

BOOK REVIEW: *SNOW*  
BY ORHAN PAMUK  
2006 NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

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*This novel was published in Turkish in 2002. It was translated by Maureen Freely and published in English in 2004. It has been translated into 44 other languages to date.*

On October 12, 2006 the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to the internationally acclaimed Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, the first Turkish person to win a Nobel Prize. In its citation, the Swedish Academy said: "In the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city, [Pamuk] has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures."

Orhan Pamuk was born in 1952 to an upper-class secular family, and spent most of his life in Istanbul. From 1985 to 1988 he lived in the United States as a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York, and a visiting fellow at the University of Iowa. Currently, he is a visiting professor at Columbia University. After obtaining a journalism degree from Istanbul University, Pamuk became Turkey's most celebrated postmodern writer. His seven novels inform the western world of the complexity of Turkey's social, political, ethnic, and religious conflicts. His books have broken all previous sales records for works by a Turkish author, both in Turkey and abroad.

In 2005 Pamuk was charged for having violated the Turkish Penal Code by "insulting Turkishness" when, in an interview for a Swiss newspaper, he referred to the Armenian genocide of 1915-1917 and the killings of 30,000 Kurds in Anatolia. While the charges were dropped in January 2006, his popularity in Turkey received a serious blow,

and he was subjected to a hate campaign. At the same time, the charges also caused a widespread international protest and raised

questions about Turkey's proposed entry into the European Union (EU). Pamuk stated that his intent in making the statement was to defend freedom of speech; the EU, as recently as November 2006, continues to fault Turkey on freedom of expression, on minority rights, on religion, and on the rights of women.

In *Snow*, Pamuk dares to take, through fictionalization, a critical view of his country's political, religious, cultural, and ethnic upheavals during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The events the author describes take place during a three-day period in the city of Kars, the "poorest, most overlooked corner of Turkey," in the Northern-East borders of Anatolia "where half of its population is working as undercover policemen and a tenth as informers." Ka, a nationally recognized poet, returns to Turkey temporarily after having spent twelve years in Germany in political exile. Encouraged by a friend who writes for the pro-secular newspaper *Republic*, Ka makes the journey to Kars to cover the municipal elections and to investigate the extraordinary number of suicides committed by "head-scarf girls." He also hopes to connect with a beautiful former classmate, Ipek, who left her husband and lives in Kars with her former communist elderly father Turgut Bey, and her "head-scarf" younger sister Kadife. After "a lifetime in which every experience of love was touched by shame and suffering," the prospect of falling in love with and marrying a Turkish woman

who he will take with him to Frankfurt and the "German-Turkish world" fills the middle-aged Ka with excitement.

The snow falls relentlessly during the three days of Ka's turbulent stay in Kars. Majestic snowflakes create piles of snow which cover "the dirt, the mud, the darkness... cast a veil over hatreds, greed and wrath." The snow also keeps the city's unemployed, hopeless, and chain-smoking old and young men in smoke polluted coffee and teahouses, sitting "next to stoves that never gave out any heat unless stirred continuously, electric heaters that ran off illegal power lines, and silent television sets that no one ever turned off." Kars had witnessed prosperity and architectural opulence when Armenians, Russians, Ottomans, and early Republican Turks lived there and made the city "a modest center of civilization." Now, as a city of the Turkish Republic, it is in a state of decay, destitution, and depression, with an ethnically, culturally, religiously and politically diverse population in a constant state of suspicion, conflict, betrayal, and violence: Kurds against Turks, ethnocentrists against Europhiles, Islamists against secularists and atheists. He comes to feel as "if he entered a shadow world...as if he had retreated into the silence of snow to escape from these stories of misery and poverty."

Confined to this environment because of intriguing political developments, ethnic and religious conflicts, and severe weather conditions, Ka spends his days roaming the often deserted streets of Kars, visiting tea and coffee houses, engaging in conversations about politics, discrimination and oppression, murders and assassinations, art and religion. In one coffeehouse he is witness to the assassination of the Director of the Institute of Education who was not letting head-scarf girls into their classrooms. The desolation and remoteness of Kars "hit him with such force that he felt God inside him." It had been years since he last wrote a poem in Frankfurt. In

the course of three days in Kars, he writes a total of nineteen poems feeling "like a medium, as if someone were whispering the poems into his ear." He calls his first poem "Snow" and is invited to read it during a town theater night which proves to be a political coup staged by the state secularists. The event leads to the killings, arrests, imprisonment and execution of many Islamists and Kurds. "You have to kill them before they kill you," declares Z.

Demirkil, the defender of the secular state. Looking at the dead body of a young Kurd who had befriended him the day before, Ka's first thought was of "the shortness of mankind's journey from birth to death in the face of executions." He meets with representatives of all political and religious factions, is suspected, interrogated and followed, but he is spared the beatings and humiliation to which Islamists and Kurds are subjected. Ka is aware of the risks to his safety but his insight into the ways the country's system works enables him to navigate himself through the labyrinth of the many dangerous situations he encounters.

Ka is a guest at the Snow Palace Hotel, which is run by Ipek's father, Turgut Bey. In making love to Ipek in this hotel feels like a miracle, and waiting for her late arrivals to his room makes him feel the pain that "had began in his belly spread to his soul." As the hours go by, the havoc and pandemonium in Kars interfere with Ka's plans for a married life in bliss and happiness in the "German-Turkish world" of Frankfurt.

Ka is the narrator of most of the novel. His best friend Orhan joins in as an alter ego to describe events that took place: first in Frankfurt four years after Ka's return there, and later in Kars, where he traveled to see the city and get first hand information about the three days his friend had spent there, and to meet Ipek in person.

