

**Islamic Feminism: A Study of Female Characters in the Works of Orhan Pamuk**

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**Abstract**

In Islam, the role of women is imbued with several meanings and discourses. The State, religious authorities, and Islamists all assert the authority to determine the position of women in Islamic societies. The debate over the meanings ascribed to women makes gender a crucial component of contemporary Muslim politics. An understanding of the gender order within a religious community may be gleaned by analyzing the sacred texts. The feminist movement in Turkey has embraced a variety of new ideologies and methods and has managed to persist in diverse forms despite all obstacles and difficulties. The challenges Muslim women encounter in Turkey are significantly distinct from those experienced by Muslim women in other parts of the world. In Turkey, the confrontation between the religious and secular sectors of society gave birth to new demands and perspectives in feminist discourse, leading to the emergence of Islamic Feminism. Like western Feminism, Islamic Feminism challenges male supremacy and addresses female suppression in society. What sets it apart from other feminist movements is that its adherents and supporters support gender justice and equality within an Islamic context. This paper intends to examine some of Pamuk's books from an Islamic feminist stance, focusing on how he addresses different challenges in the lives of Muslim women characters. The study also examines Muslim women's concerns, their fight against patriarchy, and how they emerge victorious in their battle. Through his fiction, Pamuk presents the claim made by Islamic feminists that men manipulate Islamic laws for their self-interest and utilize them against women to rationalize their segregation and subjection. Moreover, the article talks about how Muslim women who do not like westernization and secularization are labeled as the nation's "bad daughters" and "backward."

**Keywords:**Feminism, Islam, Equality, Gender roles

In Islamic nations, Feminism the fight for women's freedom and equality—is much more significant than in the West, even though many seminal feminist personalities emerged and launched the movement. Women in Islamic nations have traditionally expressed displeasure with the strict laws imposed by their patriarchal governments. Turkey is one of the Islamic countries where women have historically held a subordinate position. Although

the position of women in modern Turkey is changing, and they are attempting to identify themselves, the country's history demonstrates that women have endured a great deal of suffering and adversity in past centuries. The Ottoman era is a crucial historical period that must be addressed. From 1281 until 1924, the Ottoman Empire controlled Turkey for six centuries. The Ottoman Empire was among the wealthiest and most influential Islamic empires. The Empire was strictly patriarchal. Males were prioritized because they were seen as more capable. "women's putative physical and moral weaknesses rendered them subject to men. As a general rule, women were economically dependent on men. They derived their social positions from their husbands and fathers". (Zilfi 16). Women's conditions were significantly worse during the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Society of Turkey was entirely "silent on the subject of woman. It was even improper to talk about her" (Safarian 141). Some changes took place under Sultan Mahmud II's rule. Indeed, in 1867, the first organizations for women were founded. These organizations were primarily cultural and educational, and they paid no attention to the social position of women.

Following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, the movement for women's freedom in the Ottoman Empire gained momentum. Women began to produce poetry and fiction in large numbers.

Additionally, they expressed their opposition to the Ottoman Empire's treatment of women by writing for periodicals devoted to women. Contrary to Western civilization, the conventional structure persisted considerably longer in Ottoman society. The transition from traditional to modernity and the westernization of society began late in Turkey. Gradually, women gained freedom and the ability to express themselves in various fields. Women's rights in Turkey were firmly established during the 1920s and 1930s. The position of women significantly improved under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's reign, the man who founded modern Turkey. He championed women's rights by putting them at the center of society.

He also proclaimed that men and women are equal in social and political matters. Therefore, Ataturk may be seen as a feminist who firmly launched the movement in Turkey to modernize society and improve women's roles and status. Feminist literary criticism emphasizes female characters and their significance within literary works. Almost all fictional works worldwide assign unique qualities to their female characters, which must be analyzed in light of feminist theories. Since the 20th century, several male and female authors have attempted to undermine the notion that women are inferior by breaking their conventional roles. This binary opposition persists in Islamic or Eastern nations, and women suffer from living in male-dominated societies. Various critics and authors in these nations have attempted and are still attempting to improve the position of women.

