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**CHILDHOODS FRAGMENTED ON GARBAGE HILLS: MIGRATION,
SQUATTING, AND MAGICAL REALISM IN BERJİ KRISTİN: TALES
FROM THE GARBAGE HILLS**

*Çöp Tepelerinde Parçalanmış Çocukluklar: Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları'nda Göç,
Gecekondulaşma ve Büyülü Gerçekçilik*

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

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Sorumlu Yazar

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Abstract

First published in 1984 amid social and political turmoil in post-coup Turkey, Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills* narrates the process of squatting on the hills of an unnamed metropolis – presumably İstanbul. While the text focuses on migration from rural areas to the city as a social phenomenon, along with the formation of slums and the poverty that follows, children and the very concept of childhood remain positioned both at the centre of this process and at its periphery. Although the text portrays children as significant agents in the formation of squatter communities, it simultaneously presents them as increasingly invisible, ultimately depicting the erosion of childhood in the pursuit of a better and comfortable life – an illusion that is eventually revealed as such. Tekin's thematic concerns, including the role and position of children within this socio-spatial transformation parallel the text's formal qualities and narrative strategies, which are marked not only by magical realism, but also by fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambivalence. This paper explores children's experiences of migration and squatting as represented in Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin* and examines how magical realism as a narrative strategy, together with the text's fragmented structure, shapes and colours the representation of the child characters when confronted with harsh and traumatic social circumstances.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Latife Tekin, *Berji Kristin*, childhood, magical realism, contemporary Turkish literature.

Özet

İlk kez 1984 yılında, 12 Eylül darbesi sonrasında toplumsal ve siyasal çalkantıları içinde yayımlanan Latife Tekin'in *Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları* isimli romanı, adı belirtilmeyen bir metropolün – muhtemelen İstanbul'un – tepelerinde gelişen gecekondulaşma sürecini konu edinir. Metin, toplumsal bir olgu olarak kırdan kente göçü, gecekondu mahallelerinin oluşumunu ve buna eşlik eden yoksulluğu odağına alırken; bu sürecin tam kalbinde yer alan çocuklar ve çocukluk kavramının kendisi, aynı anda bu sürecin hem merkezinde hem de uzağında bırakılır. Çocuklar, bir yandan gecekondu topluluklarının oluşumunda etkin öznelerle dönüşürken, öte yandan giderek görünmez olurlar; böylece metin, daha iyi ve konforlu bir yaşam arayışı içinde çocukluğun yok oluşunu resmeder – ki şehirde bu şekilde bir yaşam arayışının da nihayetinde bir yanılsama olduğu açığa çıkar. Bu toplumsal ve mekânsal dönüşüm sürecinde çocukların rolü ve konumu da dahil olmak üzere Tekin'in ele aldığı tematik meseleler, metnin biçimsel özellikleri ve kullanılan anlatım stratejileriyle paralellik gösterir. Söz konusu anlatım stratejileri, yalnızca büyülü gerçekçilikle sınırlı kalmayıp, aynı zamanda parçalanmışlık, süreksizlik ve muğlaklıkla da yakından ilişkilidir. Bu çalışma, Latife Tekin'in *Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları* isimli eserinde resmedildiği biçimiyle çocukların göç ve gecekondulaşma deneyimlerini inceler ve romanın parçalı yapısıyla birlikte bir anlatım stratejisi olarak büyülü gerçekçiliğin sert ve travmatik toplumsal koşullarla karşılaşan çocuk karakterlerin temsiliyi nasıl şekillendirdiğini ve renklendirdiğini tartışır.

Key Words: Latife Tekin, *Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları*, çocukluk, büyülü gerçekçilik, çağdaş Türk edebiyatı.

