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"AS NATURAL AS EATING AND DRINKING": GARBAGE COLLECTION AND PERPETUAL RECOVERY IN LATIFE TEKIN'S *BERJI KRISTIN: TALES FROM THE GARBAGE HILLS*

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Abstract

Latife Tekin's novel, Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills (1984), tells the story of a migrant community, struggling to build squatter houses in the peripheries of an industrialized city. Although the name of the city is not explicitly mentioned in the novel, in an interview Tekin refers to Istanbul as the setting of her narrative. The community described by Tekin builds a unique relationship with garbage in this urban space, which has already been discussed in various contexts extending from urbanization to magical realism. This article aims to contibute to these discussions by foregrounding Tekin's avoidance to name poverty and by exploring her way of narrating the community's perpetual recovery. Not only does the article analyze how Tekin writes against sterilized life styles by presenting garbage as resource, but it also suggests that this narrative approach turns out to be even more conspicuous and relevant with the recent rise of street waste pickers in Turkey. The article pursues this discussion by drawing on influential scholars of waste and literature, namely Mary Douglas, Susan Signe Morrison, and William Viney, by performing close readings of the novel, and by engaging in the secondary literature on Tekin's work. Therefore, the article examines the squatters' fight against all destructive forces including nature, state-run demolitions, and various communities which try to settle on the same garbage hills. Then it illustrates how Istanbul as an unnamed setting, poverty as an unnamed condition, and folk medicine as a

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miraculous solution to health problems caused by harsh urban conditions contribute to Tekin's emphasis on the community's endless recoveries from all kinds of destructions and illnesses.

Keywords: *Latife Tekin, Berji Kristin, Garbage, Street waste pickers, Poverty, Folk medicine.*

"YEMEK İÇMEK KADAR DOĞAL": LATİFE TEKİN'İN *BERCİ KRİSTİN ÇÖP MASALLARI* ROMANINDA ÇÖP TOPLAYICILIĞI VE BİTİMSİZ İYİLEŞME

Öz

Latife Tekin'in Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları (1984) romanı, sanayileşmiş bir kente göç ederek söz konusu kentin çeperlerinde gecekondu inşa etmeye çalışan bir insan topluluğunu konu edinir. Romanda mekân açıkça "İstanbul" olarak adlandırılmasa da kendisiyle yapılan bir söyleşide Tekin, romanının İstanbul'da geçtiğini dile getirmiştir. Tekin'in betimlediği insanların çöple kurduğu ilişki kentsel yaşam beklentileriyle uyumsuzdur. Bu uyumsuzluk, romanın konu edildiği çalışmalarda kentleşme olgusundan büyülü gerçekçiliğe çeşitli bağlamlarda tartışılmıştır. Bu makale ise Tekin'in zor yaşam koşullarını betimlerken yoksulluğu dillendirmekten kaçınmasını ve çöplükte yaşam kuran insanların bitimsiz bir telafi ve iyileşme hâlinde olmalarını öne çıkararak söz konusu tartışmalara katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Tekin'in çöpü bir kaynak olarak temsil etmek yoluyla steril yaşam tarzlarına karşı çıkışını çözümleyen makale, yazarın bu anlatısal yaklaşımının Türkiye'de kâğıt toplayıcılarının sayıca arttığı bir dönemde daha belirgin bir anlam kazandığını öne sürmektedir. Romanı yakın bir okumaya tabi tutan çalışma, Tekin'in yapıtlarına yönelik eleştirel çözümlemelerle birlikte çöp ve edebiyat üzerine düşünen Mary Douglas, Susan Signe Morrison ve William Viney'nin görüşlerinden de yararlanmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, gecekonducuların doğaya, devlet eliyle gerçekleşen yıkımlara ve çöp yığınlarında yerleşim kurmaya çalışan farklı topluluklara karşı verdiği mücadele ele alınmaktadır. Topluluğun her türlü yıkım ve hastalıktan iyileşerek kurtulmasında İstanbul'un ve yoksulluğun adının anılmamasının oynadığı rolün yanı sıra kent yaşamının sebep olduğu hastalıkların tedavisinde halk tıbbına atfedilen mucizevî gücün işlevi de ortaya konmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Latife Tekin, Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları, Çöp, Kâğıt toplayıcıları, Yoksulluk, Halk tıbbı.*

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1. Introduction

Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills* (1984) tells the story of a community that settles in the peripheries of an industrialized and populated city. Although Tekin does not specify the name of the city in the novel, in an interview she refers to Istanbul as the setting of her narrative. She tells how she worked on *Berji Kristin* with the spirit of a documentarist by visiting the first shantytowns of Istanbul such as Gultepe and Zeytinburnu, talking with the inhabitants of these towns, and carefully observing their living conditions (2005: 65). Based on this interview one can infer that Tekin's purpose is to represent the social transformation of the 1960s Istanbul triggered largely by the huge wave of internal migration. People trying to make their living and hold firm in the harsh urban conditions populated Istanbul in these years and built the shanties called *gecekondu*s in the outskirts of the city. *Gecekondu*s, literally meaning "landed by night" in Turkish, are built hastily in one night before the officials intervene in and prevent the construction. *Berji Kristin* opens with people performing this illegal act and using various objects in garbage as their resources. What others discard has a use value for the squatters, confirming William Viney's observation that "[o]bjects do not have a certain 'amount' of value until this value is used up" (2014: 4). Tekin's novel stages this provisional nature of waste when the squatters reutilize the junked material in the dumping area.

