

# ELEMENTS OF DIPTYCH ANF FLANEUR: A STUDY OF ORHAN PAMUK'S *SNOW*

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**Abstract:** A diptych is a technique used in the art of painting. This was widely used in medieval literature and A.C. Spearing popularised it in literary context. In modern literature Herman Melville pioneered the form as a narrative structure through his 'three diptychs'. Turkish literature has shown this quality of duality from earlier stage itself due to its tug-of-war between the traditional Armanian civilization and modernity bring forth by the secular government. Orhan Pamuk being an icon figure of Turkish literature has knowingly or unknowingly rendered this narrative structure in most of his works. *Snow* shows the qualities of diptych in various levels out of which the structure, narration and characters are taken foe detailed analysis. The notion of Flaneur which was popularised by Walter Benjamin provides a strong theoretical framework for the application of diptych structure to literature. This paper shows how the characters in the text become a flaneur and how they compliment and contrast each others.

**Key Words:** Diptych, diptych narration, Orhan Pamuk, flaneur, politics and religion, art and politics, visual narration.

Diptych is a technique used in the art of painting. Webster's Dictionary, defines diptych as "a picture or a series of pictures painted on two hinged tablets". The best known representations of diptych in the art are the Wilton Diptych and Warhol's Marilyn Diptych. Diptych is not a form that is being restricted in art or paintings only, but it has been widely experimented in literature too. A C Spearing made the term familiarized in literary conditions and for him diptych was used "to describe a group of poems and literary works in medieval literature". For justifying his conclusion he reworked that in three eminent Medieval Poems viz; *The Awntyrs off Arthure, Golagros and Gawain*, and the story of Ceyx and Alcyone from Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. Approaching to modern literary tradition, diptych picks up another definition – a literary work consisting of two parts, or a narrative telling the same story from two opposite point of view. After the medieval times of literature that celebrates the style of diptych, it made its reincarnation in touching on three short stories written by Herman Melville. His widely discussed three diptychs are *Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs*, *The Two Temples* and *The Paradise of*

*Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids*. Hans Bergmann who worked on Melville's works explained more about diptych style adopted by the writer in the *Companion to Melville Studies*. It is as follows:

Comparison between Great Britain and America seemed to be popular at the time Melville published his three diptychs. The main topics in Melville's three diptychs are opposition between rich and poor, religion and drama, male and female, corruptness and goodness. (Bloom 261).

Orhan Pamuk, highly influenced and molded by the culture and politics of Turkey, his works all together possess a diptych structure or a double layer in its plot, setting and characterization. The original version of *Snow* was written in Turkish language in 2002. The novel begins with the return back of the protagonist Kerim Alakusoglu (Ka) to his homeland Kars (which means snow) after twelve years of self imposed exile in Germany. He is a journalist assigned with the responsibility of reporting two important events happening in Turkey – the suicide epidemic seen recently among the girls and the impending municipal elections. The ban on the headscarves girls on educational institutions by the Islamist or fundamentalist group engulfed the entire city. Ka tries to rejuvenate the poet in him and with the same passion he also attempts to persuade Ipek to accompany him to Germany. Each chapter is a novel encounter with new locations and a new person. A subplot of the matured relation between Kadife the sister of Ipek and Blue an Islamic terrorist is drawn in between with adequate importance. A series of incidents ruled over the plot. The theatre event was the most crucial among all. The conservatives entered the stage in the guise of actors in the roles of soldiers, dramatically, a live round of gunshot was made by the disguised group. Later Blue was arrested being the head of the terrorist group. Kadife being the leader of the headscarf girls who refuse to give up their right to religion was forcefully asked to remove her headscarf. They offered the freedom of Blue in return for her act. Though Blue was released he altered from the deal with the cop and evanesces into some secret location with the help of Ka. After innumerable attempts by Ka, Ipek agreed to accompany Ka to Germany but Blue's assassination made her to withdraw the plan. Later the narrator unveils Ka's treachery towards Blue and his hidden role in the murder. Ka went back to Germany alone to spend the rest of his life alone as a dejected man. But four years later he was assassinated by a Turkish Islamist group while he was walking through the streets of Frankfurt. That was then resolved to be the vengeance for Blue's fate.

