

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Orhan Pamuk

Snow

Kar

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Kerim Alakuşoğlu, who calls himself Ka, is a poet returning to Turkey after twelve years of political exile in Germany. He travels to the border town of Kars, in eastern Anatolia on the frontier with Armenia, ostensibly to report on the municipal elections and investigate the suicides of women in this remote Anatolian town for the Istanbul magazine Republic. In reality, Ka goes to Kars hoping to overcome a creative block that has prevented him from writing poetry for years, and also to visit İpek, a woman he once loved.

When Ka arrives, Kars is struck by a snowstorm that isolates the city from the rest of Turkey for four days, enough time for unpredictable and turbulent political events to shake the town. At this time, Turkey is embroiled in fierce debates between pro-Western republicans and political Islamists, centred on the issue of women's veiling. Tensions escalate after an extremist murders the head of the Institute of Education for banning veiled students from entering.

The next day, a theatre troupe led by Sunay Zaim, a failed Turkish actor turned state propagandist, stages a play in Kars promoting republican ideals. During the performance, Islamists in the audience protest, prompting the actors to open fire on them from the stage, killing several. Later, the citizens of Kars refer to this event as the "theatrical revolution". Because Kars is cut off by snow, the army cannot intervene immediately, and tensions in the city continue to mount. Ka becomes a mediator, forced to navigate between the opposing sides.

The political Islamists are led by Blue, a charismatic figure considered a terrorist by the authorities. Blue is romantically involved with İpek's sister, Kadife, a prominent advocate for veiled women. The plot reaches its climax on the fourth day during another of Sunay Zaim's performances, an adaptation of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, in which Kadife, blackmailed by the local authorities who have imprisoned Blue, is supposed to remove her veil on stage. Ka, however, does not witness the end of the performance or the resolution of events, as the army escorts him onto the first train out of Kars once the snow stops and transport resumes.

In this politically unstable city, Ka suddenly finds inspiration for new poems, spurred by political upheaval, murders, kidnappings, and testimonies of torture in police stations. These poems are later considered lost, and the events of the novel are narrated by Ka's friend Orhan, a writer who seeks to recover the manuscript of Ka's poems after Ka's murder in Germany.

A striking feature of the citizens of Kars, that is, of the characters in *Snow*, is that they are all somehow involved in both politics and literature. From the young Islamist writing an Islamic science fiction novel, to Kadife fighting for the rights of veiled women and claiming she wants her life to be told like a novel, to Sunay Zaim rewriting Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* to convince Kars's residents of the righteousness of secular life, everyone in the novel turns life into text.

Added to this is the constant questioning of Ka's motives, his faith, and whether he is merely a Westernised atheist who has infiltrated a town of devout Muslims. Pamuk's novel is political because it demonstrates how different kinds of texts, from science fiction novels, Ka's poetry, and theatrical performances to joint proclamations by political factions and even the Qur'an itself, can be interpreted and reinterpreted. The most important "politics" in Kars during Ka's stay is the politics of interpretation, expressed in how various texts are applied to the reality around them.

It is a dangerous politics, one that fails to distinguish between text, a product of a symbolic and arbitrary system such as language, and extratextual reality. One of the best examples of this in the novel is the first theatre performance in Kars, during which actors use real guns to fire at protesting spectators, while the rest of the audience continues to believe it is part of the show.

This marks the beginning of an interpretative spiral that drives the novel's plot, as different political lines converge in a scene where representatives of every ideological faction, from Blue the Islamist, to young leftists, atheists, and anarchists, gather in one house in Kars. Their goal is to write a manifesto to the West, which Ka is to deliver to the newspapers to report on the true state of affairs in eastern Turkey. The problem arises when they cannot agree on the content of the text; the only statement that remains from the manifesto is: "The people of eastern Anatolia are not stupid – they are just poor."

Interpretation thus becomes the central issue behind all political and artistic events in Kars – even the falling snow, which Ka at one point interprets as a message from God, bringing him closer to the infinite interpretability of religious texts that seek their foundation beyond language itself.

Literature, by contrast, is a discourse that does not permit interpretation beyond itself. This is already evident in the novel's title. The poet Ka insists on being called by the initials of his full name; the city he visits is named Kars; and the novel's title, *Snow*, in Turkish is kar. The combination of the poet's name, the city's name, and the novel's title reveals their textual nature – their creation through language. Interpretation, therefore, turns inward, towards the text itself. This does not restrict interpretation but highlights the distinctive character of literary interpretation, which, once it moves beyond the text, finds itself caught in a blizzard of endless meanings.

LANGUAGE: Turkish/Türkçe

This title was not censored before publishing