*Gecekondu*s and their inhabitants' intimate relationship with garbage are a natural part of their survival strategies; from the perspective of an outsider, on the other hand, they usually denote poverty, misery, unhealthiness, and ugliness.[1] Modernity and urbanization, as well as the sterilized life style they promote, disapprove of how these houses look and how these people live all the while *gecekondu* people are, most often than not, used as cheap labor by modern and urban industries. Tekin's handling of waste and related issues, particularly poverty, environmental crises and unhealthiness, shows her concern for real socio-political issues of marginalized populations. She also highlights alternative ways of connecting with these problems of urban migration by writing against the expectations of the educated urban reader.

Although *Berji Kristin* has already been discussed in various contexts extending from urbanization and migration to eco-poetics and magical realism,[2] its portrayal of life on garbage hills has become more interesting with the rising phenomenon of street waste pickers in Turkey. Illuminating Tekin's continuing concern for the marginalized population of urban life, we also aim to draw attention to this phenomenon as an example of connecting with garbage as material value. However, since Tekin's

[1] Mehmet Rıfat Akbulut and Seher Başlık explain that the inital experiences of *gecekondu*s in Istanbul were explored with the help of western theories of modernization, which resulted in the description of *gecekondu*s as "excessive," "deformed," "unhealthy," or "fake" (2011: 3). Discussing legalization of informal settings in Turkey, Hatice Sadıkoğlu Asan and Ahsen Özsoy refer to the integration problems of *gecekondu* residents and their perception as a "threat" or "danger" by the political agents of the 1970s and 1980s Turkey (2018: 66).
[2] The most recent analyses include Akçeşme (2016); Ergin (2017); Kaya (2021); and Prieto (2021).

narrative is constructed with a magical language wrought with folk stories, superstitions, and riddles, her aesthetic attitude and its role in the creation of alternative ways of connecting with the problems of urban life should not be overlooked. Therefore, our analysis of the novel is twofold. We discuss the material value of garbage in the initial phases of the community's settlements in a big city and of the changes that occur after the community completes its settlement and yields to the competitive paradigm of industrialized and capitalist society. In the meanwhile, we argue that the composition of *Berji Kristin* relies so much on perpetual recovery of its characters that weaknesses are only implied in the narrative. Therefore, we suggest, while poverty and hunger, or at least malnutrition are expected to be a natural part of the community's life on garbage hills, Tekin avoids naming them in order to foreground the strength of the community. Similarly, characters easily recover from illnesses initiated and exacerbated by unhealthy living conditions through folk medicine that provides them with some magical solutions.

2. *Berji Kristin* and Urban Migration

Tekin has provided the reader with various accounts of urban migration since she published her first novel, *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* (*Dear Shameless Death*) in 1983.[3] Revolving around the story of a young girl whose family moves from a village to Istanbul, *Dear Shameless Death* appeared as a groundbreaking novel in Turkish literature with its magical narrative and language. As Saliha Paker, co-translator of the novel into English, writes in her introduction, "Latife Tekin was no doubt aware of how strange her own fictional world would appear in the eyes of the 'enlightened' urban Turkish reader, wary of magic and superstition" (2001: 7). Paker's reference to the "enlightened" reader is important to understand how Tekin's approach to sociological facts of modern Turkey distinguished her from other Turkish writers who have had similar concerns. In *Dear Shameless Death,* the villagers' look to life that combines animistic and Islamic beliefs shapes the characters' mindset and creates the novel's magical atmosphere even after the characters move to Istanbul. Whereas the writers of the genre called "village literature" mostly appropriated the mission of changing "primitive" and "ugly" aspects of rural life by making them accessible to the urban audience, Tekin wrote an "authentic culture" (Belge 1998: 241) without censoring its irrational beliefs and rituals.[4]

Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları (Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills) complemented *Dear Shameless Death* by delving into the settlements on garbage hills.[5] Migration from villages to big cities

[3] *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* was translated into English in 2001. We will use the English title, *Dear Shameless Death,* in the rest of the article.
[4] Belge suggests that having its roots in the state-run Village Institutions (*Köy Enstitüleri*), which were established to educate village boys and girls as teachers, village literature reflected the enlightened minds of the intellectuals of peasant origin. Their way of thinking reflected their dependence on the ideologies of the state among which westernization and enlightenment occupy the central place (1998: 237-241).
[5] *Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları* was translated into English in 1993. We refer to the English translation throughout the article.

had led to the establishment of squatters, which Tekin made her basic theme in *Berji Kristin*.[6] People's struggles to survive in urban life has been a continuous theme in her literature from her first novels to the recent ones. Her 2018 novel *Manves City (Manves City),* for example, portrays how workers resist the capitalist ambitions of the factory owners at the cost of unemployment and imprisonment. Similarly, *Sürüklenme* (*Drift*) (2018) is a reflection on the poverty of young people who find themselves helpless in a world of social, political, and economic hierarchies. In an interview, explaining her choice of the title, *Sürüklenme* (*Drift*), she says that young people are "drifting" through life in search of a stable future. She then refers to the migrations that pervade the world: "In recent times, about four hundred thousand young people set out on a journey. There is a migration of young men from Asia and Africa. In fact, the whole world is on the roads" (2018).[7] According to World Migration Report of 2018, "[t]he ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic saw the number of refugees from that country reach approximately 5.5 million. The instability and violence that have made Afghanistan a major source of refugees for over 30 years has continued, with the country being the second top origin country in the world" (2018: 33). As the same report informs us, "[i]n 2016 for the third consecutive year, Turkey was the largest host country in the world, with 2.9 million refugees, mainly Syrians (2.8 million)" (2018: 34). International migration and especially its irregular forms seem to have led Tekin to deal with social inequality in a new context.

