

Shekure Subverts Standards: Gender Trouble in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the portrayal of the female character Shekure in the novel *My Name is Red* by Turkish author and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk (1998). It analyzes how Shekure's character is used to criticize widespread assumptions about the passivity of Muslim women, both in contemporary Turkey and Euro-American societies. The novel is a murder mystery set in late sixteenth century Istanbul, where individual chapters are narrated from the perspective of different characters. Shekure is the only narrator who is also a Muslim woman and, significantly, Pamuk allows her to have the novel's final word. Though she seems to possess little control over her future, in fact, Shekure repeatedly manipulates circumstances in her favor, using male figures such as her father and love interest to achieve her goals. The paper suggests that Shekure's cleverness is a plausible account of female Muslim agency and normative subversiveness in the early modern Ottoman world.

Examining the novel's portrayal of Shekure, the paper focuses on the chapters narrated from her perspective as well as other instances where she is mentioned. Given her significance in *My Name Is Red*, and the critical attention the novel has received, it is curious that scholarship has largely ignored her depiction to date, in effect dismissing her as other characters in the novel do. Shekure's chapters revealed her remarkable resourcefulness. While other characters primarily value her for her looks, Shekure's quick thinking wards off her brother-in-law's unwelcome advances, facilitates her divorce from her absent husband, and arranges for her new marriage to the character Black. After her father's murder, Shekure was left without a supportive male figure in her life. This meant that she and her children were vulnerable within the context of the novel's patriarchal society. Black, the paper suggests, was thus not only an object of Shekure's affection, but a potential male guardian whose support needed to be secured for the sake of her and her

children. Despite possessing few legal rights, Shekure finds ways to assert her will and is therefore one of the most fascinating and complex characters in the entire novel.

The paper contextualizes the representation of Shekure with respect to the lives and rights of women in the Ottoman Empire. Although early modern Ottoman society was patriarchal, it granted Muslim women certain rights under the aegis of Islamic law. Such rights included the right to choose and divorce their husbands, rights that were rare in the sixteenth century for women. Through Shekure, Pamuk realistically depicts the freedoms enjoyed by and constraints placed upon Ottoman Muslim women. In so doing, he effectively critiques dominant representations of Muslim women as passive, docile, and oppressed in contemporary Turkey and the Western media. Seen in this light, Shekure becomes a pivotal figure in the novel whose skillful subversion of her patriarchal surroundings exposes the fallacy of essentialized images of women prevalent in the “East” and the “West” in the sixteenth century as well as the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Oppressed, docile, and submissive. Many Westerners attribute these traits to Muslim women. Orhan Pamuk's historical fiction novel, *My Name is Red* seeks to challenge this narrative through the character, Shekure. First published in 1998 written in Turkish and translated to English by Erdag M. Guknar, Pamuk sets the murder mystery in late sixteenth century Istanbul, during the peak of the Ottoman Empire. The novel follows an array of characters, each narrating their own stories as well as non-human characters like the color red, a coin, and a dog, narrating several chapters. At the plot's center is the murder of Elegant, one of four miniaturists commissioned to create work similar to the realist art of the European Renaissance for the Sultan.

This novel also follows the life of Shekure, one of two female characters in the novel and the only Muslim woman. Though she is not directly involved with the murder mystery, her character drives much of the novel's action, and many characters underestimate her. Shekure exerts the most control over her own fate in comparison to other characters through manipulating her surroundings. This manipulation is not depicted as duplicitous but rather it is suggested as an effective way of working around the lack of rights women had at the time. Shekure goes through male figures in her life such as her father and husband to achieve her goals. Ultimately, through the depiction of Shekure in *My Name is Red*, Orhan Pamuk critiques widespread contemporary representations of Muslim women as passive in Turkish and Euro-American societies.

