
Orhan Pamuk, Secularism and Blasphemy: The Politics of the Turkish Novel

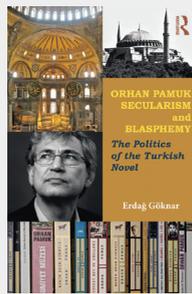
By Erdağ Göknaç

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Reviewed by Michael McGaha

IN THIS BOOK, Erdağ Göknaç, the award-winning translator of Orhan Pamuk's novel, *My Name Is Red*, has set himself the task of explaining why Pamuk's novels have received comparatively little critical attention both in his native Turkey and elsewhere. According to Göknaç, most of the educated reading public in Turkey disdains Pamuk because they believe he has betrayed Kemalism (the combination of French-style secularism and nationalism that has become a sort of state "religion" in the Turkish Republic) in order to curry favor with foreign readers. This is the "blasphemy" to which the book's title refers. At the same time, foreign readers have generally misunderstood Pamuk's work because they are unfamiliar with Turkish literary and the political context from which it emerged. Göknaç's burden is therefore the dual one of clarifying Pamuk's real political views for Turkish readers and educating foreign readers about his indebtedness to earlier Turkish writers.

Göknaç explains that Pamuk himself, far from being some sort of obscurantist reactionary, is in fact a member of Turkey's secular elite and a supporter of Turkey's modernization, from which he and his family have benefited greatly. He has been an ardent proponent of Turkey's admission to the EU. What Pamuk objects to is the "epistemic violence" with which Atatürk's cultural revolution was carried out—its violations of human rights—and



what Göknaç refers to as its "internalized orientalism." By this he means that the Kemalists accepted Western views of their culture and religion as inherently inferior. They therefore sought to suppress all connections with the Ottoman past. Furthermore, although they denigrated Islam, the Kemalists

paradoxically defined being Muslim as a condition of Turkishness. Due to patriotism and respect for the truth, Pamuk includes positive portrayals of Islam—especially Sufism—and Ottoman art and literature in his novels. This constitutes blasphemy against the official Kemalist narrative, according to which the movement from Empire to Republic was simply a matter of choosing enlightenment and progress over ignorance and backwardness. As a native of Istanbul, a city which he deeply loves, Pamuk particularly resents the decline and neglect the city has suffered under the Republic and the loss of its former cosmopolitanism, finding that the more or less forced departure of the city's Greek, Armenian, and Jewish populations has seriously impoverished its cultural life.

I believe that Göknaç overstates the political nature of Pamuk's novels. Pamuk himself has described *Snow* as his first and only political novel and has often pointed out that his political problems in Turkey—most notoriously his aborted trial on charges of "insulting Turkishness"—have resulted from his inter-

views rather than his novels. Orhan Pamuk is no ideologue and has never been publicly identified with any political party or movement. He is opposed to all sorts of extremism, and hypersensitive, humorless extremists of both the right and left may therefore be offended by the amused irony with which they are often depicted in his novels.

As Göknaç rightly points out, Pamuk himself is partly to blame for foreign critics' misunderstandings about his work. They have been prevented from properly analyzing his development as a writer by the fact that he refused to allow the translation of his first two published novels. Cevdet Bey and his sons remains unpublished in any language other than the original Turkish and an English version of *The Silent House* came out only last year. Furthermore, in his interviews with foreign journalists, Pamuk emphasized his indebtedness to canonized Western writers such as Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Woolf, Borges, and Calvino, rarely even bothering to mention Turkish authors who have influenced him.

When an English version of his essay collection, *Other Colors*, was published in 2007, he omitted his articles on Turkish novels and authors such as Ahmed Hamdi Tanpınar, Orhan

Kemal, Kemal Tâhir, Aziz Nesin, Yaşar Kemal, and Oğuz Atay. Göknaç tries to correct this omission by pointing out similarities in theme and/or style between Pamuk's novels and works by Halide Edib, Tanpınar (whose novel, *A Mind at Peace*, Göknaç translated in 2011), Nâzım Hikmet, Yaşar Kemal, Yusuf Atılgan, and Oğuz Atay. Some of these comparisons work better than others. I found Göknaç's comments on Halide Edib's *The Clown and His Daughter* particularly enlightening and thought-provoking.

Göknaç states in the preface to this book that "...the dominant discourses with which the US Academy approaches fields like Turkish and Middle Eastern studies...required the use of conceptual terms and framing that are legible to my colleagues in the US, but not necessarily current in the Turkish context, which is more strictly disciplinarily bound... The book foregrounds a theoretical framing that is cross-disciplinary and is meant to signify to other fields in the humanities and social sciences (religion, literature, cultural anthropology, history, and area studies)" (p. xiii). This book may be "legible" to Göknaç's colleagues, but non-specialized readers are likely to find the esoteric jargon he employs daunting, if not incomprehensible. Furthermore, the book is maddeningly repetitious.