

**UNVEILING THE POLITICS OF VEILING: A CRITIQUE ON
ORHAN PAMUK'S SNOW**

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Abstract

According to the norms of Islam, hijab is a divine dictum and guidance based on the Holy Koran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, many of the modern Muslim states fell under the influence of the Western paradigms of progress and hijab's position in Islamic culture became an issue of debate. Globalization worsened the situation because instead of producing the expected effect of cultural homogenization, globalization strengthened the plea for the perfection and preservation of local cultures and cultural practices. Today, in modern Muslim states, wearing a headscarf is not only an expression of faith but also an open declaration of ethnic cultural identity. Headscarf has become a symbol of cultural resistance against westernization and therefore in many societies wearing a headscarf is more a political act than a religious custom. Wearing a headscarf is a highly complicated political affair in contemporary Turkey. The study is an attempt to analyse how Orhan Pamuk's popular novel Snow unveils the politics of veiling in contemporary Turkey.

Keywords: Pamuk, Snow, Turkey, headscarf, secularism, fundamentalism, ambivalence, coup, Political Islam

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Soon after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Kemalist Cultural Revolution started. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk preferred and advocated Western ways of living. Therefore, Kemal and the Kemalists tried to suppress the Ottoman history of Turkey and they denigrated Islamic customs including hijab. After the death of Atatürk in 1938, the Military became the self-proclaimed guardians of the ideals of Atatürk. Whenever Turkey witnessed the resurgence of Islam and Islamic practices, the Military intervened. The attitude of the Military can aptly be termed "secular fundamentalism" because the aim of the Military was not just the separation of the state and religion but the suppression of the religion. The Military viewed religion as a threat and a source of backwardness. The government was under the constant vigil of the Military and therefore most of the rulers helplessly followed the vision of Atatürk. Whenever the state deflected from the secular path, the Military stepped in with coups. However, most of the common people were not ready to sacrifice their faith to obey the state/Military.

During 1970s Turkey witnessed unforeseen westernization due to globalization. Nevertheless, along with the increasing impact of Globalization, Turkey beheld the rise of the Political Islamists and the resurgence of Islamic customs, especially the wearing of hijab. In early 1980s, the number of the women wearing headscarves considerably increased in Turkey. In her essay "Silence, Secularism, and Fundamentalism in Snow," Esra Mirze Santesso says:

While the unveiling of women was a visible sign of secularization in the early years of the republic, the beginning of the 1980s saw a considerable number of women returning to the headscarf. This alarmed the secular regime, which feared, "creeping Islamism," a growing promotion of sharia over the secular constitution. To prevent the veil from becoming a rallying symbol, the Higher Education Authority announced in 1982 its policy to remove female students with headscarves from university lecture halls. (129)

Later, on 28th February 1997, the National Security Council instructed the government to ban the wearing of headscarf by women working in the public sphere. This event is known as “the post-modern coup”. This banning of headscarf, first from university and then from all government buildings, raised a lot of protest. Many conservative parents were not ready to send their daughters to schools and universities because they were not ready to disobey the divine constitution of Islam for the sake of the constitution of the Republic of Turkey. Merve Kavakçı Islam says:

It (headscarf ban) was among the reasons that parents, particularly in the eastern provinces, which are the less-developed regions of the country, did not send their daughters to school. It was a social disaster, a cancerous wound that needed attention without respite. (99)

Thus, the secular government’s adamant decision to ban the headscarf from the public sphere intensified the culture clash in Turkey and produced far-reaching effects. Orhan Pamuk’s celebrated political novel *Snow*, set in the last decade of the twentieth century, vividly narrates the ambivalent attitude of the Turks towards the headscarf.

Snow is set in a remote dilapidated Anatolian Town called Kars, which is situated near the Armenian border. Thomas Cartelli says about Kars:

. . . a city that is geographically remote from cosmopolitan Istanbul, which has historically been the site of violent conflicts among Russians, Turks, and Armenians, and more lately, of bitter political struggles between and among secular nationalists; nationalist, Marxist, and Islamic Kurds; and, especially, political Islamists, who have cast the creeping shadow of “a second Iran” over the region. (142)

As Kars is a hot centre of the political struggles between the secularists and Political Islamists, the city can offer a microcosmic view of the cultural ambivalence in Turkey. The major action of the novel takes place within three days in 1992.

