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## Unveiling the Veiled: An Islamic Feminist Study of Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*

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### **Abstract:**

Pamuk's works are characterized by a confusion or loss of identity due to a clash between the Eastern and the Western values. His novel titled *Snow* delves deep into the complexities of modern Turkey. The country is torn between the Islamic fundamentalists and the secularists. *Snow* tells the story of Ka, a poet and political refugee, who returns to Turkey after spending more than a decade abroad. He travels to Kars, far in the east, at a time when the city is boiling with many socio-cultural, political and religious issues. One of them is a recent spate of suicides by young girls banned from wearing headscarves to school. While trying to learn more about the suicides, he finds himself drawn into a more significant conflict. The present paper examines how Pamuk portrays the female struggle for identity amidst religious and secular ideologies. It also aims to take into account the concept of Islamic feminism and the question of individual choice and freedom.

**Keywords:** Female struggle, Freedom, Islamic Feminism, Identity, Ideologies.

Ferit Orhan Pamuk, familiarly known as Orhan Pamuk, is a leading Turkish novelist. He is the most widely read, critically acclaimed and one of the most significant authors of this century. His work has sold over thirteen million books in sixty-three languages, making him the country's best-selling writer. Pamuk is the recipient of various Turkish and international literary honours, including the most prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. He is the first Turkish citizen to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. During an interview in February 2005, with the

Swiss publication *Das Magazin*, Pamuk stated that thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in his own country. This statement flared up the anger of his countrymen. A criminal case was registered against the author based on a complaint filed by ultra-nationalist lawyer Kemal Kerinçsiz. Rallies were held to burn his books. He was consequently subjected to a hate campaign that forced him to flee the country. The charges against him were dropped, in January 2006. Later in an interview with *BBC News*, he said that he intended to defend freedom of speech, and it was Turkey's only hope for coming to terms with its history. In 2006, the *Time* magazine listed Orhan Pamuk in the cover article "TIME 100: The People Who Shape Our World" in the category "Heroes & Pioneers" for speaking up.

The literary output of Pamuk comprises of novels, memoirs and essays viz., *The White Castle* (1990), *The Black Book* (1994), *The New Life* (1997), *My Name is Red* (2001), *Snow* (2004), *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2006), *Other Colors* (2008), *The Museum of Innocence* (2009), *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* (2010), *Silent House* (2012), *A Strangeness in My Mind* (2015), *The Red Haired Woman* (2017) and *Nights of Plague* (2022). All these works were originally written in Turkish and later translated into English, and the dates of the translated works are given within brackets. Internationally, Pamuk has attracted an increasingly broad readership, and critics have acknowledged him as the first modern Turkish writer to break away from the popular form of pastoral novels set in rural Turkey. He is praised for incorporating unusual and postmodern literary techniques and a unique narrative voice in his novels. For him, literature functions as the most significant tool to understand humanity. In his non-fiction, *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*, Pamuk claims how the beauty of storytelling through novels carries a "very democratic kind of hope" (27).

Feminism mainly focuses on women's experiences and unequal treatment in patriarchal society. Feminist theory highlights the marginalization of women based on gender. Applying feminist theories and methods to religion is unavoidable "...because religious institutions influence individual's temporal attitudes and practices while impacting the expression of transcendental beliefs, either individually or in a community" (Ribeiro7). Ursula King opines that religion extends beyond the cultural dimension and influences the construction of "reality - all reality, including that of gender - and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human" (4). Umm Yasmin of the Centre for Muslim Minorities and Islam says that feminism is

often mistaken as a western movement, but Muslim feminists have been active since the early nineteenth century. Islamic feminists interpret the religious texts in a feminist perspective. Their arguments are grounded in Islam and its teachings. They emphasize the teachings of equality in the Qur'an and question the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching. They ask for gender equality and justice in the personal and public sphere, "Islamic feminists or Muslim scholar-activists engage feminism within their Islamic identities and analytical framework to embark on the struggle of gender jihad in order to foster gender justice and equality within the community of believers. Gender justice and the aim for equality is a fundamental component of Islamic feminism" (Ribeiro 7-8). Margot Badran, in her book *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, states that Islamic feminism "is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm... which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence" (242). The modern movement of Islamic feminism began in the nineteenth century. Fatema Mernissi, Moroccan writer and sociologist, is widely recognized as the founder of modern Islamic feminism. Following her lead, there have been others like Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. These prominent Islamic feminists have made indelible marks on the discourse surrounding women's rights in Islam. Through their scholarship, activism, and personal experiences, they have challenged the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic texts, and has advocated for a more just and equitable understanding of gender within the framework of Islam.