Tekin's work contributes to the rich repertoire of migrant literature that expresses physical and psychological sufferings in a myriad of ways. It addresses both the local issues of Turkey and the global problems such as unplanned urbanization, migration, and ecological disasters that deteriorate not only nature but also people's health. Organizing *Berji Kristin* around a struggling community, Tekin implies that the setting of the novel "could be Istanbul—but it might just as easily have been Mexico City, Cairo or any other explosively growing urban center that has spawned a squatters' community on its grim, polluted periphery" (Kalfus 1993: 18). Although Kalfus's words associate the urban life portrayed in *Berji Kristin* basically with the developing countries, Turkey, Mexico and Egypt, it is no doubt a global phenomenon.

[6] After these two novels, Tekin published *Gece Dersleri* (1986) (*Night Lessons*), *Buzdan Kılıçlar* (1989) (*Swords of Ice*), *Aşk İşaretleri* (1995) (*Signs of Love*), *Ormanda Ölüm Yokmuş* (2001) (*No Death in the Forest*), *Unutma Bahçesi* (2004) (*Garden of Forgetting*), *Muinar* (2006) (*Muinar*), *Manves City* (2018) (*Manves City*), *Sürüklenme* (2018) (*Drift*), and *Zamansız* (2022) (*Untimely*). She also wrote a film script entitled *Bir Yudum Sevgi* (1984) (*A Sip of Love*), published a memoir, *Gümüşlük Akademisi* (1997) (*The Academy* (*Gümüşlük Akademisi*)), an essay collection entitled *Rüyalar ve Uyanışlar Defteri* (2009) (*Notebook of Dreams and Awakenings*) and a children's book entitled *Altınçayır Vadisi'nin Çocukları* (2020) (*Children of Altınçayır Valley*). Except *Buzdan Kılıçlar,* which was translated into English in 2007 as *Swords of Ice* (trans. by Saliha Paker and Mel Kenne for Marion Boyars Publishing) and "Gümüşlük Akademisi," whose English translation appeared in *Translation Review* in 2012 (trans. by Saliha Paker and Mel Kenne), these works do not exist in English.

[7] Translation is ours.

Eric Prieto states how the cities of developed countries are now in a state of learning from the experiences of less developed countries. Prieto suggests that the planet's natural resources are running short because of the growing human population and energy consumption. Then he maintains, "as East and West, North and South become ever more entwined through economic and informational globalisation, the risks are shared more widely too, as the effects of localised crises—whether military, economic, environmental, epidemiological, or other—tend to ripple out ever more widely and rapidly from their point of origin" (2021: 20). Drawing attention to the fact that the persistence of "urban informality" in developing countries created an unexpected growth in "improvised housing solutions," Prieto suggests turning to fiction as a means of bridging the gap between the urban theories and the realities of urban life (2021: 22-23). In *Berji Kristin* people's way of connecting with garbage provides the reader with a peculiar vision—in line with Prieto's emphasis on the "possibilities" of urban informality—regarding the use value of the discarded material. The novel, offering lively episodes of the characters' survival through garbage, presciently fosters an understanding for today's street waste pickers.

As journalist Didem Atakan reports, the estimated number of informal waste pickers who make a living by collecting recyclables in Turkey is 500,000 as of March 2021 (2021). Representing the poorest population of society, this group also includes irregular migrants from countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria. The informal status of their work, like that of the shanties of *Berji Kristin,* exposes them to social stigma. As Andrew Wilks reports, in October 2021 "[w]aste-sorting sites were demolished and collection carts confiscated while media reports said 'many' foreign nationals were detained and sent to a nearby migrant 'collection center'" (2021). Likewise, Tekin's novel starts with people performing the illegal act of building *gecekondu*s which are repeatedly demolished by state officials. People build *gecekondu*s by using various objects in garbage as their resources.

3. Material and Aesthetic Value of Garbage

Berji Kristin focuses primarily on the squatters' survival strategies that appear in two different ways, in two different phases of their presence in garbage hills.[8] In the first phase, squatters fight to keep their houses alive and act communally against the destructive forces, be it windy weather or wreckers. When their huts are destroyed by any of these, they rebuild them. The second phase starts after the squatters accomplish to settle and become a neighborhood. In this new phase, men look for jobs around, especially in the factories, while women and children try to sell what they collect from garbage.

[8] In *Berji Kristin* people who are settled in the dumping areas are sometimes referred to as "squatters" and sometimes as "hut people." Throughout the article we use "squatters," "hut people," and "*gecekondu* people" interchangeably.

