

THE HEADSCARF ISSUE AND ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN ORHAN PAMUK'S *SNOW*

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled “The Headscarf Issue and Islamic Feminism in Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow*” shall attempt to explore and interpret Orhan Pamuk as Turkey’s most renowned and controversial writer who boldly expresses his voice regarding the socio-political reality of Turkish history with special reference to the novel *Snow* as an intriguing representation of Islamic Feminism. In *Snow*, the way the ‘headscarf girls’ resists against the government’s banning of wearing headscarves without even taking their consent which result in suicides of young girls are instances of the oppression and restraints put upon women’s rights to choose their way of life within patriarchal and religious realms. The notion of art and theatre as symbols of women’s road to freedom also plays a significant role in the novel. Hence, *Snow* is a microcosm of Turkey, its society, its politics and its Ottoman culture, caught between the East-West dichotomies and people struggling to find sense of one’s identity and belongingness. By engaging such concerns, Orhan Pamuk deconstructs the binaries of gender and emphasizes upon the unifying position of both East and West as metaphorical means for positive development and equality of all genders and between nations. The paper attempts to negotiate the way Orhan Pamuk debunks the Western misconception of Islamic women as mere victims of patriarchal fundamentalism that denies emancipatory modes of Western feminism but rather as being rebellious by committing suicides or participating in art and theatre as the most liberating means of exercising their individual will fearlessly against the so-called power structures.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, headscarf girls, identity, belongingness, binaries, debunks, patriarchal fundamentalism, power

1) INTRODUCTION

Orhan Pamuk, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, 2006 is today one of the world’s leading literary figures from Turkey who is widely read due to his eccentric style of intermingling the past and present of his own homeland. For him, literature serves as the greatest tool of understanding humanity and that the art of the novel makes people grow intellectually and emotionally through the negotiation of realities as represented by the fictional world. Pamuk asserts in his non-fiction *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* that “The beauty of storytelling through novels carries a “very democratic kind of hope.” (Pamuk, 2011, p. 27) “It indicates a desire to escape the logic of the single-centered Cartesian world where the body and mind, logic and imagination, are placed in

opposition. Novels are unique structures that allow us to keep contradictory thoughts in our mind without uneasiness, and to understand differing points of view simultaneously.” (Pamuk, 2011, p. 33).

Orhan Pamuk’s works are filled with captivating descriptions of the Ottoman era and its fall, its rich cultural and historical heritage, the formation of the Republic and its East-West encounter, the cosmopolitan growth and its conflict between traditional religious fundamentalists and the European imitating secular nationalists. Within such concerns, the novel *Snow* published in 2004 also captures one of the most important themes of the headscarf issue which speaks of Islamic feminism in Turkey through which Pamuk attempts to give voice to the marginalized identity of Turkish women by debunking the so-called myth of patriarchy exercised by the fundamentalists and nationalists.

His works despite being exposed to controversies by his natives have successfully served as a ground-breaking canon of the Turkish literary tradition by striving for a progressive approach towards tradition, religion, modernity, westernization and nationalism. Pamuk interprets the most complex question of Turkish people’s authentic Islamic identity through his creation of Islamic narrative. In this paper, the central point of argument is how Pamuk highlights particularly the notion of Muslim women’s identity within the dual image of Turkey and how they have to constantly struggle for their sense of individuality to achieve freedom and empowerment against the religious traditionalists and secular fundamentalists by questioning about the banning of headscarf as violation of their personal rights.

2) DISCUSSION

We know that feminism as a movement challenges the gendered binary perspectives within patriarchal structure and attempts to achieve equality and fluidity between the sexes by deconstructing and reconstituting the fixed forms of the self and other dichotomy as performative and inappropriate to one’s identity formation. The concept of otherness rendered upon women by culture and civilization are the roots of all forms of gender discrimination and categorization. When it comes to Muslim’s women’s demand for identity and rights, 1990 was its emerging period and movements like Islamic feminism gained popularity.

