

Original Article

Exploring Socio-Economic Dimensions in Orhan Pamuk's Novel Snow

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ABSTRACT: *This article presents Orhan Pamuk's novel Snow as a compelling and multi-layered exploration of the socio-economic tensions that underlie the political and religious conflicts in 1990s Turkey. Although Snow is frequently interpreted through ideological lenses highlighting the friction between secularism and Islam, East and West, and modernity and tradition its deeper significance lies in its critique of systemic economic injustice, marginalization, and state failure. Pamuk situates the narrative in Kars, a remote, poverty-stricken town that symbolizes the periphery of the Turkish nation, both geographically and socio-politically. In Kars, economic deprivation is not merely a backdrop but a driving force behind the unfolding tensions. The novel illustrates how material conditions such as unemployment, poverty, and exclusion from education lead to widespread despair, particularly among the youth. This despair does not naturally evolve into religious extremism; rather, it creates a vacuum of meaning, dignity, and belonging one that radical ideologies are quick to fill. The article further examines Pamuk's portrayal of the state's complicity in deepening social fragmentation. Through corruption, coercive secular policies (such as the headscarf ban), and neglect of rural and conservative populations, the state appears more as an agent of repression than of support. This failure of governance erodes public trust and pushes disenfranchised individuals toward alternative forms of community and justice, particularly through Islamist groups that promise moral clarity and socio-political empowerment.*

KEYWORDS: Socio-Economic, Radicalism, Poverty, Alienation, In-betweenness

1. INTRODUCTION

Orhan Pamuk the Turkish novelist Pamuk argues that economic changes in Turkey are not neutral but they interact with identity, history, and ideology. Pamuk wrote Snow during a time (early 2000s) when Turkey was actively pursuing membership in the European Union. Snow uses literary realism and symbolic geography to critique the socioeconomic consequences of Turkey's modernization. Pamuk ultimately asks whether Turkey's pursuit of Western-style economic progress has come at the cost of social cohesion and human dignity. The Prevalence of Regional inequality, Urban-rural divide, Unemployment and youth disillusionment is portrayed in the novel Snow through the depicted incidences and actions of the characters. He shows how rapid economic modernization, without inclusive development, will foster cultural resentment.

In the novel Snow economic crisis permeates the background and directly affects the characters' lives, choices, and emotional states. The narrative takes place in Kars, a small town in eastern Turkey that is far away and not very prosperous. Kars is very poor and has few chances, while the western cities of Turkey, like Istanbul and Ankara, are much richer and more connected to European markets and ways of life. A socio-economic reading of Snow reveals how these themes are intertwined with the material conditions of the characters and the broader economic landscape of late 20th century Turkey.

The novel follows a Turkish poet, Kerim Alakusoglu popularly called Ka. He was living in exile in Germany, and returns to Turkey to pay a visit to the town Kars on a snowy season. Officially he comes as a reporter to cover the news of young women committing suicides, he conveys to his fellow traveller "I'm a journalist, I'm interested in Municipal elections- and also the women who've been committing suicide." (06) Personally he comes for a patch up with his once lady love Ipek. Reaching Kars on a meeting with Ipek he even proposes to Ipek saying "I found out in Istanbul that you and Muhtar had separated, I came here to marry you" (36). As Ka becomes entangled in the town's political tensions, he encounters a wide range of characters. Several decades later, a friend of Ka named Orhan (Pamuk's fictional alter ego) looks back on Ka's last years and tries to figure out what really happened in Kars and why Ka was killed.

In Orhan Pamuk's book Snow, the differences between Islamists and secularists go beyond just their beliefs. It also has a lot to do with money. Pamuk's book gives a delicate and detailed picture of the tensions in Turkey in 2002. Snow uses the made-up town of Kars as a small version of bigger problems. This gap is shown in the book. Snow looks at the dichotomy not just as

two opposing ideas, but also as the setting they take place in and the struggles each character faces. People also use political power for their own ends. The history and deep culture of Turkey cause its people to be divided.

