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## **The Politics of Gender: A Postmodern Reading of Women in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the role of women in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*. Societies throughout history have developed stereotyped constructs of gender, with prescribed roles for men and women. The advent of postmodernism has challenged these traditional gender roles. Pamuk's novels, set in Turkey, depict women who embody an amalgamation of modernity and age-old categorisation. In *Snow*, Pamuk presents the female characters Ipek and Kadife as well-read intellectuals who undergo ideological transformations. This analysis explores the complex symbol of woman and femininity in the novel. Through a gender studies lens, the paper investigates the tension between past and present gender roles and considers how literature can help overcome narrow, restrictive mindsets.

**Keywords:** Gender, Stereotype, Society, Feminism, Postmodernism.

### **I. Introduction**

Ferit Orhan Pamuk (born 7 June 1952) is a Turkish author, screenwriter, scholar, and Nobel Laureate in literature. Pamuk is considered one of Turkey's most popular writers, almost thirteen million books have been sold in sixty-three languages, making him the country's best-selling author. Pamuk is the author of several books, including *Silent House*, *The White Castle*, *The Black Book*, *The New Life*, *My Name Is Red*, *Snow*, *The Museum of Innocence*, *A Strangeness in My Mind*, and *The Red-Haired Woman*. At Columbia University, he is the Robert Yik-Fong Tam Professor of Humanities, where he teaches writing and comparative literature. In 2018, he was elected to the American Philosophical Society. Pamuk, who is of Circassian heritage and was born in Istanbul, is the first Turkish Nobel laureate. He has also received a slew of other literary honours. *My Name Is Red* earned the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in 2002, the Premio Grinzane Cavour in 2002, and the International Dublin Literary Award in 2003. Pamuk received several critical awards for his early work, including the Madarali Novel Prize in 1984 for his second novel, *Sessiz Ev* (*Silent House*), and the Prix de la Découverte Européenne in 1991 for the translation of this novel into the French language. His

historical work *Beyaz Kale (The White Castle)*, published in Turkish in 1985, won the 1990 Independent Award for Foreign Fiction and increased his popularity internationally. "A new star has risen in the east—Orhan Pamuk," The New York Times Book Review remarked on May 19, 1991. He began experimenting with postmodern approaches in his books, a departure from the pure naturalism of his earlier works.

Feminism involves several social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophy. Postmodern feminist believes that if universal truth is applied to all women in society, it minimizes individuality. The main focus of the movement is to establish a platform for 'women centered perspective'. The idea of dividing the world into two worlds is against human nature. This led to the advent of several feminist groups which struggled to provide solutions to women's question. The feminist groups could be classified into Liberal, Marxist, radical, psycho-analytic, social, existentialist and post-modernist. However no comprehensive answer to the feminist question couldn't be found till date. But such co-ordination and understanding among them can make feminists achieve their goals, and help them eradicate women's sufferings concretely. According to the liberal feminists, the cause of women's oppression the cause of women's oppression lies deep in traditions and false moral ideologies.

The struggle of women for freedom and equality in Eastern or Islamic countries is even more prominent than in the West. Although many of the significant feminist figures appeared in Western countries and gave rise to the movement, in Islamic Countries, women have always protested against the rigid rules laid by their patriarchal states. Turkey is one of the Islamic countries in which women's roles and places have always been inferior to men's. Although the condition of women in present-day Turkey is improving, and they are trying to define themselves, the history of Turkey reveals that women have suffered a lot and experienced hard times since the previous eras.