The Iranian poet Tahirih was the first modern woman to undertake Qur'anic exegesis, followed by Aisha Abd al-Rahman. "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 645). Over the last decade hijab has gained more prominence in countries where wearing it is not enforced by the law. Once the veil or the hijab represented the oppression of women, but now it is seen as a symbol of pride in religion, femininity and cultural identity. Modern Muslim feminists consider that a woman's freedom of choice is important. She should be able to define her dress code. It has to be her choice whether to wear the hijab or not, and she should not feel threatened to exercise her will. Amongst the Islamic countries Turkey occupies a unique position as it is a secular nation, but patriarchy is inherent everywhere. It was in 1926, during secular Republic

rule under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, that the Islamic Law (Sharia) was abolished. Despite granting various legal rights to women, they were still treated as secondary beings in terms of political matters. In 1982 the secular government of Turkey imposed a ban on wearing a headscarf in the educational institutions and other public places. Serious protests were held and the headscarf issue was raised at the national and the international level, but all in vain. This deepened the gulf between the religious fundamentalists and the secularists. This was the time when Turkey witnessed the emergence of a new feminism, and various women's movements began in the country. During this period, the feminists started considering headscarf as a symbol of Turkishness and women's emancipation. The novel *Snow* captures this headscarf controversy about Islamic feminism in Turkey. "*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 139-140).

*Snow* tells the story of Ka, a poet and political refugee, who returns to Turkey after living more than a decade abroad. He travels to Kars, far in the east, to write about the forthcoming municipal elections and a recent spate of suicides by young, educated girls. Ka also hopes to meet Ipek, his old classmate and love, who is now separated from her husband. He is respected there as a poet but presumed to be polluted by Western thought, therefore he is seen with both interest and suspicion. The apparent reason for the suicide is the banning of the headscarves in educational institutions. Sheila Dillon while connecting the novel with the contemporary world says, "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). Through the novel, Pamuk presents the grim social and political realities of his country and tries to give voice to the marginalized identity of Turkish women. The present paper examines how Pamuk portrays the conflict between the religious and the secular ideologies. "This seventh novel from the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk is not only an engrossing feat of tale-spinning, but essential reading for our times" (n.pag.), said the Canadian author Margaret Atwood in *The New York Times*. Pamuk highlights the concept of Muslim women's identity, within a nation torn between tradition and modernization, and the struggle these women have to undergo to express their individuality. Banning of headscarves raises questions on violation of

their rights and freedom. The emphasis is given on the female struggle between these ideologies, and against the masculine authority to define their identities. The female students are subjected to double-discrimination, based on their gender as well as their religious identity.

By the time, Ka arrives in the city of Kars the problem of suicide among young girls had spread like an epidemic. This issue further intensified the clash between Islamic fundamentalists and secularists. “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’” (Pamuk 14). However, the Director of the educational institute is murdered by the young religious fundamentalists under the instructions of their leader, Blue. The city is about to witness a municipal election, and the focal point of the election is the suicide issue. Ka tries to comprehend the whole situation and questions his old classmate and love, Ipek, “Why is everyone in this city committing suicide?” (35) The reply validates the exploitation in the name of religion, “It’s not everyone who’s committing suicide, it’s just girls and women.... The men give themselves to religion, and the women kill themselves.” (35) Ipek sums up the plight of the people living in that city. Men resort to violence, which is suicidal, and women chooses to end their lives by committing suicide. Blue represents religious fundamentalists in the novel. He is a terrorist and even army is scared of him. Later he is killed in a military raid. Ka is a confused man trapped between atheism and religious beliefs. He admits to Sheikh Saadettin, “I want to believe in the God you believe in and be like you, but, because there is a Westerner inside me, my mind is confused” (100). The theatre activist Sunay Zaim and his wife Funda Eser advocate the principles of Kemalism. They use theatre to propagate the ideas of secularism. They produce a play in which Funda Eser unveils herself to proclaim female independence. It leads to a military coup, and Sunay gains power. Many young protesting voices are silenced forever, including Necip.