Turkey was greatly affected by Westernization in the 1990s. It changed politics, culture, and the economy, and it caused a lot of stress. Globalization brought about new problems in the 1990s. Also, the European Union's wants came to light. But there were still differences in ideas. After a long time of government-controlled growth, neoliberal economic reforms were put into place. The neoliberal restructuring in Turkey provided a comprehensive analysis of economic performance following the crisis, examining fundamental issues such as privatization, export growth, labor market developments, poverty, and social exclusion. Turkey put these rules into effect. Some changes were good for the economy. So, cities that were more Westernized, like Istanbul, did well. But the eastern parts, like Kars, stayed pretty poor for some reason. But Istanbul did see a lot of new trendy cafes and imported clothes. There are still traditional carpet weaving businesses in Kars, in any case. They somehow still struggle and they're trying, but just can't keep up in competition to mass-produced goods. Hence, Westernization proved both promising and troubling for Turkey.

Characters in the novel frequently compare their poverty and backwardness to the glamour of Western cities and Turkish urban centres. The ideological divide in *Snow* is not just religious vs. secular, but also rich vs. poor and urban vs. rural. The liberal elite have access to European goods, education, and ideas. People with low incomes in Kars do not. Turgut Bey believes that embracing Europe will bring modernization and economic benefits to all, not just the elite but Pamuk's novel questions whether that's really true.

Ka is a 42-year-old Turkish poet who has lived in political exile in Germany for twelve years is the protagonist of the novel *Snow*. He returns to Turkey and travels to the remote, snowy town of Kars to report on a wave of suicides among young women, as well as to reconnect with Ipek, a beautiful woman he once knew and still desires. The protagonist Ka, a poet returning from exile in Europe, brings with him the material and ideological markers of the liberal, Western world modern clothing, imported cigarettes, intellectual pretensions.

Ka's journey reflects the class-based internal conflict of the Westernized intellectual, "he was sitting next to the window and wearing a thick charcoal coat that he'd bought at a Frankfurt Kaufhof five years earlier"(3). This line vividly captures how Ka's European attire symbolized by the coat immediately sets him apart in Kars, signalling his elite, cosmopolitan identity and detachment from the local milieu. Ka returns to Kars with European ideals but finds them inadequate for addressing local suffering.

Ka as mentioned by the narrator had "a middleclass upbringing...He had grown up in a secular republican family and had taken no religious tuition outside the school" (18-19). The character Ka in the novel reflects his scepticism about political martyrdom and ideological extremism through a conversation with Kadife. He says "In a brutal country like ours, where human life is 'cheap', it's stupid to destroy yourself for the sake of your beliefs. Beliefs? High ideals? Only people in rich countries can enjoy such luxuries" (320). Through the character Ka Pamuk critiques the elitist Westernizing tendencies of the Turkish bourgeoisie, who look down on the rest of the country. Ka states in a conversation with Sheik "This place, this city, this house... they make me afraid. Because you all seem so strange to me"(97).

In a secret meeting where various political and ideological groups debate how to address Europe and the West, Turgut Bey a character who is a liberal elite declares "we all know what Europe has come to mean...Europe is our future, and the future of our humanity" (277). Turgut embodies the tension between secular intellectualism and burgeoning religious conservatism. He balances the prestige of enlightenment ideals with the pragmatic fear of rising Islamist aggression. In a conversation Turgut Bey even says "In Turkey too we have people who believe in common sense and democracy" (279). This statement reflects the aspirations of Turkey's secular, Western-leaning elite, who see alignment with Europe not only as a cultural or political ideal but as an economic necessity. Turgut Bey, as a member of the Western-educated elite, sees Europe as a path to development, modernization, and opportunity that could lift regions like Kars out of poverty.

In the 1990s, Turkey took significant economic steps toward Western-style capitalism, especially through integration with the EU and adoption of neoliberal reforms. But without the political stability and social inclusiveness to match, these Westernizing economic policies also created deep cultural and class divisions. Many citizens felt torn between Islamic tradition and Western modernity. The Turkish state, especially under the influence of the military and judiciary-imposed restrictions on the wearing of Islamic headscarves (hijab) in public institutions. Pamuk's portrayal of this issue mirrors Turkey's identity crisis, caught between Western modernity and Islamic tradition. The narrator of the novel conveys that in the view of the secular state, the headscarf was a political symbol, not a religious one through a conversation between a stranger and the director of the Education Institute. The stranger before shooting him says "We live in a secular state that has banned covered girls from schools... Does the word 'secular' mean Godless" (40).

