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ORHAN PAMUK'S *SNOW*: A SYMBOL OF FEMINIST STRUGGLE



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a feminist reading of Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* in which, women are struggling to define their identities in the patriarchal society. This inspiration and courage came to Turkish women after the Young Turkish Revolution (1908). The novel represents microcosm of Turkey, its society, its politics and its Ottoman culture, jeopardized between Eastern and Western diagonal pulls and finally the Turkish society turned into an ice lump. The complex idea is described by the novelist through an issue of banning headscarf of girls in school. By doing so the education department wants to usher in the Western Culture in Turkey.

The second aspect of this novel is Pamuk tries to mitigate the binary oppositions between man and woman. By doing so he paves the way of compromise between the political (traditional) Islam and the New Republicanism in Turkey. Thirdly, snow symbolizes freezing and isolation. So Istanbul symbolizes a city cut off from the rest of the world. It has become a

prison of the makings of the conservatives. The snow should melt by the meeting of East and West. Lastly, it is pertinent to see that Pamuk supports Westernization but with a rider.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, secularism, republicanism, east-west, snow

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

This paper presents a feminist reading of Orhan Pamuk's famous novel *Snow*. It is the story of women struggling to define their identities in the patriarchal society of Turkey. In order to understand the problems of female folk of Ottoman era, it can be compared with Victorian society of England. In both of them religion and tradition were very dominant features. In addition, oppressions of patriarchy could be felt in every field. Victorian woman did not have to bear so much of male oppression as did the Ottoman society. The struggle for the liberation of women in Turkey gained more wind after the Young Turk Revolution (1908). This made a strong impact on Pamuk's writings. The real modernization of Turkish society vis-à-vis Turkish woman started during the period of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Then the binary opposition of male/female started fading. Atatürk had to mitigate between the political Islam or traditional Islam and new Republicanism, without causing serious damage to the contemporary Turkish society. Orhan Pamuk ventures to do that political exercise. In his interview to foreign media, Pamuk more than once affirms that he is a secularist and he is a modernized and from the readers' point of view, he is a postmodernist. He puts forth his perceptions about feminism, but he does not turn the novel into a propaganda literature about women's liberation. So, one need not try to find much didacticism in the novel. In fact he loves Islam, but his being liberal secular does not come in the way of being a postmodernist novelist.

Orhan Pamuk is a leading, contemporary Turkish novelist and Nobel Prize winner for literature in 2006. In his novels, he deals with certain universal themes like quest for new identity, East-West conflict, dominating Western culture and its impact on Turkish society, fast spreading consumerism, feminism, pursuit of love and its vanity. He has written ten novels; among them outstanding novels include *My Name is Red* (1998), *Snow* (2002), *The Museum of Innocence* (2008) and others. He is a non-conformist writer. He is not only

originates new ideas but also struggles to champion them. Secondly, he is a procrastinate, that is, he is a pause-think and act sort of person. Procrastinate people are creative and make unexpected and non-linear leaps into the un-known areas. He is original in thought and expression.

While writing about feminist struggle in literature, Elaine Showalter makes two divisions, woman as a reader and woman as a writer. Woman as a reader means woman as the consumer of male-produced literature about her. There are certain common features about women in man's writings. She is a weaker creature, slave to man, symbol of sex and so on. Prejudiced male writers created stereotypes of women characters. They could not read the mind of women and imposed on them the male-written history of literature. Women's perception about life and literature were shelved.

When woman herself became a writer one finds some subtle changes in her writing's. We can make a strong case of the psychodynamics female creativity in her writings. Women appear to be solving the problem of female language and linguistics. Finally, woman as a writer developed co-textuality or the writings of other women as support literature. This is popularly called as feminist critique. This is the benchmark of feministic literature. There are the two developmental stages of feminist literature. We have to see whether this transformation has happened in the female characters of Orhan Pamuk. Especially in *Snow*, this initiation of 'woman' is loud and thumping. Kadife, head of female characters in the novel, appears to be revolutionary.

Orhan Pamuk presents some female characters in his bestselling novel *Snow* which is a political novel interwoven with a love story, which takes place in Kars a distant province on the Turkish-Armenian border around 1990. *Snow* presents a microcosm of Turkey, its politics, its society and its Ottoman culture jeopardized between the Eastern and Western pull. The protagonist Ka is a leftist and a poet, returned to Turkey after twelve years of exile in Germany. His journalist friend asked Ka to write an article on the ensuing municipal election, which would be fiercely fought among the Islamic fundamentalists, Kurdish people and the leftist. He is also charged with the task of investigating the causes of suicides among young girls, not allowed to go to schools without covering their hair with headscarves. Ka accepts this offer in order to find out his beloved Ipek.

The female struggle triggers when the education department and the school management forbid female students to wear headscarves in the premise of institution. In the bid the

director of the Institution is killed. It is the first salvo fired at the reformists by the fundamental Islamists who are obstructing women's progress.