Shekure in *My Name is Red*

In *My Name is Red*, Orhan Pamuk has Shekure subvert gender standards to achieve what she wants. Pamuk dedicates eight chapters to Shekure's narration, with the concluding chapter

being hers. This is fascinating because in a novel full of different perspectives, it is her character that gives the last word. Pamuk first introduces Shekure to readers as immensely beautiful. Shekure is the daughter of Enishte Effendi (enishte means uncle) who oversees the miniaturists' work in Istanbul. She is also the mother of Shevket and Orhan, sons with her first husband. Her first husband is a soldier who went off to war, never to return. As he is not pronounced dead, she is still technically married to him and thus, Shekure stays with her in-laws. When her brother-in-law, Hasan, tries to rape her, she uses this attempt as cause to leave her in-laws and move back with her father. During the course of the novel, she takes a second husband, her cousin, Black. He returns to Istanbul after Enishte exiles him for falling in love with Shekure when they were young. Shekure decides she wants to marry Black, and after discovering Enishte also murdered, quickly arranges a divorce from her first husband and marriage to Black under the false pretense that Enishte is gravely ill and allowing this from his deathbed. Shekure's agency and quick thinking is crucial to the reader's understanding of Shekure. Without the protection of her father, Shekure would have had to move back in with her in-laws. Hasan would take advantage of this opportunity and of Shekure. Shekure did not want this, and she cleverly arranges everything to be her way. She is not passive at the sight of discomfort and danger; instead she is active in determining her own future. The novel culminates with Shekure telling her youngest son Orhan everything, warning readers that Orhan tends to exaggerate to compose a good story. Throughout the novel, Shekure actively utilizes her circumstances to her advantage in order to achieve what she wants, demonstrating how she will not be idle.

Shekure's introduction is important to the overall contextualization of her in the novel. Her father, Enishte, first introduces Shekure in reference to Black falling in love with her. Enishte reflects, "Naturally, Black, like every young man who frequented our house or heard

what others had to say about us, or who knew about my beautiful daughter Shekure, had fallen in love with her...the belle of belles” (Pamuk 24). This is the first time readers learn about Shekure. It is apparent that instead of men admiring her personality or intelligence, men only notice her for her physical appearance. This is significant as it underlines the value of women within a patriarchal society. Their purpose is to serve as an object of the male gaze. Instead of interacting with Shekure in a substantial manner, men are falling for her without even seeing her. The very notion of a pretty woman seems to have men lusting. Thus, Pamuk’s introduction of Shekure is vital in understanding that women are initially valued in this society on their physical appearance.

Despite being judged for her looks, Shekure’s resilience and craftiness are quickly revealed to the reader, subverting the stereotype that Muslim women are passive. Thus when Hasan, attempts to rape her while she is sleeping beside her children, she screams as loud as possible about jinns. Jinns are demonic beings in Islamic thought. Her father-in-law wakes up and finds his son with an “excited violence” (Pamuk 46) in Shekure’s room. Shekure leaves the next day and Hasan cannot do anything about it, as his father knows and is embarrassed. It is interesting that Shekure refers to Hasan’s erection as “violence.” This stresses the traumatic nature of rape and more so Hasan’s aggressive nature. Hasan cannot control himself, to the point that he was willing to rape Shekure in front of her two children – his brother’s two children – while his father is sleeping. This element of hyper-masculine absurdity is present again. Shekure is so beautiful that Hasan would go to such lengths to have her. Hasan continues to pursue her in later chapters. Significantly, Shekure uses the stereotype that women are hysterical and nonsensically fearful to her advantage. In screaming about jinns, she brings the attention of her father-in-law and potentially her neighbors. She maintains the honor of her in-laws household,

which, in turn, gives her reason to leave the household. More importantly, Shekure is able to shield her children from the horrors of rape and violence. Through this moment, Pamuk reveals Shekure's quick and active thinking from the first chapter she is narrating, exhibiting that Shekure uses the gender norms set in place for her to her advantage. This further highlights how Shekure is not docile when it comes to threats, but rather vigilant.

