

# VICTORY OF SECULARISM OVER POLITICAL ISLAM IN ORHAN PAMUK'S SNOW

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**Abstract:** Ferit Orhan Pamuk was born on June 7, 1952 in Istanbul, Turkey. He is not only a famous novelist, but also a screenwriter. The works of the recipient of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature have been translated in many languages. As a result of which Pamuk remains the best selling writer of his country. His wakefulness about the activities of the secular government as well as the racial and cultural clash experienced by the people of Turkey is noteworthy. Unlike his other works, Pamuk has dealt with the most important issue of conflict between secularism and political Islam in his novel *Snow* (Turkish 2002; translated in 2004). In this novel, the author has portrayed the clash through the character of Sunay Zaim, the true proponent of secularism and Blue, the 'radical Islamist' and his admirers. To curb the growth of radical power in Turkey, the local military at Kars under the leadership of Sunay Zaim stages a couple of coups. Finding a little success, Zaim planned and arranged a stage within the stage at the National Theatre during the performance of the play *A Tragedy in Kars* in order to make an end of radicalism in Turkey. Hence, the major discussion of this research paper will focus on the various strategies of the secular government of Turkey to control radicalism in attaining the victory.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Secular, Cultural, Clash, Political Islam, Military, Coup, Theatre.

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**Introduction:** Orhan Pamuk has dealt with one of the most important current issues – the clash between secularism, the Western societies stand for and the ideology of political Islam in his novel *Snow* (Turkish 2002; translated in 2004). The novelist has represented the conflict through the characters of Sunay Zaim, the true advocate of secularism and Blue, the 'radical Islamist' and his followers. To curb the expansion of radical authority in Turkey, the local military at Kars under the leadership of Sunay Zaim stages a couple of coups. Finding a little success, he planned and arranged a stage within the stage at the National Theatre during the performance of the play *A Tragedy in Kars* in order to make an end of radicalism in Turkey. This well known political novel also deals with the multifaceted, postmodern features of the writer's other fictional works like the use of stream-of-consciousness and grotesque elements, pluralism, fragmentary, metafictional narration, and intertextuality etc. In *Snow* the novelist uses many kinds of strict practices taken from Western fiction to depict subject matters and backgrounds from the Ottoman past and the Turkish present in his fictional works. The writer is recognized for a continued revelation of the clash between the Western and the Eastern value system, custom and secularism/ modernism and the personality crisis. In an interview Orhan Pamuk says to Spiegel, "My books are a testimony to the fact that East and West are coming together. There needn't be a clash between East and West, between Islam and Europe. That's what my work stands for" (Pamuk, *Spiegel Online International*).

In *Snow*, Pamuk has represented the worldwide notion–Turkey as a bridge between the East and the West in terms of the freedom and political issues in such a way that the readers can easily come to a conclusion regarding the same. The novelist has made it quite clear that the conflict between religious fundamentalism and the ideologies of the Western culture still exists there. Edward W. Said, in his book *Culture and Imperialism* pointed out that "it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions" (52). This concept is used as critical framework to study how the polarity between the Islamic world and secular West appears in *Snow*.

Indeed, the argument on different ideas and principles in *Snow* centers on the political selection of Turkey if it would select the distinctiveness of an Islamic nation based on *Shari'ah* or choose for a

membership in the Western Union. "With *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk walks a fine line between reality and fiction" (Kavakci 163). The writer's effort of building a bridge between Turkey and Europe is evident from the text. On the other hand some of the Turkish do not welcome the same. Pamuk's *Snow* incites varied reactions through different characters depending on their choices. As a result, the clash between the ideology of Islam pursued by one set of characters and the secular law of the country followed by another in the novel. Akbar S. Ahmed's view about the conflict between the 'two opposed philosophies' where 'one is based in secular materialism, the other in faith' is also reflected in *Snow*.

In *Snow* the major incidents took place at Kars in the north-eastern Turkey during the 1990s. This city was once a border between the Ottoman and Russian empires which is presented as microcosm of Turkey in the novel. The poet-cum-protagonist, Ka's (Kerim Alakuşoğlu) journey from Erzurum to Kars by bus in the middle of the 'the silence of snow' is the beginning. Ka, after getting the proposal from his friend Taner decided to visit in order to write an article "about the municipal elections coming up and how—just as in the city of Batman—an extraordinary number of girls in Kars had succumbed to a suicide epidemic" (Pamuk, *Snow* 8). Ka, who still remained single at his middle age with a hope to get married with his beautiful 'old classmate' İpek, is now living in Kars is another motivating factor behind this journey.

In fact, the readers come to know about the various incidents that occurred at different places in Turkey through the protagonist as well as the other characters of the novel *Snow*. Ka does not encourage any anti-secular organization in Turkey in particular and any other secular countries in general. It is obvious from the fact when Ka defies İpek's request to meet with Sheikh Saadetdin who has already influenced Muhtar to become a member of political Islam. Ka becomes so annoyed that he cannot but says, "Am I supposed to pay my respects to every lunatic in Kars?" (Pamuk, *Snow* 92) Contrarily, Pamuk has also portrayed several Muslim women characters in the novel who do not want to make any negotiation at the cost of whatever things that come between them and their spiritual faith to accomplish autonomy. It is without a doubt proved through the death of the "suicide girls" after the obligation of ban on veil by Turkey's secular government. As a result, some of the people of Muslim community irrespective of men and women protested against the ban as it hurts the spiritual emotions of their community. The novelist has depicted this momentum of the clash between political Islam and secularism logically in the novel. Ka, the 'reporter' is shocked in 'listening' to the stories of wretchedness and 'poverty' of the people of Kars during the time of his conversation with them. "But the suicide stories he heard that day would haunt him for the rest of his life" (Pamuk, *Snow* 13). The "headscarves girls" take such a grim decision because they are not allowed to wear headscarves in schools. This is how they have shown their resistance against the order of the secular government of Turkey. As it is the single concern of 'suicide' by the 'covered girl', for which Ka has come at this detached part of the country; his main aim is to investigate it at the earliest. During the time of interview, Ka comes to know from the father of the 'headscarf girl' Teslime, who died by committing suicide that:

"...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. (Pamuk, *Snow* 16-17)

Teslime's death ignites the minds of the people of similar faith in Turkey. The readers become aware of it through Muzaffer Bey, the old mayor's conversation with Ka: "... now the streets of Kars are filled with women in headscarves of every kind' ... 'And now, because they've been barred from their classes for brandishing this symbol of political Islam, they've begun committing suicide.'" (Pamuk, *Snow* 21-22) The government has tried to normalize the situation diplomatically.

However, the government loses patience after the occurrence of the most shocking of all the anti-Atatürk activities that is the assassination of the local Director of the Institute of Education at the New Life Pastry Shop. Ka is the first hand eye witness of this killing (of the Director of Education). Blue, a radical Islamist is the assailant whom “he [Ka] immediately recognized” (Pamuk, *Snow* 73) during the latter’s visit to a hiding place to meet with the former. Being representative of political Islam, Blue stands against the secular law of Turkey. He is recognized as the “Master” among his followers for “his being a political Islamist of some notoriety” (Pamuk, *Snow* 71). Unlike most of the characters in *Snow*, Blue disapproves the Western culture. According to him the humiliation of the Muslim world lies in the fact that it has “fallen under the spell of the West” (Pamuk, *Snow* 81). In other words, Blue is against “imitating the West” (Pamuk, *Snow* 331). Thus, the existence of the opposing power in the shape of the political Islam and the existing laws of Turkey is evident. The government tries to curb the newly raised power in the form of political Islam with strong hand. Ka, on the other hand, who comes to investigate the condition at Kars all of a sudden, finds hardly any way to come out of the political conflicts. In fact, Ka involves himself, though by chance, in the role of intermediary between the followers of political Islam and a representative of the Turkish government during the time of a coup staged by the local military at Kars and kills numerous followers of political Islam. The task of handling the Islamists is well done by the military force of Turkey. In this clash between the secular government and the followers of political Islam, the former has controlled the latter in an instant:

“Just after the coup had started, Z Demirkol and his cohorts had shot and killed one of the two Kurdish boys they’d caught writing slogans on the walls of Halitpaşa Avenue. After seizing another boy, they’d beaten him until he’d fainted. Then there was the young unemployed boy they’d taken to the religious high school so that he could clean the graffiti off its walls. When he’d tried to escape, they’d shot him in the legs.” (Pamuk, *Snow* 311)

Blue is wholly aware of the goal of political Islam and very active in his mission of strengthening the organization of political Islam in Turkey in particular and worldwide in general. Contrarily, he is not satisfied with the pace in which the other followers of political Islam are moving forward. It is quite clear in the following words:

“These meek lambs here – they might have strong religious beliefs, but at the end of the day they obey the state’s decrees. And all those rebel sheikhs, all those who rise up because they fear our religion is slipping away, all those militants trained in Iran, even those like Saidi Nursi who enjoyed long-lasting fame – they can’t even count on having graves in the first place, let alone resting in peace in them. As for all those religious leaders in this country who dream of the day their names turn to emblems of faith – the soldiers load their bodies on to military planes and dump them in the sea.” (Pamuk, *Snow* 330)

In *Snow* apart from Blue, the other notable characters like Muhtar, Khadife, Necip and Fazıl are also the supporters of political Islam. Blue is the leader of the rest of the followers of political Islam in Turkey and strong enough to lead his cohort from the front.

However, the emergence of Sunay Zaim, a strong supporter of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the head of the secular government of Turkey becomes the obstacle on the way of the radical Islamists. Sunay Zaim, unlike Blue, considers European way as a civilization of civility. Sunay Zaim imagines himself to be like Atatürk, tries to give a real shape to secularism in Turkey. In the novel, the first staged coup incident is precipitated by a show of a Kemalist play *My Father or My Scarf* by Funda Eser. Sunay Zaim, like a hero brimming with confidence addresses the audience in favour of modernity at the National Theatre:

“Oh, honourable and beloved citizens of Turkey ... Do not fear. The reactionaries who want to turn back time, those vile beasts with their cobwebbed minds, will never be allowed to crawl out of their hole. Those who seek to meddle with the republic, with freedom, with enlightenment will see their hands crushed.” (Pamuk, *Snow* 158)

Recalling the death of the director of the Education Institute, Zaim added to his previous speech to the audience at the National Theatre and says in an angry tone: “This lowly murder will be the last assault

on the republic and the secular future of Turkey!" (Pamuk, *Snow* 159) It reflects Sunay as an advocate of secularism. Sunay Zaim "a Kamalist vaudeville artist who stages a play within-a-play coup that constitutes the centrepiece of the novel's presentation of secondary realities" (Heyking 75) proceeds according to the plan and finally becomes successful.

In a nutshell, the clash between the two ideologies as represented in the novel *Snow* of Pamuk is his response to the visible changes undergoing during the contemporary period. The strength of competing ideologies is pulling public in diverse directions. Orhan Pamuk, too, succeeds in opening up the debate like that of his contemporary counterpart Hanif Kureishi.

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