Kadife, the younger sister of Ipek, is highly emotional towards the burning issues in the city of Kars. She condemns the stupid reforms that were implemented in the name of modernity. Once she was a fashionable model, but now she is an undeclared leader of the headscarf girls and protects the interests of Islamists in the city. She tells Ka, “The Holy Koran is the Word of God, and when God makes a clear and definite command, it’s not a matter for ordinary mortals to question.... But do not assume from this that our religion leaves no room for discussion. I will

say that I'm not prepared to discuss my faith with an atheist - or even a secularist. I beg your pardon." (114) Kadife is a well-educated, strong-willed and courageous girl. She came to that city for her studies and as her sister Ipek was living there. Though she falls in love with Blue, a pro-Islamic nationalist, she remains strongly feminist in her opinions. Initially, she disdains the headscarf girls who defy the orders of the state, but finally comes forward to support them. She wears a headscarf for the first time to protest against the state's interference in individual freedom and thus becomes the leader of the headscarf girls. She admits to Ka that she had put on a headscarf one day just to make a political statement:

I'm certain that I intended it to last for only one day: it was one of those "revolutionary gestures" that you laugh about years later, when you're remembering the good old days when you were political. But the state, the police and the local press came down on me so hard that I could scarcely think of it as a joke any more - and also I had painted myself into a corner and I couldn't get out. They arrested us - the excuse was that we had staged a demonstration without a permit. But when they released us the next day, if I had said, "Forget the veil! I never really meant it anyway!" the whole of Kars would have spat in my face. Now I've come to see that God put me through all this suffering to help me find the true path. (116)

When Teslime witnessed that some of her friends are forgoing their headscarves, "the girl began to tell her father that life had no meaning and that she no longer wanted to live" (17). No one thought that such a religious girl could ever think of hanging herself. However, she commits suicide. Thus by rejecting state imposed laicism, she expresses her identity as a free person. Similarly, Hande, a friend of Kadife, constitutes her identity as a headscarf girl and removing it is a betrayal for her. She clarifies to Ka that she cannot imagine herself without a headscarf. Therefore, she is not ready to discard it. She says:

If I could close my eyes just once and imagine myself going bare-headed through the doors of the school, walking down the corridor, and going into class, I'd find the strength to go through with this, and then, God willing, I'd be free. I would have removed the headscarf of my own free will, and not because the police have forced me. But for now I just can't concentrate, I just can't bring myself to imagine that moment.' (125)

For his second play, Sunay Zaim is able to manage Kadife to perform the role of a woman who uncovers her head on stage. Although Blue disapproves of Kadife's decision to remove her headscarf. He even sends a message to Kadife, through Ka, to stop her from doing this act. But Kadife refuses to follow the dictates of her lover. She very firmly tells Ka, "Yes, I'm staying here and I'm doing the play" (379). In the last scene, she pulls the trigger and kills Sunay on the stage (though as per his desire). Thus, neither Blue, the representative of Islamist Ideology, nor Sunay Zaim, the representative of secularist Ideology, are successful in controlling Kadife's body. "Ironically, the perpetrators of violence and communal clashes also fall prey to their own violence by the end of the novel" (Muhammed 181). Thus, this novel may be read as a warning to the people who force their ideology on women either in the name of modernity or tradition or religion.

Pamuk has very effectively portrayed the conflict between religious and secular ideologies in Turkey. He addresses significant contemporary issues having global significance. Various countries, including India, have witnessed similar struggles in the recent past. The female characters in the novel are independent and powerful individuals. "Kadife, the female protagonist represents Islamic feminist ideology and boldly wears the headscarf as a mark of protest to refuse their religious rights and become the leader of the group called the 'headscarf girls'" (Devi 4). She portrays serious feminist concerns and maintains her individuality. She deconstructs the western misconception regarding headscarf as a symbol of patriarchy and backwardness. She rather displays it as a symbol of independent, modern and religious Muslim women. Ipek does not wear the headscarf but supports all women who wear it. Hande identifies herself as a headscarf girl, and never removes her headscarf. Teslime commits suicide in order to express her identity when she is not allowed to wear headscarf by the rules of the state.

*Snow* undoubtedly explores how patriarchal society tries to control female individuals and try to frame their identities. Kadife rightly claims, "Because, here in our city, men don't fear their women's intelligence; they fear their independence" (Pamuk 409). It also raises questions on individual choice and freedom. It is up to a woman to decide what she chooses to wear on her head. Neither the secularists nor the Islamists should dictate what she should do with her body. The author emphasizes the fact that imposing any kind of ideology by force creates turmoil. Instead, celebrating multiplicity of identities and accepting differences will create goodwill in



any society. Pamuk also debunks the stereotypical Western myths of the Eastern women's identity, as meek and backward, by creating strong female characters. "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 Turkish women by being pioneers of change and symbols of courage" (Devi 4). The novel opens up new spaces for Islamic feminism that represents a dynamic and evolving approach to gender equality, seeking to harmonize faith and feminism. As it continues to grow, Islamic feminism holds the potential to transform not only the lives of Muslim women but also the broader discourse on feminism and religion in the modern world.

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