

The Carnavalesque and The Collision of Ideologies in Orhan Pamuk's Snow

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Abstract

Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (2002) presents the politically and culturally divided city of Kars as a space in which secularism, Islamism, nationalism, modernity, tradition, art, and personal desire collide. The novel's most striking feature is its transformation of political conflict into theatrical performance. This paper examines *Snow* through Mikhail Bakhtin's traditional literary theory of the carnivalesque, particularly the concepts of carnival, inversion, heteroglossia, and the temporary suspension of established hierarchies. Bakhtin's theory is especially useful for interpreting the military coup staged inside Kars's National Theatre, where political authority is literally performed as theatre and theatre becomes a means of exercising political authority. The paper also considers the headscarf controversy, the competing voices of Ka, Blue, Kadife, and Sunay Zaim, and the snowbound isolation of Kars as conditions that intensify ideological confrontation. The analysis argues that Pamuk creates a carnivalesque political space in which conventional distinctions between actor and ruler, art and politics, reality and performance, believer and secularist, and victim and participant become unstable. Yet the novel also demonstrates the limits of carnival: temporary inversion does not necessarily produce liberation. Through *Snow*, Pamuk exposes the instability of ideological authority and shows how competing groups attempt to control public space, language, and individual identity.

Keywords: Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, Mikhail Bakhtin, Carnavalesque, Carnival Theory, Theatre; Ideology, Kars, Headscarf, Political Conflict.

I.INTRODUCTION

Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* is a complex novel that brings together politics, religion, identity, art, love, and violence within the isolated city of Kars. First published in Turkish in 2002, the novel follows Ka, a Turkish poet who has spent years in Germany and returns to Turkey as a journalist. His journey to Kars begins as an assignment to investigate a series of suicides among young women and the growing controversy surrounding women who wear headscarves. However, the journey soon develops into a confrontation with the competing ideological forces that shape the city. Kars becomes isolated by heavy snowfall, and this physical isolation creates a closed social space in which political and religious tensions become unusually intense. Scholars have noted that the novel explores contested Turkish identity, particularly through the conflict between secularism and Islamism and through the symbolic importance of the headscarf.

A particularly productive traditional theory for reading *Snow* is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin developed his account of carnival in *Rabelais and His World*, where he describes popular festive culture as a temporary suspension or inversion of official hierarchies. Carnival permits voices and behaviours that are normally controlled by official institutions to enter public space. Kings may become fools, fools may occupy positions of authority, and serious institutions may be exposed through laughter, parody, and performance. The carnivalesque therefore challenges the apparent permanence of established order. Although *Snow* is not itself a carnival narrative in the historical sense, Bakhtin's theory provides a useful framework for understanding the novel's theatrical coup, its competing voices, and its repeated inversions of authority.

The Carnivalesque Space of Kars

Kars functions as a temporary world separated from ordinary social and political life. The snowfall blocks roads and communication, effectively turning the city into an enclosed stage. This setting is important because the events of the novel occur within a restricted geographical space over a short period. Scholarship on *Snow* has emphasized that Kars is a border city where different cultural, political, and religious identities intersect. It is therefore not simply a background but a concentrated social space in which ideological differences become visible.

Bakhtin's carnival is characterized by the temporary suspension of ordinary hierarchies. In *Snow*, the snowbound condition of Kars contributes to such a suspension. The city's normal political structures are disrupted when the military coup takes place. The National Theatre becomes the centre of political power, and an actor, Sunay Zaim, moves from performing political authority to exercising it. The boundary between theatre and government becomes unclear. The political order is not merely represented on stage; it is enacted through the stage. Mary Jo Kietzman

observes that the novel's dramatic structure is closely connected to its representation of Turkey as a nation shaped by competing performances and ideologies. The theatrical form thus becomes central to the novel's political imagination.

