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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. 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 was first published in Turkish in 1998. 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 two 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 cross-culturally 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.

### Works Cited

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