The setting of the novel is Kars, a city in Anatolia during 1990s where one can find the 'relics of Armanian civilization and the Russian imperial rule' complemented with appalling weather. The novel *Snow* deals with the age old binaries of tradition and modernity. Also the conservative and progressive attitudes persist among both Islamic and Western ideologies and the associated tug-of-war is also shown here with immense care. These pairs of binary oppositions are strained vastly. The real picture of socio politico strata of Turkish life is shown through the representation of the symbol headscarf. This symbol accounts the notion of "Turkish identity crisis" arouse by the revival of the Islam religion.

The structure of the work can be analyzed mainly under two levels. On the first level we have the diptych panel carrying the components of visual narration and the second level describes the level of

descriptive narration where the age old clash between politics and religion are discussed. Irrespective of the type of landscape it is about, whether the village setting of Kars or the urban Frankfurt Pamuk's words did a verbal portrayal of the place with minute details including the geography, architecture, weather and so on. The nature of Kars is all about snow and snowfall. Here snow becomes the only representation as a natural phenomenon. Thus snow and its role are recounted by placing it in both the physical and mental planes. Taking snow on its physical identity, it provides the geography of Kars uniqueness, at the same time it isolates the city from rest of the world.

The wide avenue was buried knee-deep; white and mysterious, it climbed up a slope and disappeared into the night.... The icicles from one of the oleander trees reached down as low as the snow blanket draping an invisible car; the snow and ice had merged to form a tulle Curtain (Pamuk 166-7)

Snow here also placed as a substitution for divinity too. Though Ka came into Kars as an atheist he went back with an admiration to the divine presence. The nature plays a pivotal role in this transformation. Ka recurrently notes his intuition of a divine presence or an aura amid the falling snow. The nature depicted here also shows the mental dilemma inside Ka as an atheist transforming into a believer. He swings from his wish to be an atheist who walked against belief to the one who finds the divine presence in snow. He states, "The snow reminds me of God" (Pamuk85). Snow phrases and expresses the notion of belief and religion in course of time, which is explicitly delivered through Ka.

The visual narrative skills of Pamuk not only express the various faces of nature but also it attributed animations for many other settings too. The urban streets of Frankfurt and the descriptions of Ka's room and the things arranged there are also portrayed with equal clarity and sharpness like he did for the descriptions of Kars. Orhan the narrator, searches the room of Ka after his death for collecting some of his recordings. The words Pamuk used here are not as subtle and smooth as he did with the village setting, but with an adulteration of modernity and mechanized artificiality.

Apart from a natural phenomenon that results in the exploration and transformation of both mental and physical planes, snow also influenced Ka in another sense. The knowledge about the structure of snow he came across the *Encyclopedia* made him to loan it for the arrangement of his poems. Thus snow acts as a structural base for Ka's compilation of poems if it would have got published. Unfortunately all the poems written in a green book got stolen. Ka's process of production of poetry constitutes one part of the diptych panel when another level of dissection is taken into account. It includes the influences and preparations came in the process. This panel of the diptych is of art and is set in contrast to the politics discussed in the novel. It's after four years of being a dried and drained poet, Ka started to write poems. This time it was with a wild rage of rush resulted in the production of nineteen poems in three days, when Kars get desolated in the heavy snowfall.