An effort has been made to critically analyze postmodernism and feminism in its theory and practice. The present paper aims to represent the role of women characters in Pamuk's novel *Snow*, to bring out its ideological underpinnings and the author's projection of his women characters who undergo changes through different situations. Pamuk's novel is based on the backdrop of Turkey, hence, his female characters symbolise the true colour of Turkish soil. Reflecting an identity rooted in Turkish soil and a mind influenced by the West, his works are primarily characterised by an identity crisis, which apparently results from a conflict of values between the East and the West. Unlike many diasporic authors, Pamuk's imagination is not fed by exile and a lack of belongingness; rather, his nourishment is drawn through roots. The history of every civilisation shows that women have always been subordinated to a position where they have no means to re-claim their unique identity unless and until they re-visit the history, explore it and finally re-establish it through their own experiences and insights. In order to explore their own unique identity, women have to define themselves against the male-informed ideals and beliefs that are passed down from generation to generation. These beliefs have produced a dominant system by creating female subjects who are conditioned to accept the values of the system. It also aims to bring forth Pamuk's take on certain central debates of his own time regarding Islam and secularism and the role of headscarves.

## II. Postmodernism and Gender

Postmodern feminism endorses the diversity, plurality, and difference of things in postmodernism. At the same time, because postmodernism is a critique of traditional thought, it destroys the existing 'Male-centrism' way of thinking. The postmodernism worldview, however, manifests in the second and third waves of feminism from the late sixties onwards. It centres its fights for equality in the private sphere of women's lives, such as on the concept of gender, sexuality and sex. The postmodern notion of gender slowly came to society's

consciousness primarily in the 1980s when gender was acknowledged as representing a complex social system structuring human life experience. To initiate the journey of postmodern feminism, theorists like Judith Butler disagreed with the amalgamation of sex and gender they differ in their view as something that cannot be determined at birth whereas gender is a more fluid, vibrant and ever-flowing expression of one's self. Butler uses the term 'performativity' to describe how gender is created and maintained through repeated acts and behaviors. These acts, like the way we dress, speak, or move are not considered as gender identity but rather constitute that identity. In the novel *Snow* the two female protagonist Ipek and Kadife take two divergent route of dressing whereas Ipek considers head scarf as a sign of oppression whereas Kadife considers headscarf as move towards her establishment of her own identity. The rejection of the dualistic nature of gender and pointing towards the inseparability of the body with societal norms is a postmodern feministic view. Postmodern feminists disagree with the view that all women's oppression are the same. Therefore, the purpose of postmodern feminism influenced by this is to dismantle the existing concept of gender and deconstruct all previous theories of gender relations. According to Ratliff postmodernism feminists are of the view that gender is strictly determined at birth rather than flexibly constructed by culture or language. Hence, rather than using conventional underpinnings of gender that are usually based on biological facts, they generally attempt to deconstruct the gender using culture or language. Subsequently, they always allow multiple gender expressions. Moreover, the theoretical emphasis of postmodernism on plurality and differences has led feminism to value the differences between different individuals, groups, and subject positions. In recent connotations, gender identity has become progressively more independent from sex, and individuals have become ever more able to express their sexuality as they would choose, without negative social or psychological repercussions. This provides the theoretical support for feminism to 'overturn' the traditional gender binary in practice. In this case, the theme of this essay is to discuss the main ideas of postmodern feminism and their concern with gender inequalities and equal rights for women.

### III. Women in *Snow*

Pamuk's novel *Snow* deals with some of the prominent themes of Turkey and the Middle East: the conflict between a secular state and an Islamic government, poverty, unemployment, the veil, the role of a modernizing army, globalization, suicide and yet more suicide. In this novel, Ka, the so-called elitist from Germany and also the protagonist, comes to Kars, which is a remote corner of the Anatolia region of Turkey. Ka's character and inner struggle bring up the dialectic of religion and extremism which is echoed throughout Turkey. Ka is a Turkish national however likes European way of living, he unearths the conundrum of fanaticism. After a long exile Ka returns to Kars looking for a story about the girls who have been committing suicides Ka has come to cover municipal elections and the cause of the rising trend of suicidal activities of girls in that region for a paper named *Republican* as offered by his old friend in Istanbul and comes to know that his lost love Ipek is also in Kars and is living in separation from his husband, Muhtar. In the course of the novel, we come across Blue, a handsome terrorist with a beautiful gift of the gab and two young Islamist students, Necip and Fazil. A theatre named *My Fatherland or My Scarf* led by the actor Sunay Zaim, had come to Kars to stage their drama, which in turn unveiled many layers of meaning to the plot. Sunay Zaim, as an actor, reminds us of Stephen of Joyce's *Ulysses*, where he declares, "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church, and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use-silence exile and cunning." According to Edward Said, "The main purpose of the intellectual's activity is to advance human freedom and knowledge. Different dimensions emerge as we delve into the novel. One can interestingly find the characters speaking in the voices of postmodernist feminists.

