



Ethnic Margins and Discourses in Turkish Polity: Analysis Based on Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*

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Abstract

The paper discusses the discourses generated in the social and political milieu of Turkey during the 1990s, based on the time frame in Pamuk's *Snow*. History is embedded in the novel, and the plot is connected mainly to events such as the headscarf controversy and the military coup of 1997. The novel features the dominance of political Islam and issues connected to religion and politics. The techniques and structures of power in the novel are investigated with reference to Michael Foucault's concepts of power. The analysis exposes the administration of power and the strategies implicit in the various actions and behaviours.

Keywords: Discourse, power, political Islam, secular Islam, ethnicity, westernisation, biopolitics, biopower, disciplinary power.

Snow portrays the conflict between the political, religious and ethnic conceptualisations engendered by the intricacies and malformations in the Turkish system. Turkey has been a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic empire from the Ottomans to the modern era. Ethnic and religious distinctions of the empire, tellingly, the marks of its diversity and divisiveness, are customarily present in modern Turkey also. The constitutional amendment for the secularization of Turkey; effectively a project for

westernisation and modernization, was enacted in 1937. Though the status of Islam as the official religion of the country was removed from the constitution in 1923, the politicized and nationalized religion was indelible in the cultural memory of the nation. Ataturkism envisaged a nation disengaged from the Ottoman heritage as well as reified by secular nationalism, 'Turkishness' and modernity. Cultural revolution inaugurated by Ataturk's reforms initiated a cultural insurgence which replaced the Ottoman aristocracy with

revolution, military coup and modernization. The ideals of the revolution were propagated among the Anatolian peasants by the intelligentsia as well as the educators and Anatolian peasants became inflamed with the zeal for nationalism and 'Turkishness'.

According to Goknar, the following formula was executed towards the transformation of the Ottoman empire into the secular republic of Turkey:

...the cultural revolution abolished the Ottoman sultanate (1922); abandoned the cosmopolitan Ottoman capital, Istanbul, for rural Ankara (1923); abolished the Islamic Caliphate and religious courts (1924); outlawed Sufi orders and adopted European-style dress (1925); adopted the European calendar, criminal, civil, and commercial codes (1926); changed the alphabet from Ottoman script to Latin letters (1928); struck the declaration identifying Islam as the state religion from the constitution (1929); granted women the right to vote (1934); and enshrined secularism, revolution, and statism as constitutional principles (1937). (57)

Racial hygiene, ethnic cleansing and genocide impelled the various segments of the population to assert their Turkishness and fervent nationalism. As religion became reconceptualized, it was eliminated from the social sphere and got restricted to the personal domain. Pamuk's *Snow* was germinated by socio-political happenings such as Susurluk scandal which blamed the illicit alliance between government and paramilitary groups, and the 'post-modern coup' of 1997, wherein the military imposed the resignation of prime minister Erbakan.

Islam states:

The military and secular political and social establishment's understanding of

secularism was and is not simply about separation of church and state but in fact a "secular fundamentalism" that saw religion as a threat, a source of backwardness, and an obstacle to modernization, and feared that Islamists had a hidden agenda to create an Islamic republic. (Islam IV)

The ousting of Erbakan was ostensibly to alleviate the political anxieties of the secularists and other dissident groups. Another case which intensified the political crisis was the political discrimination exercised against Merve Kavakci Islam, on account of her headscarf. Merve Kavakci won the election in 1999, but was prevented from taking the oath as she was wearing a hijab which was manifestation of her political Islamist identity. There were four military coups in Turkey since the publication of *Snow* in 2002, and the coups represented an iconoclastic revulsion for conventional Islam and unquestioning obedience for extremist secularism. According to Goknar, "(This so-called "postmodern coup" later inspired Pamuk's novel *Snow*") (43). The self-declared commitment of the military towards the nation and the secular sentiments, turn detrimental to the chances of reconciliation. Findley comments on the situation in Modern Turkey, "Amid the many differences of identity politics, the sharpest polarizations are still those over the issues of religion and secularism" (415). Secular quality which defines the government becomes evasive and deteriorates into secular fundamentalism. In the inveterate clash between secular and the political, religious and the irreligious, Turk and the non-Turk, no group consolidates power, though the secular Islam and the nationalists are supporters of the state.

The religious, political and geopolitical aspects of Turkey make it indefinable to both external and internal perspectives. The metaphorical relationship between religion and politics renders it uncongenial for the inhabitants. Cengiz states, "The tension here is between living in a "secular Turkey" and

creating an Islamic way of life, hence protecting a sense of difference" (111). Ethnic minorities had never been part of Turkey's predominant cultural assumptions, since the country cherished a bipartite structural organization. By the Treaty of Lusanne in 1923, all muslim citizens in Turkey, indiscriminately of their language and ethnicity, came to be regarded as Turks. Subject positions based on muslim and non-muslim identities have been the points of contention in Turkey since the Ottoman period. The Turkish Historical Society and the Turkish Language Society established in the 1930s were two state mechanisms which focussed on the propagation of Turkism.