### **Islamic Feminism:**

*Islamic Feminism* is a feministic ideology that is addressed within an Islamic framework. Academicians promoted Islamic Feminism, primarily women, who advocated for re-examining sacred texts such as Sunnah (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and jurisprudence, as well as a focus on the interpretation of the Quran. They contend that the patriarchal view of Islam has silenced the Quran's gender-egalitarian

message, which can only be revived through a re-reading. They are steadfast in their conviction that the Quran makes no discrimination between men and women and grants them equal rights. Islamic studies specialist Dr. Margot Badran defines *Islamic Feminism* as the following.

A concise definition of Islamic Feminism gleaned from the writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic Feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all Insan (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or fiqh) conceptualizing a holistic ummah in which Quranic ideals are operative in all spaces. (Badran, 2009, p. 242).

Shahla Sherkat (born 1956), along with other Iranian feminists, coined the phrase "Islamic Feminism" in the early 1990s while contributing to the women's journal "Zanaan." The term quickly rose to prominence around the globe, notably in Islamic nations such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia, Kuwait, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Yemen.

**"Islamic Feminism"** refers to a feminist movement that interacts with Islamic theology through the study of the Quran and Sunna, as well as other Islamic texts and canonical traditions. It relies on the Quranic notion of equality of all human beings and emphasizes applying this theology to real life. Islamic feminists are examining the fundamental religious texts in light of contemporary issues. Islamic feminists employ Islamic concepts, such as the concept of ijti had, within the Islamic paradigm. By advocating equal rights for women, Islamic Feminism reflects Islam's core values. It serves as a reminder of what Islam entails for women. Islamic Feminism is a movement advocating for gender equality through a reinterpretation of the Quran and other religious writings and urging their followers to act on these ideas.

**The Character Analysis of Shekure in *My Name is Red*:**

Shekure is the most beautiful female figure created by OrhanPamuk. She is brave, gorgeous, strong, and rebellious, with the ideal combination of intellect, wit, and grace. According to critics, she comes from a society that was reticent on women's questions and deemed it improper to discuss women's difficulties and challenges. However, Shekure's narratives question gender prejudice and society's indifference to women. She is a Muslim lady who observes her faith, wears a veil, and preserves her dignity and honor. However, she also seeks a feminist identity and an independent voice, as she explains to the readers in her first narrative:

For years I have combed through the pictures in my father's books looking for images of women...they exist, if few and far between, and always look shy, embarrassed, grazing only at one another, as if apologetically. They never raise their heads, stand straight and face the people of the world as soldiers and sultans would. (MNR 51)

She is a young woman and mother of two sons whose husband has disappeared for four years. She is not legally widowed or divorced. Thus she is not eligible to get married again. She is supposed to reside with her in-laws and keep a cordial relationship with them. After her husband vanished, she lived there for two years before succumbing to her brother-in-law Hasan's evil schemes. Following her husband's absence, the family encounters financial difficulties, as a consequence of which they sell the lone slave girl in charge of the household's domestic duties. Shekure informs the reader in one of her narratives, "Hasan, now without his slave girl to take into his room at night, began forcing my door" (MNR 53). However, she rejects his attempts, uncovers him in front of his father, and boldly returns to her father's house. Even there, she constantly fears that Hasan or her father-in-law may use the legal system to reclaim her and her children at any point. She decides to marry Black after seeing him again after a 12-year absence and learning that he is still madly in love with her. She defies local customs by returning to her father's house before her husband is officially pronounced dead. Later, she rebels against religion by fabricating evidence of his death. Both of these actions may be considered part of her fight for equal rights for women: first, she defies convention to protect herself since her brother-in-law repeatedly tried to coerce her into an illicit affair. Second, her marriage to Black results from her profound love for her children because she does not want them to grow up without a father. She wants a father for them more than a spouse for herself. In addition, the novel addresses the issue of male guardianship in Islam, one of the most contentious issues in the discourse of Islamic feminists. According to Islamic feminists, the role of a guardian in a marriage is not mandatory. The argument is based on the Hanafischool of law established by Abu Hanafi, one of the four primary schools of the Islamic law that grants a woman the legal right to marry without her male guardian's consent. In other words, she can be her wali (guardian). According to Islamic feminists, Despite this legal right, women rely on the permission of their male guardians due to firmly ingrained societal customs. The sole reason for developing the notion of wali was to offer women additional security. A wali was someone (usually a parent or an elder) from whom a woman may seek guidance while choosing a spouse. However, the other three religious schools, the Maliki established by Malik bin Anas, the Hanbali by Ahmad IbnHanbal, and the Shafi by Imam Shafi, made it obligatory and granted a wali such authority that a marriage is invalid without his assent. Therefore, most Muslim women's destinies are contingent on their wali's acceptance or permission.

