

**Voices of Resistance: Examining Feminine Identity and Islamic Feminism in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* and *Silent House***

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**Dr. Bhujendra Singh Rathod L.R.**, MA.,M.Phil.,Ph D.,

Assistant Professor of English and HOD Department of Journalism Communication  
Government First Grade College, Yelahanka, Bangalore-560064

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**Abstract:**

The role of women in Islam encompasses a complex interaction of views influenced by several authorities, including the State, religious leaders, and Islamists, each claiming authority to delineate women's status within Islamic communities. Gender is a critical concern in modern Muslim politics. A comprehensive grasp of these relationships may be attained by examining Islamic holy books, which have traditionally influenced social perceptions of gender roles. In Turkey, feminist groups have evolved by adopting new beliefs, persisting despite many hurdles. The distinctive convergence of religious and secular influences has led to the emergence of Islamic Feminism, which, like to Western feminism, challenges male supremacy and opposes the subjugation of women. Nonetheless, it diverges in its quest for gender justice within an Islamic context, aiming to reconcile religious values with feminist ideals. This article analyses Orhan Pamuk's books from an Islamic feminist perspective, emphasising the ways in which his female characters navigate patriarchal constraints rooted in tradition and religion. It examines the challenges faced by Muslim women in combating social oppression and their defiance of patriarchal structures. Pamuk's oeuvre embodies the perspectives of Islamic feminists, who contend that males use religious doctrines to maintain their dominance and oppress women. Furthermore, the paper examines how Muslim women who oppose Westernisation and secularism are often characterised as "backward" or "bad daughters," highlighting the persistent conflict between modernity and tradition in Pamuk's tales. This research underscores Pamuk's intricate depiction of the difficulties faced by women in modern Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** Islamic Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender roles, Muslim women, Secularism, Social oppression, Modernity and tradition.

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In Islamic countries, the feminist movement promoting women's rights and equality has more prominence than its Western equivalent, despite the development of prominent feminist personalities who have influenced the worldwide movement. Women in these countries have long expressed their discontent with the patriarchal institutions that enforced restricted laws and social standards. Turkey, an Islamic nation with a historical precedent of women's subordination, has seen considerable transformations in the position and status of women throughout time. Turkey's historical narrative, particularly during the Ottoman period, embodies entrenched patriarchal systems that persist in contemporary society.

The Ottoman Empire, which governed Turkey from 1281 to 1924, was one of the most affluent and formidable Islamic empires, noted for its stringent patriarchy. Men were seen as superior and more competent, whilst women were considered physically and morally inferior, resulting in their dependence on men for economic and social standing. Madeline Zilfi asserts that women's alleged physical and moral frailties made them subordinate to males. Women were mostly economically reliant on males. Their social standings were inherited from their spouses and fathers" (Zilfi 16). During this era, the circumstances for women were very severe. N. Safarian asserts that Ottoman culture was mostly "silent regarding women." "Discussing her was deemed inappropriate" (Safarian 141).

During Sultan Mahmud II's reign, significant changes transpired with the establishment of the first women's organisations in 1867. These organisations were mostly cultural and educational, without any threat to the prevailing social order. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 catalysed a more vigorous push for women's rights, resulting in a significant increase in women's contributions to literature, poetry, and fiction. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the Ottoman Empire's treatment of women via magazines focused on women's problems. throughout contrast to Western countries, where modernisation occurred sooner, traditional systems endured for a far longer period throughout the Ottoman Empire.

The shift from traditional to contemporary culture and the process of Westernisation started relatively late in Turkey. Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the architect of modern Turkey, women's rights were decisively instituted in the 1920s and 1930s. Atatürk prioritised women's rights, facilitating their integration into the social and political framework of the country. He advocated for gender equality, asserting that men and women had equal status in social, political, and educational domains. Atatürk might be seen as a moderniser who instigated a feminist movement aimed at enhancing the status of women in society.

Feminist literary criticism examines the representation of female characters and their importance in literature. Since the 20th century, several male and female writers have endeavoured to deconstruct the conventional depiction of women as subordinate to males. This initiative is especially pertinent in Islamic and Eastern civilisations, where women persist in their battle against patriarchal regimes. Authors and critics in these areas are diligently working to enhance women's circumstances and contest the prevalence of male-centric narratives, so promoting the dialogue on gender equality.

