

Headscarves to Die for¹: Freedom of Choice and a Free-will Symbol in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to unfold Orhan Pamuk's conception or how he (re) presents women and their headscarves within Islamic tradition, with particular reference to his novel *Snow*. *Snow* opens with the return of Ka, a Turkish exile who has been leaving his country for 12 years to Istanbul in order to attend his mother's funeral. He then decides to investigate a wave of suicide by young girls in the provincial city of Kars who object the ban of hijab in public spaces. This study discovers that Pamuk explores the lamentation of the Muslim women emanating out of the domain of religion and the will of the state as a stepping-stone to re (claim) the meaning of their headscarf and identity. Grounded in Mahmood theory, this study argued that headscarf has a deeper meaning than just a symbol of religious devotion. It is a platform of Muslim women's individual will to exercise their chosen identity.

Keywords: *headscarf, identity, Muslim women, religion*

INTRODUCTION

"I put on my headscarf for political reason."
– Orhan Pamuk in *Snow*

Muslim women and their hijab have been a debatable issue in the East and the West. Hundreds of different questions come up related to women with headscarves. Western people perceive women with headscarves as submissive people who sacrifice their life following men's order. The Western view believes that those women do not have 'voice' and at the same time do not have the freedom to express themselves. Some others are surprised why beautiful women have to cover their attractive hair and their body while in their 'world' women try to show off

their body and hair. To the worst perception, this cultural and religious symbol is seen as a thread and associated with terrorism following the 9/11 tragedy in 2011. Muslim women and their headscarves is an issue of "great contemporary currency and political urgency" (Dillon, 1998, p. 682).

Meanwhile, Muslims believe that wearing a headscarf is a symbol of visible expression of devotion as well as a significant determinant of being Muslim. It is worth noting that the headscarf is not as simple as it appears on the surface. It is a multifaceted concept in the intersection of religion and culture embodying beliefs for those who wear it, and the understanding and misunderstanding of those who observe it.

¹ "Hijab to die for" is a borrowed term from the title of Margaret Atwood article reviewing Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, which published in the *New York Times* on 15 August 2015.

Snow is Pamuk seventh novel published and translated in English in 2002. This first and

political novel, as Pamuk claimed has extended his reputation abroad. *Snow* opens with the story of Ka, a poet who has been living as a political exile in Frankfurt, Germany travels to Istanbul to attend his mother's funeral. He also wishes to write about the wave of suicidal girls protesting the ban of wearing a headscarf in Kars, a rural Anatolian village located in Northeastern Turkey. Ka is amazed at how quiet those young girls have taken over their own life: from drinking sleeping pills or hanging themselves by using their headscarf that they tied on the lamp hook in their rooms. These young women's decision to take their own life demonstrate their resistance over the government's order to take off their headscarves.

Hence, this paper would focus on Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* and how Muslim women and their headscarves are represented, in regard to their right and free will. In addition, this paper is expected to provide an additional reference to the study of women's identity. This paper presents a qualitative study where the main data of this study is Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*. Additionally, related studies on Orhan Pamuk's work particularly *Snow* were also employed in order to support the main data in the study.

Orhan Pamuk and *Snow*

Ferit Orhan Pamuk, one of the most-leading contemporary Turkish writers, is widely known as Orhan Pamuk for his record of accomplishment in literary excellence. Pamuk is a secularist author with his best-selling novels such as *My Name is Red* (1998) and *Snow* (2002). He was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature 2006. His books have gained enormous readership across the globe and they successfully are translated into more than sixty-three languages including Bahasa Indonesia.

Pamuk, as part of the Europeanized bourgeois family studied engineering and architecture instead of painting that had been his dreamt. However, he no longer wishes to

guard his family tradition and he eventually abandoned his architecture and engineering class and he then went to School of Journalism in Istanbul University but he never becomes a journalist. When he reached 23 years old, Pamuk determined to become a novelist. He gave up everything else, then "retreated into his flat" and started living his true self a writer (<https://www.orhanpamuk.net/page.aspx?id=7>).