This interwoven narration about his poetry in between the grave discussions of political and cultural chaos around forms a perfect balance between the socio-political commentary and that of Art. And Ka, barren sometimes in the past, suddenly finds him in a whirlpool of hastening creative outcome shuts him

from all other turmoil happening around him and reclaims to a short lived happiness by the creative outburst. Here snow acts as an agent that warms his consciousness. Snow covers not only the roofs and ground, but also “conceals the inner recess of the poet’s mindscape learning him in a newly found happiness”. The vision of the snowflakes falling acts as the moment of epiphany for Ka. Interestingly Ka never had sat solely for writing a poem. Each chapter of this novel is his encounters with each other characters like Ipek, Kadife, Blue, Muhtar, Necip and Sheik Sadattin. And these conversations resulted in the rushing out of poetry in him which is immediately copied down to the green book he always used to carry with him.

On a later investigation through the notes Ka had prepared during his time in Kars, Orhan had discovered the snowflake reproduced by Ka in his notes. And the structure showed the arrangements of all the nineteen poems of Ka in the form of a snowflake.

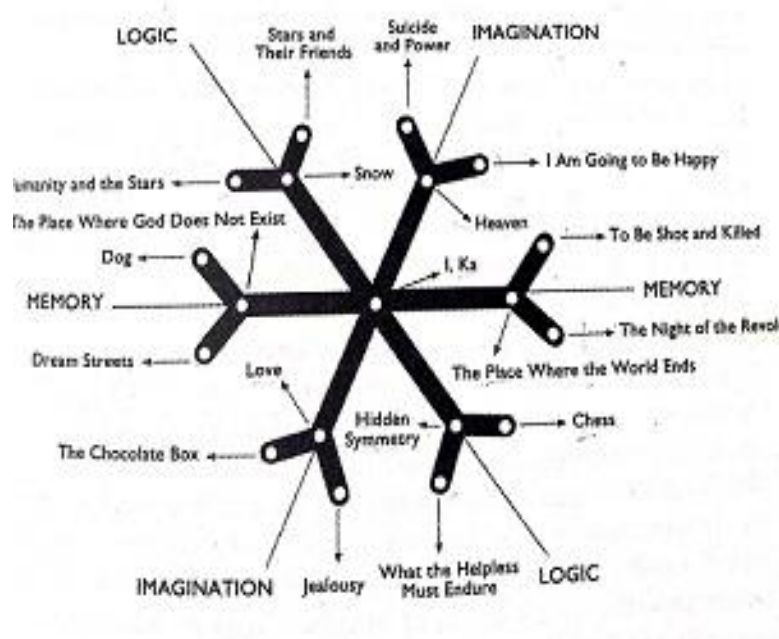


Figure 1: Snowflake structure of Ka's poems (Pamuk 267)

The second level of narration is of descriptive type which considers the raw facts and unwritten conflict between politics and religion set in the context of Turkey. The corner stone of this dichotomy with respect to ideology and identity was accelerated by the westernizing scheme enacted by Kemal Ataturk. And it was brutally reinforced by his military force. Kars is completely shown as a spiritless land turned off into hopelessness and poverty. Primarily *Snow* is a political novel. In an interview published in ‘Other Colours’, Pamuk mentions that he actually wrote the novel to “explore his own spiritual dilemmas, a person coming from an upper middleclass family feeling responsible for those who had no political representation”. Pamuk confesses that he wanted to write a “political novel” (Politics and Art in Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow*, Pamuk 372). *Snow* is a perfect ambivalence between the modernity brought through the Westernization imported by the secular state and the age old cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire imbibed to the land of Turkey. Though the conflict is set in Kars a small area of Turkey, it possesses a global reflection involving geopolitical ramifications. Overtly a political novel, the brawl of these two entities is portrayed using the moderate representation of headscarf. The state banned the headscarf girls first from the classrooms, later from the

institution itself. Many girls under the leadership of Kadife stood for their freedom of religion protested vociferously. Even the theme of religion here stood in binary – belief and atheism. In course of time, Ka shows a change from interrogative attitude of an atheist to a believer

In chapter twelve, ‘If God Does Not Exist, Then how Do You Explore All the Suffering of the Poor?’ Necip questions the Western notion of supremacy and the dubious effect it brought in religious beliefs. Also he explicitly shows the poverty they face the hopelessness it evokes.