When the novel begins, due to incessant snowfall, the city of Kars in Turkish border gets isolated from the rest of the world. Before the closing of the roads to the city, some outsiders arrive at Kars with different aims. The protagonist Ka is an Istanbulite who has been in Frankfurt, Germany for the past twelve years. He is a Turkish poet of some fame and he reaches Kars on a journalistic assignment from the secularist newspaper, *The Republican*. He has to write reports on the impending municipal election and the suicide epidemic among the young women of Kars. Ka is an ambivalent atheist. Sunay Zaim, the

leader of a revolutionary theatrical company known throughout the country for its theatrical tributes to Atatürk, the Republic and the Enlightenment, and his group of theatre actors reach Kars. This revolutionary theatre company visits Kars for a theatrical performance that extols the republican and secular ideals of Atatürk. Blue, an extreme fundamentalist and Political Islamist, is also in Kars. He hates everything Western and wants to stick on to his tradition. He is in Kars to support the headscarf girls and to prevent the suicide epidemic among young girls. Another outsider who plays an important role in the novel is an anonymous murderer. The murderer reaches Kars to kill the Director of the Institute of Education in Kars, who prevents the headscarf girls from entering the campus. Other than these outsiders there are many theists and atheists in Kars to take part in the plot of the novel.

The hottest political issue that the novel delineates is the banning of the headscarf in the Institute of Education in Kars. The secular state bans headscarf from educational institutions and in tune with the proclamation of the government, the Director of the Institute bans headscarf inside the campus. The state's decision to ban the headscarf is undemocratic and it is impossible for some girls to obey the hegemonic decision because the headscarf is a part of their being. Therefore, they organize a protest against the state and continue wearing headscarf. Hence, the Director prevents them from entering the campus. Both the Political Islamists and religious high school students support the headscarf girls. Thus, the secular state and the Director—the representative of the state—are on one side and the headscarf girls supported by the Political Islamists are on the other side. When one of the headscarf girls commits suicide, the situation becomes worse and the fundamentalists assign a murderer to kill the Director. The extent of the clash between the secularists and fundamentalists in Turkey can be estimated by analyzing the conversation between the young murderer and the Director of the Institute of Education. The young murderer points a gun at the Director and a dialogic conversation follows:

'My good man, please don't point your gun at me. You're very upset. If the gun goes off, you'll live to regret it.' / 'Why would I regret it? Why would I have spent two days travelling through this miserable snow if not to wipe out an infidel? As the Holy Koran states, it is my duty to kill any tyrant who visits cruelty on believers. But, because I feel sorry for you, I'm going to give you one last chance. Give me just one reason why your conscience doesn't bother you when you ordered covered women to uncover themselves and I swear you I won't shoot you.' / 'When a woman takes off her headscarf, she occupies a more comfortable place in society and gets more respect.' / '. . . . But the opposite is true. Headscarves protect women from

harassment, rape and degradation. It's the headscarf that gives women respect and a comfortable place in society As Professor Marvin King has already noted, if the celebrated film star Elizabeth Taylor had spent the last twenty years covered, she would not have had to worry so much about being fat. She would not have ended up in a mental hospital Go ahead and tell me, you shameless atheist. Why are you laughing?' / 'My dear child, please believe me, I'm not laughing! Or, if I did laugh, it was a nervous laugh.' / 'No! You were laughing with conviction.' / / ' So let me tell you where things stand. It's quite some time now since the Freedom Fighters for Islamic Justice condemned you to death. They reached their verdict in Tokat Five days ago and sent me here to execute the sentence.' / (45-47)

The conversation reveals two clashing ideologies regarding the use of headscarf and the young fundamentalist really executes the verdict of the Freedom Fighters for Islamic Justice. Kadife is the leader of the headscarf girls, but her relation to the religion is ambivalent. She is an atheist turned theist. When Ka sees Kadife for the first time, the narrator describes her:

She was wearing a purple raincoat; her eyes were hidden behind futuristic dark glasses; and on her head was one of those nondescript headscarves Ka had seen thousands of women wearing since childhood and which were now the symbol of Political Islam. (112)

Really, futuristic dark glasses and headscarf form an odd combination. Her dark glasses are the remnant of her "old" westernized self, whereas the headscarf stands for her new political self. Sometimes she speaks as if she has deep faith in what she does and sometimes as if she has been trapped.