Snow is claimed as Pamuk's first and political novel that represents the conflict within Turkey's identity quest, which are filled with two contradictions arising from those in favor of Islamic values and those of modern secularists. The never-ending battle between Islamic and secularist in Pamuk's point of view can be dangerous and risky. In this novel, Pamuk presents the core dilemma for Turkish people ever since the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Turkish Republic in early 1923. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of Turkish Republic, wanted to create new Turkey's identity, which is different from the Ottoman Turkey with its Islamic cultural roots. Ataturk believes that to achieve his goal, he has to cut all tiers from Ottoman Islam and "annul the cultural identity of being a Muslim" (Cagaptay, 20006, p.65). The headscarf, as one of the Ottoman heritage's symbols, therefore must be abolished.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Snow is not the first novel where the crux of the issue is the headscarf. In fact, the representation of Muslim women as an oppressed and veiled sex can be traced back from the twelfth to thirteen centuries (Marandi& Tari, 2012). Since then, Muslim women are represented as the victims of cruel patriarchal tyranny who absolutely have no control over their own destiny (Ibid, p. 11).

In *Snow*, the depiction of how headscarf is considered as a legacy of backwardness is

represented by the scene of a drama entitled *My Fatherland or My Headscarf*, showing a Turkish woman make “her grand gesture of independence, launching herself into enlightenment as she removed her scarf” (Pamuk, 2002, p.151). The actress who plays the woman taking off her headscarf explains, “the turban and the headdress were all symbols of the reactionary darkness in our souls, from which we should liberate ourselves and run to join the modern nations of the west” (Pamuk, 2002, p.155). The director of the play, Sunay Zaim conveys to Kadife, the leader of headscarf girls that he encouraging Kadife to take off her headscarf is for the same reason that he had decided to stage the revolution, in expectation that Turkish women can be as independent as European women (Pamuk, 2002, p. 410).

In addition, as a Westernized Turkish who has been living as a political refugee in Germany, Ka believes that women with a headscarf is naturally not attractive to him. A woman with headscarf will never make him interested. For Ka who is described as a Westernized secularist, a headscarf is “an indication of Muslim backwardness and oppression” (Marandi & Tari, 2012, p. 7). *Snow*, however, presents a different angle about the meaning of headscarf for Muslim women’s life and identity.

As has already been pointed out earlier, *Snow* presents the predicament of Turkey’s identity quest where the mission of modernizing Turkey was established upon secularism in contrast to religion. Turkey determined to abandon its cultural roots by annulling all the laws, which is based on Islamic tradition. Therefore, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk determines to eradicate all marks of religious symbols to establish the Republic of Turkey in 1925 (White, 2016, p. 150).

The headscarf, which is perceived as the paragon for the backwardness of Islamic culture, was therefore outlawed, as the Kemalists believe that wearing a headscarf is a form of religious coercion. The banning of the headscarf describes the violence of

the secularism project following the construction of Turkish Republic whose agenda is eradicating the multiethnic, multi-community as well as multi-religious of the Ottoman period into a “single ‘Turkish’ hegemonic identity” (Connolly, 1999: 76).

Therefore, no one is surprised that “When the authorities had outlawed the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions across the country, many women refused to comply; the noncompliant young women at the Institute of Education in Kars had been barred first from the classroom and then, following an edict from Ankara from the entire campus” (Pamuk, 2002, p. 16). *Snow* highlights Turkish girls’ lamentation who incline to wear a headscarf, but they are banned from an educational institution in Turkey. Here Pamuk wants to demonstrate that the Westernization in Turkey brings a dilemma for the Turkish society. The secularist policy to ban headscarves as the most invisible symbol of religion in Turkey has wounded the society especially Turkish women. Their resistance can be interpreted as an act of expression against their country dictation as well as their religion.