Shekure experiences this throughout the story. Her father, an elderly, lonely widower who desperately needs company, is against her getting divorced and remarried because he wants her and her kids to stay with him. He had three sons before Shekure, but they all passed away one after the other. Shekure is Enishte Effendi's lone surviving kid. At fifteen, she fell in love with a soldier, who eventually became her husband. Her father was adamantly opposed and responded angrily, just as he did when he learned of Black's affection for his daughter. She needed to persuade him to allow her to marry. However, this time, he ignores her misery and plights out of self-interest. He informs her that "without a father's approval, in your situation, you know that getting married is practically impossible...I do not want you to get married, and I refuse to grant you permission to do so" (MNR 109). This demonstrates how religious laws intended to protect women inside their families and society are utilized

against them. Her father, for his selfish purposes, disagrees with her plan to get a divorce and remarry; on the other side, her husband's father and brother have their concerns and doubts. They are concerned that if she is allowed a divorce, she will seek part of her fortune, and Hasan is concerned that she will marry another man once she is granted her freedom. She falls prey to these men's whims, ideals, and interpretations of religious law while they both profess to love and protect her. According to one sect, she is legally married even though her spouse has been missing for years, while another sect allows her to get a divorce and remarry. Here, the writer reiterates one of the fundamental claims of Islamic Feminists: women are harmed not by divine law but by men's interpretation and comprehension of it.

Shekure becomes more susceptible to threats following her father's death; thus, she conceals the news of his murder. She is afraid that Hasan and her father-in-law would come to claim guardianship, take her and her children back to their home, and compel her to marry Hasan. She hides the truth and asks Black to arrange the Nikkah (marriage) ceremony to prevent this. As a result, following her father's death, she becomes her wali and marries the person her father least approved of throughout his lifetime. Her narrative exemplifies the predicament of Muslim women in a patriarchal society who battle for self-identity. She feels pushed around and controlled by the men in her life. However, She defies conventional constraints and limits, emerging as a powerful, vibrant woman. As the book ends, Shekure informs the reader that she has shared her experience with her younger son Orhan and given him the letters written by the potential suitors who initially approached her. She concludes by expressing her belief that Orhan will represent her as more beautiful and tougher when he tells her narrative. Moreover, Pamuk has presented her as a strong character who represents the victory of womanhood.

**Fatima and Nilgun in *Silent House*:**

In his 2012 novel *Silent House*, Selahattin discusses various changes implemented by Atatürk throughout his administration. For instance, Atatürk urged Muslim women to forego the veil in favor of western attire. Additionally, he pushed them to dance in ballrooms, attend social events, and consume drinks. Selâhattin also pushes his wife, Fatima, to read his articles and books, claiming she is on par with him. He shares Atatürk's opinion that the veil is a sign of backwardness. He even refuses to treat one of his patients because she covers her face. In response to her refusal to remove it, he orders her and her husband to leave his home without providing them with any medication. Atatürk attended with his unveiled wife and daughter on most public occasions and urged others to do the same. The devout women suffered the most from all of this since it was intolerable for them to consider taking off their veil and attending parties to interact socially with males. In the story, this is demonstrated when Selahattin invites a Jewish jeweler to dinner and asks Fatima to welcome and dine with him. However, Fatima refuses to do so.

