

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN ORHAN PAMUK'S *SNOW*

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Orhan Pamuk, a Nobel laureate for 2006, stands out as the most prominent Turkish literary titan. His works strongly echo the basic polarities between the East and the West, the pull of an Islamic post and the lure of modern European manners and materialism. Pamuk lives in a world where the freedom to speak the truth has to be rearrested everyday against the political forces that would rather not here it. Istanbul is the only city in the world that sits on two continents. According to its travel posters, it is where east meets west. This suggests a happy exchange that leaves both the parties energized and enriched. In Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul, the story is rather darker. His characters belong to neither of the camps, but are wooed and tantalized by both in equal measure. Their hearts are divided, and so are their minds.

Snow is a political novel interwoven with a love story. This novel is an in-depth tour of the divided, hopeful, desolate and mystifying Turkish soul. It also narrates the difficulties faced by a nation torn between tradition and religion on the one hand, and modernization on the other. Set in the farthest east of Turkey, the locals are certain that in Western eyes they are all considered ignorant yokels. They suffer from a dreadful inferiority complex and a need to prove them to counter that. The story of the novel is set in the early 1990's in Kars, a remote and dilapidated city in eastern Anatolia famed less for its 'mournful relics of Armenian civilization' and Russian imperial rule than for its spectacularly awful weather. The protagonist, Ka, is a poet and former leftist, who has just returned to Turkey after living exile in Germany for twelve years. He is on his way to Kars, an impoverished city in Anatolia. He boards a bus from Erzurum to Kars. While travelling he finds "the wretched little shops, bakeries, and broken-down coffeehouses" (Pamuk, *Snow* 3) that lined the streets of Erzurum's outlying suburbs. Looking through the frozen windows of the bus Ka saw, "strung over every street, banners emblazoned with campaign slogan" (7) Reaching Kars, Ka books a room at Snow Palace Hotel, owned by father of Ipek, towards whom Ka is attracted.

From here starts Ka's exploration of the woes and agony of the people of Kars who are living in an absolutely confused state. His first encounter with such situation starts with the stories of suicide girls. He, then, visits the families of the suicide girls, where he comes to know the never-ending woes of Kars:

Listening to these tales of hardship...

Ka felt as if he had entered a shadow world.

The rooms were so dark that he could

Barely make out the shape of the furniture,
So, when he was compelled to look at the snow
outside, it blinded him. It was as if a tulle curtain
had fallen in front of his eyes; as if he had retreated
into the silence of snow to escape from these stories
of misery and poverty. (13)

The suicide stories Ka heard that day would hurt him for the rest of his life. What shocked him was the manner in which these girls had killed themselves. Muzzafar Bay, the ex-mayor of the city, remembers good old westernizing years of the city. He talks about “the great ball in the civic centers, the skating competitions, national gardens’ balls held under the acacia trees to support the football team” (21). In the summertime, “girls could wear short-sleeved dresses and ride bicycles through the city without being bothered” (21). Now, because all such days are gone, Bay explains them as “the city’s plunge into destitution, depression and decay” (21). He repents the loss thus: “But now the streets of Kars are filled with women in headscarves of every kind.” He adds, because they’ve been barred from their classes for brandishing this symbol of political Islam, they’ve begun committing suicide” (21-22).

In order to win war against orthodoxies and help shape a better world, we must speak to hundreds of millions of moderate and tolerant people in the Muslim world, regardless of where they live, who aspire to enjoy the blessing of freedom, democracy and free enterprise, actually the truth is that: “There values are sometimes described as; Western values; but in fact, we see them in Asia and elsewhere because they are universal values borne of a common human aspiration” (Roy 333).

In his next visit, Ka meets Serdar Bey, publisher of the *Border City News*. Outside the office, snow is falling thicker and faster than ever before. Just the sight of this makes Ka lonely. He is also worried that the “westernized world he had known as a child in Istanbul might be coming to an end” (Pamuk, *Snow* 27). The elegant old buildings dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century had been destroyed. The cinemas were shuttered for ten years. All such situations were born out of a clash between the Islamic fundamentalists and secularists. After a trail of incidents Ka meets Blue who, in Turkish papers, is portrayed as a militant political Islamist. He actually is a hardcore fundamentalist who considers that the degradation that has attacked Turkish Society is all because of the Western influence. He (Blue) thinks that if girls take off their scarves, they will become ‘degraded objects’ like other Western women. The most surprising thing is that these fundamentalists think themselves to be the ‘true guardians’ of the religion and dare to stop others from using the very word Koran just for their being slightly ‘westernized and modern’.