INTRODUCTION

Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills* (1984) centres on rural-to-urban migration and the formation of squatter settlements on the hills of an unnamed metropolis – presumably İstanbul. The novel brings together the experiences of various groups affected by this process, foregrounding their struggles to adapt to changing circumstances as they alternately thrive or fail within metropolitan modernity. Tekin's text opens on "one winter night," when "the eight shelters were set up by lantern-light near the garbage heaps," (Tekin 2015: 15) and it subsequently chronicles a series of events and challenges confronting the squatters during this period of settlement, including the construction, demolition, and reconstruction of their huts; the formation of the first neighbourhood; the opening of the first school; the unionisation of workers; and various environmental crises and illnesses caused by factory waste. Amid these developments and the chaotic environment, child characters remain positioned both at the centre of the settlement process and at its periphery. Although children actively participate in the formation of squatter communities, they gradually become disillusioned and increasingly invisible. While there is considerable scholarly interest in Tekin's thematically and technically influential text, there is hardly any study that refers to the representation of children and childhood in relation to either its narrative structure or its contextual background. This article examines the representation of childhood and children under harsh social conditions, focusing on how magical realism and narrative fragmentation shape that representation.

1. Fragmentation, and the Interplay of the Magical and the Real

Berji Kristin is a highly stylized text that draws on narrative elements of local folktales, urban legends, and fairy tales to present social realities, thereby synthesizing the magical and the real, the metropolitan and the local, the fantastic and the realistic, as well as the fictive and the factual. Although Tekin's work was later associated with magical realism – a mode often linked to Latin American literature, particularly the writings of Gabriel García Márquez – her literary style was initially received as highly experimental within Turkish literature of the period, giving rise to controversy, especially with regard to its form. Emin Özdemir, who reviewed Tekin's work shortly after its publication, characterises the text as falling within the boundaries of a tale that cannot be considered a novel due to its reliance on fantasy (1985: 7). Literary critic and publisher Semih Gümüş, in a similar vein, focuses on Tekin's literary characters and argues that they "lack individual agency," a feature that distances the text from the novel genre (1991: 110). However, Gümüş makes this point not to diminish Tekin's fiction. On the contrary, Gümüş emphasizes that *Berji Kristin* cannot be evaluated within the framework of traditional literary criteria and should instead be understood as "a highly authentic contemporary narrative" that rejects conventional causality and unity (1991: 108).

Tekin's characters in *Berji Kristin*, lacking the individualism typical of novelistic characterisation, exist primarily through anecdotes, moments, or incidents that themselves lack a central subject and,

consequently, sustain little narrative continuity, thereby producing a fragmented narrative. While people come and go, leaving physical, psychological, socio-economic, and cultural traces both on the garbage hills and on the lives of other squatters, the shanty town, later named Flower Hill (*Çiçektepe*) remains the only constant character in the text and is often referred to as a person (Dişçi 2017: 233). Flower Hill, an already deeply ironic name for the garbage hills, sprouts from the city's refuse like a small bud—or, more fittingly, like a child to whom the squatter community has given life and continually struggles to sustain.

The literary characters' lack of agency – together with the fragmented structure of *Berji Kristin* – can be linked to the text's affinity with magical realism (Kekeç 2011: 212), since magical realism prioritizes the representation of social conditions over individual characterisation and foregrounds the community rather than the individual. As Nilgün Bayraktar notes, Tekin indeed constitutes “a communal voice within the position of poverty” (2004: 112) rather than indulging in the portrayal of individual subjects, a tendency that is closely aligned with her ideological stance. Moreover, fragmentation itself mirrors the very process of squatter settlement, as the lives of the squatters are already dislocated through their departure from their roots and their movement from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Formal fragmentation accordingly develops into a metaphor, embodying not only the makeshift huts and lives of the decentred squatters, but also their psychological injuries on the garbage hills.

