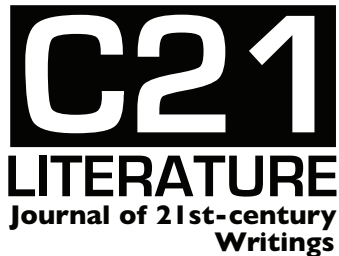




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Review

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REVIEW

**A Review of Gloria Fisk's *Orhan Pamuk and the Good of World Literature*
Columbia University Press, New York,
2018. 275 pp**

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The 2006 Nobel Laureate Turkish author Orhan Pamuk counts as one of the most widely circulated authors globally in English translation. Ever since his Nobel win, Pamuk has been the subject of a range of articles and interviews that explore both the literary and political aesthetics of his work, along with the trials he has faced in Turkey. These date back to 2005 when Pamuk made a life-changing statement to a Swiss journal and sparked a heated controversy: 'thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me wants to talk about it'. As he was put on trial for insulting Turkishness and perceived as a traitor in Turkey, his Nobel came to be associated with this statement in his homeland.

Gloria Fisk, a former assistant professor at Koç University in Istanbul, now an associate professor at Queens College, CUNY, investigates the case of Orhan Pamuk, with a focus on his novel *Snow*, and posits his ascendancy to literary fame as a fulcrum to dive into questions of what world literature means for the West and how it functions on an institutional level. Fisk contemplates the binding contract between a non-Western author and Western literary institutions and implicitly bestowed expectations on the author as a protector of human rights—as defined by the West. In this seesaw of expectation and satisfaction, her investigation leads to the state of world literature, academia and the precarious conditions under which non-Western authors live as

they try to lead their lives in the business of literature. Not only does she deliver a meticulous review of writings on the theory of world literature, she also makes compelling observations of *Snow* that might have gone unnoticed in other reviews, such as the emergence of a secular 'mastermind' (107) who kills to advance secularism.

Her introduction, entitled 'Slippery Words: Orhan Pamuk, Good and World Literature', astutely defines some key vocabulary and introduces the themes that are developed in the rest of her book. She explains crucial points in Pamuk's career that cast a shadow on his Nobel win: the case of Armenian Genocide and Pamuk's statements that caused controversies both on national and international levels. After establishing Pamuk as a transnational writer with widely-circulated novels in translation, due to the 'multinational publishing corporations that market his work as globally as any other consumer good' (4), she characterizes him as a 'legible' (1) source for herself. In her simple yet crucial question: 'what does a non-Western writer have to do to be read as an author of world literature at the turn of the twenty-first century?' (1–2), she succinctly offers a glimpse of an answer to this question, a theme on which she will expand later: 'criterion for literary merit fuses the aesthetic with the political in ways that are historically specific to Western institutions that increasingly speak with English with an American accent' (3). Fisk observes that Pamuk's entrance into the Western literary scene in English translation coincides with Anglophone market dynamics, which seem to have contributed to his ascendancy to fame, combined with the geopolitic position he inherently represents to his Western readers: a bridge between East and West and a possible and safe intermediary to soothe the anxieties of Islamic terrorism (2).

Chapter one, 'A Novel can Teach You About Other People', discusses a novel's and a novelist's function 'to teach' (33) readers about faraway people and places through fiction. Fisk takes Pamuk's *Snow* (2002), written in a realist tradition, as a case study to advance her investigation. *Snow* takes place in Kars, a city in north-eastern Turkey and tells the story of protagonist Ka, an Istanbul elite who has been living in Germany as a political exile, who comes to Kars as a journalist to investigate an epidemic of suicide among girls. *Snow's* narrative advances on several high-voltage zones of Turkey's political and cultural history—such as seculars vs. Islamists, and the 'semiotics of the

headscarf' (75) of Turkish culture. In this chapter, Fisk focuses on Pamuk's characters and what they represent in the social strata of Turkey. Rich with detailed descriptions combined with politically-charged issues, Fisk suggests that *Snow* might satisfy the appetite of Western readers and literary institutions in terms of offering an extensive look at the issues of a country and its diversified population that stretches between East and West.

Chapter two, 'A Novel Can Teach You About Other People's History', suggests that Pamuk 'convinces his Anglophone reader of his authority over historical facts' (65). For this discussion she also brings Pamuk's *The Black Book* and *The Museum of Innocence* along with *Snow*. Here, Fisk also touches upon the question of translation. She refers to Maureen Freely's translation of *The Black Book* and the effect of distance Freely instills in its Anglophone reader when she leaves some culturally specific words in Turkish unexplained. Then, Fisk turns the spotlight on Western readers' expectations from a non-Western author in terms of their ability to provide a reliable source about a faraway land. She concludes that Pamuk, while posing himself as a reliable source to fulfil this function, also 'blurs the difference between fact and fiction to put at stake the question of the good that world literature can do' (91).

Chapter three, 'Orhan Pamuk as Political Gadfly: The Armenian Issue', essentially delineates what is expected from a non-Western writer by the West. She argues that non-Western writers are assigned the task to produce 'political change [...] while [they] write the literature we would like to read' (111). Continuing Pamuk's case and observing that he 'is welcomed in Western cultures as an advocate for human rights [...] at some peril to himself', Fisk suggests that Pamuk, in this formula, gathers the necessary ingredients to the recipe for a non-Western author to fulfil Western readers' expectations. She gives a detailed account of Pamuk's statements on 'the Armenian Issue' prior to his Nobel win and of the criticism unleashed upon him in Turkey, which was to such an extent that his literary achievements paled. Thus, departing from Pamuk's case, she discusses the expectations the Swedish Academy might have of a non-Western writer. She calls attention to the Western intervention in the 'domestic politics' of a non-Western writer and invites her reader to think about the precarious situation non-Western authors might endure.