Pamuk displays Shekure's resourcefulness further in her second marriage to Black. Readers soon learn that Shekure had orchestrated the pair's first interaction. She purposely opens the blinds in her house when Black arrives so she can see him, and most importantly, he can see her. This interaction can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. Pamuk creates this ambiguity on purpose. Nevertheless, Shekure's actions here divulge to Black that she is not betrothed because she is living at her father's not her in-laws. Additionally, it acts as a catalyst into their mutual and consensual relationship. It is important to note that Shekure initiates this, revealing her cleverness.

After this interaction, the pair began exchanging letters. Shekure is hesitant and distant at first, speaking in a kind of code with Black. Later in the novel, Shekure and Black meet. They – or rather Shekure - decide that they should be married. Arguably, Black is a means to an end for Shekure. Black is easy to manipulate, would never harm her, and can protect her and her children. When she meets Black at the house of the Hanged Jew after Enishte dies, she pleads to Black, “I'm calling on you to protect me – protect us –” (Pamuk 189). Shekure starts with wanting protection for her, then moving to an “us.” To readers, this “us” may initially refer to Shekure and Black, and this may be her intention in saying it. However, the “us” could also refer to Shekure and her children. Though Shekure is fond of Black, it is reasonable to assume that Shekure is additionally using Black to ensure safety for her and her children.

The notion that Shekure is using Black as a means to an end is supported later in the same chapter. Shekure explains that, ““Love comes after marriage Of course, after marriage, love will vanish anyways; but happiness fills the void.... Love and marriage are but a means to obtaining it [contentment]”” (Pamuk 191). Pamuk reveals that although Shekure loves Black, she understands that their marriage would also be a contract. Black would give her more than just emotional support; he would provide her and her children protection. This relationship would serve as stability for both him and her. This indicates a large character change in Shekure, who in her youth fell in love with a poor but handsome soldier and subsequently married him despite society and her father’s objections. Now, even though she is marrying for love, she also sees the necessity and function of marriage. In addition, this is also significant, as with her husband most likely dead, and her father murdered, she has no male figures that would be able to protect her. Her in-laws, specifically Hasan, cannot provide a safe environment so she must marry Black to be safe. This discloses how women in society are tied to patriarchal figures for safety. This marriage for Shekure is thus, both a way to achieve happiness through love and more so, a way to achieve protection. This illuminates how Shekure is not passive, but rather active in decisions made about her circumstances.

Furthermore, Pamuk demonstrates further how Shekure uses Black for protection toward the end of this chapter. After explaining to Black the plan in a “high-handed and insincere manner” (Pamuk 192), Shekure realizes that, “only by assuming such a tone might I convince Black – who has yet to outgrow his childhood muddle-headedness – to believe in the possibility of events that even I have a hard time believing will come to pass” (Pamuk 192). Shekure often characterizes Black as immature; he was childish at twenty-four when he fell in love with her and he was still childish over a decade later. Pamuk produces this characterization purposely.

Firstly, it displays how although Shekure is more mature and intelligent than Black, he ultimately has more power in society than her. Shekure's plan to use a marriage with Black to stay safe exemplifies how Shekure is resourceful, allowing herself the opportunity to make her own choices and be able to see these plans follow through. Yet, this is also the same man she did fall in love with years prior. Expressions of love are not appropriate here because the stakes are so high. The tone that Shekure assumes showcases how she is comfortable enough with Black to be bold and straightforward. In all, Shekure's relationship with Black proves how Shekure is practical, making decisions that benefit her and her sons. Shekure's active role in determining her future mitigates the notion that Muslim women are passive and meek. Rather, Shekure exhibits how Muslim women can be cunning and headstrong.

Overall, Pamuk's depiction of Shekure in *My Name is Red* illustrates her as resilient, quick-witted, and resourceful. Though she is often appraised by her looks by others in the novel, Shekure presents how she can forge her own path despite the societal roles placed upon her. She never breaks these roles; rather she subverts them and uses them to her advantage. Pamuk illuminates this in a number of ways such as in Hasan's attempted rape of her and her marriage to Black. Shekure bends her circumstances in her favor, succeeding in spite of them. This highlights how Muslim women are not all passive. Rather, they can be like Shekure, an active participant of her own fate and future.