### **Islamic Feminism: A Reevaluation of Gender Equality within Islam**

Islamic Feminism is a feminist philosophy rooted in an Islamic context. It is mostly advocated by female academics and activists who support a reinterpretation of holy scriptures, including the Sunnah (the sayings and acts of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) and the Quran, from a gender-egalitarian perspective. These academics contend that patriarchal interpretations

of Islam have obscured the Quran's message of gender equality, and that a re-examination of these texts is necessary to re-establish a balanced perspective. Islamic feminists assert that the Quran does not exhibit discrimination between genders, granting equal rights to both men and women.

Dr. Margot Badran, an Islamic studies expert, provides an extensive explanation of Islamic Feminism, characterising it as a feminist discourse and practice rooted in the Quran. She asserts that this movement advocates for gender equality for both men and women throughout all facets of life. Badran emphasises that Islamic Feminism highlights the Quranic ideal of equality among all *Insan* (human beings) and promotes the application of this value in public institutions and everyday life. She attacks the artificial dichotomy between public and private spheres, which is nonexistent in early Islamic law, advocating for a comprehensive societal vision where Quranic ideals permeate all domains (Badran, 2009, p. 242).

The phrase "Islamic Feminism" was introduced in the early 1990s by Iranian feminist Shahla Sherkat and other authors to the women's publication *Zanaan*. The ideology rapidly garnered acceptance across the Muslim world, including nations such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Yemen. Islamic Feminism critically examines Islamic theology by analysing core texts and applying Quranic concepts of equality to modern gender concerns. Islamic feminists use notions like *ijtihad* (independent thinking) to champion women's equal rights, emphasising Islam's fundamental tenets of justice and equity. The movement advocates for a reexamination of religious texts, encouraging women to embody and implement these teachings in their daily lives.

### **Character Analysis of Shekure in My Name Is Red**

In Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*, Shekure emerges as one of his most intricate female characters. She is shown as courageous, astute, defiant, and elegant, a formidable combination of strength and beauty. Critics contend that Shekure originates from a cultural context that has historically avoided confronting women's difficulties. Her tale, however, challenges gender prejudice and cultural apathy towards women. Shekure, as a faithful Muslim lady, observes her religion by donning a veil and upholding her dignity. Simultaneously, she attempts to establish a feminist identity and an autonomous voice. In her first story, she contemplates the representation of women in her father's literature, emphasising their muted characterisation:

For years, I have scrutinised the photos in my father's books in search of depictions of women. They are there, but few, and consistently seem timid, ashamed, and only engaging with one another in a manner that seems sorry. They never elevate their heads, maintain an upright posture, and confront the global populace like warriors and sultans would.

Through Shekure, Pamuk attacks the gender constraints imposed by tradition and religion, while illustrating her quest for autonomy and acknowledgement in a patriarchal society. Her

persona exemplifies the objective of Islamic Feminism to restore the voice and agency of women in Islamic discourse.

### **Shekure's Quest for Independence: A Feminist Analysis in My Name is Red**

Shekure, a young mother of two, gets ensnared in a convoluted network of religious and cultural constraints in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*. With her husband absent for four years, she is neither bereaved nor divorced, rendering her unable to remarry. She is anticipated to reside with her in-laws and keep a polite rapport with them. Following two years of tolerating this arrangement, she becomes the object of her brother-in-law Hasan's attention. In the context of the family's financial difficulties leading to the sale of their domestic slave, Hasan intensifies his coercion of Shekure, as she recounts: "Hasan, now devoid of his slave girl to accompany him at night, commenced to force my door" (*My Name is Red* 53). Rejecting his approaches, Shekure reveals his conduct to her father-in-law and resolutely returns to her paternal home.

Notwithstanding the shift of residence, Shekure endures perpetual anxiety over being compelled to return to her in-laws' domicile. She recognises that Hasan or her father-in-law may use the judicial system to regain custody of her and her children. Ultimately, Shekure resolves to wed Black, a guy who has harboured affection for her for more than ten years. This choice contravenes traditional standards, since she returns to her father's residence prior to the formal declaration of her husband's death. Subsequently, she contrives proof of her husband's demise to get her liberation. These activities may be seen as components of her endeavour for gender equality. Initially, Shekure defies traditional norms by departing from her in-laws to safeguard herself from Hasan's approaches. Secondly, her union with Black is motivated by her desire to provide her children with a paternal figure, placing their well-being above her personal interests.

