



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Mimic Man in the Blizzard: Colonial Ambivalence, the Third Space, and the Unhomely Nation in Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*

Reneesh Thomas

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Deva Matha College (Autonomous) Kuravilangad

Abstract

This article applies Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, as elaborated in *The Location of Culture* (1994), to Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* (2002; trans. Maureen Freely, 2004). It argues that the novel dramatises three of Bhabha's central concepts -- mimicry, the Third Space, and the unhomely -- with unusual fidelity and complexity. Ka, the Turkish poet who returns from twelve years of exile in Germany to the snowbound border city of Kars, is read as a version of Bhabha's mimic man: an intellectual whose identity is constituted in the ambivalent, interstitial space between European modernity and Turkish cultural formation. The National Theatre -- where Sunay Zaim's theatrical coup becomes actual political violence -- is read as a Third Space in Bhabha's sense: a site where the boundary between the performed and the real, the secular and the sacred, is perpetually contested and never resolved. The novel's treatment of Turkish nationhood is further read through Bhabha's concept of DissemiNation: the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population in a double-time of pedagogical authority and performative disruption. The article argues that Pamuk's novel, set in a forgotten Anatolian city during an engineered political crisis, maps with striking precision the structural conditions that Bhabha identifies as constitutive of postcolonial cultural ambivalence.

Keywords: Homi Bhabha, mimicry, Third Space, the unhomely, DissemiNation, Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, postcolonial theory, Turkish literature, colonial ambivalence, cultural difference

Introduction

Snow (2002; trans. Maureen Freely, 2004) opens with a journey into a blizzard. Ka, a Turkish poet returning from twelve years of political exile in Frankfurt, boards a bus to Kars -- a forgotten border city in north-eastern Turkey -- and finds that the snow obliterates everything: road signs, landmarks, the outlines of the road itself. This opening image is more than atmospheric description. The snow that erases the legible landscape also figures Ka's condition as a subject: a man whose sense of cultural belonging, political identity, and selfhood has been rendered equally unreadable by years of displacement. He is, in the terms that Homi K. Bhabha develops in *The Location of Culture* (1994), an unhomely subject inhabiting a Third Space -- the interstitial zone between East and West, between Kemalist secularism and political Islam, between the world he left and the world to which he has returned.

Bhabha's theoretical project in *The Location of Culture* is to displace the binary oppositions through which colonial and postcolonial cultural relations have been understood -- Self and Other, coloniser and colonised, tradition and modernity -- and to locate, in the ambivalent space between these terms, the productive instability that both constitutes and threatens cultural authority. His central concepts -- mimicry, the Third Space, the unhomely, and the DissemiNation of national identity -- name the structural conditions under which postcolonial subjects produce, negotiate, and contest identity. Applied to Pamuk's *Snow*, they illuminate the novel's deepest concerns: the impossibility of pure cultural identity in a world defined by colonial legacies, the performative character of both national and personal selfhood, and the violence that erupts when the ambivalence of cultural belonging is suppressed in favour of ideological certainty.

The article proceeds in four movements. It reads Ka as Bhabha's mimic man, examining his Frankfurt coat, his secular-intellectual positioning, and his constitutive inability to belong to any of Kars's cultural formations. It then reads the Snow Palace Hotel and the National Theatre as Third Spaces in Bhabha's sense: sites where cultural authority is perpetually unstable and where the boundary between performance and reality collapses with fatal consequences. Third, it reads the novel's political landscape through Bhabha's DissemiNation, arguing that the competing ideological formations of Kars -- Kemalist secularism, political Islam, Kurdish marginalisation -- embody the nation split within itself. The article closes with a reading of Ka's trajectory and his lost notebook through the concept of the unhomely: the condition in which the private and the public, the domestic and the historical, become inextricably entangled.