In *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, Viney adds the dimension of time to the relativity of dirt explored by Mary Douglas's seminal book, *Purity and Danger,* originally published in 1966. According to Douglas, one can trace the symbolic systems in our ideas of dirt. Telling us if something is waste or not, the organizing culture makes the systems of order visible. In her words, "[d]irt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (2001: 36). She observes that modern ideas of cleanness and dirtiness are shaped by people's care for hygiene and aesthetics as well as people's awareness of pathogenic organisms (36). When it comes to the relationship between dirt and order, however, Douglas does not see any difference between the primitive and modern cultures and suggests, "we are all subject to the same rules" (41). On the other hand, Viney argues that waste is not only a matter of space, but also a matter of time. Drawing attention to our temporal relationship with objects, he suggests, "objects we call 'waste' have peculiar powers to make that temporality an explicit part of what they are and how we judge them" (2014: 2-3). In other words, those who use a particular object decide if it might be disposed or not and the sense of how time has passed plays a crucial role in this decision (Viney, 2014: 3). Those who encounter a discarded object, on the other hand, do not necessarily know what kind of a past that object has had. This time its value is determined by its potential for future use. In Viney's words, waste "is felt to be a discontinuous, provisional and yet materially continuous condition, one not to be defined by some intrinsic or universal quality but to a specific articulation of time" (2014: 4).

Drawing on Douglas's space-oriented definition of waste, one may see that the community in Berji Kristin is an integral part of waste and dirtiness defined by organizing culture. The community's prays for water or their strong emphasis on purity show the symbolic system they share with other people but their lives on garbage hills "spatially" posit them among "wasted" things. As Susan Signe Morrison discusses in *The Literature of Waste*, people who are close to waste are considered dirty. "Those who literally pick up our filth become filthy in turn," she says, referring to "the rhetoric of othering" that defines any unprivileged group of people as "unclean" or "inhuman" (2015: 97). She maintains that throwing things out has a purpose of cleaning up, so the people who deal with trash become a part of this trash: "It is no problem for *us* to waste *them*" (emphases are original) (2015: 99). Tekin's poetics, being far from presenting people of garbage hills as "wasted humans" upholds Viney's reading of waste. Elucidating his reservation about Douglas's comprehension of dirt, Viney says, "[i]n these writings the construction of ethics coincides with the plasticity of space, 'refuse' and acts of 'refusal' entwine" (2014: 2). In the urban space of Tekin's novel, things that have been refused once turn out to have value at another time, showing that the refuse and the acts of refusal are not necessarily entwined. The stories of the discarded objects do not take place in the novel, preventing us from "tracing the knowable transitions between use and non-use" (Viney 2014: 5), but the value they gain through urgent use is narrated in endless episodes.

As the novel lacks a unified story and central characters, its plot is not easy to summarize. Macit Balık defines *Berji Kristin* as a novel that progresses through the events narrated in sequences. The fundamental event, according to him, is the birth and development of a neighborhood even though time and space are often blurred throughout the narrative (2011: 35). Ahmet Duran Arslan also emphasizes the central role of the neighborhood in the composition of the novel, calling the space as "protagonist" and all the other characters as "supporting figures" (2017: 211). In fact, a specific character's actions and the formal transformation of both the place and the plot coincide, which seems to be the driving force of the whole narrative. Building of a small model of a *gecekondu* out of garbage material, getting together under the tent the strikers build, and illegal factories stood up overnight are examples of how the connection between *gecekondu* people, garbage and nature is built piece by piece. This fragmentary composition also determines the characteristic of the plot. Furthermore, Tekin constructs her narrative by means of a metaphoric and poetic language. One can nevertheless trace the growth of a shanty-town and its gradual integration into urban life. The first eight shelters are set up on a cold winter night and are thus threatened by powerful wind and heavy snow. The squatters have to fight against the scavengers and wreckers in addition to nature. Each destruction—either by a natural force or by the hand of humans—is followed by recovery. When the huts are demolished, for example, the squatters give up weeping and compose themselves. The narrator describes their recovery as follows:

> They rapidly reassembled the fragments of wood, cobbled the torn kilims and nailed together bits of tin while the children collected stones, unbroken breezeblocks and bricks and piled them up. That night they erected new huts half the size of those demolished. On the roofs they spread spoils from the garbage hill, bits of plastic, tattered rugs and kilims and, dragging fragments of broken crockery up from the flat ground from the china factory, they used them as tiles. (Tekin 1993: 19)

The hut people use the waste—torn, broken, dumped material—to reconstruct their homes, at least in part. When the wind destroys their huts, they take refuge in a building under construction and dream how they will collect materials from the garbage to redo their homes. "As they talked," the narrator says, "they saw gold and jewels in the garbage, then they closed their eyes dazzled with the glitter of precious stones and sank into sleep" (Tekin 1993: 23). Sometimes such magical expectations come true: "In a moment the old plaster moulds and debris from the china factory turned into walls again" (1993: 22). Transformation takes place with huge jumps, in a discontinuous manner, presumably to reflect the overall scrappiness. However, these miraculous moments also exemplify how Tekin equips the hut people with power through a dream logic and fairy tale language, which various scholars have interpreted in different ways.

Beyhan Uygun-Aytemiz suggests that Tekin's choice of an "ironic" language suits well for a novel that depicts the experiences of displaced people on garbage hills composed of displaced objects (2017: 454). According to Saliha Paker, Tekin's uniqueness stems from her replacement of realism with a rather "metaphorical perception of reality" whose fundamental element is "fantasy" (1993: 12). Similarly, Meliz Ergin underlines how Tekin's novels are distinguished from realist representations of urban and village literature with their poetic and metaphorical representations (2017: 128). Tekin's language is far from being anthropocentric, Ergin maintains, since she avoids the language of contemporary politics and prefers the chaotic language and narrative of dreams (2017: 113-14). Although these comments have a point, we should add that Tekin's language relies too much on the repetitions that make the novel tiresome.

