

The Sacred and the Profane: A Reading of Pamuk's Snow

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Abstract:

This paper tries to map the Turkish society as depicted in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*. The Turkish society represents in miniature the subterranean conflicts between the forces of Pro-West modernity and traditional religiosity which looks at progress from a different perspective. Turkey represents the classic case of a great Empire being subjugated by the west in modern times till its independence under Mustafa Kemal Pasha whose followers are known as Kemalites. Mustafa Kemal Pasha was a ruler who deeply believed that Turkey should mimic the West European countries so much so that he banned the teaching of Arabic in schools. Consequently, a generation grew up who, on the one hand were pulled towards Western concept of progress and on the other hand were attracted towards the traditional religious tenets of Islam. This paper reflects on the volatile nature of the conflict between the two systems of progress.

I

Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* is a highly charged novel which depicts almost a surreal and nightmarish picture of the clash between the political and the religious world view. The incidents depicted in the city of Kars reflect the subterranean and volatile forces which pull the Turkish society in opposite directions. The novel is a critique of almost all the political parties of Turkey which have their own preconceived notions about what is good for the Turkish society. On the one hand, the novel is a critique of the Kemalite process of secularization enforced by Mustafa Kemal Pasha in Turkey after it got its freedom in 1923, On the other hand, it is also a critique of the Islamic parties which want to build the polity of Turkey keeping in mind Iran as its model.

The novel is also an elegy for the vanishing of the greatness of Turkish civilization which at one point was one of the greatest empires which produced great works of art, literature and science. The elegiac tone of Pamuk finds its full expression in his autobiographical work *Istanbul* which vividly reminds us about the great glory of Istanbul which at one time was one of the richest cities on the Mediterranean sea and how the city has been ravaged on the one hand by the Russians and on the other hand by Britain. *Istanbul* tries to renarrate the history of Turkey from a Turkish stand point positing itself as a counter narrative to the stereotyped orientalist view of Byzantium which always privileged the Christian art and artifacts of the Byzantine civilization over the glorious chapter which saw stable governments under the ottoman Sultans. Now it is universally accepted that the golden period of Europe known as Renaissance begins from Constantinople (now Istanbul) which had preserved manuscripts of the works of Greek philosophers and thinkers under the patronage of various Sultans.

In *Snow*, Pamuk tries to put forward, in a balanced manner, the viewpoints represented by the secular parties, the religious parties and the communists who are considered atheists. This novel was published in 2002 when Turkey was still under secular military rule which did not allow the teaching of Koran and Arabic as wished by the great Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Pashafondly known as 'Ataturk' whose statues one can see all over Turkey. Ataturk had banned teaching of Koran and Arabic as he thought Turkey needed modern Western education with a stress on science and technology and a so called West looking progressive mindset. But the fact remains that the undercurrent of religiosity was always in existence in the Turkish society. Also the turks fondly looked back at their great unbroken tradition of being the undisputed leader of the Islamic world. Today Turkey is ruled by a soft Islamic party called the A.K. Party, but when Pamuk wrote this novel, he had already anticipated the coming of such a disposition which would draw its sustenance from the religious right rather than Kemal Pasha. Pamuk was prescient in *Snow* when he shows how religion invested an individual with a greater sense of self hood than that is available under the West-looking military dictatorship with its concomitant curtailment of Choices available for self-expression. Turkey, in a microcosm, represents the millennial conflict that exists between the Christian West and the Islamic East right from the time of the First crusade. Although most part of Turkey is in Europe, and many ancient Greek and Roman philosophers hailed from parts of Turkey, the European Union has not yet accepted

Turkey as one of its members. Although Turkey is more powerful and prosperous than a financially bankrupt country like Greece, Greece continues to be a member of the European union and Turkey is not, despite Turkey trying to get the membership repeatedly. The reason is as old as the crusades of the 11th century that is because Turkey is a muslim majority country. Although the fact remains that Turkey is the most Westernized muslim majority country in the world.

The plot of *Snow* revolves around the incidents of a suicide epidemic by the girls of the city of Kars, in the Eastern part of Turkey. The reason for mass suicide by the girls was that they refused to take off their Islamic head scarves as desired by the secular administration. Many girls were expelled from educational institutions for continuing to wear the head scarves. The protagonist of the novel, Ka who is a journalist and a poet, comes from Frankfurt in Germany to investigate the suicide by the girls. Ka himself is a Turk who is fully Westernized and almost an atheist in his skeptical outlook towards religion. In fact, Ka had fled Turkey and taken refuge in Germany because of his radical political views. Also before fleeing from the city of Kars, Ka was in love with a girl called Ipek. When Ka arrives in the city of Kars, a snow storm disconnects the city from the rest of Turkey for three days, and during this period, the extreme rightists along with some members of the army and some theatre actors organize a coup and decide to kill and eradicate all the Islamists. The city of Kars, at this point, resembles Camus's plague-ridden city of Oran which is completely disconnected from the rest of the world almost swimming in a dark, desolate, strife torn and anarchic space.

