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Theater as Metaphor in Orhan Pamuk's Novel *Snow*

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When asked about his literary influences, Orhan Pamuk, the contemporary Turkish author who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, has mentioned many writers who shaped his novels: Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino. Bertolt Brecht does not usually enter this list, although Pamuk has discussed Brecht's aesthetic theories and also integrated numerous references to Brecht in his bestselling novel *Snow*. In Pamuk's novel *Snow*, published as *Kar* in Turkish in 2002 and translated into English in 2004, the genre of theater, particularly Brechtian theater, plays a formative role, along with the genres of poetry and epic.

The central character of *Snow* is Ka, a Turkish poet who spent 12 years in political exile in Frankfurt, Germany, and who returns to his native city of Istanbul, Turkey, to attend his

mother's funeral. In Istanbul he meets a boyhood friend who works for the left-leaning kemalist newspaper *Cumhuriyet (Republican)* and who encourages him to travel to Kars, an Anatolian town in eastern Turkey, to write an article for the paper on upcoming municipal elections and on a suicide epidemic that has broken out among the young girls of Kars. He agrees to this commitment, but his secret and larger motive is his hope to meet and marry his beautiful former classmate İpek about whom he hears that she lives in Kars and has recently gotten divorced. Ka is a doubly westernized person – through his secular upbringing in Istanbul and through his exile in Germany –, and he now enters a different world in Kars.

The girls of Kars are not allowed to wear head scarves in the university, and this prohibition has led to the suicide epidemic. A snow blizzard engulfs Kars, interrupts all traffic, and isolates the city from the rest of the world. Ka is reunited with his college crush İpek, falls in love, and he dreams of taking her back with him to Frankfurt. Her sister, Kadife, is the leader of the head-scarf girls and also the girl-friend of a charismatic Islamist terrorist called Blue (“Lacivert” in the Turkish original or “Lapislazuli” in the German translation). Blue has arrived in Kars, to see Kadife, but also to lend support to the religious girls, although he harbors some conflicted feelings, since the girls' response, suicide, is a religious sin.

A revolutionary theater group has arrived in the city and stages a play, entitled *My Fatherland or My Head Scarf*. Based on an earlier Turkish drama, this play becomes a front for a military coup and an army takeover of Kars. Like other Islamic believers, Blue is arrested and sentenced to death.

The mastermind behind this coup, Sunay Zaim, is a once renowned theater personality whose glorious days are past. His aesthetic approaches are reminiscent of those by Bertolt Brecht. Later Sunay Zaim decides to stage another play, *The Tragedy of Kars*, an adaptation of

Thomas Kyd's Renaissance drama *The Spanish Tragedy*. Kadife agrees to act in this play; she has to remove her head scarf as a political statement, in order to have Blue released. Ka is forced to act as an arbitrator of this deal. During this process, the secret police of Turkey, the MİT, interrogates Ka and tells him that İpek, his love, was in a relationship with Blue and is still in touch. Ka returns to his hotel and asks İpek if this is true. İpek responds that she was in love with Blue but denies any contact now.

The second play, *The Tragedy in Kars*, is being performed, and Kadife, who bares her head, shoots the theater director, Sunay Zaim, dead on stage. This scene was rehearsed as part of the plot, and Sunay's death was anticipated by the *Border City Gazette*, a local newspaper that publishes the news a day before it happens and thereby influences the course of many events. It remains unclear whether Kadife knew that the gun was loaded. Also, Blue has been found and murdered by the secret police.

After the blizzard lifts, trains are running again and the army sends Ka back. Ka asks İpek to join him at the railway station. But she stays, believing that Ka has betrayed Blue out of jealousy, and Ka has to leave alone. His stay in Kars only lasted three days. Ka spends the remaining four years of his life in Germany, a lonely man. He is assassinated in Frankfurt, most likely by a Turkish Islamist group that has settled in Berlin and holds him responsible for Blue's fate.