According to Latife Tekin, *Berji Kristin*, “aspires to the novel genre,” much like the shanties that “dream of becoming houses” (Özer 2015: 75), thereby highlighting the parallelism between the form and the content of her work. Throughout the text, Tekin seeks to represent the formation of shanty towns simultaneously through language and narrative form (Özer 2015: 75). *Berji Kristin* bears a corresponding sense of incompleteness and discontinuity, which Nurdan Gürbilek defines as a narrative founded “upon an unclaimed, impersonal murmur in which many voices are intertwined in an indistinguishable manner” (2021: 44). John Berger, who wrote the preface to the English translation of *Berji Kristin*, similarly emphasizes the relationship between the shanty town and Tekin's language, hinting that this stylistic choice emerges “not because Latife is a post-modernist or a structuralist, but because she is familiar with the lives lived on the garbage hills” (1993: 7). Tekin is likewise familiar with the idiosyncratic language of both the rural and the urban. She intertwines rumours, jokes, laments, songs, and gossip – everyday oral practices rooted in rural life – with the language of civic existence, and she succeeds in achieving a polyphonic harmony.

Flower Hill's entrapment between the rural and the urban, as Ahmet Duran Arslan similarly notes, permeates the language, thereby putting forth “a hybrid language” (2017: 205). As the squatter community adapts and reworks its religious or superstitious practices, as well as its customs and traditions, in response to its experiences in the city, it also playfully introduces new expressions into everyday speech such as “holding down the minaret” as the sixth pillar of Islam (Tekin 2015: 26). The

outcome of this adaptation produces an improvised culture and language which is akin to the makeshift nature of their huts. These configurations that the squatters enact in architecture, culture, religion, and language, culminate in a fragmented aesthetic that oscillates between fabular tradition and social realism. The supernatural – made possible through reliance on local folklore and belief – melts into social reality, blurring the distinctions between the magical and the real and giving rise to a narrative that resembles a dream-like structure.

The cover of the 2015 English edition of Tekin's work features a silhouetted nuclear family whose bodies are ornamented with patches of Anatolian-style Turkish rugs (*kilims*) and trash, thereby simultaneously pointing to their roots in the Anatolian countryside and their new life on the garbage hills of the city. The use of silhouettes rather than clearly delineated human figures, on the one hand, reinforces the characters' presence as collective representatives of the squatters rather than individualized figures. On the other hand, the collage of rugs and garbage visually foregrounds the fragmentation characterising the squatters' lives caught between the traditional and the modern, the village and the city, as well as their effort to assemble a new identity out of this chaos. As Tekin notes in an interview, "the process of modernisation" produces "a near-fracturing division of individuals between the old and the new," whereby "humans embark on a journey of migration toward the new, enchanted by the new and driven by a desire to break away from the old" (Şahbenderoğlu 2017: 252). In this regard, the squatters' physical migration is accompanied by a psychological migration toward an anticipated better future – or an undefined dream, which leaves them suspended in a state of dilemma and in-betweenness.

The silhouette-like structure on the cover gains even greater significance in the context of children and childhood. While the collage composed of garbage and Anatolian rugs similarly points to a sense of disintegration and loss of identity experienced by the children of migrant families, it simultaneously foregrounds the transformation of children and childhood from individualized entities into a collective representation. Most significantly, the image reflects the erosion of the conventional associations of childhood and the child. Childhood is not only a crucial stage in the formation of the self but also a concept imbued with cultural and social significance. When the archetypal associations traditionally attached to childhood and the child are taken into consideration, the collage suggests that childhood – often regarded as a symbol of innocence, purity, and future generations – loses these meanings through the experience of migration and the subsequent process of squatting. Consequently, children, who represent the future of Flower Hill, emerge as rootless and decentred subjects as they grow up on the garbage hills.

The cover image of *Berji Kristin* also aptly reflects the text's employment of magical realism, as it locates the magical within Anatolian people's rituals, superstitions, and mysticism, while simultaneously maintaining a strong realist grounding through its critical focus on the lives of squatters. Magical realism, as its name suggests, brings together "opposing concepts without calling

them into question” (Kekeç 2011: 211). As Franz Roh writes in *After Expressionism: Magic Realism*, where he first coins the term with reference to modern painting, “the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (1995: 15). Roh articulates a relationship that does not conflict with realism but rather exists alongside it and remains deeply intertwined with it. Magic and realism constantly trespass into one another’s domains – not to surpass one another, but to playfully and productively consolidate each other’s sphere of influence.