I. Bhabha's Key Concepts: Mimicry, the Third Space, the Unhomely

Bhabha opens his essay 'Of Mimicry and Man' by defining colonial mimicry as 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 122). The phrase is not decorative; it names a structural condition. The colonial project demands that the colonised subject become recognisably like the coloniser -- educated in his language, shaped by his institutions, formed in his image -- but never identical to him. The mimic man is the product of this demand: he speaks the coloniser's language, wears his clothes, reads his books, and yet remains irremediably other, his very resemblance a proof of the difference it was meant to dissolve. This excess or slippage produced by mimicry does not rupture the discourse of colonial authority:

but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence. By 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual'. It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. (Bhabha 123)

The mimic man is therefore not a failed copy of the coloniser but something structurally more threatening: a presence that discloses the ambivalence at the heart of colonial authority, that reveals how identity is always partial, positional, and constructed. Bhabha traces this figure from Macaulay's Indian educational policy -- which sought to produce 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Bhabha 124) -- through the literary careers of Naipaul and Conrad, and he insists throughout that mimicry's menace lies in its double vision: it discloses, in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse, the conditions of authority's own undoing.

The Third Space is introduced in 'The Commitment to Theory' as the precondition for the production of cultural meaning. Bhabha argues that meaning is never simply transmitted from speaker to addressee but is produced in a space that is prior to, and irreducible to, both -- a space that ensures that 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha 55). This Third Space, Bhabha writes, is 'unrepresentable in itself' but constitutes 'the discursive conditions of enunciation' that make all cultural meaning possible --

and all cultural authority inherently unstable (55). It is the site where cultures do not meet in dialogue but collide in ambivalence, where the fixed boundaries between dominant and subordinate, between centre and margin, between what is permitted and what is transgressive, are perpetually contested.

The unhomely is introduced in Bhabha's Introduction through a series of literary figures -- Isabel Archer in Henry James, Bimala in Tagore, Sethe in Morrison -- all of whom share a condition in which the domestic space has been invaded and occupied by historical violence. Bhabha defines it precisely:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'. (Bhabha 13)

What unites these figures is the collapse of the boundary that is supposed to separate the private from the public, the domestic from the historical. As Bhabha writes, 'the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other' (13). The unhomely subject is not simply someone who has lost a home; he is someone for whom home has become the site of history's most intimate violence, someone who cannot locate safety in the domestic because the domestic and the political have ceased to be separable.

II. Ka as the Mimic Man: Almost Turkish but Not Quite

Snow introduces Ka through a detail that is simultaneously trivial and theoretically precise: his coat. He is wearing, Pamuk tells us, 'a thick charcoal coat that he'd bought at a Frankfurt Kaufhof five years earlier.' This coat, the narrator notes immediately, 'would cause him shame and disquiet during the days he was to spend in Kars, while also furnishing a sense of security' (Pamuk 3). The doubling of shame and security in one garment is the novel's opening enactment of colonial mimicry. The Frankfurt coat is the visible mark of Ka's partial assimilation to European culture: it is too good for Kars, which marks him as alien; it is also his only protection against the cold and against his own unbelonging, which makes him cling to it. He is 'almost the same but not quite' made sartorially visible -- too European for Kars, too Turkish for Frankfurt, fully at home in neither world.

Ka's position in the novel maps precisely onto Bhabha's account of the mimic man's double vision. Having spent twelve years in Germany, Ka has absorbed European modernity -- its secular rationalism, its literary culture, its habits of critical distance -- without being able to claim it as his own. He is not German; he is a Turkish political exile whose German existence has been one of marginalisation and creative paralysis. And when he returns to Turkey, he finds that his European formation has made him equally foreign to the worlds of Kars: he cannot share the Islamists' faith, cannot share the army's Kemalist certainty, cannot share the Kurdish poor's experience of material deprivation, cannot share the local journalists' provincial nationalism. Bhabha writes that the menace of mimicry lies in 'its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority' (Bhabha 126). Ka's double vision does exactly this: he sees both the Islamist and the secularist positions from an angle that discloses their ambivalence without offering him any stable ground of his own.

