

**POLITICIZING FAITH: ISLAM AND SECULARISM IN ORHAN PAMUK'S SNOW**

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**ABSTRACT**

Though, the conflict between Islam and Secularism in Orhan Pamuk's works is a widely explored topic, it remains pertinent, for Religion and Secularism are burning issues in the contemporary scenario. This paper is an attempt to read Pamuk's work *Snow* to bring out its ideological underpinnings. It also aims at bringing forth Pamuk's take on certain central debates of his own time regarding Islam and Secularism. The paper becomes significant when one understands that Pamuk's predicament is of a unique design. On the one hand, because he comes from a wealthy family and from the more Westernized city of Istanbul, Pamuk is seen as a member of the secular elite by the religious groups in Turkey who turn a blind eye to his observations, on the other hand, because of the ways in which he critiques the military, in his immediate surroundings, he is accused of taking sides with the religious groups. In this respect, Pamuk faces accusations from both sides. A critical analysis of *Snow* exemplifies that Pamuk responds to these accusations with a persistent double critique of both militant secularism and politicized Islam. Pamuk suggests that there is a broad range of choice available to re-construct modern Turkish identity, and that one does not need to take sides and align oneself with either one ideology or the other.

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"If Freud tells you that when something is suppressed it comes back in disguise, then my novels are, in fact, that disguise."

—Orhan Pamuk in an interview to Eleanor Wachtel

A conceptualization of literature as an apolitical engagement devoid of any stake in the world, as against an exercise rooted in ideology and committed to power structures with its particular agendas, is antediluvian. Terry Eagleton in *Criticism and Ideology* observes that literary texts are to be understood as "producing" ideologies: "the text is a tissue of meanings, perceptions and responses, which inheres in the first place in that imaginary production of the real which is ideology" (75). A text may appear to be free in its relation to reality but won't be free in its use of ideology, resulting in the production, rather than the reflection of ideology. "Texts are the products of social, cultural and political forces, not solely the creation of an individual author, and so texts reflect and engage with the prevailing values and ideology of their own time" (Brannigan 179). Literature, therefore, becomes an artifice which recreates the consciousness of a/the time. It does not merely reflect what has already come, but rather it foresees what is to come. Once a literary work is put into a social context, it becomes a kind of discourse. Thus, the understanding of the working mechanism of ideology in a novel is of great significance.

This paper is an attempt to read Orhan Pamuk's work *Snow* to bring out its ideological underpinnings. It also aims at bringing forth Pamuk's take on certain central debates of his own time regarding Islam and Secularism.

Though, the conflict between Islam and Secularism in Pamuk's works is a widely explored topic, it remains pertinent, for Islam and Secularism are burning issues in the contemporary scenario. "Political Islam"/ "Islamism" is a global, cultural phenomenon emerged, especially, after the Iranian revolution of 1979. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon in the United States has only sharpened critical attention, academic or otherwise, on Islam. *Jihad*, *Hijab*, and *Sharia* - the terms largely intrinsic to Islam - are no unfamiliar terms to people who pay attention to public or even popular discourse in the present. In

recent times, Islamist politics and the Muslim women's headscarf have assumed centre-stage among most of the debates on Islam.

Pamuk's predicament is of a unique design. On the one hand, because he comes from a wealthy family and from the more Westernized city of Istanbul, Pamuk is seen as a member of the secular elite by the religious groups in Turkey who turn a blind eye to his observations, on the other hand, because of the ways in which he critiques the military, in his immediate surroundings, he is accused of taking sides with the religious groups. In this respect, Pamuk faces accusations from both sides. In return, he responds with a persistent double critique of both militant secularism and politicized Islam. Pamuk suggests that there is a broad range of choice available to re-construct modern Turkish identity, and that one does not need to take sides and align oneself with either one ideology or the other. As Seyhan observes in "Seeing through the *Snow*," Pamuk's work "gives no credence to those who see him as a champion of modern Islam or who condemn him as an agent provocateur against the Kemalist reforms of the Republic" (4).

In other words, Pamuk's works are at war with the way the modern Turkish Republic was set up and flourished.