Though Turkey has a fundamental multi-ethnic population which includes Kurds, Alevis, Circassians, Lazis, Armenians, Greeks, Russians and others, Turkish nationality is decided by the degree of Muslim identity. The secular status of Turkey serves only to create an abject and parochial attitude of the elite religious class towards the mild, diffused, unstructured subculture categories. The attempts of the Attaturkian government for the dilution of the religious centralism substituted it with aggressive strife between fundamental Muslims and secular Muslims. Specifically, after the establishment of the Modern Republic of Turkey, the political space in Turkey became ultimately one of unswerving friction between the radical muslim sects and the secular muslim groups. State being a monolithic elitist establishment, does not safeguard the interests of the nonstandardised, marginalized, untagged sections of the population who are neither secularists nor fundamentalists.

Snow presents the ideological confrontations and the power engagements which are natural and aspiring for the hierarchical arrangement of the populations. Power operative in the network of social relations, may be at times concealed, and exercised unawares through its carriers. Kars in the novel is a garrison town which is kept under the inspecting gaze of the army as well as the

fundamental reactionaries of religion. The disciplinary power of the state produces different subjectivities, gestures as well as compartments necessary for maintaining the power structures of the system. Turbulence in Turkey is emblematic of the ethnocultural marginality experienced by the Kurds, Armenians and Caucasians, within the territory of Turkey. The post-Ottoman regime strategically places the entirety of the national experience on secular Islam and political Islam. Hence the non-muslim section of the population is relegated to the margins, except for the non-muslim Elites. The sidelined communities have only diminutive power at their disposal as they are placed outside the margins of the society. There is hierarchy existing in the power structures. Foucault says, "In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, coordinated cluster of relations". (*Power/Knowledge* 198) Segregation of non-muslim residents is pre-existent in Turkey and the millet system proves the religious pattern of organization in the Ottoman empire. The state tries to suppress multiple discourses and it shows an aberration towards absolutism. The multicultural groups are delimited with reference to this tactic. The preponderant groups manage to make the population compact and in compliance with their edicts. The biopolitical state maintains an ethnic divide which triggers the tension between the Turkish nationalists and immigrant population. "Biopower does not operate anymore at the level of the individual, but it is waged at the level of the population, and, more important, exercised in the name of the biological existence of a population" (Cisney and Morar 16).

Kerim Alakuşoğlu (Ka), the protagonist, dwells on Armenian population of Turkey. The Armenian traders essentially formed the diverse nature of Turkish civilization. Evacuation of ethnic outlaws by the state, deserted the Russian and Armenian buildings in the Attaturk park. Resistance against forced islamization and Armenian demand for

independence incited the Armenian genocide of 1915. State conspired with the agencies of power to disallow the life of undesirable population, to the points of massacre and deportation. The biopower administered against the Armenian citizens proves ethnocultural power index of the Armenians. Mendieta describes the connection between biopower and biopolitics, "Biopolitics is thus part of a conceptual triptych: biopolitics deploys biopower in order to produce events and processes that result in a biohistory" (42).

Euro-scepticism is widely observed in the novel; for instance, society's perception towards Ka. On his return after twelve years of exile in Germany, Ka is viewed suspiciously by the authorities as well as the commoners in Kars. Ka's inclusion in the public events is guaranteed only by the recommendation of some state agent such as Sardar Bey. According to Necip the religious fundamentalist, "To become an atheist, then you must first become a westerner" (Pamuk 145). Blue, the fundamentalist turns suspicious about Ka's German friend Hans Hansen. Blue turns strangely inquisitive to know if there is a cross on the wall of the German reporter Hansen Hans's house. Blue as well as Kadif, the fundamentalist become overtly concerned about the religious preoccupations of Europe. Kadif is eager to preserve Turkish culture against the intrusion of European cultures. She warns Ka "Whatever you do, don't try to belittle him by playing the conceited, foreign-educated European sophisticate" (229).

Z Demirkol, a paramilitary agent and a pro-soviet communist, return from Germany to protect the nation against Kurdish Separatist Guerillas and Islamist fundamentalists. Kurdistan which forms the south west part of Turkey is distinctive with its sparsely populated mountainous regions, non-urban peasantry and Kurdish elites. State is insensitive towards the isolation of the community and precludes the efforts for secession. The outcry of Kurds against poverty and unemployment as well as the efforts of the Kurdish nationalists, to restructure

the boundaries of the nation is menacingly viewed by the state. In the novel, police raids the headquarters of the People's Freedom Party in the Halil Pasa Arcade, and Kurds are arrested for subversion. Kurds are considered as infiltrators who come down the mountains to attack the people. Discipline enforced by the state produces delinquencies and criminalities which are necessary for the continuity of the state and its agencies of power. The state creates expendable populations with its religious, racial and ethnic norms, and employs the techniques of massacres, policing, and crossfires to regulate the population. Ka talks about the comment of Muhtar Bey, the leader of Islamist Prosperity Party, "...he told me how Kars had been witness to an endless string of murders, massacres and other evils dating all the way back to the time of the Armenians" (Pamuk 164).