In Frankfurt, Orhan learns that Ka lived an isolated life in a cluttered apartment, visiting sex shops and using "small cubicles for viewing

porno films." He supplemented his small asylum benefit with collections from poetry readings, attended only by small Turkish audiences. When in Kars, Orhan is informed that during the past four years, the only new development in the city is that "everyone is watching a lot more TV; rather than spend their days sitting in a teahouse, the unemployed prefer to sit at home watching free films beamed from all over the world by satellite... the white dishes now itched to the edge of every window." At an official dinner given in his honor, Orhan finds Ipek "more beautiful than anyone could have imagined." It is at this dinner, he writes, "where I had my first glimpse of her, I found myself stunned, bedazzled, and deeply jealous. . . It was at this astounding moment that I must have decided to write the book now in your hands."

In the maze of this political novel, the major themes Pamuk focuses on include the effects of poverty and immigrant status, of political and religious oppression, of the violation of women's rights, and the divide between East and West.

Poverty runs rampant in Kars. Unemployed men are "no longer sure they could afford to go to the teahouse because of the high price of a glass of tea." These are men who know only too well that "no one else in Turkey could be as wretched, poor, and unsuccessful as they." The elements of poverty and helplessness that Ka encounters are shocking. He is informed by locals that the negative perception the West has of them is based on their poverty. "We aren't stupid, we're poor... the poor have hearts, minds, humanity, and wisdom just as everyone else."

Turks who immigrate to Germany in search of a better life or for political reasons, return to Turkey in Western dress reflecting a presence of superiority. Men and women who come to Kars from poorer neighboring countries in search of employment are detested by the locals. Being accused of his Westernization, Ka confesses "I may belong

to the intelligentsia in Turkey, but in Germany I am a worthless nobody." When in Frankfurt, Orhan sees on the faces of his immigrant compatriots "the loneliness and defeat so commonly seen in first-generation immigrants and political exiles." In Kars, the army persecutes men and women from neighboring Georgia who enter the city illegally and "tackle these parasites and clean the city." In these descriptions, Pamuk captures the universal plight of and discrimination against immigrant populations.

The crowning event at the end of Ka's first day in Kars is a televised stage performance which, in reality, is a staged event for a coup by the defenders of the Republic. The purpose of the coup is to influence the results of the municipal elections and to protect the state "against Kurdish separatist guerillas and Islamist fundamentalists." In the uproar that follows Kurds and Islamists are executed indiscriminately. All Koran and Kurdish political activity is suspended, and young men handcuffed to one another "were badly roughed up, their faces were covered with bruises, their heads were shaven, their faces and eyes swollen from beatings." Pamuk's detailed description of this "cleanup operation" vividly depicts the brutal side of man, the unlicensed use of power, and the unpredictable fate of the oppressed ethnic, religious and political minority.

In his attempt to investigate the suicide epidemic among young Muslim women wearing head scarves, the stories he heard "would haunt him for the rest of his life." After having been told their whole lives by parents and religious figures to keep their heads covered, the secular state wants them to take their scarves off. They are banned from schools when all they were doing is "obeying the laws of their religion" by choosing to honor God's rather than the Government's decree on women and scarves. In a state of confusion, oppression, and helplessness, they commit suicide; a grave sin for a Muslim.

According to Kadife, “the moment of suicide is the time when they understand best how lonely it is to be a woman and what being a woman really means. Women kill themselves because they hope to gain something. In Kars, men do not fear their women’s intelligence; they fear their independence.” Pamuk also offers descriptions of Georgian and Ukrainian women’s maltreatment by Turkish men: the married dairy owners and leather merchants who use them for sexual pleasure under severe inhumane conditions. The troubling double-standard that protects the purity and virginity of a family female member and blatantly assaults the dignity of destitute helpless women is a toxic cultural practice. Pamuk’s descriptions capture this universal form of toxicity.

Finally, Ka’s conversations with the secular republicans, the Islamist fundamentalists, the transformed communists and the atheists, the young and the old, the male and female citizens of Kars, offer insight into the East-West divide that they believe causes irreconcilable cultural and religious differences. The terrorist acts that transcend national boundaries today can be better understood in the context of what happens in Kars in the course of three days. “Don’t do me the injustice of holding me to European standards that were never designed for us! Let me tell you what happens to fools who wander around Kars pretending to be Europeans...three days, that’s all it takes, three days and they are dead, shot, gone for ever,” Serdar Bey, the publisher of the local paper, tells Ka. Blue, the handsome and charismatic Kurdish hero, says that in Kars, if one worships God as a European, he is bound to be a “laughingstock.” In his conversations Ka is repeatedly reminded that in Kars one will be killed for being “a little Westernized,” for wearing a tie or a fancy coat like the one he bought in Frankfurt. “To think like a Westerner is not possible; plus it can

break a man’s pride to try,” he hears someone say. When Orhan visits Kars and is inspired to write *Snow*, a young male Kurd warns him that “if you write a book set in Kars and put me in it, I’d like to tell your readers not to believe anything you say about me, anything you say of us. No one could understand us from so faraway.” Pamuk’s reporting of these chilling expressions by Kars citizens increases the reader’s skepticism about the success of attempts to bridge the East-West divide.

The globalization of concerns about freedom of speech, tolerance and respect of ethnic and religious differences, equal and equitable treatment independent of one’s gender and political affiliation, make *Snow* very relevant and enlightening reading. In the words of Margaret Atwood: “*Snow*...is essential reading for our time.”

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