

**Multiple Voices and Unfinalizability in *Snow*****Dr. Radhika K S**

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**Abstract**

While analysing the dialogic nature of novelistic genre, Mikhail Bakhtin says that there are multiple voices in a novel; the voices of characters interact with each other and all the voices to have equal status. As there are many voices with equal importance no voice, no character and no situation is finalizable in a novel. This paper is an attempt to analyse the unfinalizability in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*. In the city of Kars, the state wants the girls to remove the scarf whereas religion wants them to wear the scarf. Caught between religion and state, the girls in *Snow* commit suicide the reason for which is not completely clear.

**Keywords:** Polyphony, unfinalizability, suicide, state, religion, multi-voiced.

Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the genre of novel deals mainly with the dialogic nature of language and novelistic discourse. For Bakhtin novel is polyphonic, multi-voiced as it allows the characters to have independent voices. While analysing the fiction of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin says that Dostoevsky's novels are polyphonic and he adds that novelistic genre for that matter is polyphonic. The result of polyphony is unfinalizability, that is the characters turn to be unfinalized without a proper conclusion. Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984) says, "Everything requires change and rebirth. Everything is shown in a moment of unfinalized transition" (167). Thus every character and every situation seem to have no final conclusion.

Bakhtin's concept of unfinalizability of characters and situations seems to be justified in Orhan Pamuk's novel, *Snow*. Set in the background of the struggle between state and

religion in the city of Kars, Snow narrates the story of suicide girls in the city. Snow is a multi-voiced novel as it echoes the voices of various characters and institutions. In *Snow* (2002) there is the marginalization of the body as religion and state, the two powerful patriarchal institutions subjugate female body through the medium of headscarf. The novel *Snow* (2002) has evidences of multiple perspectives which Bakhtin sees as a feature of polyphony. The women in *Snow* (2002) are unfinalizable in their reaction to the dominance of patriarchy. The main focus of the novel is the complex political situation in the city of Kars where women are caught between state and religion.

Friederike Eigler says that in there are no isolated voices in a polyphonic novel. “No voice exists in isolation but always relates to, is shaped by, and competes with other voices” (191). In *Snow* (2002) the voice of the victimized women encounter with that of state and religion. The state imposes restrictions on women in matters of headscarf in order to promote western culture, to assert its authority over the people and to curb the rise of the antagonistic groups including political Islamists. The state takes headscarf - “yet one more symbol of patriarchal control<sup>28</sup>” as a tool to subjugate female bodies. (Kietzman330).

As a part of their religion the women in the Turkey used to wear headscarf which is now banned by the state. In this situation, a group of girls decide to wear the headscarf as a voice of protest against the tyranny of the state. Kadife, the leader of the headscarf girls describes their condition thus, “Their mothers and fathers brought them up to be as they are. So did the religious instruction they received during their state education. Then suddenly, after having been told all their lives to keep their heads covered, these girls were told, ‘The state wants you to take your scarves off’” (*Snow*113). They considered the ban of headscarf as interference into their personal life and chose to cover their heads once again to assert their individuality.

Religion, a powerful patriarchal institution, forced headscarf on women, thus suppressing them by taking control over their body. The state repeats the same agenda of subjugating the female body by forcefully removing the headscarf of the women who used to wear it. The multiple dimensions associated with veiling seem to be significant in this context. Like unveiling, veiling can also be considered as an act of liberation as it is imposed by the secular state, another patriarchal institution.

According to Trinh T. Minh-ha

If the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out, or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance.... So that when women decide to lift their veil one can say that they do so in defiance of their men's oppressive right to their bodies. But when they decide to keep or put on veil they once took off they might do so to re appropriate their space.... (316)

The headscarf provided the girls with a sense of integrity and security, a feeling of liberation from the onslaught of the tyranny of oppression by the institution of patriarchy which is represented by the state. When the state insists that they unveil the headscarf as a symbol of freedom, it is seen as an interference of the state in personal lives. So they wear the headscarf to assert their personal freedom.

Kadife the leader of the headscarf girls says that she “put on a head scarf one day to make a political statement” (Snow114). She ‘intended to wear it for only one day’ and never thought of becoming a headscarf girl (Snow113). But the state, local press and the police reacted to her in such a way that she became stubborn and took the leadership of the headscarf girls. Her father appreciated her as she ‘had found a

special new form of rebellion' (Snow 114). She makes it clear that by wearing the headscarf she voices her strong protest against the state.

On the one hand, there is a group of girls who veil themselves against the law of the land, on the other hand, there is another group called the political Islamists, the extreme religious group who manipulates this situation to spread their ideologies as well as to capture political power in the coming elections. They spread religion among people and try to defeat policies of the secular state. They instigate rebellion in the headscarf girls though not directly. The relationship between the political Islamists and the headscarf girls is metaphorically emphasized by the secret love affair between Kadife and Blue, the leader of the political Islamists. The veil which women wear as a part of their religion has become 'the symbol of political Islam' (Snow109).

Women find this situation difficult to cope with as both state and religion take them as their medium to achieve their end. "Both sides inscribe their ideologies on the bodies of the women: That is, they must not or must cover their heads as signs of their secular freedom (the state) or their religious obligation (those who desire a theocratic state), both sides tugging at the women" (Clemens143). In this situation, found themselves in the midst of the chaos and confusion, women resort to suicide.