In Chapter four, 'Orhan Pamuk as Exile: Pamuk and Auerbach in Istanbul', Fisk turns her spotlight on the concept of exile. Although Pamuk—an Istanbul native himself—stated that he has never lived abroad in exile, his 'ability to live safely in Turkey' (113) seems to have prompted Fisk to consider the condition of an exile. As she discusses Pamuk's position in this category, she provides a historical account on the concept of writer-in-exile going back to the chapter's titular figure Eric Auerbach, who fled to Istanbul to escape Nazi Germany. Her focus on the rhetoric of exile also suggests how this word might be used ubiquitously and in vain. Fisk engages in a dialogue with Emily Apter and Kader Konuk to discuss Auerbach's status as an exile in Istanbul and his statements about the lack of resources and severe isolation in Istanbul when he was writing *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Apter and Konuk question Auerbach's claim and argue how his situation might not have been as dire as he claimed. Fisk analyses both scholars' arguments, putting them in a textual dialogue and gradually works her way towards a delineation of an author's difficulty to live safely in their home country. Thus, she reflects on Pamuk's ambiguous position using the rhetoric of exile and questions the fetish of 'comparatists working in Western institutions' for a figure in exile when 'the role poses dangers to those who inhabit it' (124–25).

Following on from a non-Western author's stance against the politics of his nation, in chapter five, 'Orhan Pamuk wins the Nobel Prize: The Cases of Orhan Pamuk and Mo Yan', Fisk wraps up the thread and ties it to the Swedish Academy's politics and desire to celebrate a non-Western author. She suggests that in order for non-Western writers to gain recognition, they are expected to reach to a level of an notoriety as a dissident at home as a result of their defence of human rights. Fisk observes—alluding to Pascale Casanova's 'The World Republic of Letters'—the value of the Nobel for those countries that are 'at the margins of the world republic of letters' (129) compared to United States and Europe. Along with an account of Pamuk's Nobel, Fisk also brings Mo Yan's win in 2012 into the conversation. Mo Yan is criticized both at home and abroad for complying with the Chinese regime. At this point Fisk also brings into the conversation some Western literary examples such

as Harold Pinter and proceeds to highlight different consequences a Western and a non-Western writer might face: the former may pay the price by merely losing popularity while the latter face the threat of imprisonment. Fisk shrewdly calls attention to the drastic differences in the conditions the authors on the opposite ends of the globe might endure and to the exigency—which can be characterized as reckless—of Western institutions on a non-Western author. She calls for a transparency in the Nobel criteria to lighten the burden of any speculation that might surround a non-Western writer's win. She, thus, argues for Pamuk's right to Nobel emancipated from the weight of 'political utility' (3).

Fisk specifically investigates American universities in chapter six, entitled 'World Literature as an Artifact of the University in the United States: The Part About Critics'. Making literature departments her focal point, she searches for 'the best ways to understand literature transnationally from the institutional location' (165). She delineates the ways in which universities such as Harvard, Stanford and UCLA contribute to and shape the debates about world literature. In the footnotes Fisk points out how many scholars who contribute to this debate work in the US as immigrants or fly in to conferences to present their works in an institutional setting in the US (166). She discusses the slippery state of world literature and literature departments at universities while asserting a prevalent presence of English language in this market. As she delineates the practice of literary criticism at (prestigious) US institutions, and the criticism they throw at 'neoliberalism' and 'global capitalism' at MLA conventions, Fisk turns the spotlight on an urgent problem that young scholars face: dearth of employment prospects.

After identifying the North American literary critic as a 'white collar proletarian type of worker', a term she borrows from Martin Oppenheim, Fisk brings her book to a close by simply asking 'Now What?', in the final chapter 'Coda: Now, What?'. Her concluding assessments on world literature humanizes the names of authors and critics that appear as words on the page and lays in front of us the most rudimentary fact of life: everybody needs money to live, for food and shelter. She observes that literary critics in the US work in relatively better conditions than most in the

world and that they 'import students and faculty from all over the world' and 'export their institutional culture' to Asia, Europe and the Middle East, thus constructing a 'literary world unwittingly in the image of the United States' (193). She also draws attention to another rudimentary fact when it comes to literature, translation and language: it is quite impossible to read every book in its language of authorship (189–190). Throughout her comparative analysis of Pamuk's reception in her different classrooms she questions the demands made on him. And as she puts forward this motion, she invites critics and institutions to acknowledge the hegemony of US-based critics. Fisk ends her book by answering the question of her final chapter with another critical question that seems to be both challenging to address and pregnant with answers that are yet to be articulated if humanities departments continue to exist: 'Under what conditions does literature get read in this world, at what cost, to whose benefit? How can those of us who are lucky enough to get paid to read make the balance better?' (201).

Across this work Gloria Fisk examines the Orhan Pamuk case and delivers a compelling account of the state of non-Western authors and the good they are expected to do in the world with their literature. She conducts her investigation both from a proximity and at a distance: she is a scholar who reads Pamuk in and from the West who also had taught in Istanbul. Her distance is delicately mixed with her proximity to Turkish culture. Her stance provides her a sensitive lens through which to observe the abundant and complicated social and political aspects interwoven in Turkey's fabric. And eventually, her account escapes an 'East meets West' network of clichés on top of a theoretical aspect, Fisk also offers spacious room to discuss the business side of literature and bluntly takes financial aspects of the academia and the dominance of certain literary institutions into consideration. In the end, whether to refute it or to champion it, whether you are a Pamuk admirer or not, Fisk's book is a valuable addition to scholarly debates in and out of the classroom and to Pamuk's literature.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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