The novel's sharpest rendering of Ka's mimic position comes in his encounter with the two political extremes that dominate Kars: Sunay Zaim's authoritarian secularism and Blue's Islamist militancy. Both men possess what Ka entirely lacks: the conviction that they know what Turkey is and what it must become. Ka is drawn to both and convinced by neither. His inability to choose -- which Fazil, the young Islamist student, captures in a phrase that could have come from Bhabha's own theoretical vocabulary -- is expressed as the condition of having 'two souls inside' his body (Pamuk 294). This is not simply personal irresolution.

It is the structural condition of the postcolonial mimic man: a subject whose formation has taken place across two incompatible cultural fields and who can therefore fully inhabit neither.

Ka's poetry -- the one creative achievement that his three days in Kars unlock after years of sterile silence in Frankfurt -- is the product of this condition rather than its cure. The poems arrive involuntarily, from a source Ka cannot identify or control. He describes their structure using the image of a snowflake: each poem occupies a unique position on two axes, 'Imagination' and 'Logic', radiating outward from a centre he calls 'Memory'. The snowflake is an emblem of the Third Space: a structure of infinite possible positions, each different, none primary, none original. Ka's poetry is enabled precisely by his cultural homelessness -- by the fact that, occupying the interstitial space between two cultures, he has access to the ambivalence that both cultures suppress in the name of coherence.

III. The National Theatre as Third Space: Performance, Violence, and the Real

The novel's central political event -- Sunay Zaim's theatrical coup, in which a live stage performance becomes the occasion for an actual military takeover -- is Pamuk's most sustained enactment of Bhabha's Third Space. Sunay is a revolutionary theatre actor who has spent decades performing radical political plays; he is also a figure who has become indistinguishable from the roles he plays. By the time of the novel, he has arranged a real military coup to coincide with a theatrical performance, so that the soldiers fire real bullets from the stage while the audience watches, uncertain whether what is before them is staged or actual. The director of the Education Institute is shot on stage; the audience laughs; he is dying while they applaud.

This is the Third Space in its most dangerous form. The boundary between what is performed and what is real, between what is represented and what is enacted, has dissolved entirely. Bhabha's argument that the Third Space is the site where 'even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha 55) is literalised here: the theatrical sign of violence and the real act of violence have become indistinguishable. The live television broadcast compounds this dissolution. When Serdar Bey's newspaper reports events that have not yet happened -- including, as we eventually learn, Ka's own death -- the boundary between narration and event, between the production of national meaning and the events that meaning is supposed to describe, collapses with the same finality as the boundary between performance and reality on Sunay's stage.

Sunay's coup is also a staging of what Bhabha calls, in his account of DissemiNation, the nation's pedagogical authority. The theatrical performance that Sunay orchestrates is a re-enactment of Atatürk's modernising reforms: the forcible unveiling of women, the assertion of secular over religious authority, the demonstration that the Turkish state will not tolerate the headscarf in public institutions. In staging these reforms as theatre, Sunay reveals their constitutively performative character. Kemalist modernity was never a natural or organic expression of Turkish culture; it was an act of force, a performance of authority, a theatrical gesture that required the stage machinery of the army, the education system, and the state apparatus to sustain itself. When Sunay repeats the gesture in 2002 in Kars, the repetition makes visible what the original performance was designed to conceal: that this authority has no substance beyond its own enactment.

The headscarf around which the novel's crisis turns functions in the Third Space as what Bhabha calls a site of ambivalent signification: a sign whose meaning cannot be fixed or stabilised by any of the cultural formations competing to determine it. For the Islamists it signifies religious authenticity and resistance to Western cultural imperialism; for the Kemalist secularists it signifies backwardness and the subordination of women to patriarchal religious authority; for Kadife herself it is a complex personal act that exceeds both of these readings entirely. When Kadife is compelled to unveil on stage at Sunay's demand, the act is simultaneously a theatrical gesture, a political coercion, an act of mourning for Blue, and a form of self-determination. No single ideology can account for all of what the unveiling means, because it takes place in the Third Space where all such fixed meanings are rendered provisional and unstable.