Magical realism, therefore, particularly in literature, provides an arguably more effective ground for the representation of social realities in ways that are simultaneously more bearable and more forceful, through subversion and a reliance on folklore. Magical realism combines fantasy and fiction, which, as Hande Tekdemir writes, “provides another estrangement that is by no means an escape from reality but an attempt to represent an alternative reality” (2011: 43). The boundaries between fantasy and fiction, as well as between magic and reality, are blurred in order to correspond to the metamorphoses experienced not only in the world of arts and literature, but also within the social, political, and cultural ambivalence of the postmodern era. Magical realism, in this context, particularly offers “a form through which Third World stories can be told” (Gün, 1986: 278), as it brings Third World dichotomies – such as poverty and excess wealth, or the metropolitan centre and the slum – onto the same narrative plane, while simultaneously highlighting the failure of conventional modes of realism to represent these social realities in such a playful yet strikingly critical manner.

2. Childhood amid Migration and Political Chaos

In *Berji Kristin*, Tekin draws an authentic and empathetic portrait of the squatter community and its process of settlement. She is particularly effective in conveying children’s experiences in shanty towns, as well as the post-traumatic effects of this process, while simultaneously highlighting children’s naïve perspectives and their innocent attempts to contribute to family survival. This sensitivity can be linked to Tekin’s own childhood experience of migration, as her family moved from a small town in Kayseri – a city in Central Anatolian – to İstanbul when she was only nine years old. Nurdan Gürbilek refers to Tekin’s having “a dual mode of existence, a kind of bilingualism” after she came to the big city (2021: 64). For Tekin, there was not only the language of the house but also that of the outside world (2021: 64); consequently, she led two separate lives, like her characters who remain caught between two lives – two cultures. Tekin herself recalls that her “childhood split into two by a sharp pain” when she arrived in İstanbul in 1966 (Özer, 2015: 35). She “struggled to adapt to the city” while simultaneously striving to “preserve her own values and her language” (Özer 2015: 35). Tekin knew life both in the village and in the shanty towns, where women and children moulded feminised and domestic spaces, interwoven with tales, songs, and older women’s beliefs – practices that gradually lost their validity, proved fruitless in the city, or were transformed in an effort to respond to the uncertainties and demands of urban life.

As her family worked in factories and construction struggling with poverty (Arcagök 2024: 116), Tekin, first as a child and later as a young woman, not only witnessed but also experienced the transformations of shanty towns, as well as the broader social and political events unfolding across the country. It was not merely Tekin's first-hand experience, but also the critical gaze of an intellectual – an aspiring young writer particularly sensitive to social processes affecting women and children – that has made *Berji Kristin* a relatable and a sincere work of literature. Tekin recalls having observed shanty towns with admiration both before and during the writing of *Berji Kristin*. She also took long walks through the streets of the slums, conducted interviews with factory workers and the early leaders of labour movements with the aim of giving them – and, in fact, all squatters – a voice through her literature (Özer 2015: 69).

The first waves of mass migration from rural areas to big cities had already begun in the late 1940s, driven by “chronic rural poverty” and the anticipation of “urban employment,” well before Tekin wrote *Berji Kristin* (Levinson, 1993: 30). By the 1960s, “squatterland” – as Saliha Paker calls it in the introduction to her English translation of *Berji Kristin* – “was an extension of the village,” with millions of people “flowing into the big cities to make a living” (2015: 12). By the second half of the 1980s, frequent public complaints centred on the “invasion” of big cities, accompanied by the widespread feeling that “İstanbul was being lost” as a result of migration, even though “the pace of squatting had begun to slow” (Gürbilek 2001: 69). Although time – like space – remains deliberately ambivalent in *Berji Kristin*, Tekin traces the evolution of the squatting process from its earliest stages through its subsequent transformations, revealing its successive phases, extensions, and outcomes, as well as the point it ultimately reaches in 1980s.