Serdar Bey, a journalist of Kars is mysteriously murdered for his intimacy with the Kurds. The political islamists, and ethnic minorities are persistently kept under surveillance and the inspecting gaze is severe than the physical punishment. Those who intervene, in the decision making of the state or other dominant hierarchies, are murdered. Biopower is in force with regard to the inadmissible class of people who are trying to share the identity of the state.

Thus, the journalist is killed, which makes the power network broken or nonvalid in his case. In the wake of the massacre at the National theatre, two army trucks attack religious high school boys. Boys barricade the doors shouting "God is great" (Pamuk 172). Kurdish boys are murdered in the encounter. Actor Sunay Zaim is a champion of Ataturk's westernization project, and he masterminds the catastrophe at the National theatre, with the silent backing of the state. State wants the transgressor or the undesirable to be exterminated from the domain and so intimidates him with punishment.

Tea houses in Kurds are filled with

unemployed men. During curfew, Kurds are held dubious and MIT (National Intelligence Organization, Turkey) agents and Officers interrogate them for their identity cards. Even the chauffeur is requested to keep these men under a precautionary watch. The identity of the Kurds suggests security risks for the nation. Curfews are biopolitical controlling techniques which express the governmental concern for the population, 'against the fundamentalists and Kurds'. Apparently, these people hold the subject positions of disposable population and is always kept under surveillance. With regard to the ethnic groups in Turkey, the suspectful gazes as well constant intervention in their personal and social life by the dominant population effectively acts as penetrating devices of power. Some of the Turkish soldiers as well as Kurds who are visitors at a Turkish nanny's shop undergo ill-health. Nanny's sarbath becomes the hypothetical reason for illness, and kurds are accused for their malevolence towards Turkish soldiers. Kadif confirms the rumour. "Some Kurds are so unhappy that they know no God" (Pamuk 224). The welfare of the Kurds is decided by the discourses of the elite. It says, "Angry Kurds poisoned the sherbet to kill the military personnel" (Pamuk 224). State minoritizes the ethnic people and discipline them to become self-critical of their unwarranted status in the state. Zahide, the Kurdish maid is confined to domestic commitments and her world is limited to cooking pots or cutlery. Scattered and miserable groups like Ukranian and Georgian women are smugglers and prostitutes in the hotels of Turkey

Another issue which is central to the plot of the novel is a series of suicide episodes. As per the directives of the state, the women are not allowed to wear headscarves in universities, and those who wear it will be dismissed from the colleges. The fictional event has a historical parallel. In response to the recommendation of the military, a rule banning the headscarf in the universities was enacted in the aftermath of the

1997 military coup,

The Turkish Muslim women student organizations and Islamic feminists raised this headscarf issue at both the national and the international level and approached the Turkish Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights. But their claims were discarded as an indispensable step taken by the secular government to ensure the democratic set up of the country from the realms of Islamic fundamentalism. This response deepened the growing gulf between the secularists and the religious fundamentalists (Devi 2)

The state and the secular regime want the integration of religious women's interests with the progressive imaginations of secular women. Headscarf is used as an apparatus for sustaining difference, for exclusion of religious women from the secular domains. The dispute in the name of headscarf indicates the intent of both the groups to induct their individualized mode of religious belief in a secular nation.

Armies rage violent conflicts with the Kurdish nationalists and make the Kurds extremely desperate and revengeful. Detectives are deployed at coffeehouses as part of the surveillance mechanism. Perpetual involvement in the affairs of the Kurds persuade them to reject the hierarchical possibilities of power. Kurds launch resistance schemes such as bombing, kidnapping, destruction of Atatürk statue, poisoning the water supply etc. (Pamuk 214). The patronizing power of the mainstream cultural discourses disrupt the integrity and connectedness of the life of Kurds.

Socialist militancy in the city enlist the support of the Kurds for their ambushes and fightings. In a conclave held at Hotel Asia, Kurds deprecate their poverty, "No one in Europe is as poor as we are" (Pamuk 277). The youths condemn the otherness and inferior status attributed to their literature by the west.

One of the youths says, "When they write poems or sing songs in the West, they speak for all humanity. They are human beings- but we are just Muslims. When we write something, it is just ethnic poetry" (Pamuk,2004, p.288)

Conclusion

The state and the various regimes are keen to restrict the multiple discourses of religion, race, and nationality, which are non-compliant and non-conformist. The connectivities mobilize the discourses and the discourses create power. The novel reveals the assorted application of disciplinary power, biopower, and sovereign power to expel the dissenters in the state and to limit them to the margins. State imposes the visibility of its citizens, particularly of the fundamentalists and the minorities. The network of operations in the society is powerful, but nobody holds absolute power. Resistance is an established pattern of power behaviour in the relations of the nation and achieves violence, reforms, policy changes, crimes, massacres etc. as the outcome. Foucault explains the productive aspect of power, "It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Power/Knowledge 119). The power mechanisms in the novel are indicative of constructive changes and productivity rather than oppression, since effective resistance is being exercised among the various components of power. In the case of headscarf controversy or ethnic conflicts, the minority groups protest, with the effect of universal reverberations.

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