The everlasting chain of construction and destruction designates the operation of the community and the narrative, but the survival of the narrative seems to depend on the repetition of the same phenomenon only with some differences. The motif of the babies carried with the wind, for example, is repeated in the following pages with a difference. A baby dies this time, being trapped between the remaining materials of a collapsed hut and then takes wing by getting out of the quilt used to wrap it (Tekin 1993: 20). The episode functions in almost the same way with the previous episode of the flying babies: Something lost is recovered in some way either through fight or through magic. Such episodes show on the one hand how Tekin's narrative of dream empowers the community to recover from troubles and on the other hand, how, as Azade Seyhan points out, "the book can turn off readers, since an excessive use of metaphor may wear thin" (2008: 172-73).

Seyhan also rightfully draws attention to Tekin's stereotypical portrayal of the Jews and the Alevis, a heterodox group in Shia Islam—though we believe that Kurd Cemal and the gypsy inhabitants of the cardboard town are exposed to similar biases as well. These stereotypical descriptions affect the overall reception of the novel a great deal, since it seems that the ideal community of the novel excludes the traditionally excluded peoples of the Turkish nation state almost completely.[9] Seyhan argues that these descriptions "cannot be excused as poetic license or explained away as a criticism of society, since these types do not represent the larger society" (2008: 176). Therefore, we suggest, Paker's and Ergin's

[9] For example, Kurd Cemal is described as a leader of a gang who imposes his own rules and regulations in the community and whose false promises disappoint and betray people (Tekin 1993: 76). The refrigerator factory belongs to Mr. Izak, whose name reveals his Jewish identity. He is portrayed as a man who is in pursuit of enlarging his business and makes his workers work endlessly for his purposes (83-85). When Gypsies come to the garbage hills, Honking Alhas, an expert of gypsy lore, introduces them to other people as "barbarians" (109). The garbage people got afraid that their hills would become dirty because the Gypsies are so "filthy" (110). Likewise, a stereotypical rumor regarding Alevis' immoral sexual habits spread in the community (126). Although these stereotypical descriptions can be considered as narrative attempts to illustrate and criticize unjust treatments of minority groups, the novel functions to "remind" stereotypes by avoiding to provide any "recovery." In other words, while the novel performs the strength of squatters, scavengers, and workers through its language and discourse, particularly through its repetitive circles of destruction and construction / illness and healing, these stereotypical descriptions do not function in a similar way and they remain unresolved.

idealizing commentaries on *Berji Kristin* should be evaluated together with Seyhan's reservations. Nonetheless, when it comes to the narrative of how the hut people relate to garbage, Tekin's novel falls quite far from the sterilizing codes of modern and urban life. The novel creates a space in which babies play with "broken shards" around the china factory (Tekin 1993: 17) and a young girl, Sırma, makes a tiny hut "out of the broken bits of glass, the old nylon comb with two teeth, the buttons and the bottletops" (1993: 24). Thanks to such renewed attention, waste material is doubly reincorporated into the narrative for the purpose of physical and symbolic reconstruction, defying the sterile distance deemed impossible to breach.

The refuse on the Flower Hill is so valuable for the hut people that they come to the dumping areas very early in the morning and collect plastic, paper, bottle and whatever they find. They either use them for their own purposes or sell them to the workshops in the neighboring areas (Tekin 1993: 30). A man who declares himself the garbage owner gives them money per kilo for what they collect. Furthermore, Tekin portrays other communities who have a similar relationship with garbage. The gypsies, for instance, set up "cardboard houses" on the garbage mounds making use of the objects they scavenge:

> Lines were stretched from one corner to another, and plastic dolls scavenged from the garbage, their hair and arms torn off, hung from them like bunches of grapes. Old fashion magazines thrown on the refuse heaps were stuck up on the cardboard walls, pinned open at their cover pages. The rest of the spaces were adorned with colored glossy paper picked from the rubbish and cleaned up. Round or flattish bottles and tin cans with picture labels hung from the ceilings. (Tekin 1993: 113)

This passage, like many similar ones, exemplifies how garbage gives people incessant energy they need for survival. Cooperating with two other magical powers—endless motivation to fight and superstitious remedies—it helps them overcome miserable situations.

Although they act with the spirit of community in the beginning, episodes of fighting for survival include people's violent treatment of each other in many different ways. For example, women wound the wreckers; police officers remove people from the hill by force; people beat up the Garbage Owner (Tekin 1993: 22-23) and Garbage Owner's men set the houses on fire (124). Yet, the narrator informs, "[n]ew cardboard homes were set up as the ashes of the dead blew through the Flower Hill streets" (96). Some otherwise disturbing behaviors—beating people, stoning huts, setting houses on fire—are presented by Tekin as a necessity in the given conditions. The presumed misery of *gecekondu* district is not narrated in a realistic way so as not to distract the reader from seeing their resilience.