The 1980s were marked by profound socio-political turmoil, most notably the coup d'état, which was, as Jale Parla contends, “undoubtedly one of the most brutal and sinister events in the history of the Turkish republic” (2008: 34), as the military implemented severe and violent measures to suppress leftist movements. The 1980 coup d'état and its aftermath significantly shaped literary and artistic production, including Tekin's own writing career. While the “catastrophic effects of military violence” and “political terrorism” had already been central themes in literature since the 1960 coup d'état (Bayraktar 2004: 105), writers in the 1980s began to shift not only their thematic concerns but also their modes of representing social and political trauma. As a result of the “decline of leftist ideology” following the 1980 coup d'état, writers searched for “new narrative techniques and different ways of representation other than realism” (Bayraktar 2004: 108). The liberal economic policies introduced in the aftermath of the coup also gave rise to “new social types” such as “Anatolian immigrants who embraced the neoliberal worldview of the Özal government and put their faith in the Turkish dream of becoming the first millionaire on their street” (Parla 2008: 34), thereby transforming the social and cultural landscape. Consequently, Türkiye's reconfigured social and political agenda, coupled with depoliticization that followed the coup, culminated in a departure from the conventional social realism

that had dominated earlier literary periods. Orhan Pamuk and Latife Tekin, for example, as Erdağ Gökner observes, “transcended the limits of the dominant discourses of collective understandings of Turkish nationalism and socialism” (Gökner 2010: 497). In order to challenge the narratives of pre-coup Türkiye, they playfully experimented with fiction and adopted postmodern narrative strategies, eschewing familiar and conventional modes of representation and finding distinctive literary voices not only within Turkish but also in world literature.

Berji Kristin, in this context, syncretizes Tekin’s deeply personal experiences, the most painful and harsh social realities of its historical moment, and the ideological transformations of the period through a style that ironically surpasses traditional modes of representation. Tekin interlaces elements of magic and realism, drawing on a mode of “fantasy which was not a means of escapism but of reconstructing an individual experience that was authentic and indigenous” (Paker 2015: 9). The use of fantasy does not distance the narrative from reality; rather, it enriches and strengthens Tekin’s storytelling, as she recounts a communal history rooted in her childhood.

3. Fragmented Childhoods in the Shanty Towns: Growing Up with(in) Garbage

In her essays titled “Children and the Poor” (*Çocuklar ve Yoksullar*), Tekin articulates both a desire to be a child again and a wish to write a children’s manifesto before she dies (2009: 93). Tekin’s fiction, as well as her non-fiction, consistently provides scenes from childhood, centring on themes such as the author’s own childhood memories, children in the rural parts of the country, the child’s gaze, and the long-lost dreams of childhood. While *Berji Kristin* likewise presents a traditional extended family structure – particularly common in Turkish rural society – through the depiction of large numbers of children, these child characters remain both at the centre and at the periphery of their family’s migration and settlement process intertwined with chaos, hope, and loss. Children in *Berji Kristin* become active participants in every aspect of squatting without restraint, while they are simultaneously relegated behind immediate priorities such as securing shelter and food. They still contribute to the formation of a new life on the garbage hills by performing tasks within the limits of their capacities, ultimately either surviving or falling victim to the garbage, itself. Although the text does not focus on individual children in a conventional novelistic sense, childhood itself emerges as a collective presence, functioning almost as a character – much like Flower Hill itself.

The stylistic, linguistic, and thematic fragmentation of *Berji Kristin* shapes and reflects children’s experiences during the formation of shanty towns, illustrating how childhoods on the garbage hills are continuously and violently interrupted. As soon as the first huts are built, women arrive with their babies in their arms and sling makeshift cradles from the rooftops made “of plastic basins” (Tekin 2015: 16), transforming the infants into extensions of the flimsy huts themselves and rendering them an integral part of the squatting process. The cradles hanging from the ceiling come to symbolize the fragility of the futures that await the squatters – particularly the babies. As the weakest and most

unprotected members of the community, children become the first victims of squatting. The wind eventually loosens the rooftops and carries them away, “and the babies too, asleep in the roof-cradles” (Tekin 2015: 17). The subsequent search for the flying babies becomes even more surreal and tragic: while the mothers lament and keen for their children, they simultaneously tie “magic knots in their handkerchief and headscarves to arrest the passage of the wind” (Tekin 2015: 17). As magical and naïve as this scene may appear, the squatters’ hope that they will find the babies together with the roofs paradoxically condenses both their desperation and their hope for life on the garbage hills.