IV. DissemiNation: The Turkish Nation Split Within Itself

Snow is a novel about the impossibility of Turkish national identity as a unified, coherent formation. The Kars that Ka enters embodies what Bhabha calls DissemiNation -- the nation revealed as internally fractured, unable to suture its own contradictions, constituted by the very heterogeneity it attempts to suppress. In 'DissemiNation', Bhabha argues that the production of the nation as narrative involves an irreducible split between two temporal modes of addressing the people:

In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation. (Bhabha 209)

The pedagogical mode asserts the nation as a pre-given historical reality, a continuous tradition that grounds the present in an authoritative past. The performative mode interrupts this authority by demonstrating, in the very act of enunciation, that the nation's unity is produced rather than given, constructed in the present tense of narration rather than retrieved from a settled origin. In Kars, both of these modes are simultaneously in crisis, and their failure is mutually constitutive.

The Kemalist pedagogical narrative -- Turkey chose modernity under Ataturk's direction; secularism is the authentic expression of the Turkish national character; the Republic is the progressive culmination of Turkish history -- has produced the Kars that Ka encounters: a city of forty per cent unemployment, of young women killing themselves in epidemic numbers, of Kurds who are excluded from the national narrative entirely, of Russian stone buildings and Armenian churches that testify to histories the official national pedagogy has suppressed. The pedagogical narrative has failed its own people, and this failure is legible in every street Ka walks down.

The performative counter-narrative of Islamist resistance -- the claim that there is an authentic Turkish-Islamic identity waiting to be recovered from beneath Western secularist imposition -- is equally incapable of addressing what the novel shows. Blue's politics are compelling as a critique of Kemalist arrogance and Western contempt but offer nothing to the Kurdish livestock dealer on the bus to Kars, nothing to the unemployed men in the tea-houses, nothing to the girls who are dying. Bhabha writes that 'the barred Nation It/Self, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference' (Bhabha 212). Kars is precisely this: a space where the nation's internal heterogeneity -- ethnic, religious, economic, political -- cannot be resolved by any of the ideological formations that claim to speak for it.

The suicide epidemic is the novel's most devastating figure of DissemiNation. The girls who are killing themselves are doing so for reasons that no single ideological narrative can account for. Some protest the headscarf ban; some resist forced marriages; some have succumbed to a despair that exceeds political categorisation. They are, in Bhabha's terms, the remainder of the nation's attempt to constitute itself as a unified subject -- the excess that no pedagogical narrative can absorb. Ka comes to Kars nominally to report on their deaths; but the novel suggests that their deaths cannot be reported, cannot be adequately explained, because they occur in the gap between the competing national narratives that claim to speak for Turkish women without ever actually listening to them.

V. The Unhomely: Ka, Ipek, and the Dissolution of the Private

Bhabha writes that 'the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence' (Bhabha 15). Ka's three days in Kars are a sustained experience of this relation. He arrives hoping to construct a private world -- a love affair with Ipek, a notebook of new poems, an escape from the sterile public world of Frankfurt exile -- and discovers that in Kars no such private world is possible. The Snow Palace Hotel, where Ka stays and where Ipek, Kadife,

and Turgut Bey live, is an unhomely space in Bhabha's precise sense: a building that is simultaneously a hotel (transient, public), a family home (domestic, private), and the site of the novel's central political drama. The snow that seals the city against the outside world does not protect the domestic from the historical; it only makes the domestic more intensely the site of the historical's intrusions.

Ka's love for Ipek is the novel's most sustained exploration of the unhomely dynamic. He constructs an elaborate fantasy of escape: he will persuade Ipek to leave Kars with him for Frankfurt; they will build a domestic space there, insulated from Turkish political violence; his poetry will continue to flow; they will be happy. The fantasy is a fantasy of exiting the Third Space -- of finding, somewhere in Germany, a place outside the ambivalence that constitutes his existence. But the novel refuses this exit entirely. Blue holds Ka's desire for Ipek as leverage over him, using it to make Ka a messenger between the Islamist underground and the military authorities. The private -- Ka's love -- is from the beginning a political instrument. The domestic and the historical have always already interpenetrated each other, and the snow that seals Kars is not a boundary between them but the condition under which their entanglement becomes visible.