In fact, Tekin's biographical accounts reveal that her basic motivation for writing her first two novels is to perform this resilience by creating a language that mimics the dynamics of these migrant

communities. Tekin was born in a village in Central Anatolia and moved to Istanbul when she was nine. She describes what she lived through then as causing a "sharp pain." She explains the way in which she used that sharpness to mold a powerful tool of resistance:

> My father quickly became working class, then gradually fell into unemployment. Three brothers worked on construction sites. I finished high school, slipping away like a trembling shadow from seven brothers and sisters. […] I fought hard to keep up with the city and was badly bruised. During my struggles I fell apart from those that I grew up with. But I resisted in order not to lose my own values, my language, and the constant and passionate love that those people bore me. (Quoted in Paker 1993: 10)

Tekin wanted *Berji Kristin* to reflect the *gecekondu* life with its language and form.

Consequently, she worked to build a narrative which does not dare to be a novel, only dreams to be one (Tekin 2005: 66). While evaluating another novel of herself, *Sword of Ice,* she expresses her belief in the impossibility of talking of "really" poor people (2005: 146). She maintains that whenever she reads something about the poor, she feels the ignorance there. "The poor continue to live," according to Tekin, "in the silence of a fairy tale which has not been—and will not be able to be—translated into another language" (2005: 146).

Berji Kristin reverses modern minds' perception of garbage collection, its ugly view and unhealthy consequences, through a naturalization and valuation of the act by including the dimension of resilience. To resist the wind, for example, supporting their huts with the objects they collect from garbage or wear plastic sacks at nights are "as natural as eating and drinking" (Tekin 1993: 32). The wind is so destructive for the Hill that the community makes up stories and believes that in order for the wind to lull, they should often utter the wind's name. In a way, instead of avoiding what destructs them, they indulge in it and give the name "Wind" to both boys and girls (33). By "walking against the wind," men lose their healthy posture as their backs get twisted and their necks get awry (34). Although these incurable deformations bring about many problems such as men's losing their jobs, the community's endurance appears to be the pillar of the novel.

4. City as a Living Organism: Istanbul, Poverty, and Malnutrition

"City as a human body," as Morrison calls it (2015: 77), tries to throw out some elements to keep its organization safe. Morrison explains how filth is covered so that it should not undermine the operation of the city's infrastructure: "Like those bodies hiding their vulnerable and exuding margins and orifices, the city, metaphorically imagined as a body, sets itself up against the country, home to dungy fields and garbaged landfills out of view" (2015: 75). Tekin's position contradicts the expectation

of this sterile urban life. She seems to imagine the city as a living organism exposed to various unhealthy conditions extending from disease bringing water to chemical waste. In other words, *Berji Kristin* does not offer a perspective that implies the city should throw out the squatters, but it clearly shows that the body of the city and its *gecekondu* elements fight together against any threat to their existence. Therefore, even though both the setting of the novel and its protagonists recover from troubles, they bear all the deformations led by this process.

The valuation of the deformed city as such takes us to the unnamed phenomena of the novel: Istanbul, poverty, and malnutrition. Beside Tekin's personal account, *Berji Kristin* itself provides clues regarding its setting. The narrative points to the peculiarities of Istanbul, such as its windy hills, its seagulls, its developing industry, and its ethnically and religiously diverse population. That is why the scholars refer to the city in the novel either as "Istanbul" or as "presumably Istanbul."[10] Tekin's preference for not naming the city is probably related to her choice of blending realism with fantasy. Thus, she represents the realities—migration, establishment and development of shantytowns, unemployment, environmental pollution and subsequent health problems—through a fairy-tale language.

Malnutrition is curiously another unnamed phenomenon in *Berji Kristin.* The squatters struggle to keep their huts alive by regularly feeding them with discarded material, but there is no clear answer to the question of what they themselves eat. Hilal Kaya's statement that "[t]he squatters struggle to build homes out of old tin cans, they scavenge for food" (2021: 63) should be an assumption since there is no clear episode of the squatters' scavenging for food in the novel. However, the narrator describes how "[t]he women filled their pouches rapidly as though gathering herbs or sorting over cracked wheat" (Tekin 1993: 32). This simile is a good example of Tekin's preference to imply the presence of nutritional problems while keeping them unnamed. The status of malnutrition resembles that of Istanbul, the former being the implied condition and the latter being the implied setting. Both are everywhere in the novel but the writer does not refer to them clearly.

Although providing necessary nutrients and avoiding hunger should be a natural part of their survival strategies, Tekin does not directly state it probably because of a belief she inherited from her father. Telling some of her childhood memories, she refers to a night when her family had to sleep famishedly:

> I remember a hard night from my childhood. There was nothing to eat in the evening; my family was totally broke. It was exactly like in Tevfik Fikret's verse,

[10] Saliha Paker traces real Istanbul in Tekin's narrative (1993: 13). Hande Tekdemir discusses *Berji Kristin* as a city novel directly taking the city as Istanbul (2011). Meliz Ergin writes that *Berji Kristin* accounts for a community settled on the outskirts of a big city "like Istanbul" (2017: 158).

> 'My children, we are hungry today too.' My father told us to go to bed and sleep. 'If you sleep, it will pass,' he said. He was not going through an easy thing as a father. However, he said this without any hesitation; we slept and saw it really passed. You can see food in your dream; you can even eat it and satisfy your hunger. (Tekin 2005: 51)[11]

Tekin tells this anecdote not for dramatizing the poverty she experienced in her childhood, but for drawing attention to her father's approach to hunger. "He had a weird belief," she says, "a belief that if one falls down at something once, this person will fall down forever" (Tekin 2005: 51-52). She goes on to explain that her father had an intuition as to the necessity of holding his head high, which she adopted in her life and writing (52). Therefore, one may suggest that Tekin, portraying the community in *Berji Kristin,* wants to highlight the community's power of struggle and prefers to take the community as an "entity" as John Berger observes (1993: 6). When the main character appears to be Flower Hill, its inhabitants are exposed to what the Hill itself is exposed to. They drink toxic water, breathe toxic air and eat some food to avoid being poisoned.