The Theatre Coup and Inversion of Authority

The coup at the National Theatre is the clearest example of carnivalesque inversion in *Snow*. Sunay Zaim, a theatre actor and director, uses a performance as the setting for a military takeover. The event deliberately collapses the distinction between representation and reality. The audience initially enters the theatre expecting a performance, but the staged violence becomes actual violence. The actor who represents political authority becomes an agent of political authority. This reversal is precisely the kind of instability that Bakhtin's carnivalesque makes visible.

The theatrical coup also transforms the conventional hierarchy between performer and spectator. In ordinary theatre, actors perform and spectators watch. In *Snow*, spectators become participants and potential victims. The audience's position changes from passive observation to involuntary involvement in political violence. Theatre therefore becomes a mechanism through which authority is produced. The stage ceases to be an imaginary space separated from life and becomes the location where political reality is manufactured.

This inversion is significant because the coup is itself presented as a performance. Sunay's political actions depend upon costumes, speeches, staging, timing, and audience response. The political leader becomes an actor, while the actor becomes a political leader. Pamuk consequently presents authority as something that may depend upon performance rather than merely upon institutional legitimacy. The theatricality of the coup exposes the constructed nature of political power. Kietzman's study of the novel's dramatic elements similarly emphasizes the importance of theatrical performance in the representation of national conflict.

The carnivalesque does not necessarily mean that the characters experience freedom. Bakhtin's carnival temporarily overturns hierarchy, but it remains temporary. In *Snow*, the inversion ultimately produces fear, imprisonment, death, and renewed control. This distinction is important. The coup creates an abnormal space, but the abnormality does not automatically liberate the people of Kars. Instead, it reveals how easily the language of liberation can become another form of domination.

Multiple Voices and Heteroglossia

Another Bakhtinian concept relevant to *Snow* is heteroglossia, the coexistence of different social and ideological voices within a single literary work. *Snow* is constructed through a multiplicity of voices rather than a single authoritative explanation of Turkish identity. Secularists, Islamists, nationalists, students, women

who wear headscarves, atheists, believers, intellectuals, journalists, soldiers, and ordinary citizens articulate competing understandings of modern Turkey.

Ka occupies a particularly unstable position among these voices. He has lived in Germany, yet he remains connected to Turkey. He is an intellectual and poet, but he also becomes involved in political negotiations. He experiences a renewed interest in religion while simultaneously maintaining an attachment to secular and Western ideas. His position prevents him from becoming a completely reliable representative of any one ideological camp. His encounters with Blue, Kadife, Sunay, Ipek, and other figures expose him to contradictory interpretations of freedom, faith, modernity, and national identity.

Blue represents an Islamist political position, while Sunay represents a theatrical and authoritarian secularism. Kadife, meanwhile, complicates the ideological conflict by making the headscarf question inseparable from female agency. The women at the centre of the headscarf controversy are not simply symbols in a political debate; their individual choices reveal the human consequences of ideological struggle. Gokberk argues that the headscarf in *Snow* operates as a complex cultural marker whose meaning cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. This multiplicity corresponds with Bakhtin's idea that social reality contains competing voices that cannot always be reduced to one final authoritative interpretation.

The Headscarf Conflict and Ideological Inversion

The controversy surrounding the headscarf provides another important site for examining the carnivalesque. In the political discourse surrounding Kars, clothing becomes a visible sign of ideological identity. The headscarf is interpreted differently by different groups: as religious commitment, political resistance, oppression, tradition, or personal choice. Its meaning therefore changes according to the speaker and the ideological context.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the headscarf conflict demonstrates how official and unofficial meanings compete for public space. Secular institutions attempt to regulate visible expressions of religious identity, while Islamist characters challenge that authority. The conflict creates an inversion in which a seemingly ordinary article of clothing becomes a powerful political sign. A private act of dressing becomes a public statement. The body itself becomes a contested space where political ideologies struggle for recognition.

The suicides of young women further complicate the issue. The controversy cannot be treated only as an abstract conflict between secularism and Islam because it affects individual lives. Pamuk repeatedly brings ideological arguments into contact with personal suffering. The result is a novel in which large political concepts are measured against individual desires and fears. The carnivalesque framework helps

reveal the instability of the categories imposed by official discourse, but the novel also warns that individuals can suffer when ideological systems attempt to define them completely.