Indeed, Kadife's transformation from a westernized atheist to the leader of the headscarf girls is quite accidental. She arrives at Kars to join the Institute of Education there and gets intertwined with the politics of Kars. Putting headscarf is a tradition in most Islamic societies. However, in the Institute of Education putting a headscarf is "revolution". In his article "Religious Cosmopolitanism?: Orhan Pamuk, the Headscarf Debate, and the Problem with Pluralism" Justin Neuman says: 'After eighty years of secular rule, the scarf has ceased to function as the symbol of religious and patriarchal traditionalism for which it stood in Kemalist discourse' (158). Actually, Kadife puts on a headscarf for one day's fun; for one day's "revolution". However, that one day turns out eventful enough to transform her into an inevitable figure in the politics of Kars. She says:

I'm certain that I intended it to last for 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 printed myself into a corner and I couldn't get out. They arrested us—the excuse was that we had staged a demonstration without 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. (116)

Thus, the Political Islamist self that she bears on her head is nothing but an accident. For her the headscarf is both a burden and a means of defiance against the state. It is a burden because, instead of making her an ordinary Muslim girl, the headscarf, the long-standing Islamic tradition, paradoxically makes her an exceptional revolutionary figure. It is defiance against the state because the state always acts tyrannical, not democratic. By wearing a headscarf, she achieves one more goal. Ezra Mirze Santesso says:

Her ambivalence towards the ban compels her to come forward as a leader of the headscarf girls, with the agenda of opposing the government's policy of intruding upon women's personal decisions about their bodies. (132)

Thus, her act of wearing headscarf enables her to transcend the hackneyed image of the Muslim girl as a downtrodden and silenced subject incapable of taking individual decisions.

The Political Islamists use the sufferings of the headscarf girls as the chief political weapon to raise vote for the imminent municipal election. The snowfall and the isolation of Kars bring the inhabitants of Kars closer, but to intensify the conflict between the theists and atheists. At the National Theatre, Sunay Zaim's theatre company performs an anti-religious, revolutionary play *My Fatherland or My Headscarf* that openly denounces headscarf. The play provokes the political Islamists and conservatives. Amidst their retaliations, Sunay Zaim stages a pre-planned coup with the help of some military men and MIT agents. As mentioned earlier, Kars is isolated from the outer world, and secularists use this opportunity to suppress the Political Islamists in Kars. Before the re-opening of the roads to Kars, the secularists carry out a "purgation" process. They kill some of the political Islamists including Blue and put numerous others into jail and torture them. After the coup, Muhtar, the mayor candidate of the religious party withdraws his nomination, out of fear. Thus, the coup prevents the Islamists from winning the election.

Two dramatic performances—My Fatherland or My Headscarf and A Tragedy in Kars—staged by the leftist revolutionary artist Sunay Zaim form the core of the novel. Both these plays are centred around the headscarf issue. As Sunay Zaim is a proponent of the Republican vision of the great leader Atatürk, his performances openly vituperate the practice of wearing headscarf. He stages these plays at the National Theatre before a huge audience, which includes the Political Islamists and religious high school boys. His plays are deliberately filled with provocative dialogues and the first performance invokes violent reactions from the part of the Islamists and Zaim uses this situation to stage a coup to suppress the Islamists in Kars. Thus, through these two plays, Pamuk presents the attitude of the secularists towards the headscarf and the reactions that these performances invoke provide the readers with a clear cut idea about the attitude of the Islamists towards the headscarf.

Whenever religious parties become too much strong in Turkey, Junta intervenes with military coups. Pamuk parodies this historical fact in his novel Snow through the portrayal of an imaginary theatre coup. Turkey, in 1990s, witnessed innumerable clashes between the westernizing ideals of the secularists and the traditional ideals of the Political Islamists. Orhan Pamuk selects this period of extreme political unrest as the context of his novel Snow and unveils the cultural ambivalence of his country by delineating the dialogic interactions between the secularists and fundamentalists regarding headscarf, one of the most discussed, debated, and well-known cultural icons of Islam.

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