One of the main sources of influence in this novel is Franz Kafka. This is already evident in the onomatopoeic allusions in the original Turkish text. The novel's protagonist, Ka, is an acronym for Kerim Alakuşoğlu, the poet's full name. The name "Ka" alliterates with "Kar", the Turkish word for "snow" and title of this novel; and by adding the letter "s" we arrive at "Kars",

an actual city in northeast Turkey. The three frequently recurring words Ka, Kar, and Kars compose a poetic triad that becomes further enriched when considering that the city of Kars, where much of the novel takes place, is located in “Kafkasya”, the Turkish word for Caucasus. The Caucasus (in Turkish: *Kafkasya*) – the region in which Turks, Armenians, Kurds, and Russians fought so many battles – becomes a Kafkaesque universe in Orhan Pamuk’s novel. The poet Ka’s name also reminds the reader of Josef K., the protagonist of Kafka’s novel *The Trial* which starts with the sentence: “Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested.”¹ There are similarities to Pamuk’s novel: While Ka came to Germany as a political exile, he is actually not very interested in politics, and he is even a little bourgeois. His true passion is poetry, not politics. Ka frequently states that he does not know why he was arrested in Turkey – it must have been something he published in a newspaper, but he cannot pin it down. Similarly, Orhan Pamuk does not see himself as a political novelist. He claims that this one book, *Snow*, is an exception. The protagonist Ka can thus be easily seen as a Kafkaesque figure that is caught in the paradoxes and complexities of contemporary bureaucracy from which he ultimately cannot escape.

The novel contains other literary allusions: One example is the fictive character Hans Hansen, whom Ka invents as a journalist or editor from the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and whom he modeled on a *Kaufhof* salesman who sold him his precious coat in Frankfurt.² Hans Hansen, who is supposed to print a statement by Blue in the novel *Snow*, is an obvious reference to Thomas Mann’s novella *Tonio Kröger*.

Pamuk integrates the three genres of poetry, prose, and drama into his novel. Poetry, as already noted, is represented by our Kafkaesque poet Ka; the epic genre is mediated through the narrator Orhan; and drama is personified by the figure of Sunay Zaim.

Narrator Orhan, the personification of prose, inserts himself briefly into the novel's beginning and becomes a more active character toward the end, after Ka's death. With the exception of a short paragraph at the beginning in which the narrator introduces himself as "an old friend of Ka's" (*Snow* 5), the first half of the book appears to be told by an omniscient third person narrator. Only in the later part does Orhan insert himself as a first person narrator – and probably the author himself, as several references, to his daughter Rüya or his forthcoming book *The Museum of Innocence*, show. This narrator figure acts as detective and as storyteller: He pays extended visits to Frankfurt and to Kars, just like the author Orhan Pamuk did to do research for his novel. In Frankfurt, narrator Orhan searches for the poems that Ka wrote while in Kars, and in Kars he hopes to learn whether Ka really betrayed Blue. He is unable to find the poems but discovers that Ka had indeed given away Blue's hiding spot to the military and thus caused his death. As a farewell to his friend, Orhan decides to write a book on his journey to Kars, which turns out to be the novel *Snow*.

The most extensive space is devoted to the genre of theater, through the character of the actor and director Sunay Zaim. Sunay is frequently associated with Bertolt Brecht. His ensemble is introduced as a "Brechtian and Bakhtinian theater company" (*Snow* 147). Later there is an insinuation that "it was East German funding that had made it possible for him to perform Brecht" (*Snow* 206); and since this is mentioned in the context of Sunay performing Atatürk, it is left open whether Sunay performed a character in a Brecht play or acted the man himself. There is also gossip about Sunay's disappearance one time: "One rumor had it that they'd joined the Brechtian Berliner Ensemble, ostensibly to teach drama though really they were learning how to be terrorists" (*Snow* 207). Toward the end, in the description of Sunay's adaptation of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Ka satirizes Sunay's style: Sunay "made

Corneille, Shakespeare, and Brecht more relevant by adding belly dances and bawdy songs” (Snow 337). In a later passage, Sunay specifies his interpretation of the play: “Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*: the rebellious rape victim’s tragic speech . . . with some alterations inspired by Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Szechuan*” (Snow 362). Sunay enjoyed regaling the audiences with “scenes from Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, and Brecht, if only to furnish the promised ‘play within the play’” (Snow 425).