The act of suicide symbolizes the destruction of the body which is subjugated by the religion and the state. The suicide committed in an unnatural way voices their suppressed feelings. One of the headscarf girls killed themselves in the midst of their daily chores. Pamuk writes:

There was one sixteen-year-old girl, for example, who had been forced into an engagement with an elderly teahouse owner; she had eaten her evening meal with her mother, father, three siblings, and paternal

grandmother, just as she had done every evening; after she and her sisters had cleared the table with the usual amount of giggling and tussling, she went from the kitchen into the garden to fetch the dessert, and from there she climbed through the window into her parents' bedroom, where she shot herself with a hunting rifle. (*Snow* 13)

The girl did not take time to think over the act and she killed herself in a dramatic manner which shocks every one. This pattern is present in almost all the suicides. Ka, the protagonist was frightened by "...the way these girls had killed themselves: abruptly, without ritual or warning, in the midst of their everyday routines" (*Snow* 13). More than the act of suicide, the manner of their suicide shocks and frightens people.

People become more and more scared because this act of suicide spread like an epidemic as if there is an invisible medium carrying the message of death from one girl to the other. This chain of suicides throws light at the psychological trauma these girls have been going through. The pressure from the family, society, religion and state becomes intolerable and it seems that they have reached at the impasse. One can sense that there is inner dialogue going on in the minds of these girls and they convey the message silently. It reaches at those who share their miserable state. Though there is no word, there is a powerful action taking place. It is a silent protest and a violent acceptance.

The society interprets the suicide epidemic in multiple ways and finds out many reasons for it- the headscarf being one. The sufferings they have undergone while wearing the scarf, force them to kill themselves. The threats from the family and the state authorities and dismissal from the educational institutions seem to be

sufficient reasons for them to commit suicide. When they felt that they cannot live a decent life wearing a scarf, they give up their life. Hande, one the headscarf girls speaks about Teslime, her friend who has committed suicide. Tesilme, one of the most devout of the headscarf girls had to face pressure from her family, school and the state. When the authorities threatened her father, she lost support from her family, and father told her that she would be expelled from the house. When this tactic failed, he entered into negotiations to marry her off to a forty-five-year-old policeman. She could not yield to her father because, for her, “the head scarf did not just stand for God’s love, it also proclaimed her faith and preserved her honor” (Snow119). Teslime ‘had hanged herself’ when she felt that she cannot live with honour and integrity (Snow 120).

It seems that the notions of the purity and virginity of female body contribute to the suicide epidemic. One girl commits suicide after her teacher accused her of not being a virgin. “Once the rumor had spread all over Kars, the girl’s fiancé called off the engagement, and the other young suitors...stopped coming too” (Snow 15). Unable to face the family and society she too kills herself. The importance given to virginity in spite of all the adaptation of European culture leads girls to commit suicide. She might have felt that she cannot live with honour if the society accuses her of not being a virgin.

For some people, unhappiness is the major reason for suicide. But the authorities do not agree to this. The deputy governor says: “But if unhappiness were a genuine reason for suicide, half the women in Turkey would be killing themselves.”

He suggested that these women might be offended if they had to listen to a chorus of male voices remonstrating, “Don’t commit suicide!” (Snow 14-15). When the

patriarchal society forbids them from committing suicide, they take suicide as a resistance. In Kars, Ka witnesses many posters forbidding women from committing suicide. The posters which state that suicide is blasphemy and life is the gift of God is another form of instruction from patriarchy and it forces many women to commit suicide.

Blue, the leader of the political Islamist, says that it is not only the Muslims, but women from the other community too commit suicide. “Girls who commit suicide are not even Muslims!” said Blue. “And it’s wrong to say they’re taking a stand over head scarves” (Snow 75). He adds that if Ka writes the report like this it will spread rumours about the headscarf girls. The reason for the suicide is not headscarf but something more i.e. they felt alienated in the family as well as in their educational institutions.

Ka’s lover Ipek says that there is something special about suicide as it is only women who commit suicide. “It’s not everyone who’s committing suicide, it’s just girls and women,” said Ipek. “The men give themselves to religion, and the women kill themselves” (Snow 35). This comment becomes significant as she is a divorcee and her ex-husband Muhtar belongs to the group of political Islamists. In Ipek’s case, her husband Muhtar turned to religion and forced her to follow the strict instructions of religion. Ipek, a woman with independent thoughts, could not adjust with his extreme religious principles and they get separated.

Thus, the novel does not give a final conclusion to the question as to why they commit suicide. While unraveling the mysterious suicide taking place in a turbulent political situation, the novel presents before its readers a multitude of voices commenting on the act of suicide. The readers are unable to find out whether it is a

protest or an acceptance. This situation is in line with Bakhtin's idea of unfinalizability in a polyphonic novel, in which there is no final conclusion for anything or anyone.

Kadife, the leader of the headscarf girls, is unique in her approach to the political situation which subjugates female body. When she is forced to unveil herself in front of a large audience by Sunay Zaim, a representative of the state, thus declaring herself a supporter of the secular state, she agrees to it in order to save her lover Blue. If successfully executed, this would justify the cause of the ban on headscarf and state would win the war. Sunay Zaim manipulates the situation to make himself shot dead by Kadife on the stage, thus gaining immortality. Sunay dies on the stage and Kadife is accused of the murder and sent to jail. Rachel E. Hile says, "Unlike suicide girls Kadife does not die. She serves time in prison and after that marries Fazil and has a child. When other headscarf girls commit suicide, Kadife survives. Her type of revenge is different from other girls. Blue is killed but Kadife does not commit suicide" (145). She survives the tragedy caused by Blue's death, without yielding to suicide. By imbibing the energy from the other girls who have sacrificed their life, Kadife decides to live. Just like the unfinalizability in the death of the suicide girls, there is unfinalizability in Kadife in not committing suicide. The other girls resort to suicide as a protest and revenge to the dominant patriarchal institutions like state and religion, but Kadife decides to live.

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