On his arrival at Kars, Ka meets Ipek as her father is the owner of the hotel where Ka stays. Ka learns that Ipek was once married and now divorced from her husband Muhtar who is a member of the local Islamic party and who has decided to contest the mayoral election. Ka meets Muhtar who insists that Ka should meet the local spiritual Sheikh and on meeting the Sheikh, Ka feels a sense of isolation and inauthenticity in his own behavior and he also feels the urge to write his first poem in Kars. Ka now starts doubting whether he is a true atheist.

Meanwhile, the director of the local education institute is murdered by the Islamists because he had expelled many girls from the institute for wearing head-scarves. The Turkish Intelligence service MIT is sure that the murder was committed by the Islamists at the behest of a radical Islamic leader mysteriously known as Blue. Ka comes across two young boys from the religious school who are known as Necip and Fazil. Necip is in love with Ipek's sister Kadife. Kadife in turn is the lover of Blue. It is through Fazil that Ka has a chance meeting with Blue whom he had imagined to be an unsophisticated, cruel and ill-informed fundamentalist. But on meeting Blue, all his pre-conceived notions are shattered as Blue comes out to be a remarkably well-informed and charismatic person who has lived in Europe, read the works of Frantz Fanon and has been inspired by Fanon as well as other writers who advocated liberation for the colonized countries. Blue makes fun of Ka's inauthentic, borrowed Western attitudes which go to prove that Ka is only a mimic man parroting the European notions about freedom, secularism and democracy without knowing his own culture. Blue pointedly asks Ka whether he has read

Shahnama and why children in Turkey are not taught this book. Incidentally, Shahnama is the longest epic written by a single author Ferdowsi in the 11th century whereas Homer's *Illiad* and *Odessey* as most scholars agree had not been composed by one single author but many unknown authors. After meeting Blue, Ka is confused whether his notions are authentic or not. In Ka's eyes, Blue is a bigoted fundamentalist and throughout the novel Ka finds it difficult to give up this notion. The problem is that Ka does not realize that what he calls fundamentalism is nothing but the clash between the progresses of modernity with the traditional mindset. Modernity makes allowance for plurality and divergent choices even in the matter of choosing one's religion. With the progress of modernity one can choose to be even irreligious, one can give up one's religion and switch to another. But in the traditional societies, switching from one religion to another was not possible and the dictates of religion applied to everyone what religion decreed was considered to be the only way of life where plurality was shunned. The traditional mind with a belief in monotheistic religion finds it difficult to accept that there are more varied ways of leading one's lives. For instance, when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1790, the Arab historian Abd al-Rahman al Jabarti was stunned that the French Women did not cover themselves and talked and mingled with men openly and the Frenchmen urinated publically and in front of one another and did not even take regular bath, and did not pray to the same God as Jabarti:

“The French follow this rule: great and small, high and low, male and female are all equal. Sometimes they break this rule according to their whims and inclinations or reasoning. Their women do not veil themselves and have no modesty; they do not care whether they uncover their private parts. Whenever a Frenchman has to perform an act of nature he does so wherever he happens to be, even in full view of people, and he goes away as he is, without washing his private parts....”¹

The result was shock and contempt in the mind of Jabarti for the French who otherwise is a very balanced historian. In societies which had not come under the spell of European enlightenment of the 17th century with its contempt for superstition, organized religion and celebration of the rational mind- particularly by the French philosophers like Voltaire, Denise Diderot, D'Alembert, Rousseau and the Scottish philosopher David Hume who was perhaps the first to declare himself as an atheist- the traditional way of life persisted which believed in a monocultural society for good or bad. To such societies the ideals of European enlightenment seemed forced imposition on their way of living and thinking. Such traditional societies were neither regressive nor can be called backward because the post modern critics have also challenged the notion of European enlightenment as some kind of beneficent force. On the contrary, post modern and post colonial critics think that enlightenment values were hegemonic in nature destroying the welfarism of traditional societies which were built on the principle of cooperation among the co-religionists and among the people from the same tribe. Egypt and Turkey are examples of what happens when enlightenment values are forcefully imposed on an

unwilling society which has a different world view. The same can be seen in the destruction of the traditional societies of Africa.