“In Turkey during the early 1990s the issue of women's head covering acquired politicized momentum, along with a concomitant polarization between secular groups, organized around the cult of Kemal Ataturk, and Islamists.” (Kadioğlu, 1994, p. 645)“Colonial feminist and native Orientalist-Kemalist discourses have placed an unwarranted significance on the modern outlook of women. In so doing, they have shifted the argument away from universal feminist claims regarding public and private role dichotomies. The Kemalist discourse, furthermore, created an image of women who were burdened with the difficult task of maintaining a balance between being too traditional or being unchaste-too modern and promiscuous like Western women.⁵ Women's modes of public visibility became the focus of major political controversies in the aftermath of the Kemalist reforms. The political Islamic discourse began partaking in these debates in the 1980s. The new Islamic women voiced grievances regarding the double burden placed on modern Kemalist women who successfully managed the home and a career. Their claims seemed to intersect with some feminist points.” (Kadioğlu, 1994, p.647)

Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow* is exceptional in a sense that women are not seen as weak and helpless but are rather recreated as much more powerful and independent and not just mere silent submitters to patriarchal subjugation. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters written about her visit to Turkey also give an alternative view to similar notion that Pamuk portrays in his novel. “Montagu's letters

will show that they neither reproduce nor simply complicate the eurocentrism and authoritarianism of Said's model but replace it by representing moments of cultural confrontation in which self and Other do not remain fixed in polarized positions but are rewritten through discursive and social interaction.”(Kietzman, 1998, p.538)The only difference between the two is that Montagu herself recounts her experiences from the perspective of a western outsider and Pamuk is an insider who assumes the dual role of being an outsider as well to be able to delve deep into the realities from a broader perspective. Montagu's Turkish embassy letters debunks the stereotypical Western myths of the Eastern women's identity. Her role as an observer and a viewer offers interesting insights into diverse social truths. “Although the letter has been read repeatedly as an emblem of Montagu's orientaling gaze, which reinscribes the absolute difference between western viewer and exoticized Others, Montagu does not Other the women by making them stand for generalized Oriental humanity or for the disjunction between eastern and western cultures. Instead, she represents an encounter in which all participants collaborate to construct their subjectivities in relation to the Other not by denying difference but by articulating and exploring it.” (Kietzman, 1998, p. 538)

Turkey's occupies a unique position amongst the Islamic nations due to its secular nature and when it comes to feminist movement, the issues behind their revolt are also different. But nevertheless, patriarchy is inherent everywhere throughout the world and women have always been the worst victims of its prejudiced practices by being treated as secondary beings. In Turkey, during the Ottoman rule, polygamy was commonly evident as one of the examples of violating women's rights without their consent. Women throughout history, not only Turkey but everywhere have been oppressed and subjugated because of which feminist movement emerged as the necessary means to challenge such practices to gain respect and recognition. In Turkey, it is only during 1926 during the time of coming of the modern, secular Republic rule under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk that the Islamic Law or the Sharia Law was abolished. However, despite granting different legal rights like citizenship rights, educational rights, abolition of polygamy to women under the secular government, they were still relegated the secondary status in terms of political matters. Amidst such concerns, the state began to interfere in their personal lives and their right to choose an attire according to their will which soon became a national issue for the Islamic feminists. Hence, critics and feminists questioned the secular government who in the name of exercising democracy for the natives attempted to dictate women and restrain them from realizing the ultimate freedom to choose their way of life according to one's own self. Hence, critical native writers like Orhan Pamuk addresses these feminist concerns in his works and argue how there is an urgent need to redefine the reform policies of 1920s and 30s which left the established patriarchal norms unquestioned and unchanged. In the modernizing mission of Turkey, we thus need to probe into such gender centered approaches to ensure that everyone gets equal amount of representation in its new progressive culture.

