postscriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies, Vol: 1 (January 2016)
Online; Peer-Reviewed; Open Access www.postscriptum.co.in
Mukherjee, Pritha. "Committing Suicide for a Headscarf: … " pp. 1-10

Committing Suicide for a Headscarf: Agency and the Feminist Subject in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*

Pritha Mukherjee
Assistant Editor, Orient Blackswan
Associate Editor, *Postcolonial Interventions*
<https://postcolonialinterventions.com/>

The author has pursued both bachelor's and master's degrees in English at Presidency University, Kolkata. She is primarily interested in postcolonial literatures and intends to work on the texts of trauma and violence in the context of Southeast-Asian politics, the memory narratives of partition survivors and refugees. She is also interested in the discourses of alternative feminism and female agency being shaped up in non-Western societies.

Abstract
In her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (2005),* Saba Mahmood points out that the identification of Islam as a patriarchal, conservative religion gives rise to the contention that the Islamic woman is a victim of the constrictive patriarchy of her religion, denied access to emancipatory modes of Western feminism. Mahmood argues that while this attitude of the West engages in a process of cultural hegemonisation by dangerously downplaying the uniqueness of the spatiocultural differences between the West and the Middle-East, it also ignores the exercising of individual will by the Islamic women. In my paper I will draw upon Mahmood's argument that the veil is not merely a symbol for faith, but an instrument in the construction of self-identity to interpret the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's engagement with the idea of women's suicides in a remote Turkish town in his novel *Snow* as an expression of oppression and thwarted autonomy resulting from the failure of a modernist state to accommodate non-liberal modes of agency and thought as embodied in the sartorial choice of a woman rejecting the emancipatory Western styles of dressing in favour of a traditional Muslim attire of a headscarf.

Keywords
Islamic feminism, female agency, politics of the dress

When in 1925, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk toured Turkey, seeking to abolish all signs of religion necessary for the establishment of his secular republic (White 150), the donning of the headscarf, as the most visible sign of the inferiority of Muslim women's position within their religion and society, was discouraged. As the contemporary Egyptian feminist leader Shairawi had noted, the headscarf was an instrument of patriarchal oppression and the "greatest obstacle to women's participation in public life" (qtd in Badran 93). In the modernist Kemalist Republic, therefore, the headscarf was banned.

Acknowledging this attempted polarisation of religion, culture and politics in the Turkish Republic, the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk observed in an interview with Z EsraMirze (2008) that the separation that the state wanted to achieve had failed, because the "religious identity is part of cultural identity, political identity is part of religious identity, and religious identity is also a part of Turkish political identity" (179). Instead of the "strong red mark between religion and the culture and identity", therefore, what had resulted was a "blurry" line (179). The unfortunate connotation of this indistinct separation for the formation of national identity forms the premise of Pamuk's novel *Snow* (2002).

Narrated as an attempt at reconstructing the last days of the narrator Orhan's friend Ka in the border town of Kars, *Snow* begins with a description of Ka's journey to Kars to investigate the 'municipal elections … and also the women who've been committing suicide' (6). A political exile from Turkey who was granted asylum at Frankurt, Ka was actually journeying from his mother's funeral at Istanbul to meet his lost love İpek at Kars. When he arrives at the town buried under a snowstorm, Ka is caught up in the shadow battle between the secular liberal politics of the state and the supposedly fundamentalist Islamic forces holed up in the town. Revolving around an opposition between faith and politics, the coup, with its focus on the liberation of the women, goes horribly wrong. Ka returns to Frankfurt with a notebook of nineteen poems composed at Kars, to be murdered by probable Islamist assailants. Nonetheless, nothing is finally unearthed, either about Ka's last days or about the 'headscarf girls' (16) he had declared a minor interest in.

Colleen Ann Lutz Clemens suggests in her paper that *Snow* is a thinly veiled allegory about the struggle over the headscarf between the Islamists trying to gain a foothold in the

government and the secularists trying to deny a place of importance to religion (139). She points out that Pamuk seems to suggest that the battle between the two factions indicates the inability of the Turkish women to voice their own demands distinctly by creating "parables of women entrapped in this struggle between a secular state and religious groups, and uses them as models of women's lack of agency to create their own form of resistance without eliminating themselves from the system through suicide" (140).

In my paper, I will argue that what Clemens perceives as 'lack of agency' (140) results from a misconstruing of the concept of women's agency as located "within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power" (Mahmood 36). In her work *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject,* Saba Mahmood critiques the failure of postmodernist feminism to perceive the problem of universalizing women's desires for liberation within the binarised model of 'subordination and subversion' in her work on the Piety Movement in Egypt (38). I will focus upon the suicides of the unnamed women to distinguish between the ones that result from direct victimhood and the ones which result from being precluded membership in the community. I also aim to draw upon Mahmoud's arguments on the agency of women willing to perform their religion as a part of the construction of self-identities to highlight that the suicide of Teslime, the leader of the 'headscarf girls' (Pamuk 16) is, in reality, a reaction against the robbing of her agency to create an "architecture of the self" (Mahmood 31) by both the state and the religious leaders.