The struggle of woman for equality and fair treatment in the patriarchal society is an age-old phenomenon. The crux of the problem in this novel is the Turkish Government has banned headscarf in schools and colleges. This rouses stout opposition from the traditional society. But the government forces to abandon headscarves. The matter becomes so explosive that some girls are dropped out of schools and some go to the extreme of committing suicide. "And now, because they've been barred from their classes for brandishing this symbol of political Islam, they've begun committing suicide" (Pamuk, *Snow* 21-22). While doing his duty by interviewing with the father of the same headscarf girl Teslime, who died by committing suicide, Ka comes to know from him that:

Regarding the headscarf, clearly the girl's mother, who wore one, had set the example, with the blessing of the whole family. But the real pressure had come from her school friends who were running the campaign against the banishment of covered women from the Institute. Certainly, it was they who taught her to think of the headscarf as a symbol of 'political Islam'. So, despite her parents' expressed wish that she remove her headscarf, the girl refused, thus ensuring that she would frequently be removed by the police from the halls of the institute. When she saw some of her friends giving up and uncovering their heads, and others forgoing their headscarves to wear wigs instead, the girl began to tell her father that life had no meaning and that she no longer wanted to live (p. 16-17).

Finding no positive response, there occur a number of anti-Government 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 Lycée, writing ugly remarks on the poster hanging on the wall at the Gang of Fifteen Café, entering into a conspiracy to use hatchet to destroy the statue standing outside the government offices (p. 311).

Among the traditionalists, kadife is bold girl and the leader of the conservative group. She corroborates with some likeminded men. They kill the director of the institution for banning headscarves. This triggers proclaiming martial law in the country and some leaders are treated very cruelly and some are killed. The task of handling the activists is well done by the military force of Turkey. In this clash between the government and activists, the former has controlled the latter in no time:

Just after the coup had started, Z Demirkol and his cohorts had shot and killed one of the two Kurdish boys they'd caught writing slogans on the walls of Halitpaşa Avenue. After seizing another boy, they'd beaten him until he'd fainted. Then there was the young unemployed boy they'd taken to the religious high school so that he could clean the graffiti off its walls. When he'd tried to escape, they'd shot him in the legs (p. 311).

At this juncture a drama company arrives in Kars under Sunay Zaim to enact a play to show Turkey as a secular country like the West. Sunay wants to whip up the reformist feelings among women so that they can revolt against headscarves which by this time have become the symbol of feminist struggle. As Sheila Dillon observes, "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" (Dillon, 682-83).

Kadife hates Sunay and wants to kill him because he helps the police to arrest Blue, her beloved, another activist of revolution. Sunay invites her to participate in an anti headscarves drama "My Father Land or My Headscarf". Kadife accepts this proposal and is ready to bare her headscarf and show her hair to public. She is ready to change sides and remove her headscarf to the chagrin of the audience. This volte-face of Kadife is a trick to free her beloved Blue, who was in the clutches Sunay.

When Kadife removes her headscarf the whole audience started shouting and looting against her. However, the last best is yet to come. In the last scene Kadife is to shoot Sunay as a finale to the play. She is to use an empty gun in acting out this scene, but in spite of all care Kadife uses real gun and kills Sunay.

Thus, Kadife takes revenge on the people who force discarding headscarves. She has taken revenge of the girls who committed suicide and it is a warning to the Government and supporters of removing headscarves. It may be a message to the people who force their will on women in the name of modernity or in the name of religion.

The title *Snow* represents a city cut off from the outside world. Thus snow is a symbol of isolation the religious symbol of Muslim. Headscarf isolates woman from the modern world. Pamuk takes this title from Turkish play by Cevat Fehmi (Baskurt) *Before the Ice Melt*. He uses the metaphor of snow for more than one meaning. In all his endeavors woman is at the centre of the affairs. What happens outside happens first to the woman. Snow represents freezing fear which sucks energy and drags.

Secondly, snow is a metaphor for the religious deficiency in the Post-Ataturk Turkish society should change from a secular society into liberal secular society. Liberal secularism does not come in the way of what an individual should wear what he should eat, which God he should worship. Women's dress with veil or headscarf cannot become a state issue.

Thirdly, in *Snow*, the State Intelligence Agency (MIT) keeps very strict watch on people. For instance, the reader is informed that,

They had the files on everyone in the whole city and employed a tenth of the population as informers (197) and thanks to various informers, all those who'd been saying ugly things about the soldiers and the actors and spreading groundless rumors about them in the city's teahouses had been rounded up (Pamuk, *Snow* 311).

Every tenth man in the country is the informer. Young women are watched whether they marry or elope with revolutionary men.

Next, *Snow* points at a sad point history which modern Turkish would like to forget. The blood chilling holocaust between the Armenians and Turkish people left the country with unemployment, poverty; high suicide rate among young men and women; youth lost the will to button up their stained only jackets.

One more thought of Pamuk that appeals to his readers is he upholds Westernization but with a rider. Orhan Pamuk means to suggest that the effort to westernize traditional society has hardly done more damage and a little good. The pain and agony felt by Pamuk on the mimicry of Westernization can be seen here, "I am not mourning the Ottoman Empire I am a Westernizer..... They (Turkish elites) lacked the confidence necessary to create a national culture rich in its own symbols and rituals" (Pamuk, *Other Colors* 369).

I would like to express my views differently. Mere headscarf is made to be a potent instrument of freedom struggle of women, does not hold much water. The holy Koran does not see veil, naquab etc as a contentious issue. It is a dress item. Secondly, is the Turkish society so naive to make the headscarf issue such a national debate? Instead the role of Turkish woman in the new social and religious dispensation after the East-West accommodation and liberal secularism is much more important issue hold national debate. In my opinion headscarf or no headscarf cannot stir a national debate.

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