Besides or even before Brecht, the most frequent association of Sunay Zaim in the novel is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the army officer and revolutionary statesman who founded the Republic of Turkey. Atatürk was born in 1881 in Salonica, present-day Thessaloniki, which is now a part of Greece but was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire at the time. This personal background may have motivated Atatürk’s western outlook: Kemalism, the ideology of Atatürk, introduced modernism and secularism to the Turkish Republic, when it was founded in 1923. The official program involved the transition from a multiethnic Islamic Ottoman Empire to a secular republican nation-state (1923), the abolition of the Caliphate (1924), the abolition of the Islamic law *Sharia*, the adoption of the Swiss civil code (1926), and the abandonment of the Arabic script, replacing it with a modestly modified Latin alphabet (1928). The head scarf for women and the fez for men were both banned. While women were propagated as bearers of secularism and westernization, these changes did not bring about the social equality they promised.³

Sunay Zaim is frequently compared to Atatürk. He and his wife Funda Eser used to be the “leading lights of the revolutionary theater world” in the 1970s (Snow 7); and the “Sunay Zaim Theatrical Company . . . is known throughout Turkey for its theatrical tributes to Atatürk, the Republic, and the Enlightenment” (Snow 30). Sunay Zaim himself enjoyed “military and

theatrical careers” (*Snow* 200), an allusion to Atatürk who began his career as an army officer and to the close connection between the military and the secular elite in Turkey at the time.

Sunay’s lifelong dream was to perform Atatürk himself, and while one of the chapter headings saw him as “a man fit to play Atatürk” (*Snow* 200), he was never able to realize his dream. In earlier years, “the predominant view was that great national films called for great international stars like Laurence Olivier, Curd Jürgens, or Charlton Heston” (*Snow* 204). Sunay was hoping to be the first to change this pattern, but could not succeed. Ideologically, however, he feels close to Atatürk, and Sunay represents the ideals of the Turkish Republic.

In addition to Brecht and Atatürk, and probably connected to the latter, Sunay Zaim is often associated with the movement of the “Western Enlightenment” (*Snow* 31), which is also called the “European enlightenment” (*Snow* 261) or the “republican enlightenment” (*Snow* 373), in this instance referring to Turkey. The play *My Fatherland or My Scarf* that he performs in a new interpretation is considered an “enlightenment masterwork” (*Snow* 31). In this play Sunay’s wife Funda Eser was “launching herself into enlightenment as she removed her scarf” (*Snow* 158), briefly becoming “a heroine of the enlightenment” (*Snow* 163). In the second play, *The Tragedy in Kars*, based primarily on the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Kyd with a few alterations inspired by Bertolt Brecht, “Kadife the head-scarf girl shocked audiences first by baring her head in a moment of enlightenment fervor and then by pointing a weapon at Sunay Zaim . . . and firing” (*Snow* 364). While the image of baring your head as an act of enlightenment may be satirical, the frequent references to the enlightenment as a western phenomenon may respond to a common perception, or misperception, in the West – the idea that one of the major distinguishing features between eastern and western societies lies in the fact that eastern societies did not experience a period like the 18th century enlightenment that caused such

profound democratizing changes in Europe. Through the character of Sunay Zaim, Pamuk seems to suggest that Atatürk's revolutionary and republican reforms in Turkish society can be equated to the European enlightenment.

