

Laura Ceia-Minjares, PhD
Assistant Professor of French Studies
California State University, Long Beach

Imperial Waste: Ruins, Nostalgia, and the Everlasting Dwellings between East and West
in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*
(Return to Nowhere)

“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 about any of us. No one could understand us from so far away.”

“But no one believes in what they read in a novel” I said.

“Oh, yes, they do,” he cried. “If only to think themselves as wise and superior and humanistic, they need to think of us as sweet and funny, and love us. But if you put in what I've just said, at least your readers will keep a little room for doubt in their minds.”

Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*

(This is a conversation between one of the minor characters, Fazil, and an unnamed writer from Istanbul, named Orhan, who will endeavor to write the story of Ka in Kars.)

The above excerpt somewhat sadly concludes the worldwide acclaimed novel of most recent Nobel-Prize winner, Orhan Pamuk. The survivor of a farcical, if tragic *coup d'état*, and a former Turkish radical Islamist who took up translating Turgenev in prison, Fazil is concerned here precisely with the problem of *representation*. Fazil's apprehension, I argue, is multi-layered: firstly, as the inhabitant of a small border town at the eastern edge of the former Ottoman Empire—a site of conflict and contestation—, Fazil is a provincial in relation to the more cosmopolitan people of the city of Istanbul. Hence, his identity as a “marginal” is at risk of being re-configured *for him* within a reinforced center-periphery polarity. Secondly, Fazil reflects upon the nature of the literary artifact *per se*: the novel has been postulated both as constructing imaginary worlds where the symbolic is favored to the “real,” and as a repository of socio-political and cultural realities of its time. If we were to understand the notion of representation in its aesthetic sense i.e., a substitution of the “real” with a “stand-in” and as the act of

rendering present that which is now absent or past, Fazil calls into question the reader's assumptions of "truth" and "authenticity," in regard to his personal as well as collective identity. Finally, if we were to presume that the writer of the novel within the novel is indeed Orhan Pamuk the reception of the book by Western audiences inevitably comes to mind. As one of the very few Turkish writers to gain international exposure since World War II, Pamuk has often been identified in the West, as "the voice" of Turkey: in *The New Yorker*, John Updike applauded his courage to speak out about "such matters as head scarves and religious beliefs," in a country where prosecution for free speech is still a harsh reality; more problematic however, is the "recognition" that comes from writer Margaret Atwood who spoke of Pamuk as "narrating the country into being." Atwood's remark emphatically designates Pamuk's novelistic constructions *as Turkey*, and hence invests him with the task of a Sheherezade: for Atwood, Turkey originates from, takes shape within and acquires visibility through Pamuk's stories / tales.

In this short introduction, I aimed to uncover a few of the main questions *Snow* poses to the Western reader, and to draw your attention to the complex, polyphonic and sometimes confusing levels of representations that Pamuk's novel invites us to contemplate. After all, *Snow* is a detective novel—a Western genre--, as much as it is a socio-political one. Its main hero, Ka, is a middle-aged Turkish poet exiled in Frankfurt. Lonely and uncertain about his destiny, abandoned by his muse, and enticed by the prospect of a new love, Ka sets out for Kars. A decaying border town at the eastern edge of the former Ottoman Empire, Kars has recently been plagued by the suicides of a series of young women wearing head-scarves. Also of late, the city has also become a stronghold of Islamic fundamentalists and Kurdish separatists. As a favor to a friend, Ka

takes on a journalistic assignment to investigate the so-called “head-scarf suicides,” and arrives in Kars on a stormy winter night. During the following four days in the border town paralyzed by the snow (*kar* is the word for “snow” in Turkish), Ka finds a brief moment of happiness with his new lover İpek, and meets her father—a secularist hotel keeper who watches his other daughter, Kadife, become a religious radical. Further on, Ka is inspired by a Sufi dervish who shakes his secular beliefs; writes poems which would never be found or published; meets a journalist who writes the news before it happens; crosses paths with a striking Islamic fundamentalist and his mistress—İpek’s sister, Kadife. Finally, Ka is caught in a military coup which he narrowly survives, only to be assassinated later on, lonely and betrayed, on the foreign streets of Frankfurt.

As the novel appeared in translation in the Anglophone world in 2004 (hence post-9/11), critics tended to converge on its socio-political context, displaying a particular tendency to essentialize the events presented in the book, and to look for answers (somewhat facile at times) to the “so called” East-West cultural and political crisis.