Pamuk's story also explores the theme of male guardianship, a controversial subject in Islamic feminist debate. Islamic feminists contend that the presence of a male guardian, or wali, in marriage is not a religious need. This assertion is based on the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence, which permits women to marry without the agreement of their wali. This view posits that a woman may serve as her own guardian. Nevertheless, cultural norms often inhibit women from using this privilege, and the notion of wali is seen as a protective measure, providing women with counsel in choosing a partner.

The three other major Islamic schools, Maliki, Hanbali, and Shafi, vary in their interpretations, necessitating the approval of a wali for a marriage to be deemed lawful. This grants male guardian's considerable authority over a woman's marriage, often influencing her destiny. Enishte Effendi, Shekure's father, epitomises this position throughout the story. An old widower, he contests Shekure's want to remarry, favouring her and her children remaining with him for company. He has lost three boys, and Shekure is his last surviving offspring. In spite of her distress, her father denies her request for permission to marry Black, stating: "Without a father's

consent, given your circumstances, you are aware that marriage is virtually unattainable..." I oppose your marriage and deny you permission to proceed with it." (My Name is Red 109).

This demonstrates how religious regulations, originally intended to safeguard women, may be used to benefit males. Although Enishte Effendi asserts that his actions are motivated by love for his daughter, his rejection is mostly influenced by his own emotional need. Conversely, her in-laws, especially Hasan, fear that Shekure's autonomy would threaten their financial interests and authority. Her impending divorce jeopardises their influence, as they fear she may assert her entitlement to her husband's wealth or remarry. Consequently, Shekure is rendered a pawn by the men around her, subjugated to their interpretations of religious law.

Pamuk's depiction of Shekure's predicament illustrates a fundamental assertion of Islamic feminists: women endure hardship not due to divine law, but due to the male interpretation and implementation of it. The tale illustrates how patriarchal systems use religious traditions to exert control over women, hindering their ability to fully exercise their rights. Through Shekure's struggle, Pamuk attacks the constraints put on women by cultural conventions and religious interpretations, while also underscoring the need of reevaluating these limits in the context of gender equality.

Following her father's murder, Shekure becomes even more vulnerable to external threats. Fearing that her brother-in-law Hasan and father-in-law would seize guardianship and force her to return to their home to marry Hasan, Shekure decides to conceal her father's death. In a strategic move, she requests Black to arrange a *nikah* (marriage) ceremony to protect her autonomy. By doing so, she asserts her role as her own *wali* (guardian), marrying the man her father had most disapproved of during his lifetime.

Shekure's journey is emblematic of the broader struggles faced by Muslim women in patriarchal societies. She is caught in a web of manipulation by the men around her, yet she defies societal constraints, emerging as a strong and self-determined woman. By narrating her story to her younger son, Orhan, and sharing letters from her initial suitors, Shekure subtly reflects on how she wishes her story to be represented. She concludes with the hope that Orhan will portray her as both more beautiful and stronger than she appears. Pamuk's presentation of Shekure thus underscores the resilience of womanhood, portraying her as a figure of triumph against patriarchal pressures.

### **Fatma and Nilgun in *Silent House*: A Generational Contrast in Turkish Feminism**

Orhan Pamuk's novel *Silent House* (2012) delves into the tensions between modernism and tradition in 20th-century Turkey, particularly through the lives of Fatma and Nilgun, who represent contrasting responses to Western ideologies. The novel touches on reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, such as his encouragement for Muslim women to abandon the veil, adopt Western clothing, and participate in public life, including attending social events and

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drinking alcohol. Atatürk's vision of secularism and modernity forced a radical rethinking of Turkish identity, with profound effects on women's roles in society.

Selahattin, Fatma's husband, is a staunch advocate of Atatürk's vision, pressuring his wife to read his writings and books to challenge her traditional values. He shares Atatürk's belief that veiling symbolizes backwardness and even refuses to treat a female patient who covers her face. Selahattin's embrace of modernism is also reflected in his behaviour at home. When he invites a Jewish jeweler to dinner, he insists that Fatma join them, ignoring her discomfort. Fatma's refusal is emblematic of her resistance to the enforced Westernization that many Turkish women faced during this period.