Sunay Zaim performs and directs two plays in Kars: At the beginning of Ka's stay in Kars we witness *My Fatherland or My Head Scarf*, which is a revised version of a Turkish play from the 1930s and 1940s entitled *My Fatherland or My Scarf* (Snow 157). Three days later, toward the end of Ka's stay in the city, Sunay stages *The Tragedy in Kars*, an updated version of Thomas Kyd's 16th century Elizabethan tragedy entitled *The Spanish Tragedy*, viewed by many as a precursor of *Hamlet*. In both plays a woman removes her head scarf and shows her hair to the audience; and both plays end violently in ways that mix drama with reality, or theatrical action with contemporary politics. The first play presents a military coup, as soldiers come on stage and shoot at the audience, and the second play seems to undo this coup and take revenge, since Kadife, the head-scarf girl who has to lift her scarf, afterwards turns to Sunay Zaim on stage with a loaded gun and shoots him dead.

Taking his cues from the philosopher Hegel – and Pamuk might have added Walter Benjamin or Bertolt Brecht – that history and theater are made of the same materials (Snow 213), Pamuk describes the first military coup as a “theater coup” (Snow 327, 372). The “coup d'état” is presented as a “coup de théâtre”. The military takeover is “staged” literally as a theater performance, where the audience in the provincial little town of Kars believes it is watching a sophisticated avantgarde performance from the big city of Istanbul. Only after the first injuries does the audience realize that the spectacle is not fantastic but real.

In the second play Kadife stages her counter-coup on stage by shooting Sunay Zaim. The reader never learns whether her act was intentional or not, since it was part of the script and plot,

but the gun should not have been loaded. It is also possible that Sunay committed suicide by handing her a loaded gun. This theatrical ending may symbolize that the age of rationalism as it was enforced by the military in Turkey, and as it is reflected by the ideology of Atatürk, and by extension and occasional reference, also by Bertolt Brecht, did not provide all the answers to the country's complex questions.

Finally, a few words on the novel's title, *Snow* or *Kar*: "Snow" is a leading metaphor or leitmotiv in the book. It corresponds to geographic reality: Unlike the Mediterranean western part of Turkey where the sun shines frequently all year round, eastern Anatolian Turkey can be cold, snowy, and subject to extreme temperatures. In Frankfurt too, it snows a lot. *Snow* is also the title of Ka's poetry collection, although we never hear the poems, only the titles, and the notebook is lost. He arranges his poems in the shape of a snow crystal, a hexagon, around three main axes that characterize each poem: reason, imagination, memory. These snow crystals embody the secret symmetry of life for which Ka searches and where he may find God. The snowflake is a metaphor for unique beauty and at the same time for transience, and a momentary, short-lived ephemeral state. Snow can also isolate, as it shuts off Kars from the rest of the world, and at the same time it is a sign of peace and harmony: It covers up the poverty in Kars and dampens the sounds of the military coup. Snow adds a magical, dream-like quality to this book. As Ka wrote in one his early poems on the search for happiness, "it snows only once in our dreams" (*Snow* 4). The whiteness of snow can symbolize purity; and Ka, whose mother has just died, may be looking not only for erotic love, but also for maternal love in İpek. In addition, snow makes all the dramatic events in this book appear like a "fairy tale". This frequently recurring term in Pamuk's novel reminds the reader that besides the genres of poetry and

especially drama, the fairy tale has influenced Pamuk's conception of *Snow*. As an epic genre, *Snow* can be perceived as a blend of Kafkaesque novel and Romantic fairy tale.

Notes

¹ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 3.

² Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Vintage International, 2005), 245-256. Page numbers for subsequent quotes from Pamuk's novel *Snow* will appear in parenthetical documentation within the text of this article.

³ Venkat Mani, "The Good Woman of Istanbul: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*," *Gegenwartsliteratur: Ein germanistisches Jahrbuch – a German Studies Yearbook 2* (2003): 43.

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