After this meeting with Blue, Ka makes his way back along the railway tracks. There, in the dirty waiting hall, he finds other three teenage boys, Necip, Fasil and Mesut. They stop Ka and tell him a story of the director of a religious high school in Istanbul. They call him an atheist who, infected by a disease, began to put unreasonable pressure on his lovely little pupil. The director was so much into the Western ways that he couldn’t utter a single sentence without stuffing it with French words, he spent all the money he had stolen on the latest “European fashions” (84).

Pamuk’s introduction of religious angle in the story exposes us to the hypocrisy, religious fundamentalism and the dilemma of a society. It can be seen how the poor, uneducated people easily fall prey to religious hatred and extremism. They get entangled in a cow-web of so-called morals and create an imaginary world of ethics for them. They remain aloof from the

changing society, which leads them to depression and frustration. They do not find the modern world good enough and hope for some imaginary heavenly light to enlighten their lives.

After discussing religion with children, Ka returns to hotel where he happens to meet Ipek. Like others, she also believes that Ka is no more a religious person who knows Islamic teaching; this is the reason why his mind is confused regarding the concept of being religious. As a result she suggests him to visit Sheikh Saadetin Effendi for spiritual solace. When he meets sheikh he openly says that he wants his country to modernize like Europe and that he wishes freedom for the people of his country but he regrets the fact that the religion seems to be against that. The condition of wearing headscarves for women is also an issue that bothers Ka. While narrating his own experience, he speaks:

I grew up in Istanbul in Nisantas among society people.
I wanted to be among society people. I wanted to be like
Europeans because I couldn't see how I could reconcile
my becoming a European with a God that required
women to wrap themselves up in scarves. I kept
religion out of my life but when I went to Europe,
I realized there could be God who was different from
The God of bearded provincial reactionaries. (98)

There is a blend of anger and sympathy, at this point, for the people who are satisfying their frustrations in the name of religion. Ka still believes that a part of his mind still operates in a 'different Western way'. Some scholars in the East think that today's West and its achievements were first theoretically born in the East. They think, "The west is not a western invention at least, not simply or merely. It was developed and imagined in important, new and influential ways in the non-west" (Bonnett 163). *Snow* is not only a novel exploring the hypocrisy, religious fundamentalism but also there is dilemma of a section of society. The people have entangled themselves in a cobweb of so-called morals. Not only this, they have also created a pseudo-world of ethics for themselves. They try to remain aloof from the changing society, which results into frustration and depression. Sisirkumar Ghose, in his book *Modern and Otherwise*, writes that: "The hope of a kingdom of Heaven within and a city of God upon earth cannot be the right principle of an ideal human arrangement" (41).

A simple theatrical performance in Kars shocks and confuses many. When Funda Eser, a theater artist, removes her scarf 'even the most westernized secularists get frightened' by seeing their own dreams coming true. Such is the clash, where somewhere the people want to embrace the air of change but they are chained in the chains of hypocrisy which they call traditions. They call Sunay Zaim, the theatrical performer, and Funda Eser a 'pimp and a prostitute'. The most amazing thing is that the people have no taste for theatre, novel, poetry, cinema and other forms of modern art and even if they have, they keep it buried in their hearts just to prove them as religious. It is so surprising that Blues' anger arises out of the fact that the West takes its great inventions and democracy more seriously than the word of God. He thinks that the West wants them just to imitate it like monkeys but the truth is just opposite. Everyone, even the most ordinary grocer feels compelled to the boast of having his own personal views. Blue calls Westerners clever and says that they take their God seriously and make fool of others. He blames the West for using its technological supremacy to the superiority of the atheism. But we, on our part, can feel only pity for Blue for his line of thinking.

Underdeveloped nations have always been attracted towards materialistic success. On the one hand, they seem very enthusiastic to adopt or follow the Western model of success and, on

the other hand, there is presence of deep fear and contempt in them. This is the conflict that the people of Turkey are facing: “They live between the competing cultural traditions of the West, and their indigenous heritage. Muslims are engaged in the reclamation and restoration of that heritage, as well as in the modernization of it” (Lobber- fluehr 142).

Snow is not simply a story of an impoverished city of Kars. It is basically a mirror that reflects the true picture of Turkish society. Though the issues that arise are the conflicts prevailing in Turkey but they are similar to the issues of the entire world. The novel encourages the readers to have an open minded approach towards all human affairs. No one can lead an isolated life, so the things that are good should be received and welcomed from all corners. It gives insights on the opinion for religion as well; the religion should not be the sole guiding force of one’s life and behavior. Today signs of cultural clashes can be clearly seen around, and keeping that in mind, it can be concluded that snow opens up the further scope of investigation in the area of religious and cultural conflicts.

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