Within this context, my paper proposes a different reading of *Snow*, that of the immigrant’s return to a place he formerly called “home.” I focus on Ka’s perceived identity as a double exile: from Turkey, as well as from his current place of adoption-- Frankfurt. Although posing as a journalist looking into the matter of headscarf suicides, Ka’s secret quest, I argue, is for the lost Turkey of his childhood, a mental space [home] free of conflict, and infused by the nostalgic memory of the cosmopolitan wholeness of the Ottoman Empire. Ka’s experience in Kars, I argue, underlines the contradictions of Turkish interstitial identity, as he is confronted not only with the punctured heritage of the Ottoman Empire, but also his own secular, Western-laden systems of beliefs. On the

one hand Ka's liminal status of living in-between cultures ostensibly make him an ideal narrative instrument for exploring the peculiarities of the two, as it seems theoretically possible for him to assume or dispose of the prerogatives of his Turkish identity almost at will. However, this liminality—far from eliciting a celebratory position on either side—will prove precisely to be the source of his condemnation. As one who has experienced the values of the West, his existential parameters have been forever modified. Thus, his attempts at navigating the socio-cultural and political turbulences of this corner of the country he left behind make him an intruder, despite his constant efforts to reintegrate. As an outsider trying to penetrate the mysteries and cultural taboos of this former imperial space, Ka, I contend, not only disturbs the fragile equilibrium of Kars, but his endeavors at representing this space—poetically or journalistically—will prove impossible:

Ka the Foreigner

The [cautionary] tale of Ka is a story within a story, reconstructed by a writer named Orhan—a friend of the poet—a year after the events unfold, from police reports, television tapes, Ka's handwritten, disparate notes, and a number of competing personal narratives. Ka ostensibly has left traces of his passing through Kars and Frankfurt within the somewhat unreliable and partisan memory of people he knew; however, he himself was unable to consign anything of substance on paper. Furthermore, the voyage of Ka to Kars, as an unidentified traveler on a journey through a snowy winter night is postulated within a setup reminiscent of Western fables or fairy-tales. If we were to read this *mise-en-scène* through a Derridean lens, Ka's posthumous identity is engendered through an excessive textual production, which generates pluralities of readings and makes use of narrative artifice as a means of representation. The “writer's” endeavor—sealed by the

material disappearance or the present “lack” of Ka— reads as an attempt to recall a now “unobtainable presence.” The fable-like setting however, seems to refute, or at least dissuade any attempts at constructing the facts or Ka’s identity as a “truthful” or “authentic” one, an idea that is re-iterated by the last lines of the novel which I have reproduced for you above.

As recounted by the Orhan the writer, the arrival of Ka in the city of Kars bares the first marks of his differentiation:

[...] the big **dark-red Bally valise** was now wedged between his legs. He was sitting next to the window and wearing a thick charcoal coat he’d bought at a Frankfurt *Kaufhof* five years earlier. We should note straightaway that this soft, **down beauty of a coat would cause him shame and disquiet** during the days he spent in Kars, while **also furnishing a sense of comfort**. [...] Although he had spent the last twelve years in political exile in Frankfurt, he had never been much involved in politics. His passion was for poetry [...]. **He was tall for a Turk [...] with a pale complexion that had become paler during his journey**. The traveler is an honest and well-meaning man and full of melancholy, **like those Chekhov characters** so laden with virtues, they never know success in life. [...] The traveler’s name is Kerim Alakusoglu [...], **he does not like his name**, but prefers to be called Ka (from his initials). (*Snow*, pp. 3-5)

Ka’s dark-red Bally valise, suggests a chromatic intrusion, (an act of imbalance if you will) within the general white/grey color scheme of the bus, its travelers and their snowy surroundings, and, a blood stain, in a possible flash-forward to Ka’s tragic ending.

Almost fondly reminiscent of Pnin—a creation of that ultimate cosmopolitan traveler, Nabokov, —Ka’s grey, comfortable coat becomes him. Bought at a *Kaufhof*—a German word left un-translated and very likely part of the Turkish immigrant vocabulary—, it betrays a reality that is foreign to and cannot be conceptualized by the people of Kars.

The coat might symbolically and partially shield him from the harsh realities of contemporary Turkey, but it also plays as a shameful signifier of the world Ka has left behind. In a somewhat hilarious however emblematic twist, Ka’s peregrinations through

the shantytowns of Kars are accompanied by a vagrant dog whose own coat bares the same grey color and who, like Ka, appears to have lost his way in the snowy labyrinth of the troublesome border town; the constant compliments Ka receives on the “quality” of his coat seem to always turn double-handed—mostly as ironic statements hinting at Ka’s “desertion” to the West; the coat is also “different” and “beautiful,” an unremitting reminder for the citizens of Kars of their “backwardness” and “inadequacy” in the eyes of the “other world.” Ka’s coat, I argue, serves indeed as the gaze of the “superior” other. Finally, pale and “too tall for a Turk,” and baring the psychological traits of an anachronistic Chekhovian character, in its peculiar hybridity as both an immigrant returning to Turkey and a composite personage of Western literature, Ka seems destined to fail at its endeavor from the outset.