The negative impact of a consumerist economy in Turkey is a recurring theme in Orhan Pamuk's work, especially in how he reflects on the cultural, social, and psychological consequences of modernization and Westernization. His novels often critique the loss of cultural identity, alienation, and the emptiness of materialism, particularly within Istanbul's urban, middle-class society. Kars, a remote and impoverished town in northeastern Turkey, becomes a microcosm of Turkey's political and economic tensions. Once a cosmopolitan hub during the Russian Empire's occupation, it has since declined into obscurity, poverty, and social stagnation. The narrator tells "It (Kars) was the poorest, most overlooked corner of Turkey." (18) Pamuk repeatedly describes the town's crumbling infrastructure, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. The bleak economic reality breeds frustration, religious radicalism, and political extremism. In Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, the heavy snowfall that blocks all roads in and out of Kars is more than just a plot device it carries strong symbolic and metaphorical meaning.

The snowstorm physically cuts Kars off from the rest of Turkey, including Istanbul and Ankara. No one can leave or enter the town. This geographic entrapment mirrors how the town feels socially, politically, and economically isolated from the rest of the country especially from the wealthier, modern, secular urban centres like Istanbul. While the snowstorm in *Snow* is not just weather it is a powerful metaphor for how the people of Kars are cut off from the mainstream narrative of Turkish modernity, neglected by central power, and left in ideological limbo, caught between tradition and change, Islam and secularism, poverty and development. The narrator says "He (Ka) stepped off the bus and his foot sank into the soft blanket of Snow... a blanket of snow had settled over the memories." (7). Economic liberalization and globalization are subtly shown to be irrelevant or inaccessible to most people in Kars, whose concerns are survival, dignity, and identity—not shopping or self-expression through brands.

The act of banning headscarves becomes more than a religious issue it becomes an economic and social exclusion. Poor, devout girls are denied upward mobility, making radical religious groups their only source of validation and identity. The Islamists in Kars, who oppose this vision, see Europe not as salvation, but as a source of cultural imperialism and economic exclusion. Kadife a character, challenges the hypocrisy of secular liberalism, arguing that true freedom should include religious expression. She says, "To play the rebel heroine in Turkey, you don't pull off your scarf. You put it on." (319) The headscarf ban in Turkey was not just a cultural or religious matter it was a powerful socioeconomic tool. It served to maintain elite control, limit upward mobility, and embed secularist ideology within state institutions and markets.

While talking with Sheik Ka says "I've always wanted this country to prosper, to modernise...I've wanted freedom for its people... But it seemed to me that our religion was always against all this" (98). The conversation of Ka and a young woman shows how the tradition and modern policy of Turkey has limited the economic choices of women. Pamuk emphasizes the uneven impact of modernization, pointing out that in an urbanized area like Istanbul, uncovered women are common and accepted, whereas in more rural, underdeveloped places like Kars, such behaviour is deemed unacceptable. Ka's desire to impose a Western understanding of love, politics, and reason onto Kars leads him to misread people's intentions and underestimate the depth of religious conviction in the town. Ka comes to Kars almost like a cultural tourist, fascinated by the chaos but ultimately untouched by it. His departure and his failure to act meaningfully parallel how Western economic interests often exploit or observe instability without engaging with its root causes.

In *Snow*, Pamuk is critical of both radical Islam and authoritarian secularism. However, it is the secular state's use of Westernized ideology to repress Islamic expression that most clearly demonstrates the degradation of Turkish culture. Conservative Muslim girls are barred from attending school and university due to the ban on headscarves, which represents a deeper economic and social exclusion. The headscarf issue was not only religious but economic it prevented education and future employment. The ban on headscarves in schools and universities affects women from conservative, lower-income backgrounds those who cannot afford to study abroad or bribe officials. In the novel, Pamuk exposes the dilemma of Turkish women through a conversation that takes place between Sunay and Kadife, saying "a few young women in Kars killed themselves because they were forbidden to cover their heads as they wished... As long as I can feel the love of God in my heart, there is no place for me in Kars" (410). Women's roles in *Snow* reflect their socio-economic vulnerability.