Snow, Silence, and the Temporary World

Snow itself contributes to the novel's carnivalesque atmosphere. It covers streets, buildings, and landscapes while isolating Kars from the outside world. Jane Eden Hartle notes that Pamuk uses snowfall in his fiction to both conceal and reveal cultural, historical, and political material. In *Snow*, this double function is especially important. Snow hides the city from the outside world, yet the isolation allows its internal conflicts to become more visible.

The whiteness and silence of snowfall also contrast sharply with the violence taking place inside the city. The quiet landscape creates an atmosphere in which ordinary distinctions appear suspended. Ka experiences the snow as both material reality and a source of poetic and spiritual reflection. The snow therefore does not possess a single meaning. It can suggest purity, silence, isolation, beauty, death, or uncertainty. This multiplicity is compatible with Bakhtin's resistance to fixed and final meanings.

The closed city also resembles a theatrical stage. Characters enter, leave, perform, negotiate, deceive, and observe one another within a limited space. The city becomes a laboratory in which ideological identities are tested. Pamuk's use of theatre within the novel strengthens this effect: Kars is simultaneously a city, a political arena, and a stage. The theatrical structure makes the instability of authority visible.

The Limits of Carnival

Although Bakhtin's theory illuminates *Snow*, the novel also reveals the limits of carnival. Carnival traditionally creates a temporary world in which official authority is mocked or inverted. In *Snow*, however, the inversion is manipulated by political actors. Sunay's theatrical coup does not destroy authority; it replaces one form of authority with another. The performance appears to overturn the ordinary political order, but it ultimately reinforces coercive power.

This distinction makes Pamuk's use of theatricality especially significant. The novel does not suggest that every disruption of hierarchy is liberating. A temporary collapse of authority can create a space for new forms of domination. The stage becomes a place where the population is made to witness its own political powerlessness. The carnivalesque is therefore transformed into a disturbing political spectacle.

The same ambiguity appears in Ka's personal search for happiness. His desire for Ipek intersects with political negotiations, religious questions, and his poetic ambitions. His private life cannot be separated from the ideological world

surrounding him. This fusion of the personal and political demonstrates the instability of individual identity in a highly polarized society. Ka attempts to move between opposing positions, but the novel shows how difficult such neutrality becomes when political violence enters everyday life.

II. CONCLUSION

Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* can be fruitfully examined through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque because the novel repeatedly destabilizes established boundaries between authority and resistance, theatre and reality, performer and spectator, public ideology and private identity. The military coup staged at the National Theatre is the central example of this inversion. Sunay Zaim's transformation from actor to political authority turns political power into theatre and theatre into political power. The headscarf controversy similarly transforms personal appearance into a public ideological conflict, while the multiplicity of voices in Kars reflects the Bakhtinian idea of a world in which competing social languages resist complete unification.

At the same time, *Snow* complicates the liberating potential traditionally associated with carnival. The temporary suspension of hierarchy does not necessarily produce freedom. In Kars, theatrical inversion leads instead to violence and coercion. Pamuk therefore uses the carnivalesque not simply to celebrate disorder but to expose the instability and performative character of ideological authority. The snowbound city becomes a temporary world in which political, religious, and cultural identities are forced into direct confrontation.

Ultimately, *Snow* demonstrates that identity cannot be easily contained within binary categories such as secular/religious, modern/traditional, East/West, or believer/non-believer. Pamuk's novel gives these opposing positions space to speak while showing the human cost of ideological absolutism. Bakhtin's theory makes it possible to understand how the novel converts political conflict into a theatrical and carnivalesque spectacle. Through this strategy, *Snow* reveals that when authority becomes performance, reality itself can become a stage and individuals may become both actors and unwilling spectators in the political drama of their society.

III. REFERENCES

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