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" (682-83). The focal point of the contestations regarding the public expressions of Islam in Turkey has largely been about women wearing the headscarf which they or others think is Islamically binding on them and the State constraints on it. Women wearing or removing the headscarf, thus, is loaded with antagonistic significance in the country's political landscape. While the secularists in Turkey always saw in it signs of radical Islam that threatened secular democracy in the country and women's subordination to men, the Islamists viewed it as a religious practice voluntarily chosen by women.



The headscarf is a recurring trope in *Snow*. The novel presents the dilemma of the headscarf girls, Hande and Teslime, who are dismissed from a local educational institution in Kars, in north-eastern Turkey. The text, it appears, upholds the right of the women to wear it. Ka, who plays "the intrepid reporter" (9) is shocked while "listening" to the stories of wretchedness and "poverty" of the people of Kars. "But the suicide stories he heard that day would haunt him for the rest of his life" (13). Ka is puzzled to know that some girls have committed suicide not because of any physical torment or any kind of religious conservatism by their parents or husbands or the problem of money but they did so all of a sudden during the time of their daily work, without any prior warning. It arouses curiosity in Ka to go deep into the heart of the matter through his interviews with the parents of the victims. From the father of one of the "headscarf girls" - Teslime, who committed suicide, Ka comes to know 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. (16, 17)

This observation by the deceased Teslime's father leaves behind enough clues to support the view that the reason behind the death of his daughter is the ban on headscarves in institutions.

Kadife is another interesting character. She is the daughter of a liberal-leftist named Turget Bey and the sister of Ka's love, Ipek. She is introduced as the "the leader of the headscarf girls." At some point in the novel, she tells Ka that it was to make fun of the headscarf girls that she went to see them first. Then she understood the necessity of rebelling against the State which wanted the girls to remove the headscarf, she first wore it to make a "political statement." She then never wants to remove it afterwards because she feared that the whole of Kars would spit on her face for her lack of honesty. Now, in the end, she has "come to see that God put me through all this suffering to help me find the true path" (116). Faith and politics are intertwined in such a manner that it becomes impossible to distinguish one from the other. On meeting Ka for the first time, she avoids shaking hands with him "out of deference to Islamic convention" (112). But after some time in the novel, we see the same Kadife, who does not appear to have any problem in embracing Ka. Later on readers are told that Kadife has been Blue's mistress for quite some time. Even her sister Ipek claims that Kadife had actually been eying Blue even when her sister was in love with him. Thus, her role of being the leader of the headscarf girls becomes ironic. Her headscarf, it appears, is only a costume for being a suitable lover for Blue, the "militant Islamist" (319).

The reader may be forced to conclude that her sentimental advances towards Blue, even as she speaks of the headscarf as the word of God and as an emblem of faith, contradict the very meaning of this piece of cloth. Kadife, a woman who is so virtuous in public that she does not bare her head even at home before her father, despites the Islamic allowance that one can remove one's headscarf among blood relations with whom marriage is forbidden. She is not worried about the nuances of the practice of donning the headscarf perhaps because she has been blinded by political Islam.

Muhtar Bey, the moderate and inconsistent Islamist, is a convert from communism to Islamism. His first port of call, however, was Sufism before his eventual disillusionment with it. When the novel



begins, we understand that he has divorced his beautiful wife Ipek because, among other things, of her refusal to cover herself. But now however, he realizes that it was a “mistake” form in his part “to ask her to cover herself in accordance with the sharia” (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. He does not mind that even though he is the district head of the Prosperity Party, it would cause him political difficulties if his wife is not covered since he also knows that he is “going to win the election in four days’ time and become the mayor” ( 64). He tells Ka: “Tell her I am through acting like a jealous provincial husband; that I’m ashamed and sorry for the pressures I put her under during our marriage” (64). The dubious design of the prospective mayor’s unfolds itself at this juncture. What is important is not the headscarf or the values attached to it, but the political brownie points one can squeeze out of it. Otherwise how does the headscarf, which led to the disintegration of their relationship, become no issue days before his almost sure win in the election?