Fatma represents a generation of Turkish women who lived through the profound transition from a traditional, religious society to a modern, secular state. As part of this first generation, she witnesses the replacement of the Muslim calendar with the Christian one and the adoption of Western caps in place of the traditional fez. These changes are not just symbolic but transformative, reshaping the very fabric of Turkish society and challenging long-held religious values. In Fatma's narrative, her financial ruin serves as a metaphor for the cost of modernity. The empty jewelry box she hides in her closet once held precious gems gifted to her by her parents as part of her dowry. Over time, Selahattin depletes her wealth to finance his encyclopedia, which embodies his obsession with science and progress. Fatma, now destitute, depends on her grandchildren in old age, a poignant reminder of how modernization, though seemingly progressive, often left traditional women disenfranchised and isolated.

Fatma's marriage to Selahattin further highlights the clash between religion and secularism. A devout Muslim, she marries a secular-minded army doctor at fifteen, following him when he is banished from Istanbul. Despite his outward liberalism, Selahattin imposes his ideals on Fatma, dismissing her religious convictions. When he refuses to install bars on the windows, arguing that women are not animals or birds, he declares, "We are all free... it is a window that opens onto freedom, isn't it a beautiful view?" (*Silent House* 22). His words reveal a growing indifference to his wife's traditional values as he becomes increasingly engrossed in Western scientific thought.

Pamuk contrasts Fatma with Nilgün, a younger character in *Silent House*, who embodies a different response to the modernity imposed by the male elite. Nilgün, a socialist, embraces Western values more readily, though she faces her own set of challenges within the changing Turkish political landscape. This generational contrast highlights the diverse ways Turkish women navigated the tensions between tradition and modernity.

In analysing the lives of Shekure in *My Name is Red* and Fatma in *Silent House*, Pamuk offers a nuanced depiction of women's challenges within patriarchal and changing society. Both characters oppose the limitations imposed on them, but in quite different contexts—one influenced by religious law and the other by modernist changes. Their narratives elucidate the intricacies of female resistance, demonstrating that the pursuit of autonomy often entails manoeuvring between the conflicting dynamics of tradition and modernity. Pamuk's writings prompt a comprehensive examination of the complex nature of women's liberation in both Islamic and secular contexts.

Selahattin's impression of Fatima progressively declines as he starts to see her as an ignorant and immutable lady. In reaction to her refusal, he pursues extramarital companionship, engaging a servant girl as his mistress and siring two boys with her. Fatima's anguish is mostly psychological, as Selahattin consistently disparages her religious convictions and treats her to harsh ridicule, asserting, "There is no God... there is science now." "Your deity is deceased, you foolish woman!" *Silent House*. His persistent belittlement and efforts to assert dominance over her indicate a profound power disparity in their marriage. He coerces her to consume alcohol with him, intensifying his insults in reaction to her resistance. Although Selahattin advocates for the merits of modernity and Westernisation, he concurrently warns Fatima to avoid any misconceptions about the changes implemented by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s. He informs her that their marriage is based on Ottoman law, which bestows upon him the unilateral authority to divorce her with only two words. This statement underscores the susceptibility and exploitation present in the lives of Muslim women, depicting a concerning dynamic in which males wield authority without responsibility.

Fatima's uneasiness is evident when she observes ladies around her donning uncovered clothes, causing her to avert her gaze in embarrassment. She is astounded by the metamorphosis of her once tranquil coastal village into a vibrant tourist hub replete with noise and modernism. This transformation prompts her to acknowledge that her husband's conception of progress has come to fruition, therefore straining her connection with modern society. Notwithstanding the alterations, Fatima stays resolute in her religious beliefs, rejecting what she considers immoral influences. For instance, she abhors booze and harbours resentment towards her husband's alcoholism, even admonishing her son for using alcohol. At the age of ninety, she is disheartened to see her grandchildren emulating their father and grandpa.

