

A Nation In-between: Negotiating Turkish Identity in Orhan Pamuk's Snow

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Abstract:

Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, published in 2002 is an openly political novel that encapsulates the fragmented state of Turkey and its people. Mustafa Kemal's efforts of modernization, officially severed all of Turkey's ties from its Ottoman past and by doing so opposed the plurality of cultural identity. So many changes were forced to be adapted by the people of Turkey in order to establish a national identity. The sole objective of these measures was for Turkey to be accepted into the European Trade Union. Pamuk, the 2006 awardee of the prestigious Nobel Prize in literature, demonstrates the struggles of people living in an in-between country in his works. Turkish identity forms an indelible part in his oeuvre. *Snow* captures Turkey's cultural, religious and political conflict, and in doing so, problematizes the question of identity. Employing the theories of Bhabha and Hall, this paper ventures to study the portrayal of Turkish identity in Pamuk's *Snow*.

Keywords: Cultural identity, fluid, production, hybridity, Third Space, ambivalence, metafiction

Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy.

- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

Ferit Orhan Pamuk is a Turkish writer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in the year 2006 for discovering "new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures", "in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city" ("Nobel"). Pamuk is so deeply engrossed in the cultural politics of Turkey that all of his works inevitably explore Turkish identity. His novels describe the never-before-colonized Turkey's struggle with its ambitious project of forming a national identity that is heavily influenced by the West and its ramifications on its subjects. *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk's only political novel as he prefers to say, captures the cultural conflicts like tradition vs. modernity, religion vs. secularism and the obvious East vs. West, prevailing in Kars, a border city located in eastern Turkey.

Pamuk's *Snow* is a space of negotiation where cultures assimilate and hybridize. The setting of the novel as an ideologically polarized city aids in projecting the fragmented state of Turkey. In its path to progress, Turkey's assimilation of western traditions did not sit well with the people of Turkey, particularly the fundamentalists. Turkey's outright rejection of its

Ottoman history and its failure to bridge the gap between the Ottoman past and the modernized Turkey resulted in an identity crisis in its subjects. This paper aims to trace the portrayal of cultural identity as a fluid concept in Pamuk's *Snow*. The paper draws on Stuart Hall's theory of identity and Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridization to explore the dynamic nature of cultural identity as shown in the novel.

Stuart Hall, a prominent figure in Cultural Studies, defines cultural identity as an ongoing process. He posits that identity is not an essence but "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" ("Culture" 222). Hall is against the idea of a singular collective identity. He postulates that like the numerous similarities people with shared history and ancestry possess, there are numerous differences that need acknowledgement. Such differences facilitate distinctiveness in every individual. Therefore cultural identities are both becoming and being. It is not only shaped by the past but is incessantly shaped by the present.

Hall in his work "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" says that cultural identity, belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (225)

He insists on how identity is a fluid concept that is subject to changes effected by history, culture and power. Orhan Pamuk's idea of identity is in line with that of Hall's. His novel *Snow* encapsulates the fluid nature of identity through its protagonist Ka. Ka returns to Turkey from Germany after his political exile of twelve years. Like Pamuk, Ka belongs to an upper class bourgeois family in Istanbul. When he returns to Turkey, he goes to Kars, a border city in Anatolia, to meet his estranged lover Ipek, on learning that she has recently got divorced. Ka goes to Kars under the pretense of a journalist who seeks to cover two important incidents namely the suicide epidemic and local municipal elections.

The novel vividly captures the tensions of a city that is agitated by the forced changes that question the core of their identity. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in his efforts to modernize Turkey, implemented various measures that irked the general public. He wanted Turkey to be a secular nation that is disconnected from its Ottoman history. Kevin Robins, in his essay "Interrupting Identities: Turkey/Europe" says, "what was being attempted by the Republican elite was no less than the annihilation of the past. The new nation and state were born out of this fundamental disavowal" (68). This disowning included "the proscription of the fez and other forms of 'uncivilized' headgear" (68). Though it was incidental, the banning of headscarves became such a serious problem that headscarves became a political symbol.

Snow dramatizes the banning of headscarf through the suicide epidemic. Girls who are not ready to abandon the headscarves are banned from the lycee. The girls throughout their lives have been instructed to cover their heads as a ritual and all of a sudden, because their state wants them to, are forced to abandon the headscarves. The girls feel it to be a dishonour to the values they have been upholding so far. Unable to lose their headscarves and

feeling publicly shamed by being banned from the schools, these girls take drastic measures. This is because the girls are forced to lose their identities.

Turkey, in its endeavour of modernization, stripped its citizens of their values. As Richard Taper puts it, “Kemalist doctrine was no alternative to Islam in providing identity and organising principles of life” (qtd.in Robins 69). When religion and its symbols are stripped from the citizens, they feel that their identities are ripped off. Kadife, the leader of the headscarf girls feels that no one has the right to dictate her the terms of leading her life. She interprets the girls’ decision of suicide thus: “The main reason for suicide, obviously is pride. At least, that’s why women kill themselves . . . A woman doesn’t kill herself because she’s lost her pride; she does it to show her pride” (*Snow* 405).