If God does not exist, then that means that Heaven does not exist, either. And that means that the world’s poor, those millions who live in poverty and oppression, will never go to heaven (Pamuk105)

After the assassination of the Director of the Education, an important event that marked the dreadful conflict is the gunshots at the National Theatre. They staged the play ‘MY Fatherland or My Headscarf’ which is about a girl who burns her headscarf. As a part of the play, there is a scene where the soldiers fire their guns. But what happened was the fundamentalists in guise of those army men fire live rounds into the audience. “This is not a play – it is the beginning of a revolution”. Ataturk used his force to strenuously augers his ideology of modernity through Westernization. Both the secularists and the fundamentalists stand equally aggressive and powerful. Both try to garble the headscarf issue and the suicide epidemic in particular to crush the other.

What the most interesting is nobody knows the exact reason for why suicide as an epidemic spread throughout the country. The families of these girls who had committed suicide insist that “their daughters had given them no cause for concern”. Since there included some girls who refused to remove their headscarf and got expelled from the university, the fundamentalists and the media point figure at the secularists. Ka’s discussion with Blue opens a new thought on this issue. Though Blue a staunch fundamentalist and mentioned as an “Islamic terrorist” he varies from others. He reported to Ka that one of those girls was having a love affair.

But if you write that a covered girl kill herself sinned against God – all on account of a broken heart the boys at the religious high school will be furious. Kars is a small town. (Pamuk70)

Each has their own version of reasons for the suicide epidemic according to their politics and their religious views. According to the deputy governor “unhappiness” is the reason, and for Ipek “the men give themselves to religion and the women kill themselves” (Pamuk35). Kadife being the leader of the headscarf girls saw this so as to “save their pride” for religion.

### **Characters: The Elements of Diptych and Flaneur**

Characters are the backbone of a text. It is next in importance after the plot. Ka and Kadife performs the role of protagonists in *Snow*. Though Ipek, Blue and Orhan are the minor characters, they played their roles with utmost importance. Considering the notion of characters there are two levels of analysis which overlaps

each other. They are the diptych elements and the idea of flaneur. What overlaps in these two is flaneur is a type of diptych. And many times one may fail to distinguish these elements differently. Though flaneur is a well known concept proposed by Walter Benjamin, in cooperating the idea of diptych seems to be a novel idea.

Walter Benjamin is one of the key figures or the iconic intellectual of twentieth century criticism. Benjamin skillfully made use of Marxism and Surrealism together to analyze new arenas in socio-cultural landscapes. From this recipe evolves the concept of flaneur. In the words of critics, a flaneur is:

A bourgeois subject strolling idly through the new city spaces of modernity. He is more than a mobile spectator. His identity is constituted by the physiological charges and shock of the city, and his enjoyment of the commodification of all subject (Ketsath17)

Walter Benjamin developed his myth of Flaneur at the peak of 1920s and 1930s. This gives more of a kind of theoretical framework to the idea of diptych. The idea of flaneur possesses two characteristics at a time. On one hand it enjoys in immersing itself in the crowd as an object of observation and on the other hand being viewed. In the words of Walter Benjamin himself, “the city splits for him (the flaneur) into two dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room.” Basically they are loafers who move away from works, over powered by laziness. A flaneur is treated both as a phenomenon and a character; he is objective in a crowd and subjective when taken as a character. The theme of flaneur is rendered in many literary products.

Orhan Pamuk is one among the few writers who deliberately invoke this myth of flaneur in their works. Pamuk worked with the concept of working-class flaneur and this is profoundly traced in his *A Strangeness in My Mind*.