The girls, represented by Hande explains how she and her friends suffer as a result of the anti-headscarf campaign. Hande is dismissed from the school because she comes to the class without taking off her headscarf:

Sometimes I can see a vision of a girl walking into school, her hair flying all around her. I can see her walking down the hall and going into my favorite classroom – oh, how I miss that classroom! I can even imagine the smell of the hallway and the hot, sticky air. Then I look through the pane of glass that separates the classroom from the hallway and I see that the girl is not there. She is another girl, and I start to cry (Pamuk, 2002, pp.126-7).

Another ordeal is even more severe. Being

deeply agitated in a dilemmatic frustration for choosing between what they have been taught (putting on their headscarf) and what they are now forced to do (barring their head), some girls decided to take their own life. They believe that life is no longer meaningful without the freedom to follow their belief. They silently commit suicide for they believe that life would be meaningless without the freedom to exercise their right to wear their headscarves. It can be seen from the case of Teslime. This headscarf girl is heartbroken when she discovers that her friends uncover their heads or give up their headscarves and replace it with a wig. The girl eventually died by committing suicide:

It seems that the girl, Teslime, had spent her last evening silently watching the tension show called Marianna. After making tea and serving it to her parents; she went to her room and readied herself for her prayers, washing her face, her feet, and her hands. When she had finished her ablutions, she sat down on her prayer rug and lost herself for some time in thought, and then in prayer, before tying her head scarf to the lamp hook from which she hanged herself (Pamuk, 2002, pp 16- 17).

Indeed, those girls' decision to take their own life instead of barring their head is a respond to the government banning of headscarf. They resist the oppression of official edict to remove their headscarf and choose to die instead. The girls' action show that headscarf is more than a headgear for them. It is a symbol of their honor as well as a marker of their faith: "the headscarf did not just stand for God's love, it is also proclaimed [their] faith and preserved [their] honor" (Pamuk, 2002, p. 121).

Teslime's suicide is an act to exercise her right in selecting what identity she wants to claim. In Clemens' interpretation, Teslime takes her own life is a daring act of objectification to those who try to dictate her about what she can wear. By committing suicide, Teslime also "cut the chain of

signification coerced on her body" (Clemens, 2011, p. 147). Teslime and the rest of the girls refuse to submit to both the government edict that want them to take off their headscarves or to the Islamic party that insist them to keep putting on their headscarves in order to symbolize political religious resistance. Thus, it is very humble to say that the piece of garment has deeper meaning and symbol than just a religious obligation.

Moreover, the persistence of the schoolgirls in the novel to secure their headscarf shows that their headscarf is not a symbol of patriarchy oppression where Muslim women are the victim of the unfair patriarchal practice. Unlike the message delivered by Ayaan Hirsi Ali that headscarf is the form of women submission over men, therefore they have to debar it, the girls in *Snow* show that their headscarf is their choice to demonstrate their identity. The girls launch themselves into enlightenment by putting on their headscarves not by removing it (Pamuk, 2002). Covering also provides the girls with a sense of being true to themselves and a method to get rid of sexualization and a sense of belonging in one community. As one of the girls admits: "I am not all that afraid of becoming someone else. What scares me is the thought of never being able to return to the person who I am now- and even forgetting who that person is" (Pamuk, 2002, p. 123).

CONCLUSION

The aforementioned discussion has shown that *Snow* presents a different meaning of headscarf within the life of Muslim women. Headscarf, the crux issue in *Snow* has demonstrated that it is beyond what people believe as a "symbol of patriarchal oppression and also the biggest obstacle for Muslim women to take participation in public space" (Badran, 2005, p. 93).

This paper reveals that the headscarf has a deeper meaning more than as a means of patriarchal oppression or women

subjugation over men. Teslime and other girls in *Snow* prove that their headscarf gives them a sense of selfhood and a foundation for them to exercise their identity and to control their own destiny. They refuse to follow the order of patriarchal practices represented by the secularist and fundamentalist. For them, headscarf is an instrument to involve in public spaces rather than a symbol of submission to men culture.

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