Muslim Women in the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth Century

In order to understand Orhan Pamuk's choices in his novel, an analysis of Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire is necessary. The common belief in Western society is that women at the time had virtually no rights, that women were bound to the coverture practices like

in Europe. Coverture regards the legal status of a married woman, the woman and her property would all belong to her husband. Though it is true that most Muslim women were restricted to their households, whether it is Sultanate harems, or the homes of peasants, these women nevertheless exerted some control over the household.¹ Though Ottoman societies were patriarchal, they allowed women to have several rights. These rights were exclusive to Muslim women who were direct subjects of Ottoman rule. For example, women were allowed to choose who they were to marry and be able to divorce in court.² This is understood to derive from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, and dictates of Shariah law. This context surrounding the rights of women in the late sixteenth century Ottoman Empire elucidates Shekure's situation in the novel.

This context connects to the depiction and motives of Shekure in the novel. In accordance with Shariah law, the Ottoman Empire allowed women to divorce their husbands on fair grounds. This is apparent throughout the novel as Shekure and other characters speak of divorce and different courts. Of course, a divorced woman without a father is virtually powerless and vulnerable. Shekure makes it apparent that without the protection of her father or Black, she would be vulnerable, especially to her brother-in-law Hasan. She would not be able to seek a divorce if everyone finds out her father is dead. This is significant as it illuminates how Shekure manipulates gender barriers put in place in order to achieve what she needs; here it is stability and protection. This reveals that although Muslim women do attain certain rights in this society, they are still bound to the patriarchal structures in place. Although Shekure maneuvers through

¹ Lewis, Reina. *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel, and the Ottoman Harem*. Rutgers University Press, 2004.

² Pierce, Leslie. *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*. University of California Press, 2003.

these obstacles to obtain a divorce and remarriage, she has to go through male channels. Without this manipulation, she would be bound to her in-laws.

Muslim Women and the Late Twentieth Century

Orhan Pamuk publishes this novel in Turkey at the end of the twentieth century, in 1998. To many Westerners, Islam oppresses women. Westerners often view Muslim women as docile, victims of their own religion, and as more oppressed than women in other religions.³ Critics of Islam often point to passages in the Quran, or to headscarves, as evidence of oppression. However, as Islamic scholars explain, this is not the case. Moreover, not all Muslim women are docile and submissive. This overstatement is harmful to Muslim women, depriving them of their own agency when it comes to their situations.

Through making Shekure such a headstrong and empowered character, Pamuk illustrates that Muslim women are bound by the same patriarchy that other women are. Muslim women are not submissive, as many in the West would like to think. Rather, they can be empowered and headstrong as Western women characterize themselves to be. Thus, Pamuk's portrayal of Shekure was purposeful in clarifying Western misconceptions of Muslim women being docile and substantially unequal to their male counterparts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* comments upon the widespread contemporary passive and docile representations of Muslim women in Western societies through his characterization of Shekure, who manipulates her way through late sixteenth century Ottoman society. Similar to European women, Shekure has expectations and limitations. As

³ Saktanber Ayşe. *Living Islam: Women, Religion, and the Politicization of Culture in Turkey*. I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Istanbul is situated between the East and the West, it incorporates elements from both cultures. The lengths that Shekure has to go through in order to have agency over her life are absurd but understandable given her circumstances. It is important to affirm that this is not a trait of just Muslim society, but of all societies that are inherently patriarchal. Patriarchy sets barriers and expectations that women must follow. The only way to get around these obstacles without causing larger problems is to subvert them as Shekure does. Appreciating Pamuk's portrayal of Shekure is crucial to the larger understanding of the novel. Interestingly, though there has been vast scholarly work done revolving around *My Name is Red*, none seem to focus on Shekure. She is cast aside by literary scholars and reviewers despite having such a vital part in the novel. Although Shekure is not directly involved with the murders or their investigations, she narrates a large portion of the novel. She is the focus of many other characters such as Black, Orhan, and Esther. Glancing over her importance would be an injustice to the study of *My Name is Red*.

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