In *Snow*, a subplot of the matured relationship between Kadife, the sister of Ipek and Blue, an Islamic terrorist, is drawn in between with adequate importance. Kadife, being the leader of the headscarf girls who refuse to give up their right to religion, was forcefully asked to remove her headscarf. They offered Blue freedom in return for her act. Though Blue was released, he altered the deal with the cop and escaped into some secret location with the help of Ka. After numerous attempts by Ka, Ipek agreed to accompany Ka to Germany, but Blue's assassination made her withdraw the plan. Later, the narrator unveils Ka's treachery towards Blue and his hidden role in the murder. Ka returned to Germany alone to spend the rest of his life alone as a dejected man. But four years later, he was assassinated by a Turkish Islamist group while he was walking through the streets of Frankfurt. The representation of the symbol headscarf shows an accurate picture of the socio-political strata of Turkish life. Many girls under the leadership of Kadife stood for their freedom of religion and protested vociferously.

#### **IV. Transformations and Tensions**

Through his writings, Pamuk takes the courage to paint the contemporary situation of Turkey, which is changing politics and postmodern feminist thinking. After twelve years of self-imposed exile in Germany, Ka returns to Turkey. When he learns that a huge number of teenage girls are committing suicide in the little town of Kars, he decides to look into it. Mustafa Kemal Pasha tried to modernise his nation by strictly westernising the female dress code, where he barred women from wearing headscarves, especially in educational institutions.

The novel's protagonist, *Snow* Ka, visits the border city of Kars, an area that is cut off from the rest of Turkey due to heavy snow. Ka poses as a journalist who wants to cover Municipal elections, but basically, he is interested in unearthing the reason for the suicidal tendencies of the young girls in Kars. In the process of getting to know the people, he is quite surprised and happy to know that his beautiful and glamorous college friend Ipek is in Kars, although she is divorced now. Earlier, Ipek was the wife of Muhtar who was the poet friend of Ka. Muhtar Bey, the moderate and inconsistent Islamist, is a convert from communism to Islamism. At the novel's inception, we understand that he has divorced his beautiful wife, Ipek, because, among other things, of her refusal to cover herself. But now, however, he realises that it was a "mistake" on his part "to ask her to cover herself in accordance with the sharia" (p.64). He wants to re-marry her and asks Ka, an old friend from their days at the university together, to convey to Ipek how much he regrets his actions. As Ka intentionally gets friendly with the family of Ipek's family, he gets the opportunity to come across Kadife, who, in the course of the novel, becomes a strong Islamist feminist character. Eventually, Ka is abreast of Kadife, who is a bold girl and the leader of the conservative group.

The novel augurs with the changing situation, which is reflected in the conversation between Ka and Muzaffer Bey, the secularist ex-mayor who visits down memory lane in the late forties when he himself invites troupes to play revolutionary plays, 'This work tells of the awakening of a young girl who has spent her life enveloped in a black scarf', he said. 'In the end she pulls it off and burns it.' In the late forties, they had to search the entire city for a black scarf to use in the play; in the end, they had to phone Erzurum and ask for one to be sent. But now the streets of Kars are filled with women in headscarves of every kind, Muzaffer Bey added" (p.21). As we delve into the novel, we become acquainted with Blue, who is a terrorist and had a love affair with Ipek when she was already married to Muhtar. But in the latest scenario, Blue, who claims to be a true Islamist, is in love with Kadife, Ipek's sister.