The squatter community recognizes and ritualizes the wind’s power when it kills a baby by carrying both the infant and the roof to the factory garden, and the people of Flower Hill inscribe this event into their collective memory by naming the hilltop where the mother curses the wind “Wind-Curse-Point” (Tekin 2015: 20). Following the wind’s devastation, the squatter community is visited by the wreckers; nevertheless, after each demolition, “life erupts from the garbage” again (Arslan 2017: 200). Hazards brought by the wind or the wreckers are mitigated through garbage, particularly with the aid of children, who collect waste for adults to rebuild the huts. Garbage, wind, and even the wreckers simultaneously manifest as both life-giving and life-taking forces, functioning throughout the text as recurring emblems of death, birth, and rebirth.

As the squatters find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of the destruction and reconstruction, accompanied by repeated loss – most devastatingly, the deaths of babies caused by cold and demolition – this persistent instability leaves children and young adults deeply traumatized. While the death of the babies is mythologized through an analogy between the ascent of their souls and birds taking wing toward heaven, Sirma, a young girl in the neighbourhood suffers a nervous breakdown, “trembling before the ruins, embracing a complete, undamaged brick,” and finally “tearing out handfuls of hair and throwing them to the wind” (Tekin 2015: 20). Amid garbage and manifold forms of struggle, children – and indeed childhood itself – emerge as a fragile yet persistent centre of hope and resilience. This dual association becomes further visible when children are entrusted with the task of naming the separate locations that emerge as Flower Hill expands both geographically and demographically. While this responsibility momentarily reinforces childhood’s association with renewal and imagination, the children’s chosen names – “Factory Foot,” “Garbage Pit,” and “Rivermouth” – reveal how their inner worlds are shaped by the pervasive presence of garbage and factory waste.

Shortly after being subjected to the wind’s hostility, the children become victims of the chemical waste released from the nearby factories. They mistake the “pure white foam” emitted by the factory for snow – a scene that echoes Tekin’s childhood memory of snow covering the houses in her village and the peak of Mount Erciyes (Tekin 2009: 149). According to Tekin, “snow is our childhood and rain is our youth” (2009: 161). While this so-called “factory snow” first amplifies the magical

atmosphere of the narrative, the children's exposure to it abruptly fractures fantasy, revealing a stark social and ecological reality:

"In the middle of playing, children turned dark purple as if drugged and fell into a deep sleep. One of the sleeping children never woke up. [...] Bright blue spots came out on the children's bodies and the hair of two women went white" (Tekin 2015: 28-29).

Children with purple skin and blue spots visually echo the collage of garbage and rugs displayed on the cover image of Tekin's work. Children's bodies become sites of inscription that bear and carry the traces of every encounter they endure, and each physical change comes to signify a psychological trauma that impairs both their present and future. As children's bodies continuously receive wounds, their identities also become the target of oral practices that mutate in the city. For instance, the hut people begin giving the name "Wind" to their children (Tekin 2015: 33), and children transform wind into a source of play, inventing games around it and turning it into a vehicle for entertainment. The mothers also start burying their babies' umbilical cords in the factory garden so that their children may one day find jobs in the factories, following the advice of Güllü Baba – who functions as a religious, semi-healer and semi-wise elder within the community. Through such practices, the squatter community inscribes the entire process of migration and settlement onto children's bodies and identities, turning them into monuments and ensuring that this collective trauma is transmitted to next generations.