While some of the girls resort to suicide as their only way out of embarrassment and a few others like Kadife choose to stand strong in their stance, most of them are like Hande, who is caught in the in-between state. She contemplates removing her headscarf. She is sure of her devotion to her faith but is scared of the state. She says, “when I do take off my headscarf, I won’t be doing it on my own free will . . . The true reason is that (for not taking the headscarf off) I can’t concentrate, I can’t imagine myself without a headscarf” (*Snow* 125). She is subjected to an identity crisis but later she says, “I am not all that afraid of becoming someone else” (126). She eventually reaches the Third Space where she is ready to form a hybrid identity.

While Hall talks about the fluid nature of cultural identity, Homi Bhabha goes further to talk about the endless production of it and the space where it is created. Bhabha stands with Hall in believing that identities do not have a fixed origin and that they are not rigid. He puts forward his theory of ‘Third Space’ which means the space where identity is negotiated. Bhabha defines Third Space in his *The Location of Culture* as “the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture”(38). It is an ambivalent, interstitial space where hybrid cultures that are put to further translations are formed. Kars in its political scenario becomes the Third Space where its citizens form hybrid identities.

While defining hybridity, Bhabha says, “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (112). In Turkey’s case it is not only the colonial power against which hybrid identities are formed but also against the nationalists of Turkey. Hybridity in *Snow* can be well comprehended when Ka’s interaction with the city is looked at. When Ka comes back to Turkey after his life as a Westerner, he is not received warmly. He is treated as someone who will never be able to understand the tribulations of those people having identity issues. Ka, like most of the upper class people, calls himself a secular Muslim but the fundamentalists perceive him to be an atheist. Necip, one of the religious boys says, “As soon as you’re back in Germany, you’ll start thinking that God doesn’t exist - just as you did before” (*Snow* 105). Ka says, “we don’t believe in God with our whole hearts anymore . . . in the West, we confirm our beliefs by reason and logic” (114). However after he comes to Kars, he feels his European identity questioned.

When Ka lives in Germany, he does not have the sense of belonging. He lets himself be influenced by the Western ideals. He stands for modernization. He even calls himself a secularist like so many others living in Istanbul because “religious attachment was also seen as a subversive force, also posing a threat to the modernization and nationalization process in Turkey” (Robins 69). However he always has this feeling of being out of place. He feels that he is judged for being a Turk. He feels conscious of his Turkishness whenever he is amidst the Europeans. He says, “Most of the times it is not the Europeans who belittle us. What happens when we look at them is that we belittle ourselves” (Snow 75). When asked about his life in Germany, he says, “The thing that saved me was not learning German . . . My body rejected the language, and that was how I was able to preserve my purity and soul” (Snow 33).

Ka has this feeling of being in-between not only in Germany but also in Turkey. Kars kindles in him questions about his association with God. Snow, as he claims, reminds him of God. Though he is ashamed of it, he declares in a drunken state that, “I want to believe in the God you believe in and be like you, but, because there’s a Westerner inside me, my mind is confused” (Snow 100). As Findley Carter says in his book *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity: A History*, “so deep is the imprint of Islam on the Turkish society that it and the Turkish language form the two primary markers of Turkish identity” (7). It would be impossible to define Turkish identity without its religion because Islam has permeated through Turkey that Islam and Turkey are inseparable. The effect of it could be seen in Ka. He becomes a transformed person though he doesn’t want to acknowledge it.

Margaret Atwood, in her introduction to the novel, says, “since he himself isn’t sure, he vacillates from one side to another. Shall he stick with the western enlightenment? But he was miserable in Germany. Shall he return to the Muslim fold? But despite his drunken hand-kissing of a local religious leader he can’t fit it” (vii). Ka is stranded in between the atheist environment in which he spends his years of formation and Kars, where he senses the presence of God. He is subjected to the ‘Third Space’. Ka believes in God and at the same time he believes in logic. “As a product of Kemalist reforms, he instinctively defends the Western aspects of his identity and fears losing them in the rising religious fervor” but “Ka’s visit to Kars awakens in him a new spirituality” (Pederson 141). Pamuk does not offer any solution to this state of Ka. He is faithful to his role as a story teller. He shows how Turkey is in an in-between position with characters like Ka and Hande.

Ka’s desire to get married to Ipek, reflects his quest for belongingness. Ka almost succeeds in his efforts. He is able to convince Ipek to get married to him and go to Germany where they could start a new life. Similarly, his spiritual rekindling and defining himself through religion is almost successful. Ipek is not ready to leave her place. As she starts packing her stuff, she senses displacement. “Then she started to pack another suitcase with the things she’d previously excluded on the basis that there were probably things of far higher quality in Germany . . . wondering whether she would be able to find the styles she preferred in Germany” (Snow 394). She is worried that she might lose her identity to be someone she hardly wants to be. Besides, her political affiliations, and her love for Blue stop her from leaving Kars. She says, “I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going” (398). This failure in love

reflects his failure in defining himself based on his positioning. As Hall says, Ka's identity is shaped by his interactions with Kars' history and power dynamics. However Ka fails to find a definite identity as he falls into the third space.

According to Atwood, "Pamuk's novels don't provide cut-and-dried solutions, but they follow the tortuous lines of such questioning with anguished and wrenching fidelity.... His power as a novelist stems in part from his refusal to judge the choices his characters make" (vii). Pamuk rather than commenting on the judgments of his characters, simply presents them for the world to see through. Ka's identity is trapped between Turkey's European aspirations, its religious ideologies and political violence. He is a symbol of all the other people of Turkey who are caught in-between. Ka's everlasting quest for identity and sense of belonging highlights Pamuk's portrayal of Turkey as 'a nation in-between'.

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