Fatima represents the Turkish women of the 20th century who were forced to adopt western Feminism and other western ideologies by the educated male elites. She is a part of the first generation of Turkish women who have lived through the country's transition period from a traditional, religious culture to a modern, secular, and westernized one. She exemplifies the generation of Turkish women who have observed major societal



transformations. She witnesses, for instance, how the Christian calendar has replaced the Muslim calendar in her nation and how hats (western caps) have replaced traditional Turkish caps called fez. She is a woman whose life has been wrecked by her husband's imposition of modernism and atheism. In the story, this is emphasized by her financial destitution, represented by the empty jewelry box she keeps hidden in her closet. The box was originally full of priceless gems her parents gave her as dowry. However, her husband gradually emptied it to fund his encyclopedia, leaving her impoverished and reliant on her grandchildren in her old age. She is a pious Muslim woman who married a secular-minded army doctor at fifteen. When Selâhattin is banished from Istanbul four years after their wedding, she follows him like a devoted wife. They ultimately choose to relocate to the beach village of Cennethisar after traveling fifty kilometers from Istanbul. Her husband, who professes to be a liberal, open-minded, and intelligent guy, informs her that he is opposed to having bars installed on the windows: "are women birds or animals? We are all free... we are putting in shutters, and we are going to have windows just as Europeans do... it is a window that opens onto freedom, isn't it a beautiful view" (Silent House 22). He becomes increasingly apathetic to his devout and conventional wife as he gets fascinated with the power of science and the West.

Moreover, he quickly starts to regard her as an unchangeable ignorant lady. As she starts to reject his attempts, he makes a servant girl his lover, with whom he has two boys. The anguish that Fatima experiences throughout the book is primarily psychological. Selâhattin frequently ridicules her religious beliefs and torments her with outrageous proclamations such as s like "there is no God... there is science now. Your God is dead, you silly woman!" (Silent House 25). He constantly degrades her and attempts to impose his will on her. He even coerces her into drinking alcohol with him; the more she opposes, the more he insults her and her religion. Selâhattin, on the one hand, speaks eloquently about modernity and westernization. However, on the other, he advises Fatima not to have high hopes for the new reforms (reforms by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s). During the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was governed following Islamic law. He informs her that he wed her following Ottoman law and has the right to divorce her with just two words. He informs Fatima that he has the right to divorce her at any point and remarry. This assertion highlights the susceptibility and exploitation of Muslim women. It reveals that men believe they have the freedom to do anything, giving them a sense of power and supremacy.

Fatima is disgusted to see women donning unveiled dresses and turns her gaze away in shame. She is shocked to find the beautiful seaside town transformed into a luxury tourist destination, with apartments, restaurants, crowds, and noise. Upon seeing all this, she concludes that her husband's vision has become a reality. Throughout the narrative, she retains her religious convictions and rejects whatever she considers immoral. For instance, she despises wine, dislikes her husband for being a drunkard, then scolds her son about his drinking, and even at the age of 90, she is appalled to see her grandsons treading in their father and grandfather's paths.

Through Fatima and Selahattin's relationship, the story explores marital abuse, women's economic exploitation, and their quest for identity in society. All of these challenges come under the realm of Islamic Feminism. Considering Fatima as a prototype of Islamic Feminism, a discourse more concerned with Muslim women's identities within their communities, she appears as a strong figure who defies her atheist husband's attempts to transform her. She can keep her identity, and her husband's forceful arguments against religion cannot undermine her religious convictions. Most reviewers consider her a conservative, strict, harsh, and obstinate woman. Fatima, for instance, represents strict religious values, yet she is also open to the progressive side of her personality. She is a woman of intellect and religion, rejecting western cultural dominance when it contradicts her religious beliefs. She reprimands her son for avoiding his obligations and secluding himself in a room. She attempts to encourage him to confront the outside world. She is happy to see Nilgün dressed in a headscarf in the graveyard, yet she never criticizes her western lifestyle or attire.