On the other hand, there is the Kemalist artist Sunay Zaim who tells Kadife, “the leader of the head-scarf girls,” (346) when she bares her hair on stage: “Your hair is so beautiful, Kadife. Even I would certainly want to guard you [like the Islamists or other religiously observant Muslims] jealously to keep other men from seeing it” (412). Strikingly enough, both the Islamist Muhtar and the Kemalist artist Sunay Zaim in their insistence that their women should wear the headscarf, share a common denominator in terms of their view of the headscarf. Both men regard it as a shield which men make use of in order to jealously guard their “property” from other men. Here the women’s head scarf becomes a mere product of patriarchal agendas, a shield to guard man’s “property.” As suggested earlier, the text introduces multiple perspectives and offers a space for people holding conflicting views to present their arguments with regard to the headscarf.

In the view of the Director of Education Institute, it is the politicization of the headscarf that makes the whole situation a mess. According to him,

people have turned the headscarf into a political weapon and are making use of women as pawns in a political game. Also, it may have been “politicized so that the foreign powers can turn Turkey into a weak and divided nation” (43). The arguments put forward by the young man who shoots the Director are those that originate from many Islamic circles. As far as he is concerned, the women by covering themselves are making a statement against being harassed. This is the reason, according to him, behind the low number of the incidents of rape and harassment in Muslim countries. He goes on to argue that it is because the State wants the Turkish girls to be the slaves of the West that they are prohibiting the headscarf. He argues that the State contradicts the educational and religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution through this ban. Hence, the novel suggests that the headscarf is now the symbol of political Islam in Turkey. Islamists’ being is in favor of the headscarf which allows their opponents to label it as their symbol. It is not actually the symbol of political Islam; the text, however, says that its proponents and opponents think of it in such a way. “Certainly, it was they who taught her [referred to Teslime, the covered girl, and her friends] to think of the headscarf as a symbol of political Islam” (16).

However, the followers of political Islam have not encouraged this outbreak as committing suicide is forbidden in Islam. In order to overcome the problem of suicide by headscarf girls, the government has taken a number of steps. 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” (113-14). But all these measures prove futile. With the increase in the number of deaths as a result of suicide epidemic, the followers of political Islam become more and more furious. Initially, they try to come out from that crisis desperately by demanding from the government the withdrawal of the ban on headscarves from the religious institutions. Finding no positive response, there occur a number of anti-Atatürk 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” (311).

The most heinous of all the anti-Atatürk activities that occurs is the assassination of the local Director of the Institute of Education at the New Life Pastry Shop. The assailant was none other than Blue, a radical Islamist. However, to the surprise of the Islamists, they hardly derive any benefits from their anti-Atatürk activities. Contrarily, their activities go against their own fate as the government is not ready to tolerate their protests. The task of handling the Islamists is well done by the military force of Turkey. Hence, the text blames the Islamists for worsening the headscarf issue. In other words, the Islamists are exploiting religion in order to settle political scores. Despite the long rhetoric of the youth who murdered the Director of the Institute of Education and the claims of the women themselves— such as Kadife on the ethical dimensions and the dimensions of faith on the headscarf issue— one does not come across a single woman in the novel who covers herself on such grounds. In other words, the novel appears to say that Muslim women in Turkey do not need the headscarf on grounds of devoutness. To put it differently, the text appears to say that the headscarf is not the religious responsibility of the Muslim women, rather, the political responsibility of the Islamists. They are the ones who badly need it and have turned it into their very symbol. The Islamists appropriated it for their own political benefits. Moreover, in Pamuk's view, women and minorities are the ones at the receiving end of political Islam. In an interview with Jorg Lau, Pamuk answers a question on what sparked the controversy about *Snow*:

Some of my secular readers were furious that I showed so much empathy towards a young girl who wears a headscarf of her own free will. I can understand that, especially when it comes from women. Women are the hardest hit by political Islam. (4)

Pamuk is completely at ease with Islam as a privatized religion. Responding to a question about the American media's vilification of Islam, Pamuk says: “Intellectual Americans should be able to make a distinction between political Islam, fundamental Islam and Islam as a religion like Christianity, which essentially is not different from Christianity” (Skafidas 27). As a fervent liberal secularist, Pamuk obviously has issues with public expressions of Islam. In *Snow*, the central protagonist Ka presents a similar argument to Muhtar Bey, the candidate of the Islamist party for the upcoming municipal elections.