In the course of the novel, when Ka, Blue and Kadife are having a conversation, and Ka tells Kadife without much thinking that Kadife should sign on behalf of Muslim feminists' Kadife's reaction is stated below: Ka asks Kadife, 'You could sign as the representative of Muslim feminists' (p. 22). I have no wish to represent anyone', said Kadife. As the play staged by Sunay Zaim was going to be staged by Kadife where she was about to flaunt her hair in

front of audience and few minutes before she came to know that following a tip - off her love Blue was assassinated. She confronts Sunay before going to stage with strength and resolution 'You are very intelligent. Kadife', said Sunay. 'Does this frighten you? Asked Kadife, her voice taut and angry. 'Yes!' said Sunay, with lecherous languor.' It's not my intelligence that frightens you. You fear me because I'm my own person', said Kadife.

'Because, here, in our city, men don't fear their women's intelligence, they fear their independence.' (Snow p, 409). To the contrary', said Sunay. I staged this revolution precisely so that you women could be as independent as Women in Europe. That's why I'm now asking you to remove that scarf'. (Snow p, 410).

'If I'm going to stand up to the Europeans, it will be by my own, to tell my own story-whole story, with all my sins and my foibles" (p.241).

Kadife here resonates with Spivak as she also believes that the underprivileged sections are politically voiceless in any society. They are not mentioned in any written record, and their achievements are not considered necessary. The marginalized section, whether in terms of colonized, subaltern or women in the society, has to speak quite loud in order for themselves to be heard.

## V. Symbolism

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). On the contrary, when the Western world considers the veil as a sign of oppression, some women consider the headscarf as their choice of religious freedom. The state and society should not interfere in between to select their own choices. This thinking is echoed in the words of women of Canada when Katherine Bullock, in her book *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, interviewed women in hijab in Toronto. She stated her findings in the following words: "For the women in my study, however, hijab symbolized neither oppression nor terrorism, but "purity," "modesty," a "woman's Islamic identity," and "obedience, or submission to God and a testament that you're Muslim." They felt peaceful in their hijab and enjoyed wearing it. While concluding her book, she states, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* thus will hopefully serve as an alternative perspective on these debates. My book has been an attempt to present another story of the veil: the story of those, like myself, who find peace and joy in Islam, and who do not believe that Islam suppresses women, or that hijab oppresses them."

However, Terry Eagleton noted in his recent introduction to literary theory that: "It is in the nature of feminist politics that signs and images, written and dramatized experience, should be of special significance. Discourse in all its forms is an obvious concern for feminists, either as places where women's oppression can be deciphered or as places where it can be challenged. In any politics which puts identity and relationship centrally at stake, renewing attention to lived experience and the discourse of the body, culture does not need to argue its way to political relevance." (Eagleton. 2021, P.35) The age-old belief of women, femininity, femaleness, reproduction or sexual roles, or even sexuality itself that are relevant to the whole societies in the world now can be looked at on the basis of constructive criticism that is based on culture, history and reality.

Pamuk's *Snow* is a symbol of isolation, the religious symbol of Muslims as Headscarf isolates women from the modern world. 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 head dress 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.” (p, 155). The title *Snow* represents a city cut off from the outside world. Thus, snow symbolizes isolation, a religious symbol for Muslims. The headscarf isolates women from the modern world.

## VII. Conclusion

By reading Pamuk's *Snow*, it is evident that his heroines clearly understand what they need as individual beings. In this novel however the girls who are covering their heads with the scarf here are endorsing their right to choose their way of dressing or better understood as say their religious preferences which was denied by the State. Ipek has her own mind when she, under the pressure of her husband, refuses to cover her head, ultimately leading to divorce. Through Kadife's lens, her choice of wearing a headscarf is feminism, empowering her as a human being. She challenges the State by not abiding by the so-called 'secularism' where certain rules and regulations are formed in order to become westernized. Women's issues of self –identity and self –consciousness are existing in today's world in different forms worldwide. The patriarchal forces draw a defining line and it is for the feminist forces to stretch it according to time and conventions.

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