What Ka fails to understand is that Blue has rejected the Western way of giving precedence to plurality and wants his country to gain its former glory by following one single way of life i.e. the Islamic way. Blue takes Iran as his model for revolution and hopes some day a similar revolution will happen in Turkey. The city of Kars also reflects the manner in which political boundaries were drawn and redrawn ruthlessly by the Imperial European powers. The city of Kars was at one time part of the great Ottoman Empire but was captured for some time by Britain and then by Armenia and lastly by Russia. Only after the fall of communism in Russia in 1989 was part of Kars handed over to Turkey to which it originally belonged. So Kars is a city populated by Turks, Armenians, Russians and Kurds. Every time the city changed hands, there would be riots between different communities. This inherent instability and a sense of uprootedness is something which is a perennial feeling among the people of Kars. Political upheaval impinges on the personal lives of its citizens as well. So in the novel we have Ipek's father who is an atheist and a communist, there is the theatre actor Sunay Zaim who is a staunch kemalite and there is Z. Demirkol and Colonel Noori who are fascists and want to kill all Islamists. It is no wonder that in such a cauldron there are bound to be cataclysmic events which shake the social and political fabric of the city. It goes to the credit of Pamuk that he deftly presents the view points of the protagonist without taking sides.

The novel progresses as Ipek convinces Ka that she is in love with him and promises to return with him to Germany and start a new life. The novel reaches its climax when Ka learns from Z. Demirkol that Ipek had always been the mistress of Blue and even now she is telephonically in touch with Blue. When Ka confronts Ipek, she accepts the fact and says that she could never love any man in the way that she loved Blue. When Ka tells her that Blue is a fundamentalist who is wanted for the murder of the director of the Educational Institute, Ipek tells him that Blue is the kindest man she had ever seen, a man who literally cried when he saw two injured puppies on the road. Murder was something against Blue's kind nature. In a fit of jealousy, Ka goes to Z. Demirkol and tells him where Blue is hiding as a result of which the soldiers go to Blue's hideout and kill Blue and Kadife's friend Hande who was with Blue. Kadife takes off her head scarf in front of a big audience at the National theatre and Ka leaves the town hoping that Ipek would join him at the station but Ipek does not accompany him to Germany. Four years later, Ka was assassinated by followers of Blue who wanted revenge. It is only after Ka's death that the narrator of the story visits Kars and tells us the whole story. In fact, the narrator also falls in love with Ipek, but Ipek bluntly tells him that she can now never love a man. The betrayal of Blue by Ka is almost a retelling of the betrayal of Christ by Judas. Pamuk builds his own kind of allegory where the compassionate religious man is hounded out by the advocates of reason. Perhaps Pamuk is questioning the tyranny of reason as an all-encompassing panacea for the ills of divergent societies. It must be pointed out that Pamuk himself is an atheist but is able to understand the unique religiosity of the Turkish people and their way of life by showing

the conflict between the Western Secular tradition which believes in pluralism and the Turkish monochromatic tradition which is built on co-operation and belief in one single unifying idea which could be Islam or Kemalism as propounded by Mustafa Kemal.

The character of Ka is developed by Pamuk as someone who is not sure of his own convictions and his identity hovers between Western rationalism and the Eastern tradition, whereas Blue's character is developed as that of a determined, strong person who is sure of his goal and conviction with an aura of mystery. After all, mysticism which is not completely understandable seems more attractive than the dry, pronouncements of reason. Could that be the explanation for both the sisters falling in love with Blue knowing each-other's relationship with Blue? After all the figure of the mystical frenzied William Blake is always much more attractive than the reasonable figure of Alexander Pope with his rationalism!

II

For Blue, Islam is the glue which will unify the whole of Turkey. Although Blue refers to the Iranian revolution as a model, his ideals would be closer to the movement known as 'Muslim Brotherhood' in Egypt, because Iranian Revolution was basically A Shia Revolution which does not believe Mohammad to be the last prophet. The Muslim Brotherhood which is a sunni organization was recently in the news for engineering the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Muslim Brotherhood is based on the teachings of the Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutub who was against the imposition of Western Liberal values and the freedom enjoyed by women in the west which he thought was on the side of excess. For example in one of his writings, he points out,

“Humanity today is living in a large brothel! One has only to glance at its press, films, fashion shows, beauty contests, bathrooms, wine bars and broadcasting stations! Or observe its mad lust for naked flesh, provocative postures, and sick, suggestive statements in literature, the arts and the mass media! And add to all this the system of usury which fuels man's voracity for money and engenders vile methods for its accumulation and investment, in addition to fraud, trickery and blackmail dressed up in the grab of law.”²

Blue himself points out how he felt hatred for the West when he tells Ka,

“I was an electronic engineer. Because of the hatred I felt for the West, I admired the revolution in Iran. I returned to Islam. When the Ayatollah Khomeini said that 'the most important thing today is not to pray or fast but to protect the Islamic faith', I believed him. I took inspiration from Frantz Fanon's work on violence, from the pilgrimages Sayyid Kutub has made in protest against oppression, from the same man's ideas on changing places, and from Ali Shariyat.”³