I know I'm not going to be one, but say I did become the sort of believer who prays five times a day. Why would that disturb you? Perhaps because you can embrace your religion and your community only if godless secularists like me are overseeing business and government affairs. A man cannot pray to his heart's content in this country, because he depends on the efficiency of the atheist who's an expert at managing the West and the other aspects of worldly business. (61)

Here, one can see Pamuk setting up Ka to emphasize the divide between the private and the public with the latter as a domain where secular ideals are supposed to prevail, to be handed over exclusively to the secularists because they are the ones who are experts at managing worldly affairs. Ka says that the Islamists are able to fulfill their religious demands just because the secularists are taking care of the public domain. To put it differently, if the Islamists begin to get involved in public affairs, they may not be able to “embrace religion and community” the way they wish to. It is better for them, therefore, to confine themselves to their private sphere of religion and community. By foregrounding the efficiency of the secularists in managing the public domain, the above piece of the secularist rhetoric also suggests that the Islamists are not experts in the same or that they cannot effectively handle the affairs of both the private and the public simultaneously. Pamuk has leveled a series of critiques against political Islam. Pamuk spells out that an “Islamist Islam” is



something which has much less to do with (pure) Islam. Pamuk does not elucidate his statement that political Islam has much less to do with Islam than is commonly thought. Neither does he tell us what else it has to deal with. Pamuk's Islamist can become one only if he is half-utilitarian and half-rationalist. It is such an Islamist who resurfaces in the imagination of a liberal secularist like Ka as being driven by a lust for power. This suggests that there is no way in which one may feel obliged to take up issues in the public sphere, merely because of the demands of one's religious faith. The point appears to be this also: the faithful, cannot effectively handle the demands of attending to matters of the public sphere because they are supposed to be burdened by the demands of a private religious sphere too.

*Snow* throws a great deal of light on the way the State's secular nationalist ideology legitimizes itself through artistic apparatuses. At the beginning of the novel, Muzaffer Bey, the secularist ex-mayor, commemorates with pride the details of a play titled *My Fatherland or the Scarf*, which was staged long back in Kars in the later 1940s. It was an anachronistic piece that had tried to rescue the headscarf clad women, to bring from the depths of darkness towards enlightenment. The people backstage had to search the entire town of Kars for a black headscarf to use in the play. In other words, even when it had effectively erased all signs of religiosity from the public sphere as evidenced from the difficulty in procuring a black headscarf, the repressive State mechanisms staged such plays in a visceral fear of the return of the religious. The present-day play being held in the Kars National Theatre at the night of the coup in the text is a new version of the earlier play; it is now re-titled *My Fatherland or My Headscarf*. The play's very title hints at the message it seeks to make: either one pulls off one's headscarf and be a loyal citizen of the fatherland, or put it on and be ready to face the disciplinary State apparatuses: which shows that the secularization project of Turkey was forceful in all its varied ways. Also, the State mechanisms in Kars are ever vigilant about crushing all artistic productions except the ones that remain in service of its official

ideology. There are references to a ban on Kurdish music: "the city's cultural director, whose main job was to seize banned tapes of Kurdish music and send them to Ankara" (152). All left-wing plays have also been outlawed. "When the military took over in 1980, all left-wing plays were banned, and it was not long afterward that it was decided to commission a big new television drama about Atatürk in honor of the hundredth anniversary of his birth" (190). Every "other" cultural production is deemed anti-national.

The text points out that most of the media in the country are under the control of the State. The editor of *The Border City Gazette*, an influential newspaper in Kars, himself says that ninety percent of what they publish is received from the Office of the Governor and the Kars Police Headquarters; the police do not allow him to print the "truth."

All over the world, even in America, newspapers tailor the news to their readers' desires. If your readers want nothing but lies from you, who in the world is going to sell papers that tell the truth? If the truth could raise my paper's circulation, why wouldn't I write the truth? Anyway, the police don't let me print the truth either. (302)

In the novel, the State intelligence agency named MIT spearheads the "panoptic" gaze of the State. The MIT has its tentacles spread all over the country, tracing every small counter-move and keeping all dissident groups and their members under constant surveillance. 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" (311). The authorities have employed more than one informer in the headquarters of the Islamist Prosperity Party in Kars and the party leaders' phones are constantly tapped. While the State consistently deals with all moves against Kemalist ideals, it turns a blind eye towards vital issues that "affect" the common people, such as the growing unemployment, poverty and the high suicide rate. A



large number of youth spend their time in teahouses, watching TV, without jobs. Most of them have become depressed to such a degree that they have even “lost the will to button up their stained, oily jackets” (198).