While discussing that Liberal postmodernist feminism frequently runs the risk of stereotyping the religious, Muslim women as the silent, submissive Other, Mahmood invokes the Foucauldian premise of agency as arising out of the "capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions [which are] ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed" (29). In other words, the capability of a subject to act is determined by the relations of domination and subordination conditioning the cultural existence of the subject. It is almost natural therefore, that the women subjected to physical violence — one had been forced into consenting to the marriage proposal of an aged teahouse owner, one was beaten by her father over the control of a TV remote and the other by her drunken and unemployed husband seeking to vent his frustration—kill themselves, for that is all that they can do in their

situation. Their problem is, Clemens suggests, one of an inability "to move freely [being] impeded by cultural mores" (141).

As their culture dictates subjugation to patriarchal norms, even their right to end their lives is contested. Both the state and religion rush to decry suicide as criminal and blasphemous respectively. Simultaneously, their families refuse to recognize the validity of their suicides, identifying them as a mass hysteria triggered by outside influence, in this case, by the suicide epidemic at Batman.

While these suicides neatly fall into postmodernist feminism's presupposition that Muslim women need to "discard their societies in order to be liberated" (Leila Ahmed, qtd in Khan 10), a closer look at the other cases convinces the reader that this is not so. These girls, subjected, in most cases to verbal violence — one distraught over the rumours of her pregnancy and another over continuous jibes at her inability to conceive— had carefully premeditated their suicides, calculated the time and the small gaps in routine which would help them to end their lives and chose to die within the precincts of their homes. Their complete lack of privacy – "the suicide girls had had to struggle to find a private moment to kill themselves… even as they lay quietly dying, they'd had to share their rooms with others" (16) – does not suggest a doing away of community, but seems to be a final spectacle aiming to communicate their isolation to the others living within the communities which they had wanted to belong to.

The girl, who was slandered with a false report of pregnancy, was distraught over the termination of their engagement by her fiancé at the same time that her other, younger suitors also stopped visiting her house to propose marriage. The other was deeply ashamed at her inability to bear a child. Thus construed, the suicide of these women is not merely a straightforward case of an escape from domination, but a complex one resulting from a falling short of their agential aim to actively submit to the hegemonic norm of patriarchal domination instead of resisting it (Mahmood 9).

As Mahmood contends in her work, such agency would be untranslatable into the discourses of feminism which are based upon a "teleology of progressive politics" in relation to power (9). As a result, the active desire of these women to submit to the norms instead of resisting them would be inscrutable to the people trained in the model of oppositional

thinking. For both Ka and the deputy governor therefore, it "is certain that these girls committed suicide because they were extremely unhappy" (15). Even as he recognizes the flaw in this reasoning, the deputy governor is unable to come up with a better explanation, suggesting instead that the women may have been committing suicide to oppose the "chorus of male voices – fathers, imams, the state – remonstrating: 'Don't commit suicide!" (15).

As has already been pointed out earlier, the modernizing mission of the Turkish Republic was instituted upon liberal-secular politics in contradistinction to religion. The headscarf as a metonymic surrogate for the retrograde tendencies of Islam was therefore outlawed. In the novel, this symbolism of the headscarf is artistically embodied in the play *My Fatherland or My Headscarf*, performed by Sunay Zaim at the National Theatre of Kars, shortly before he stages the coup, on behalf of the government against the Islamists present in the town. The second scene of the play depicted a woman making "her grand gesture of independence, launching herself into enlightenment as she removed her scarf" (151). As Funda Eser, actress playing the role 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" (155). Even Sunay later tells Kadife that he was asking her to remove the headscarf for the same reason that he had "staged th[e] revolution", so that the "women could be as independent as women in Europe" (410). When sharp rejoinder immediately sounds from the back of the National Theatre, teeming with students from the religious high-school, "[s]o why not take off everything and run to Europe stark naked? "(155), the mutual exclusivity of the statist politics and theocratic logic becomes apparent.

For the State to proceed with its liberal aims, religious values and rituals would have to be sacrificed and vice versa. Eventually therefore, a systematic massacre of the boys of the religious high schools is organized by Sunay's party followed by routine rounding up and custodial torture of those arrested to reveal the plans of separatist Kurdish militants or the Islamic fundamentalists within the town.