Tekin aims to confront readers with not only the harsh realities of life on the garbage hills but also the powerlessness of human beings before nature and the vulnerability of children within such social and environmental conditions. She achieves this effect, as proposed by Franz Roh and later emphasized by Tekdemir, by using the magical as an alternative means of reflecting upon the real. As Hande Tekdemir notes with regard to magical realism, Tekin "constantly overstep[s] the boundaries between reality and fiction" (2011: 43), and the blurring of these boundaries functions not merely as an expression of local belief systems but also as a coping mechanism that enables individuals and communities to confront personal and collective traumas. At the juncture of the magical and the real, children's magical thinking, imaginative capacities, and playful disposition also become important narrative instruments through which the novel reconfigures and exposes the hardships associated with migration and squatting. Magical realism, enriched by the playfulness of children and the superstitions of the community, enables the reader "to see the extraordinary in the ordinary," thereby further emphasizing both the physical and psychological harm experienced by the squatters during this process (Tekdemir 2011: 43).

In one of her essays, Tekin writes that, "the elderly whose wisdom has reached the point of aberration, along with children and the poor, are my heroes" (2009: 153). She explicitly identifies a parallel between childhood and poverty – a connection that becomes evident not only in *Berji Kristin*, but also throughout her interviews, and, most particularly, in her non-fiction. According to Tekin,

“Children murmur the language; they are born with a light that grounds them at the level of the earth. [...] Yet when we grow up and experience a rupture, that light—the one that once placed us on an equal footing with all beings—begins to recede; it fades, and we grow isolated, left utterly alone” (2009: 93).

Tekin aligns herself with a romantic conception of childhood, emphasizing a narrative of lost innocence that accompanies the process of growing up. In this regard, the relationship between childhood and poverty as represented in *Berji Kristin* is multifaceted. On the one hand, the squatters – with all their goodwill, hopes for the future, dreams, and expectations of a new life with better opportunities – come to embody childhood itself. On the other hand, children, already marginalized despite their association with innocence and hope, are not merely pushed into the background but are further erased and rendered silent. Childhood, therefore, functions as a metaphorical figure, standing for the Other, the oppressed, and the effaced. As Tekin writes, “like children, the poor murmur words as well [...] whether it is the poor who speak or the wind that blows makes little difference, as their voices fly toward the stars with the light” (2009: 96). As observed by Nurdan Gürbilek, “these two processes – migration and growing up; the transition from sound to writing, from childhood to adulthood – enter Tekin’s narratives as a single experience, as different facets of the same experiential continuum” (2021: 49). At this juncture, migration emerges as a central force that binds together poverty, the poor, children, and childhood.

The name of Tekin’s novel likewise incorporates the text’s structural, linguistic, and thematic fragmentation, while also pointing to its engagement with magical realism. The eclecticism of the title underscores the analogy Tekin draws between childhood and poverty, by juxtaposing garbage with tale, as well as *Berji* with *Kristin*, within the same semantic frame. While the eponymous “*Berji*” refers to the shepherd girls who milk the sheep in the village, it acquires new meanings within the villagers’ transformed reality on the garbage hills. The name “*Berji Girls*” starts to be used for girls who sift through refuse, since collecting garbage becomes a feminised yet undervalued sphere of labour that is likened to agricultural harvest practices. Milk, an archetypal symbol of nourishment and purity associated with whiteness, is replaced by garbage, which throughout the narrative functions as an emblem of decay and death, giving the impression that lives built upon garbage gradually consume and corrupt their inhabitants. *Kristin*, on the other hand, emerges as a pseudonym used by the squatters to refer to the local prostitute of Flower Hill, Crazy Gönül. The use of a foreign name for a prostitute first evokes, in the squatter’s perception, a collapse of female morality as a consequence of modernity associated with the big city and, by extension westernisation. According to Güneli Gün, the book’s title epitomizes its “fusion of good and bad” (Gün 1993: 886) through the juxtaposition of *Berji* girl, with all her rural and innocent connotations, and women who make a living with their bodies in the city, thereby revealing the text’s structuring around dichotomies. Most significantly, however, this dichotomous title embodies the loss of innocence associated with childhood, youth, and rural migrants,

through Berji's transition – from milking girl to garbage collector, and finally to Kristin – while simultaneously hinting at a moral and cultural transformation, if not a perceived decadence.