Political and religious ideologies are inseparable from economic realities. The failure of both the secular state and Islamist opposition to address material suffering perpetuates a cycle of violence, repression, and radicalization. The tension between Islamists and secularists is not just ideological but has strong economic underpinnings. Parties like the Republican People's Party staunchly defended the headscarf ban: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey. Though Atatürk did not formally ban the headscarf, his reforms laid the ideological groundwork. The military also thought of itself as the protector of secularism.

A lot of the characters are out of work or have jobs that are not very safe. Young people, in particular, are shown as having no direction and few opportunities, which makes them angry and radical. The young people in the book who use violence for religious or political reasons often do so because they are desperate for money. A lot of the characters in the story turn to Islamist politics not just because they believe in it, but also because they feel left out, humiliated, and cut off from economic opportunities.

In the 1990s, Turkey went through major economic changes due to liberalization, which changed both the way businesses worked and the way people lived every day. Consumerism made it clear that neoliberalism has two sides. This economic system brought both opportunities and problems to a political environment that was growing quickly but was also unstable. The rise of consumerism and economic liberalization shows how the poor, conservative Muslims, and young people who are unemployed are becoming more and more economically excluded and frustrated. Because the economy is not growing, many characters see moving to Europe or to a city as their main goal. The elite group uses modernization and republic protection to justify keeping already-poor communities from moving up in society.

Orhan Pamuk is Turkey's most famous novelist and a Nobel Prize winner. He uses complicated narrative techniques to look at how consumerism has grown along with economic liberalization in Istanbul. Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* features consumerism and economic liberalization as secondary themes within the broader social and ideological context of 1990s Turkey. The novel *Snow* provides a subtle yet impactful critique of Turkey's consumer-driven economy by illustrating how uncritical acceptance of materialism and modernity leads to historical erasure, emotional voids, and social alienation.

In Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*, the poor people in the city are forced to move because modernization makes promises that are never kept. Pamuk often writes about how Western consumerism affects economies that are already having problems without really helping the people who live there. Pamuk looks into Turkey's place between Eastern and Western influences and its fight between traditional and modern values as part of a larger identity crisis that started in the 1990s. Turkey's economic instability increases cultural anxiety, which causes Pamuk's characters to feel alone and spiritually empty. Pamuk uses subtle ways to criticize the government's neglect of remote areas and political ideas that do not deal with real economic suffering, as well as corruption and hypocrisy among the rich and powerful.

The book *Snow* gives a realistic picture of how women deal with financial problems while also dealing with emotional problems in a society that is divided. *Snow* serves as both a political narrative and a socioeconomic allegory. Pamuk's work looks at how poverty, cultural exclusion, and state repression shape people's identities and the beliefs of the public. The author depicts a multifaceted ideological landscape in which each position encounters challenges stemming from its social class interests, emotional needs, and economic consequences.

In *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk paints a clear picture of how different life is in cities compared to Kars, a small town that is far away and not growing economically. The book shows Kars as a place that has been left behind by modernization, almost as if it is frozen in time. This is a subtle way of showing how uneven urbanization is in Turkey. Pamuk says that modernization has had different effects on the middle class, "Once upon a time in Kars, there had been a large and prosperous middle class, and it had been removed from Ka's own world" (19). The rich descriptions of Kars its decline, its isolation, and its cultural conservatism paint a vivid picture of a place left behind amid Turkey's broader urbanization.

Economic hardship, High unemployment, especially in eastern provinces like Kars, the limited access to quality education and jobs, particularly for conservative or rural youth and the State's failure to deliver basic services and opportunity contributed to radicalization among young people, in Kars. The Muslim youth of Kars feel humiliated by Westernized Turks, as well as by economic conditions. Islamists promise to restore lost pride and dignity, especially through symbols like the headscarf, seen as defiance against secular humiliation.