“Pamuk’s Turkish characters often internalize the gaze of an imagined Westerner for whom they constantly perform their urbanity”, said some critics. That’s they look out on the world and then largely gaze inside themselves. At this point there evolves Pamuk’s *Snow* where its protagonist Ka acts as a flaneur. Not only Ka but most of the characters in Kars are flaneur. The city of Kars sets a backcloth of social interaction, and at the same time it sets a room for all to retrieve into their own collection of memories. *Snow* answers certain fundamental questions like, “How can the individual accommodate and remember absence and loss? How can individual memory be located within the collectivist urban experiences and material structures which struggle to hold meaning beyond the immediate conditions of their constructions?” (Ahmet “The Hegemony of Liberal-Secular Narrative in Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow*”)

Most of the characters in the novel possess a dual nature either in their behavior or ideologies or in their relationships with others or both. What is interesting in these characters in Pamuk undermines and destabilizes each character by introducing degenerate counterpart. Also there are many characters complement or contrast each other.

Ka is the male protagonist of the novel. He left Kars to Germany and returns back after twelve long years. His character always shows a duality. In time he oscillates between the present chaos and childhood

memories. The nourishing memories of his home and the time he spent with his parents recurrently appear in his notes and set base for his poems. His first poem 'Snow' was such an outburst of sudden overflow of memories. In present Ka shows intimacy only to Ipek and for her love. Politically he exploited both the secularists and conservatives for his own benefits. But taking religion into account, Ka again falls into a binary. He came to Kars as an atheist. But when he returns to Germany he is presented as a believer. The diptych panel presents both these phases of the protagonist effectively. Ka is also a flaneur who strolls alone through the city of Kars meets and sees many. His inner psyche is always dealing with his memories and creative stimulus but he shows an objective attitude to all that surrounds him which is less committed and affected. At the same time his subjective mind always ambles inside in search of his own thoughts which later resulted in the poetic outcome. Ka objectively observes all that happens and everyone those passes around him. As a flaneur he notes every minute detail, at the same time he effaces into his own memories. This simultaneous to and fro journey from his objective presence and subjective memories concretes Ka as a flaneur in all sense. Another level where Ka becomes a flaneur is at the level of his profession. Ka came to Kars to report the suicide epidemic for a news paper. Here he is a journalist with objective attitude with least personal involvement and interest in the issue. His objective encounters with such incidents and people led to the stimulation of Ka's subjective poetic instincts. In shot Ka the flaneur here is an objective journalist and a subjective poet.

Kadife the female protagonist shows immense power equal to that of the male characters. She exemplifies the women who struggle to find their identities in Turkish politics. She appears to be revolutionary. She stood both as a political and a religious figure at the same time. Here religion becomes her politics. She leads the community of head scarf girls. Kadife possesses a relationship with Blue. And the Turkish police use this to impose their law of removing headscarf. They thought that Kadife being the leader of the headscarf girls, through her they could suppress the rebellion. But Kadife proved their calculations to be wrong. Though she agreed to remove her headscarf in return for the release of Blue, at the stage she was ought to perform the act she shot the general to death. This was a shrill to the women freedom and power. Kadife becomes a flaneur with her objective attitude towards the political atrocities and objective sensations towards her love. She stood firm to her belief and fought for it without yielding to any temptation and provocation. At the same time rather than a political figure she proved herself to be a normal girl yearning for love and the presence of her love. Even her primary decision to remove the scarf too was for the freedom of Blue. Like Ka she too observes everything that surrounds her. But Ka examined the physical appearances more and connected them to his inner self and memories. Kadife monitored the inner soul of all the happenings without any bias or prejudice of religion. Her subjective phase is explicitly shown in her conversations with Blue, prominently. Though they talked about the chaos and revolution she never hesitated to share her anxiety about Blue's safety and her need for a life with him.

