of the school. Ka replies him that the girl killed herself over a love affair. He threatens Ka that he should not write that the girls who killed themselves had sinned against God and also asks to write about the girls who stood to cover their heads. Blue enquires about this to Ka as:

Why don't you ask these girls whether they'd like you to write in the German Press about their sisters who, having stood up for the right to cover their heads, were so devastated by the repercussions that they departed this world in a state of sin. (78)

In this way, Islamists and secularists try to exploit the situation for their fundamental means.

One secular group puts on a classic play condemning headscarves at the National theatre. This brings much more tension between secularists and Islamists. When Muslims protests, three nationalists appear on the stage and start firing. In that incident Necip is killed. As Ka feels pity for those religious school students, he is warned by one of the leftists as:

No one who's even slightly westernized can breathe free in this country unless they have a secular army protecting them, and no one needs this protection more than intellectuals who think they're better than everyone else and look down on other people...when we go the way of Iran, do you really think anyone is going to remember how a porridge –hearted liberal like you shed a few tears for the boys from the religious high school (who were arrested) when that day comes, they'll kill you just for being a little westernized.(326)

To release Blue, Kadife agrees to remove her headscarf during the course of the play in Zaim's production which was to be telecast live on a television show. But Blue and Hande are shot down to death by the secularists. The tension between Prosperity party and Republican party brings out the saliency in Turkish culture and politics. There is a collision of western values with Islamic fundamentalism. Pamuk recreates the environment in which extremist movements take root and flourish. Ka's government investigators tail him everywhere and the army force is a constant presence and this atmosphere inspires Ka's creativity and he is able to write poetry. The confrontation between secular and extremist Islamic worlds makes us aware of the radical Islam. Young followers of

Blue form a new group of Islamic militants who vow to take revenge for the death of their admired leader. It is assumed that one of them had assassinated Ka. Behind the silence of the snow, *Snow* reveals the internal conflict between the secularists and Islamists.

This work illuminates the contradictions gripping the individual and collective heart in many parts of the Muslim world. This work brings out the fragility of the non-western world and its ambivalence about the godless west. It brings out the conflicting political and religious tensions of the country and the residents representing a melting pot of historical influences-socialism, communism, atheism and the most rapidly growing Islamist fundamentalism.

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