“Once upon a time there was a cosmopolitan city”

As I previously mentioned, Ka returns to Kars, in search of the long-lost Turkey of his childhood summers, as the cosmopolitan Istanbul he once knew has essentially disappeared. In Ka’s imagination, Kars functions as the last outpost of a utopian multi-ethnic, peaceful and mutually enriching co-existence, a place where Ka’s own liminal, trans-national identity could possibly find a home. Kars was once a prosperous border town at the intersection of two empires, the Ottoman and Russian, an important trade route to Georgia and a gateway to the south and the Mediterranean. Over the last two centuries, Kars has been home to a large Armenian community, to Persians fleeing the first Moghul, Greeks with Byzantine roots, “Georgians, Kurds and Circassians from

various *tribes*.” A prosperous **merchant community** [mobility] Kars seems to have housed and tolerate all.

As an Istanbulite intellectual, versed in liberal left-wing theory and practice, Ka’s, views of cosmopolitanism tend to embrace (somewhat uncritically one might say) its Enlightenment-derived, universalist set of values, where the abstract notions of plurality, mobility and trans-nationality surpass national myths and ethnic belongings. Ka’s universalist view privileges a “global,” all-encompassing view of humanity living under the same umbrella of the Ottoman Empire; here ethnic identities are often seen as simply a matter of denomination indicating an origin, however cultural specificities are erased. Ka’s interpretation of cosmopolitanism also seems to be inextricably linked to the meta-narratives of the modern Empire. Empires were cosmopolitan in that they “housed” [were home to] multiple ethnicities living in close proximity, and hence allowed for [at least in theory] sites of cultural hybridity and “positive” contamination. At the same time however,—and here is where the somewhat paradoxical nature of cosmopolitanism lies—to quote Erica Johnson, in *Home, Maison, Casa* “imperial sites were understood to be essential, homogenous ‘homelands’ for not only those citizens living within their borders, but for everyone living under the rubric of [imperial] rule.”

Needless to say, upon Ka’s return, Kars is but a shadow of its glorious past. Subjected to Atatürk’s nationalization and industrialization efforts, [and possibly a victim of new global economic forces] Kars’s former Russian palaces and Armenian churches lie now decrepit and abandoned in the impoverished streets of Kars. The city also has a growing number of unemployed, who—Ka learns immediately--deserted by the empty promises of the secularist state have found solace in emerging ethnic communities and /

or religion. The dismissal of Kars, is posited by Serday Bey, the secular owner of the most prominent journal of Kars, in the following terms:

“In the old days we were all brothers,” said Serdar Bay. He spoke as if betraying a secret. “But in the last few years, everyone started saying, I’m Azeri, I’m a Kurd, I’m a Terekemian. Of course we have people here from all nations [...]. As for the Kurds, whom we prefer to think of as a *tribe*: In the old days, they did not even know they were Kurds. And it was that way through the Ottoman period: None of the people who chose to stay went around beating their chests and crying “We are the Ottomans!” The Turkmens, the Posof Laz, the Germans who have been exiled here by the czar—we had them all. But no one took any pride in proclaiming themselves different. It was the communists and their Tiflis radio who spread tribal pride, and they did it because they wanted to divide and destroy Turkey. Now everyone is prouder and poorer.” (26-27)

While Ka’s notion of cosmopolitanism remains at a somewhat theoretical level and it is tinged with nostalgia—I remind you that he experienced the cosmopolitanism of Kars as a child, and as an upper-class, left-wing, Western-educated [hence **mobile**] Istanbulite—Serday Bay comments critique, at a pragmatic level, the reality in place. In both cases however, as **Turks**, and hence as representatives of the former **colonizer**, they both decry the demise of the empire. [I should note that in both Ka’s [or Pamuks’ ?] description of Kars, as well as Serdar Bay’s comments, there is a definite hierarchical classification: Kurds, Circassians and Turkmens are viewed as *tribes*, versus Turks who are a nation.] If Ka, the exiled, traveler, the outsider, laments what he perceives as a loss of diversity, Serday Bay disparages a loss of “homogeneity.” Furthermore Serday Bey’s equates the Ottoman Empire with the modern Turkish nation. Within this modern Turkish nation-state, reconfigured, and almost jealously guarded identities, the establishing of new ethnic boundaries which take pride in their mode of differentiation, seem to negatively resonate with the inhabitants of this border town. Instead of allowing for cultural exchange, difference, in this case, paves the way to a threatening cultural clash and socio-political contestation. Furthermore, Serday Bay blames the West for this negative contamination,

namely communism, a construct “foreign” to and hence incompatible with the realities of Turkish nation. This also comes as a veiled incrimination of Ka, whose Istanbulite upbringing and recent exile to Germany gave birth to “polluted” identity, fluctuating and hence hard to contain. If this identity allows him to move with a certain facility amongst ethnic groups and religious lines, it denies him however the possibility to belong.

Ka’s dilemma here is, I argue, is posited as the problem of an increasingly trans-national world rooted in old models of national identity. If the project of the Empire was to create its own identity and dissolve tribal affiliations, is the project of globalization fraught by the same type of issues, i.e dissolving national identities into global ones? And if yes, at what cost?