The secular government in 1982 imposed a complete ban on women's headscarf in the educational institutes and other public places which evoked serious protests amongst women groups as they regarded this move as intervention of their basic human rights. The Turkish Muslim women student organizations and Islamic feminists raised this headscarf issue at both the national and the international level and approached the Turkish Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights. But their claims were discarded as an indispensable step taken by the secular government to ensure the democratic set up of the country from the realms of Islamic fundamentalism. This response deepened the growing gulf between the secularists and the religious fundamentalists. It is during this period that the feminists considered headscarf or the veil as the prominent symbol of defining the sense of Turkishness and women's liberation. “The discourse of colonial feminism viewed Islam as innately oppressive to women. The veil and seclusion symbolized

that oppression as well as the backwardness of Islam. Veiled women came to be viewed as obstacles on the road to civilization. Hence, the modernization project that colonialism purported to export made the veil an open target of attack. As a result, the issue of women came to occupy a central place in the colonial narrative of Islam. This Orientalist narrative of Islam was being reproduced simultaneously within Muslim societies.” (Kadioğlu, 1994, p.651)

In the novel *Snow* (2004), the headscarf controversy forms the most important issue in the novel. “Snow works to allegorize Turkey by looking closely at the headscarf issue as the keystone of the struggle between the Islamists fighting for governmental control and the secularists clinging desperately to the idea of defeating a theocracy. If Snow is telling the national story of Turkey, it says that the Turkish women whom we see in the streets protesting against candidates are not really being heard. If they cannot speak for what they want, they may be doomed to a fate similar to that of the women in the novel. Snow presents parables of women entrapped in this struggle between a secular state and religious groups, and uses them as models of women's lack of agency to create their own form of resistance without eliminating themselves from the system through suicide.” (Clemens, 2011, p. 139-140)

The poet protagonist Ka visits Kars after twelve years of political exile in Germany to write a report on the headscarf issue and the girls who committed suicide against this headscarf struggle. The headscarf for one group of women symbolizes their right to associate with religious faith and for some others mark a kind of protest against the nationalist state and its rigid policies. Female characters like Teslime and Hande commit suicide because they feel forcefully pressurized by their family and the state to remove headscarf and end up committing suicides as signs of resistance against such impositions. “These girls of the novel create a community of women sharing the same suffering; all are resigned to the knowledge that they are caught in a construction of gender formed at the present historical moment by two warring ideologies, and that nothing will change in this conflict. They do not copy or emulate one another; instead, they offer different ways of resisting these two constructs. In the end, women can only create a community in a private way by eventually killing themselves and taking any communal agency along with them. None of these women has the opportunity or even the time for private reflection or public organizing, so they view suicide as their only viable option for self-expression.” (Clemens, 2011, p.145)

Kadife, the female protagonist represents Islamic feminist ideology and boldly wears the headscarf as a mark of protest to refuse their religious rights and becomes the leader of the group called the ‘headscarf girls’. Ipek, Kadife’s sister and her friend Hande never wears headscarf but is supportive of the feminist stance of those who wear it. Sunny Zaim’s wife, Funda Eser who is a belly dancer and theatre actress by profession is also against the headscarf ban. In this novel, Pamuk argues how in the name of modernization and cosmopolitanism, the secularists exercise dominating control over the natives who reject to uphold certain ideals being imposed. Even though the Western influence is strongly visible upon many of the natives including women, many of them also feel their own freedom being threatened. “When the authorities had outlawed the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions across the country, many women and girls refused to comply.” (Pamuk, 2014, p. 16) Many decided to continue wearing their headscarf while some others feeling confused and violated, committed suicide to free oneself from such evil means and symbolize a sense of faith, honour and pride over their own will by giving up the artificial world. As Kadife claims, “A woman doesn’t commit suicide because she’s lost her pride; she does it to show her pride.” (Pamuk, 2004, p.405)