While the surge of westernization and secular fundamentalism disrupts Fatima's life, her granddaughter Nilgün is victimized by religious extremism. In the novel, Nilgün is a fantastic female character. Despite being a silent character, she is brilliant. She is a Muslim, progressive, sophisticated woman who only wears a veil on certain occasions. For instance, when she, her two brothers, and her grandmother go to the graveyard to perform Fatiha prayers, she wraps a scarf around her head. She is the only character in the book which strives to build a relationship with her grandma Fatima. Nilgün also shares her grandmother's refined taste in literature. Nilgün, too, enjoys reading novels authored by foreign writers. She may consequently be seen as her grandmother's embodiment in many respects. They are both victimized by males. For instance, Selahattin wants his wife to adhere to his ideas, while Hasan wants Nilgün to be obedient and subservient. Selahattin is horrified by his wife's simplicity, and Hasan is appalled by Nilgün's contemporary lifestyle. While the first wants his wife to stop practicing her faith and wearing a headscarf, the second wants his lover to stop wearing fashionable clothing and take a headscarf. In both circumstances, these two women endure suffering. Their silence represents their anguish, hatred, and dissent. Fatima snaps out of her trance as she burns Selahattin's documents after his death. This is her most intense scream in the narrative. When Nilgün refers to Hasan as a fascist, she expresses her rage. Although both women go through hardships, they also fight against a patriarchal society's dominance and repressed mechanisms.

The female character in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* and *Silent House*, which are the subjects of this article, represent different times and social strata. However, what binds them together is their shared fight for freedom and individuality. They fight to break away from cultural and patriarchal norms to create a feminist space, yet they do so while steadfastly holding their faith. Their quest for justice is not personal but collective, and hence their protest against religious traditionalism and secularism symbolizes the voice of Islamic feminists. They devote themselves entirely to the Islamic way of life because they highly value their religious beliefs. They oppose the traditional patriarchal practices incorrectly understood as Islamic beliefs because they consider Islam respects women and provides them

equality. Shekure achieves her place by opposing the conventional, male-dominated interpretation of religion. Fatima rejects her husband's attempts to change her and the cultural and intellectual dominance of the West. She can preserve her identity as a Muslim woman. The novel's progressive, intelligent character, Nilgün, portrayed as a danger to the freedom of the intellectual class of women, defies religious extremism. All of these women reject male representation or male influence. They emerge as formidable and indomitable Muslim female icons in a patriarchal society.

**Conclusion:**

In Muslim nations, the Islamic feminist movement is gaining strength and receiving global attention. The suffering of Muslim women has evolved into one of the most contentious issues in the media and literature. According to Islamic feminists, all restrictions imposed on Muslim women result from patriarchal rather than divine decree. They contend that the prejudice and restraints that limit the independence of Muslim women are the results of patriarchal restrictions imposed in the name of Islam. They claim that males have dominated religion throughout history, and women have been relegated to second-class citizens. Islamic feminists emphasize the necessity of challenging and confronting male supremacy.

Moreover, precisely, this is what Pamuk's fictional female characters do; they struggle, resist, and ultimately succeed in forging a compelling feminist narrative. Orhan Pamuk's delineation of these women characters is persuasive and energetic, representing them as catalysts for change. In the present research work, it has been shown that Pamuk's female characters collectively resist the patriarchal rule of religion and the denigrating perceptions of Muslim women as timid, submissive, and backward. Pamuk's novels have contributed to a broader feminist perspective. He discusses various dimensions of Muslim women's identities, not just in terms of their relationships with males but also their faith and country.

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