Mahmood points out that many Islamic scholars opine that the "resurgence of Islamic forms of sociability … within a range of Muslim societies is best understood as an expression of resistance against the Western politico-cultural domination..." (28). As Kadife explains, "To play the rebel heroine in Turkey, you don't pull off your scarf, you put it on" (319). As a result, when the Director of the Institute of Education, Professor Nuri Yilmaz at Kars follows

the official order issued from Ankara to debar and expel all the girls wearing the headscarf from the premises of the institute, he is identified as an agent of the West, forced to confess at gunpoint “to being a pawn in a secret plan to strip the Muslims of the secular Turkish Republic of their religion and their honor and thereby, turn them into slaves of the West” (47).

What is almost easy to miss is the question that Professor Yilmaz poses to his would-be assailant, “[H]ow much suffering [have] w[e] caused our womenfolk by turning headscarves into symbols – and using women as pawns in a political game?” (43). His crazy, fanatic murderer responds, rather simplistically, that the veil is a marker of faith, a weapon that protects women from “the animal instincts of men in the street” (46).

The easy oppositionality illustrated by the murderer’s response is similar to Hande’s insistence that she cannot take her veil off for fear of turning into “either an evil stranger like the ‘agent of persuasion’ or a woman who can’t stop thinking about sex” (125). Her brand of Islamic feminism which made its “appear[ance] at a moment when the notion of secular state and society had taken hold” (Badran10) precluded a balanced view of both. This is why Hande, like Ka (a secular progressive liberal with leftist sympathies) is unable to account for Teslime’s suicide. Though she admits that she herself had presented the idea of committing suicide to Teslime, Hande professes her inability to gauge how a girl, as devout of faith as Teslime, could actually kill herself, despite being aware that suicide was blasphemy in Islam.

Hande observes that for Teslime, the first of the ‘headscarf girls’ and the only one to be named in the course of the narrative, “the headscarf did not just stand for God’s love; it also proclaimed her faith and preserved her honor” (121).This pronouncement, more in line, with Hande’s deeply political views, is still able to highlight the extreme importance of the veil for Teslime. Predictably therefore, Teslime was deeply shocked by the compulsion to remove her headscarf to avail herself of the facility of education at the government institute. Even though her mother continued to wear the veil, her family tried to convince her to part with it, like her friends who were worried that she would be expelled from the institution if she failed to follow the edict.

At the institute itself, a movement slowly gathered force, protesting against the statist diktat. As the narrator clearly spells out, it is these girls who had made Teslime aware of the investment of a deeply political symbolism in the headscarf: “Certainly it was they who

taught her to think of the headscarf girls as a symbol of 'political Islam'" (16). Despite being drawn into this movement as a way of resistance, the girls slowly surrender their veils once they realise that their stance would not hold ground before state power. Teslime however persists in her stubborn refusal to give up, resulting in an eventual expulsion from the institute. When she commits suicide however, the shock waves unsettle both sides of the camp.

Trained in the binaristic way of thinking, Teslime's friends as well as Ka are unable to understand that the significance of the veil for Teslime overreached concerns of religion or political affiliation. As may be argued, even her participation in the resistance movement results from what Foucault calls 'positive ethics'– the practicing of a specific set of highly localized practices or discourses which helps the individual to achieve "a particular state of being, happiness or truth" (Mahmood 28). In other words, Teslime wanted to be allowed to wear the veil not as a symbol of protest, but as a way of proclaiming her identity.

Clemens interprets Teslime's suicide as an act of protest to reclaim her own body by ending the chain of signification that disallowed her from making her own decision about what she wore (147). Evidently, the meaning of the headscarf, in terms of the construction her own identity, was disrupted both by the state's refusal to allow her to wear it and by the Islamic party's insistence that she wear it to demonstrate a stance of fundamental resistance. The garment then symbolised more than just a fulfilment of religious duties, as Marshall contends (109).

In fact, donning the scarf becomes a part of a "mutually constitutive relationship between body-learning and body-sense" for Teslime (Mahmood 157-158). So when it is denied to her, it is a disruption of her agency, her desire to "inhabi[t] norms" of religion and religiosity as a way of defining her self-hood. As Teslime reiterates in front of her family and friends, "her life had no meaning and that she no longer wanted to live" (17). Her suicide then is a resignation at the state's refusal to let her choose an ideology for herself as well.

As Kadife is convinced, Teslime's suicide would make a very "interesting story" (114) for Ka's friends in Germany and Istanbul, both audiences being easily predisposed towards the tendency of straitjacketing the matter as one of the long standing conflict between modernization and traditionalism. Presenting Teslime's story to the world as a simple case of fundamentalism would be congruent with the epistemological violence of

universalism engaged in by Western feminism (Ahmed 57). Ka however promises to tread carefully, even when he fails to understand the import of Teslime's suicide and is terrorized by all that he cannot explain.