As changes in Flower Hill unfold at a remarkably rapid pace, children are drawn into labour protests on the front lines, lose their health in an epidemic caused by contaminated drinking water, and fall victim to folk remedies imposed by elderly healers, such as being forbidden to cry or urinate in order to prevent water loss from their bodies. One development that appears to prioritize children emerges with the idea of establishing a school in Flower Hill. Nevertheless, the school building “with two walls of breezeblock and a thin roof” (Tekin 2015: 103) reproduces the provisional nature of the huts that are already “held together with pieces of wire and wood” (Tekin 2015: 85). The idealistic young teacher – later called the “Poet Teacher” – romanticizes life on the garbage hills through his fascination with “the sight of the garbage hills under the evening sun,” his collection of “the songs and games of Flower Hill,” and his decision to establish “a folk-dance group” (Tekin 2015: 103). However, his idealism fails to translate into practical solutions for children's lives. On the contrary, the Poet Teacher contributes to the reproduction of the children's upcycled existence on the garbage hills by adapting the caps worn by boys during circumcision ceremonies for young girls, or by organizing a school performance that includes the Kurdish folk song “Lorke Lorke” alongside Romantic poetry recitations.

As a result, even governmental attempts in Flower Hill to ameliorate children's lives fail to create any sense of completeness, as children wake each day to a reality characterised by in-betweenness, discontinuity, and disharmony. While the Poet Teacher continues to compose idyllic poems that idealize the garbage hills, he is confronted with the harsh reality that Flower Hill is gradually transformed into yet another makeshift industrial zone, populated by sham factories. Toward the end of the narrative, the text rewinds to its very beginning – to the night when the shanties were first erected – thereby circling back as if caught in a vicious cycle. This time, Gypsy migrants join the inhabitants of Flower Hill by constructing their own shanties alongside them. The Gypsy community introduces its own language and songs into the shared linguistic space, while Gypsy children bring with them their own games. In this way, Tekin's narrative takes the form of a spiral that resists the conventional narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end. The entire process of migration and settlement is thus rendered as a consuming and unending phenomenon – one that continually disrupts, scars, and withers everything around it – including childhood itself in all its fragility.

CONCLUSION

In *Berji Kristin*, Tekin constructs a narrative grounded in fragmentation that is both stylistic and thematic. Its genre, language, characterisation, the use of time and space – and even the narrative subject itself – exist as disconnected pieces of a structure that never resolves into a coherent whole. A pervasive sense of incompleteness and unsettlement permeates the text, as the very process of settlement

is repeatedly disrupted by governmental interventions, capitalist exploitation, and losses caused by harsh social and natural conditions, as well as by competing authorities who take advantage of the squatters. Within the universe of *Berji Kristin*, Flower Hill stands at the centre, while people and events orbit around it, frequently scattering and vanishing, unable to achieve self-completion.

Tekin's commemoration of her own childhood memories of squatting intertwined with the local beliefs and stories of her village evolves into an intellectual writer's contemplation of a national and communal experience in Türkiye that unfolds through harm and pain. Tekin's fragmented style, form, and subject matter mirror the makeshift nature of the huts themselves and are further enriched by her utilization of magical realism, which likewise functions through collages of seemingly incompatible objects and ideas. While the text maintains strong ties to squatting as a social reality, magical realism, through its reworking of folklore, local beliefs, and sayings, gives *Berji Kristin* a sense of unworldliness coupled with mystery.

Children, who migrate with their families to the city, become present and responsive in every stage of this process, eventually emerging as discontinuous and disrupted beings. The disruptions that begin in their infancy with the hostility of the wind gradually accelerate as they become an extension of Flower Hill rather than of their families. While their innocence and naivety initially symbolize the hut people's dreams of a better life when they first arrive, children later turn into a site of collective trauma, or into the beginning of a cultural memory through their recursive experiences of diseases, atrocities, and failures. As such, childhood itself comes to the forefront as an emulation of the shanty town itself, which is impoverished, and ready to fragment at the slightest gust of wind, yet strong enough to be rebuilt.

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