The novel's most precise rendering of the unhomely comes in the scene in which Ka locks Ipek in his hotel room before going to the National Theatre. He does this, his letter explains, for her protection -- to keep her away from the violence he knows is about to occur. But the room in which he imprisons her for her own safety is the same room in which they have been attempting to build their private world. The domestic space, the site of intimacy and shelter, has become a cell. Bhabha's formulation that in the unhomely moment 'the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting' (Bhabha 13) is here enacted with painful literalism: Ka's act of love and Ka's act of political complicity are the same act.

Ka is shot dead in Frankfurt four years after his three days in Kars. He does not die in Kars, in the political crisis that surrounds him, but in Germany, the city he thought of as safe. The unhomely follows him there. There is no space outside it: no pure domesticity, no European refuge that history's violence cannot penetrate. The notebook containing his nineteen poems from Kars -- the only enduring testimony to what he experienced, the only record of his creative life reborn -- is lost between Kars and Frankfurt and never recovered. The narrator Orhan, a version of Pamuk himself, goes to Kars four years later to reconstruct Ka's story and finds that reconstruction is always incomplete, always mediated through other people's memories, always haunted by absences. The lost notebook is the novel's final unhomely figure: the text that should have secured Ka's inner life against historical oblivion has itself been consumed by the violence it attempted to escape.

Conclusion

Snow is one of the most rigorously postcolonial novels in contemporary world literature, not because it depicts the legacies of European colonial rule in the conventional sense, but because it dramatises, with precision and formal intelligence, the structural conditions that Bhabha identifies as constitutive of the postcolonial subject's relation to cultural identity, nationhood, and historical violence. Ka is not simply a man caught between East and West. He is a subject whose formation across two incompatible cultural fields produces the creative instability that enables his poetry and the psychic paralysis that makes it impossible for him to act decisively at any of the novel's moments of crisis.

The Third Space of Pamuk's novel -- the Snow Palace Hotel, the National Theatre, the tea-houses where Islamist students and secular intellectuals briefly converge -- is not a space of easy cultural mixing. It is, in Bhabha's account, the site where 'even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha 55), where cultural authority is exposed as produced rather than given, where the boundary between the performed and the real is permanently at risk. Sunay's theatrical coup, which turns

the National Theatre into the site where that boundary collapses fatally, is the Third Space at its most extreme -- the moment when the ambivalence of cultural discourse erupts into actual death.

Snow offers no resolution to this violence. What it offers instead is the formal enactment of what Bhabha calls the 'complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address' (Bhabha 201) through which the nation speaks to and about its people. In its multiplicity of voices, its refusal of any single authoritative perspective, its structural dependence on gaps and missing texts, the novel enacts precisely the kind of cultural negotiation that DissemiNation makes possible: a negotiation that does not resolve ambivalence but holds it open, refusing the ideological closure -- whether Kemalist or Islamist -- that the novel's violence demonstrates can only be purchased at the cost of the lives of those who cannot be made to fit.

Works Cited

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994; Routledge Classics, 2004.
2. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 1986.
3. ---. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Penguin, 1967.
4. Goknar, Erdag. "Orhan Pamuk and the 'Ottoman' Theme." *World Literature Today*, vol. 80, no. 6, 2006, pp. 34--38.
5. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 222--237.
6. Pamuk, Orhan. *Snow*. Translated by Maureen Freely, Faber and Faber, 2004.
7. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
8. ---. *Culture and Imperialism*. Chatto and Windus, 1993.
9. Saygili-Hurec, Gokce. "Politics, Paranoia, and the Poet: Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2008, pp. 133--144.
10. Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Blackwell, 2001.