The writer prefers to shed light on their communal life rather than their individual presence. Prieto's suggestion that Tekin's characters have a sense of "pre-individual, almost infra-human reality" (2021: 31) reminds us of James Vernon's reference to pre-modern understanding of hunger as a "natural," "inevitable," or "necessary" condition (2007: 2). Modern understanding of hunger as a "collective social problem," as a sign of "failing political and economic system"' that create their "victims" (Vernon 2007: 2-3) intrinsically exists in *Berji Kristin* but it immerses in its magical poetics. Poverty, for Tekin, needs to be portrayed in a book that is "visceral and gritty without being exploitative or leery" (Frostick 2018: 3).

Considering Jane Pryer and Nigel Crook's reference in *Cities of Hunger* to the inevitable malnutrition among slum dwellers (1988: 3), one may assume that the *gecekondu* population of *Berji Kristin* was suffering from malnutrition and undernutrition, if not starvation. Tekin's simile that likens scavenging to "gathering herbs or sorting over cracked wheat" might be an implication of how garbage provides them with food as well. At this point, we can return to the connection we built between the surviving strategies of *gecekondu* people and current street waste pickers, as the latter declare their

[11] Translation of the quotes from this interview is ours throughout the article. Tevfik Fikret is a well-known Turkish poet who lived between 1867-1915. In his poem "Balıkçılar" (Fishermen) a father tells his children that they have nothing to eat because the windy weather did not let him go fishing and because their grandmother is on her deathbed.

health problems both because of environmental and nutritional problems. As one waste picker, whom Duygu Özsoy interviewed for her research, summarizes, they eat whatever they find and sleep in a small room shared by an indefinite number of people (2012: 108-109). Although Tekin's characters do not express a state of hunger, malnutrition or undernutrition, they are described in situations that confirm Pryer and Crook's following observation:

> There are many factors which have severe repercussions on the mental and physical health of the people living in the slums and shanty towns of the developing countries: the high population densities, poor makeshift housing, inadequate or non-existing facilities for sanitation and clear water, and environmental as well as industrial pollution; and because of insecurity of tenure, slum dwellers have little incentive to initiate improvements in their physical environment. Such conditions interact with and contribute to malnutrition among slum dwellers. (1988: 3)

An example of how malnutrition both affects and is affected by health is mothers' lactation capacity (Pryer and Crook 1988: 14). Reports on hunger and health often shed light on the importance of breastfeeding as exemplified by 2007 *World Hunger Series* prepared by United Nations World Food Programme. It draws attention to the relationship between the nutritional status of pregnant women and the well-being of future generations (2007: 33-34). In *Berji Kristin*, women try to overcome Şengül's inability to breastfeed her child first through some herbal cures and then by taking her to Güllü Baba. As the narrator tells, "When they brought Şengül to Güllü Baba, two bags of mint were tied over her breasts which were completely filled and clogged with milk" (Tekin 1993: 42). The mint works as a remedy and the milk oozes into Şengül's breasts slowly. Şengül's pain is so unbearable that she needs also Güllü Baba's spiritual treatment. Two women with "problems of bleeding" accompany Şengül (43). While this episode may imply the hormonal issues caused by unhealthy conditions of squatters, possibly including malnutrition, the novel's magical narrative foregrounds miraculous healing processes.

Although there is a negative correlation between urbanization and the use of herbal treatments (Yeşilada 2013: 93), people's well-being in *Berji Kristin* relies on folk medicine, not only because of their poverty that prevents them from accessing health services, but also because Tekin uses it as part of her magical narrative strategies. When "official institutions," "woolen bandages" or "white pills" are unable to cure headaches or musculoskeletal pain caused by powerful wind of the Flower Hill, people appeal to "the oldest bedridden woman of the community" (1993: 35-36). The narrative strategy here is to consume some material and relatively rational solutions to better convince the reader that the community has to gather its strength in unique ways. While the community's reliance on folk medicine shows their limited opportunities and hence Tekin's criticism of social injustice, its miraculous outcomes place Tekin's writing in a position against the expectations of the enlightened reader.

5. Chemical Waste and Health

The transition from an unofficial shantytown to an official neighborhood implicates also the rise of industrial capitalism, leading to a more competitive lifestyle and thus changing the meaning of garbage to some extent. It loses its value as "resource," but more interestingly, this loss is expressed by means of a metaphor of being fed. The Turkish idiom "*sütten kesilmek,*" meaning going dry and necessarily stopping breastfeeding is adapted to the hut people's relationship with garbage. Tekin produces a new idiom, "*çöpten kesilmek,*" to narrate that the community ceased to be fed by garbage. The novel foreshadows this transition at an early phase when Güllü Baba foretells the future of Flower Hill:

> [F]actories would be opened on Flower Hill where the deformed men would work, and there would be so many more factories that the women and children would stop scavenging and would fill them: the community would prosper, but their sores would never heal. The factory waste would alter the colour of the earth, the howling wind would scatter, and murmurs would turn into screams. (Tekin 1993: 46)

Güllü Baba's prophecy signifies increasing industrialization, environmental dirt and the ensuing loss of innocence. The transformation of the shantytown is complete and now it may act like any other town. Its vital connection to the garbage hill is over, so they now think that they are as separate from the garbage as the city folk think they are. However, we should not forget that garbage might be categorized into two: Good garbage is the one which allows new forms to be built, whereas bad garbage, the poisonous one, prevents any new forms to be shaped. Distance is the outcome of the prevailing bad garbage.