In the novel many characters express deep resentment at Turkey's Westernization, which they view as a betrayal of their values and identity. For the people in places like Kars, modernization feels like cultural erasure and economic abandonment. A character Serdar Bey expresses "Please don't do me the injustice of holding me to European standards that were never designed for us" (308). Pamuk does not offer clear solutions but rather illuminates the tragic consequences of ignoring the material roots of social conflict. Through *Snow*, he calls for empathy, critical self-reflection, and a deeper understanding of the economic foundations of identity and ideology in modern Turkey. Pamuk's *Snow* portrays socioeconomic tension not just as a background for conflict, but as the engine behind Turkey's political, religious, and personal turmoil. These tensions between rich and poor, West and East, secular and religious are not abstract they're deeply lived by each character.

When education no longer guarantees a job, and the economy excludes large portions of the population, ideological groups fill the vacuum. Disillusioned youth may turn to religion, nationalism, or extremism to find identity and justice. Orhan Pamuk does not portray radicals as one-dimensional villains. Instead, he suggests that Economic inequality and cultural marginalization breed extremism. The character Blue is a central figure in the novel who represents the radical Islamist movement. He recruits young, disillusioned men, giving them a cause: defending Islam, tradition, and dignity against a secular, corrupt elite. The character Blue an ideologically charged figure and an Islamist dissident, reiterates "there is after all. Only one West and the only one western point of view. And we take the opposite point of view" (233). Blue stands as a powerful representation of political dissent, cultural resistance, and ideological revolution. In a narrative steeped in tensions between secularism and Islamism, modernity and tradition, Blue emerges not just as a political dissident but as a revolutionary figure who challenges the moral and philosophical foundations of the Turkish state.

Long-term unemployment in Turkey, especially among young men, creates frustration, hopelessness, and a loss of purpose. When individuals feel they have no future within the current system, they are more likely to embrace anti-system ideologies. Young men in Kars sit idle in teahouses and on street corners with nothing to do, no jobs, and no aspirations. Islamist groups like the one led by Blue offer a purpose and a mission in place of employment.

In the novel, young men are often described as ashamed, humiliated, or forgotten. Islamist movements promise to restore dignity through moral superiority and spiritual strength. Blue says that the young men of Kars have never had jobs, never had money, never had dignity and the religion Islam has given them dignity. For many of his followers, religion becomes a form of rebellion not only spiritual but deeply political and economic. Blue steps, not merely as a protestor, but as a voice for a population that feels silenced. Blue's revolutionary ideology is not driven solely by anger, but by a vision of cultural justice. In one of his conversations with Ka, he says "Our religion is not a dark cage, Ka. It is a palace with all the windows open to the light."

In *Snow*, Orhan Pamuk sees Westernization as a two-edged sword: with the promise of progress, it also causes alienation, repression, and cultural dissolution. The book does not praise either the West or traditional Islam. Instead, it shows how painful it is to give up your cultural roots for an imported identity. *Snow* is a sad meditation on a country that is losing itself in the West's mirror. It is a country that has forgotten how to be itself while trying to become someone else. Orhan Pamuk has written about Turkey's economic problems in the 1990s, which led to emotional and cultural instability. He writes about poverty, alienation, inequality, lost identity, and collective grief. Young men say they have no reason to live. They think that joining any religious cause, even a violent one, is better than being poor and not being seen.

The political, show, and thought mix in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*'s theatrical coup is one of the most memorable and symbolic events in the book. The coup that happens in the novel is not just a political event; it is a cultural show. It shows that Turkey is caught in a copy of Western modern life that is not real and does not touch the heart. The theatrical coup is worked out mainly by Sunay Zaim, a bad stage actor with strong secular ideas, working with the army and officials who are under the control of the state. It is mainly about secular dictatorship, but it also has a big effect on the economy.

The play "My Fatherland or My Headscarf" is performed as a sectarian play with an anti-secular propaganda in the National Theatre. Sunay Zaim puts on a show for the coup, using theater props like scripts, clothes, and shows. One of the most important parts is when he puts on a show that turns into a bloodbath. He and his guys shoot into the stands at the Islamists in the seats as if it were a show. Economic problems can make people and groups feel bad about themselves, especially when they are related to race, religion, or way of life. Pamuk skillfully links the show of political power to the harsh actualities of the towns, highlighting how money and the lifestyle of life make them feel left out.