Throughout the novel, Kadife is the only woman who constantly portrays strong feminist concerns and refuses to be a mere shadow of anyone including her own lover, Blue. She believes in

maintaining her self-individuality without being defined by anyone's presence and follows her own way of life. She also participates in the theatrical act of recreation of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* by agreeing to play the role of a headscarf girl who pulls out the scarf to be a rebel heroine in the play "My Fatherland or My Scarf" dramatized by Sunny Zaim's company at the National Theatre of Kars. As a theatre woman, Kadife had been playing the role of a helpless, victimized and stereotypical woman for over twenty years but Funda Eser, another theatre woman influences her to evolve from such gendered theatrical roles by removing headscarf on stage as a revolutionary gesture. Funda Eser tells Kadife, "Let your hair speak for itself, and let the man go mad!" (Pamuk, 2004, p.352) The metaphor of headscarf in the play depicts a woman making "her grand gesture of independence, launching herself into enlightenment as she removed her scarf" (Pamuk, 2004, p.151).

Kadife sets an example of deconstructing and debunking western misconception of Eastern women choosing to wear headscarf as not outdated but rather as equally capable of being modern, independent and religious at the same time. Pamuk thus rejects the notion of defining people's identity by judging the dress and attire of one's own culture. Kadife's representation show how Islamic women can also wear colorful stylish clothes, be outspoken and even have the right to date a man of her own choice. Pamuk nowhere portrays such girls as dull, helpless or tricked by the Islamists but rather as intelligent and emancipated individuals and confronts the prejudiced patriarchal claims that women are in need of a savior to liberate them from the traditional curbs. Funda Eser remarks, "When the angry girl tore the scarf off her head, she was not just making a statement about people, nor about national dress; she was talking about our souls, because the scarf, the fez, the turban and the headdress were all symbols of the reactionary darkness in our souls, from which we should liberate ourselves and run to join the modern nations of the West." (Pamuk, 2004, p.155).

Women in the novel emerge as liberated being by taking up different responsibilities independently. Ipek is the one to look after her father and manage the hotel business and Kadife never gives up on her headscarf protest despite receiving threats. All the female characters in *Snow* are brought together by Pamuk towards their common feminist struggle for freedom of identity and individuality from the chains of traditional, cultural and patriarchal restrictions. The way they successfully overcome their fears over multiple discrimination carried out either in the name of religion or the state offer realistic insights to women of the world. Therefore, it's a kind of collective struggle for justice of every woman. These women characters are also the voice of the Islamic feminists who want to continue with their religious faith wholeheartedly without any external interference. They emerge as powerful Muslim feminist figures within a rigid patriarchal atmosphere and serve as an inspiration for every woman to be fearless enough to reject any kind of authority and exploitation over their inherent rights and by continuing to resist and challenge patriarchal practices until they are finally able to realize a fully egalitarian society which respects and upholds every individual self equally.

3) CONCLUSION

Snow is a powerful feminist narrative that re-writes, recreates and renews fixed notions of women as weak, backward and marginalized by creating empowered, dynamic and unconventional female characters who redefine the Western concept of Muslim woman by being pioneers of change and symbols of courage. *Snow* and other novels by Pamuk received worldwide attention due to his major socio-political concerns relating to the East-West dichotomy but his feminist issues did not achieve much wider recognition which is why there is a need of thorough exploration on this ground as well to come up with newer and broader perspective for further research. It is because the idea of gendered categorization is also the most debating issue that acts as the root of any discriminatory

behavior and hence, constant engagement and negotiations are necessary to end such practices within any culture and society to be able to live together peacefully. Orhan Pamuk's narratives are therefore a ray of hope for Turkish people's misrepresented identities as they wait for "a hero, someone ready now to make the large sacrifices that would deliver them all from poverty, unemployment, confusion and murder." (Pamuk, 2004, p. 431).

Language always acts as the most powerful weapon to affirm one's strength, capacity and intelligence in the process of knowledge formation and which Orhan Pamuk rightfully explores the same in his narratives by taking the dual role of an insider as well as an outsider to be able to dig into his country's past from a much wider perspective. *Snow* provides the instance of how through literature, one can fill the existing gap of women's space between lived realities and theatrical analysis.

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