The relationship between Fatima and Selahattin exemplifies elements of marital violence, economic exploitation, and the pursuit of identity, all included by Islamic feminism. Fatima exemplifies a paradigm of Islamic feminism that highlights the identities of Muslim women within their communities, emphasising her resilience over her husband's efforts to impose his ideas on her. Her strength in preserving her identity, despite Selahattin's coercive atheism, challenges the idea that women must relinquish their beliefs in the face of modernity. Although

some detractors may characterise Fatima as a rigid and inflexible individual, her persona embodies a nuanced interaction between stringent religious devotion and receptiveness to new concepts. She exhibits an intellectual and spiritual profundity that enables her to reject Western cultural hegemony when it conflicts with her convictions. She admonishes her son for his self-isolation, urging him to interact with the world. Furthermore, she conveys delight while seeing her granddaughter Nilgun adorned with a headscarf at the cemetery, refraining from any criticism about her modern attire.

Unlike Fatima, who grapples with Westernisation and secular fundamentalism, Nilgun falls prey to religious fanaticism. Nilgun is a quiet but astute figure who represents a progressive Muslim lady, opting to wear a veil selectively, for instance, during trips to the cemetery for prayers. In contrast to others, she proactively pursues a connection with her grandma, exchanging her cultivated literary preferences. Both women, meanwhile, endure subjugation from the males in their life. Selahattin insists that Fatima renounce her religion, whilst Hasan tries to suppress Nilgün's contemporary lifestyle. Selahattin's contempt for his wife's simplicity reflects Hasan's revulsion for Nilgün's modern fashion selections. In all instances, Fatima and Nilgün experience considerable emotional distress, their silence reflecting their suffering, frustration, and opposition.

The tale culminates at a critical juncture when Fatima emancipates herself from her passive life by incinerating Selahattin's papers posthumously, a symbolic gesture signifying her release and expression of repressed rage. Nilgün's characterisation of Hasan as a fascist reflects her animosity and defiance against patriarchal authority. Despite enduring significant challenges, these women defy the repressive structures of their patriarchal culture, exemplifying a battle for autonomy that profoundly aligns with the principles of Islamic feminism. Pamuk's depiction of Fatima and Nilgun highlights the intricacies of female identity and defiance within a swiftly evolving societal context.

The female protagonists in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* and *Silent House* originate from disparate historical circumstances and socioeconomic classes, but they together confront a shared battle for autonomy and self-expression. Both women challenge cultural and patriarchal limitations, endeavouring to establish a feminist domain while upholding their religion. Their endeavour beyond individual frustrations; it is a collective movement against both religious traditionalism and secularism, establishing them as advocates of Islamic feminism.

These individuals are profoundly anchored in their Islamic convictions, which they see as essential to their identities. They contest patriarchal standards sometimes misrepresented as Islamic, saying that authentic Islamic principles honour women and promote their equality. For example, Shekure's character challenges conventional, male-dominated conceptions of Islam, affirming her identity within a context that respects her distinctiveness as a Muslim woman.



Conversely, Fatima opposes her husband's efforts to enforce Western cultural standards, thereby safeguarding her identity and repudiating the intellectual supremacy of secularism.

Nilgun, a pivotal character, represents progressive values and challenges religious fanaticism, so establishing herself as a danger to the limitations imposed on educated women. These women together reject male image and influence, emerging as robust icons of female emancipation inside a patriarchal culture. Their trips illustrate the intricacy of women's lives and their fortitude in confronting injustice.

**Conclusion:**

The Islamic feminist movement is gaining traction and attracting global attention, with the challenges faced by Muslim women emerging as a central topic in modern discourse and literature. Islamic feminists contend that the constraints imposed on Muslim women stem from patriarchal interpretations rather than divine directives. They contend that these limits stem from male domination in religious environments, which has traditionally reduced women to lower positions.

Pamuk's female characters poignantly exemplify this battle; they represent resistance and agency, providing a compelling feminist narrative. Through such depictions, Pamuk attacks the patriarchal structures that skew the notion of Muslim women as meek and regressive. His work expands the feminist discourse by examining several facets of Muslim women's identities, taking into account their interactions with men as well as their links to religion and ethnicity. Pamuk's tales greatly enhance the feminist viewpoint by questioning established assumptions of Muslim women's societal responsibilities and emphasising their potential for change and empowerment.

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