Pamuk makes it clear that the problems and unrest in Kars are not just about religion; they are also about how poor and left out they are. Young men who follow Islamic groups often do so because they have no other choice, not just because they believe. When the state is seen as bad, not working, or only helping the rich, people lose faith in its right to rule. Radical groups call themselves the "true defenders of justice". They often promise a right or equal society.

The theatre group and the group of agitators in the novel are both examples of how the elite try to control things and how they make people feel like outcasts. The sudden show of power by the theatre group, called the Theatrical coup, while it is aimed at stopping political Islam, misses the real reason why it exists. By stopping Islamist voices by a show of force, without fixing the poverty or schools, the state keeps things the way they are and keeps unrest going. This suggests that there is a deeper money problem that the secular style of rule ignores, and in doing so, it helps the very groups that it claims to fight. Pamuk shows how high up officials in the government, especially those who deal with the law or spy on people, are mainly shadowy workers.

They keep Sunay in the spotlight and do the work behind the scenes to make the coup work. The Theatrical coup shows how people use power-as-symbol to hide the fact that they don't have much money, especially in Turkey's poorer and more religious areas. Pamuk criticizes a way of thinking in the West that values looks over reality and ideas over things like good schools and hospitals. This makes towns like Kars poor and ashamed.

Ka, the main character, does not take part in the coup directly, but her role is unclear and morally questionable. He is shocked by the violence, but he does not say what he thinks. He writes a poem not long after the massacre, which suggests that he is either horrified by it or sees it as an idealized version of what happened. He agrees to talk to Blue, the Islamist rebel, but then lies to him, which helps the coup. Pamuk uses this fake coup to make fun of the Turkish state's performative modernization, where ideological conflicts are fought not for justice but for show, and real suffering is turned into theater. The indistinct demarcation between art and authority, performance and power, reveals that Turkey's Westernization initiative, executed through spectacle rather than inclusion, engenders violence, alienation, and moral disintegration.

Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* is set in Kars, a small town that represents Turkey in the 1990s, a time when the country was dealing with economic instability, cultural differences, and political polarization. One of the most important themes of the novel is how young people become radicalized, especially into Islamist beliefs. Pamuk writes about how being poor can make this happen.

2. CONCLUSION

Snow talks about religion, identity, and politics, but Orhan Pamuk talks about something even more tragic: economic despair is what drives radicalism. The youth of Kars are not products of extremism; instead, they are shaped by a landscape of hopelessness and a future devoid of dignity. Pamuk implicitly critiques the economy through the unconscious clash of identities, illustrating a society that fails to provide justice, opportunity, and belonging, thereby fostering despair, which is the precursor to radicalism.

Snow is not merely a political or religious narrative; it fundamentally examines the socio-economic fissures that distinctly fragment individual existences and disrupt the national consciousness. The novel takes place in Kars, which is covered in *Snow* and has a gloomy atmosphere. It shows a community that is stuck between tradition and modernity, secularism and belief, wealth and poverty, and their fight against the long-lasting effects of economic indifference and inequality.

Pamuk makes it very clear that the unrest in Kars, and by extension in Turkey in the 1990s, is not just because of ideological differences. It is also because of economic stagnation, marginalization, and the lack of state protection or provision. These material conditions provide the foundation for ideological extremism to flourish.

The constant *Snow* in the book is a symbol that means a lot. The *Snow* means silence, stillness, and purity, but it can also mean repression, exile, and coldness of emotion. In a way, the *Snow* covers up the town. The town's socio-economic problems are hidden under a pile of social and political disagreements or domestic and religious conflicts that the wealthy upper classes ignore and a divided, often hostile, society denies.

Pamuk suggests that we need to realize that ideology can't guarantee peace or progress by bringing to light the problems that have been hidden. To make changes that last, we need to include everyone and treat them with respect. Without economic inclusion, social equity, and human dignity, no society can avoid descending into fear, factionalism, and violence.

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