Although Blue refers to Sayyid Qutb, one has to remember that Sayyid Qutbwrote 30 volumes of commentary on the Quran and his commentaries show a mind which looks for rational meaning of the various Ayats rather than interpret the Ayats from a literalist viewpoint. Blue, from what he says and does, belongs to the literalist school which harks back to a golden age when Prophet Mohammad lived and dispensed justice as recollected by the prophets companions and have been transmitted orally and later compiled and are known 'Hadiths'. In Blue's world, the job of men and women would be separated and female sexuality is to be controlled. The Quote from Sayyid Qutb makes it amply clear. That is why literalists like Blue would never like women to unveil themselves or moving outside without a male companion. A gender based division of labour is found in societies which are governed by Koranic prescriptions. For instance, women in Saudi Arabia are still not allowed to drive vehicles.

Blue's utopia would be a highly patriarchal society which constricted women's rights and where non Muslims would be required to pay protection tax. Blue's angst rises from the fact that he believes in only one truth whereas his journeys in Europe had brought him into contact with the industrial liberal Western capitalist countries which gave him a cultural shock. It is no wonder that Blue had married twice before entering into a relationship with both the sisters Ipek and Kadife because polygamy is the norm in a conservative Islamic society. Equal rights for a women is something foreign to such utopias propounded by Blue as is clear from an interview given by one of the muslims Ulemas to Ahmad Rashid perhaps the greatest authority on the rise of Taliban: The Maulvi says,

“Let us state what sort of education the UN wants. This is a big infidel policy which gives such obscene freedom to women, which would lead to adultery and herald the destruction of Islam. In any Islamic country where adultery becomes common, that country is destroyed and enters the domination of the infidels because their men become like women and women cannot defend themselves. Anybody who talks to us should do so within Islam's framework. The Holy Koran cannot adjust itself to other people's requirements. People should adjust themselves to the requirements of the Holy Koran”.⁴

Blue's world would be a frightful dystopia where one half of the population (i.e. Women) would be subordinated to the other half and the non-believers would be treated as fringe groups with very limited rights. Blue's view of his ideal world would closely resemble today's Saudi Arabia where the chief Imam still believes that there are seven heavens as described in the Koran and the Copernican view is wrong.

Ka, on the other hand, is a cosmopolitan who is ambivalent about his own identity. As long as he was in Germany, he believed that he was an atheist. But after he comes to Kars and meets Ipek and Kadife, Necip and Fazil, he begins to doubt his atheism and thinks that God is sending him poems after coming to Kars. At one point he is almost convinced that he is now atheist:

“The snow reminded me of God’, said Ka. ‘The snow reminded me of the beauty and mystery of creation, of the essential joy that is life.’”⁵

The most telling comment on Ka’s ambivalence is made by Kadife when she says,

“The only people who worry about needless suffering are atheists who’ve never suffered a thing because, after all it takes only the tiniest discomfort for atheists to decide that they can’t bear life without faith anymore, and the next thing you know they’ve returned to the fold.”⁶

The atheist Ka is almost converted to theism because of his intense love for Ipek. Ka represents the European enlightened mindset which comes into contact with unflinching belief in the powers of God and this encounter brings about a tectonic shift in his attitude towards the society and its enshrined traditions, but the pull of secular liberal values proves to be stronger for him. When after losing Ipek, Ka returns to Germany, he can never think of proposing to any other girl and continues to write unsent letters to Ipek until his murder by the assassins. Of course, like any Western young man, he does have sexual flings with many girl friends but none of them could be classified as love. As a mind influenced by Western values, he respects Ipek’s individuality, Kadife’s political Islam, Hande’s decision to wear headscarf to assert her identity. Although many times, he thought Kadife is even more intelligent than Ipek, he could never entertain any thoughts of an amorous relationship with her unlike Blue. His jealousy can be explained away as the spiteful jealousy of a cuckolded lover which is how most normal young men would react. Compared to Blue with his elusive, mystical, religious air, Ka appears to be a more flesh and blood human being who suffers the pull of tradition as well as the push of modernity. Ka probably represents everyman in today’s cosmopolitan world where all of us come into contact with alternative ways of living and worshipping and suffering alienation when our values collide with the values of the others. Ka’s values collided with the values of Ipek, Blue and Kadife, but it is to his immense credit that he respected the multiple views like a true cosmopolitan. In short, Ka’s world with all its limitations would be a preferable place than Blue’s Utopia which ultimately would turn to dystopia as in Iran and Afghanistan.

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