History, as we know from the various ongoing debates from the twentieth century onwards, is a highly contested terrain. *Snow* lays out history as a massive State re-organization of various events and actions concerning marginalized groups and interests. The text refers, for instance, to a museum which commemorates the Armenian massacre of the Turkish people. This museum tells the story of Armenian massacre in a way which caters to the interest of the nationalist history. To quote from the novel: “A section of the same museum commemorated the Armenian massacre. Naturally, she said, some tourists came to learn of a Turkish massacre of Armenians, so it was always a jolt for them to discover that in this museum the story was the other way around” (32). The text offers spaces for understanding the silences, pauses, and gaps that often characterize the documentation of national histories. Thus, the text foregrounds the State’s act of forgetting and getting its own history wrong to ward off the anxieties and fears regarding a particular historical event as it might undermine the steady process of nation-building.

Pamuk is trying to claim that what practiced by the Turkish government is not secularism, in the true sense of the term, but a political discourse, and it never allows a secular way of living, rather it forces one to be a secular; hence is not acceptable. If secularism becomes the political doctrine of a nation-state, it does not mean that the state should condemn all the religious practices followed by its people. Rather the state should be able to accommodate all religion in its affair without any difficulty. It should allow freedom of expression. Talal Asad points out that secularism is more than mere separation of religion and politics; what is distinctive about secularism is that “it presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ ‘politics’ and new imperatives associated with them” (2). Secularism is a concept “centrally located within” a concept of

“modernity” (13). It is one of several principles such as constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, and freedom of the market that the project(s) of modernity seeks to institutionalize. According to Pamuk Turkish secularists should turn themselves into liberal secularists. He says: “I am a secularist, but a liberal secularist. There should be a harmony between the people’s wishes and secularization energy. Turkey’s secularists should also be liberal” (Pasha).

Liberal secularism according to Charles Taylor “consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (*Secular* 3). In liberal secularism belief and non-belief, theism and atheism are not to be seen as rival theories, in cognitive terms, but rather as different ways of being in the world, of living one’s life. It is a whole set of ideals, philosophical and political. It means having social and political views favoring progress and reformation, which promotes ideas such as fair elections, civil rights, freedom of the press, freedom of religion and advances the philosophies of human arts and science.

Pamukian liberal secularist view draws its roots from Taylor’s view that the political doctrine of secularism, as conceptualized and practiced across the globe, resists homogenization. Taylor has foregrounded the inextricable link of secularism with democracy which in turn makes claim to equality and individual liberty. Secularism, according to Taylor, helps promote a concern central to a liberal democracy. It enables the members of a State to transcend the differences articulated along the lines of class, gender, and religion by virtue of a common allegiance to the State via the medium of citizenship. The idea of an “overlapping consensus” (31) which allows people irrespective of their particularistic identities to have varying background justifications to subscribe to an independent, secular ethic made up of some core principles is crucial here. But, since the background justifications may differ more often,



there is the possibility of political disagreements. He argues that liberal secularism is one of the models of secularism that emerged from a European context that sought to achieve political ethics independent of religious convictions, in contrast to the one that aims at finding a solution for the conflicts between warring religious groups. A fervent liberal secularist, Pamuk obviously has issues with public expressions of Islam.

He is, however, happy that Westernization/secularization did take place in his country, though he says he has reservations about the way the project of Westernization was conceived. In Pamuk's words:

I'm not mourning the Ottoman Empire. I'm a Westernizer. I'm pleased the Westernization took place. I'm just criticizing the limited way in which the ruling elite—meaning both the bureaucracy and the new rich—had conceived of Westernization. They lacked the confidence necessary to create a national culture rich in its own symbols and rituals. (*Other* 369)

Pamuk upholds the concept of free speech, which is highly cherished as a principle in liberal thought. He considers liberal secularism as a panacea for all ills. For him, it constitutes a political order, or a world view, in which equality, individual autonomy, democracy, free speech, religious freedom etc. would reign free.

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