Both Ka and Kadife can be place in the adjacent panels of a diptych due to many contrasting and complementary features. Both of them form a pair of love stories parallel to the main plot. Though Ipek and Kadife are sisters, they are entirely different form each other both in ideologies and ideals. Ipek never disagreed with religion but in the novel she is not shown as a staunch believer who fought for the right to

religion like Kadife. The contrasting features with respect to Kadife set the reason for placing her in the adjacent panel to Kadife in the diptych to illuminate the two ends of the situation. Considering Ipek as a flaneur, her objective sense is least noticeable. She superficially observes things without paying any particular attention or allowing her thoughts to ponder over them further. Everything passes by her without making any picky impressions on her. Her subjective thoughts majorly revolve around her family and her confusion whether to accept Ka's offer or not. Since the narration accounts from the thoughts of Ka and Ka being an impersonal personality to a larger extent, the novel provides little knowledge about the thoughts and feelings of other characters. Only the conversations they had with Ka left for their further analysis.

Blue is a minor character in *Snow* compared to Ka. But he possesses more or equal importance as Ka himself. He is a Muslim radical who later got arrested by the nationalists. Ka here acted as a mediator between Sunay Zaim, the leader of the National Theatre Group for Blue's release. The two faces of Blue here are of a radical and a lover. Being a political figure he was completely committed to his duties and rights for his religion. He was the main opponent for the secularists and they seek all the possible ways to get rid of him. However Blue received heroic attire through his death and the protagonist Ka is degraded at this point. Considering Blue as a flaneur the objective phase includes his observations on the current political scenario around him. Though he fought for the freedom for religion he never used the lens of religion as a bias in front of everything around him. His objective stand in analyzing the true picture of the mishappenings in Kars is shown in many instances. One such instance is when he presents another unsung side of the act that those suicides were because of various other reasons mainly love failure. An important quality of Blue shown here is unlike other Islamic terrorists he never tried to exploit these incidents to use against the opposition. Instead he advocated Ka not to spread his version of findings as such without further hearings because it may provoke the religious students and make them violent. Blues subjective feelings are explicitly shown in his immense respect and need for religion. Though Ka provides the links and evidences for his relationships with Kadife and Ipek, those of the thoughts and intensity of that relation from the side of Blue is absent in the narrative.

Necip is another character who is minor in length but possessed profound importance in the development of the character of Ka. He is a student at the religious high school. Together form perfect binary panels for the diptych. Both see themselves in the other. For Ka, Necip is his past and for Necip, Ka is his future. This facilitate Necip to read the past time thoughts that Ka had. Necip's unfulfilled relationship with Kadife foreshows the fate of relationship of Ka and Ipek. What he expects from a relationship with Kadife is same as that of Ka's longings. Ka had declared himself an atheist with the mind of a Westerner. But reaching at Germany he understood they too have a God but different from the Gods of East which allow its followers the freedom to be themselves. Amid of their conversation Necip downloads the thoughts that Ka once had in his childhood. Necip says that what he possesses now is the same thoughts once Ka had when he was at the age of Necip. Both possessed, in past, a longing desire to become a writer well known. And in present they both yearn for the fulfillment of their love, which later left part equally. The major difference between Necip and Ka not only lies in the time period, but also in their will power and



courage to follow their mind. Anxiety and fear overrule Ka. But belief in God and indomitable spirit of Necip mark a hand advantage over Ka.

Unlike you, I'm not afraid of my life or my passions', said Necip. '...I can't live without being passionately in love with someone, or something, beautiful. Now I've to find love and happiness elsewhere (Pamuk142)

Most of the characters in *Snow* shows a dilemma in their relationships with others whether in the name of commitment, love or attraction. Each character becomes a flaneur in this narrative which becomes a dramatic coincidence and set a concrete base for the theoretical backbone of the study. There are another two distinctive specialties which can be traced out of the characters in the novel. The first feature is that each character can themselves form a diptych panel with the duality in them. The next level is they form a diptych with one or more characters either by contrasting or by complementary features. However the diptych narration adds to the intensity to the text and its themes discussing the conflicts and ideological divergence from different point of views. This technique adds to the scope for a further research both on the text and on the narrative technique.

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