That the veil is not a "manipulable mask in a game of public presentation" (Mahmood 157) becomes evident when İpek's sister Kadife is called upon by Sunay Zaim to participate in his final play at Kars before the snow cleared. Initially, she has to be convinced to agree to bare her head to save the life of her lover, the notorious Islamic terrorist Blue. However, she refuses to use a wig or use a body-double on the stage for the act, refusing to engage in hypocrisy for the sake of public opinion. Even when Blue is conducted to a safe house, she decides to continue with the act, dropping her headscarf by a supreme exertion of will.

Predictably Ka, who fails to comprehend the importance of the body in the creation of the self (Mahmood 159), does not understand why Kadife refuses to engage in the duplicity. Having merely perceived the political significance of the veil, he is surprised that Kadife is prepared to remove it even when the threat to Blue's life has abated. He does not realise that Kadife was embarking upon a project of destroying her identity to eliminate herself from a society which disallowed an existence that did not adhere to either end of the power binary. As she tells Sunay, she had no desire to emulate Europeans, merely a deep love for God, which, as she perceived, "had no place … in Kars" (410).Removing her headscarf, defying the wishes of her lover Blue, would be the first step towards the severing of ties with the society in Kars.

For Blue, the headscarf was a symbol of religious fundamentalism. Like the Islamist regime in Iran which had made it compulsory for all women in Iran to wear the headscarf, he considered the garment a sartorial extension of Islamic faith. At the opposite end, Sunay Zaim proclaims that he had staged the coup in Kars "all for the fatherland" was prepared to kill innocent people for their belief in religion. According to him, the secular rhetoric of state politics had decreed that a faith in Islamic religion was tantamount to not "living like Westerners" (412).

Blue and Hande had already been bombed at their hideout by Sunay's military forces. Having come to know of this, Kadife readily agrees to shoot Sunay onstage, according to his own desires, to eliminate the remaining extreme of the two political camps. His death therefore, like those of Blue and Hande, becomes symbolic of the elimination of the

oppositional stance which proved inimical to the cohabitation of religion and politics in the Turkish Republic. Had both the forces been allowed to coexist, they would have contributed towards a wholesome development of identity by acknowledging the right of people to choose their niche for themselves, instead of creating a stunted society permitting no alternative for the construction of self-hood and agency.

The Islamic practice of veiling, as Leila Ahmed suggests, presents the most evident symbol of the "oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam" to western feminism (qtd in Khan 9). In Turkey, as Cindoglu and Zencirci point out however, in the rapidly evolving socio-political context, which involves both a moderation of the stance of the Islamist movement as well as the ruling secular party, the headscarf has come to symbolise a sort of "modern agency" instead of a "passive submission to patriarchy" (792).As Pamuk observes however, the headscarf is still not something that the Turks could regard nonchalantly, as a garment that can be worn by a few and not be worn by others in the Turkish state (Mirze 179). Contrarily, it is at the "heart of political struggle between political Islamists and so-called seculars" (Mirze 179), as is evident over the huge protests against the election of Erdogan as the new President of the Turkish Republic in spite of the fact that his wife wears a headscarf. Pamuk's novel *Snow* becomes a way of exploring the unfortunate fallouts of such wars resulting in a misrepresentation of suffering and a larger inability of the society to perceive what had gone wrong in the life of its women.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Badran, Margot. "Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s." Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 1.1 (2005): 6-28. JSTOR.Web. 20 Apr. 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4032684>.

Cindoglu, Dilek, and Gizem Zencirci."The Headscarf in Turkey in the Public and State Spheres." Middle Eastern Studies 44.5 (2008): 791-806. JSTOR.Web. 20 Apr. 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40262616>.

Clemens, Colleen Ann Lutz. ""Suicide Girls": Orhan Pamuk's Snow and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary Turkey." Feminist Formations 23.1 (2011): 138-54. Project Muse.Web. 14 Apr. 2016. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ff/summary/v023/23.1.clemens.html>.

Khan, Shahnaz. *Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora*. Toronto, Ont.: Women's, 2002. Print.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005. Print.

Marshall, G. A. "Ideology, Progress, and Dialogue: A Comparison of Feminist and Islamist Women's Approaches to the Issues of Head Covering and Work in Turkey." Gender & Society 19.1 (2005): 104-20. JSTOR.Web. 15 Mar. 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30044571>.

Mirze, Z. Esra. "Implementing Disform: An Interview with Orhan Pamuk."Pmla 123.1 (2008): 176-80. JSTOR.Web. 20 Apr. 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501835>.

Pamuk, Orhan. *Snow*.Trans. Maureen Freely. New York: Random House, 2004. Print.

White, Jenny B. "State Feminism, Modernization, and the Turkish Republican Woman." NWSA Journal 15.3 (2003): 145-59. JSOTR.Web. 15 Mar. 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317014>.