The narrator informs the reader that Berji girls "used to milk the sheep that grazed out in the summer pastures at night" (Tekin 1993: 31). People decided a girl's upbringing by looking at the way she milked the sheep. The narrator explains, "[o]n Flower Hill only the girls who picked over the refuse were considered worthy of the name and awarded such praise" (32). Milking the sheep in village is replaced by scavenging for things in the urban life and both are praised as honorary works. The implicit idea is the dishonor of prostitution, which coincides with the capitalist turn in *Berji Kristin.* Tekin explains that men used to give foreign names to prostitutes in order not to stain their honor. Therefore, they give the name Kristin to the first prostitute of their neighborhood (64). Bringing the names Berji and Kristin together in the title, the novel seems to avoid a moral judgement, but the special meaning attributed to being a Berji girl shows that the fast integration of *gecekondu* people into the conditions of urban life results in a loss of innocence.

Those who satisfy their needs from garbage attain opportunities to find jobs after new garbage hills and factories erect in the region. When garbage collecting becomes a profession, garbage hills attract people from other parts of the city and the men of the community start looking for jobs outside Flower Hill. Following this development, the novel is wrought with vivid scenarios, dialogues, and rumors on factories and their owners, workers and their strikes, unionization and its consequences, communism and revolution. This long, detailed and colorful part reveals Tekin's political agenda and her concern for class-consciousness. She maintains the fairy-tale atmosphere of the novel even in these parts and appeals to oral tradition, particularly folk songs when narrating labor struggle. Hut people fight not only against the exploiters, but also against the chemical waste that makes them ill. Surrounded by social, political and ecological injustices, they perform solidarity, which is not untouchable. If solidarity is vulnerable to defeats, they give it up and embrace their interests.

The cycle of destruction and construction is replaced this time by the cycle of illness and health. The community of Flower Hill is amazed by snow, which turns out to be the waste of the factory. The flowers wither, the trees wilt, the animals die, and people get sick. People's reaction to the factory is violent. They throw stones at its windows, smash its gates, and tear down its walls (Tekin 1993: 28). After reconciliation, the factory owner gets the neighborhood to be washed with "the hot bluish water in which the factory serum and medicine bottles were washed" (28). Flower Hill people and their belongings are all washed with this blue, hot water, which results in an illness: "The skin of some began to peel while the faces of others turned purple. Bright blue spots came out on the children's bodies and the hair of two women went white" (29). While describing harmful effects of chemical waste, Tekin does not leave aside the possibility of recovery. For example, against intoxicating waste, people eat some healing foods. The community is always in a circulating movement of finding a balance between the useful and the harmful, the constructive and the destructive. The city and its *gecekondu* population struggle to remain healthy and come to terms with whatever is happening to them.

6. Conclusion

As a novel that offers a perspective from within, *Berji Kristin* provides the reader with an opportunity to see "urban possibilities" (Prieto 2021) behind the lives that are entwined with garbage and chemical waste as well as the lives disrupted by nutritional and health problems. Portraying a migrant community, which relies on garbage for survival, Tekin shows us what "we myopically avoid" (Morrison 2015: 97). Referring to sterilized lifestyles of Western modernization, Morrison suggests, "[o]ne way that we make wasted humans invisible is to make them cognate to waste; waste is something we take all means to avoid" (2015: 97). In *Berji Kristin* we are introduced to a community that remains alive with the help of waste despite the hard conditions such as destructive nature and the state officials who prevent them from constructing their illegal *gecekondu*s. This perspective is far from portraying

the members of the community as "the wasted humans" (Morrison 2015: 97), enabling us to reflect on the poor population of cities such as street waste pickers and the immigrants many of whom are homeless and suffer from physical ailments.

Tekin's poetics avoids naming their miseries in line with her fantastic approach to harsh realities like poverty, unemployment and illness, which are all represented through a magical narrative. This rhetoric was unconventional for Turkish migrant literature, which was shaped to a great extent by the socialist realist writers. For Tekin, however, writing the real social problems in a fantastic manner has a rationale. It is a literary attempt at representing what she views as unrepresentable. She thinks that if one cannot talk of "really" poor people, then a writer should create a new language to give them a voice. If people need to sleep on empty stomach to keep their head high, then the writer should not represent them complaining of hunger.

The magical world of *Berji Kristin* is further supported by folk medicine and spiritual treatments, which enable people's recovery from physical illnesses and some psychological troubles. Health also appears to be a socio-political problem in the novel with its references to the difficulties of accessing official institutions. Yet folk medicine functions as a miraculous tool for curing the community of the troubles it is having. Representing waste as resource, leaving nutritional problems implicit and construing spiritual treatments as miraculous, *Berji Kristin* fosters the idea that understanding the marginal population of the cities requires a new language, different from that of those who can "waste" the poor.

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