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Liminality in Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills*

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Abstract

The concept of liminality, which is primarily an anthropological term, is not new, but in fact it is a neglected area in Turkish literary and cultural studies. The concept of liminality and its potential to open avenues for future studies remains under-researched. As one of the first steps to fill this gap, the anthropological term liminality is used to analyse a literary text as it pertains to the narration of migrant experience, living in between the rural and the urban, and the use of magical realism in Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills* (1984). Tekin's novel is presented as a test case to show the applicability of liminality to the field of literary and cultural studies. Reading Tekin's *Berji Kristin* through the lens of liminality reveals how it can be used to understand Tekin's interest in the problems of liminal communities and her concern for the environment.

Keywords

liminality, magical realism, migrant experience, Latife Tekin, Turkish novel

The word liminality originates from the Latin *limen*, which means boundary or threshold, and is a condition of ambiguity, displacement and marginality. Because liminality as a term is broad, complex and functional, it needs to be clearly defined. The concept of liminality was introduced by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his *Rites des passages* (1908), or *The Rites of Passage* (1960), which analyses the rites of passage in various societies. He uses liminality to describe the transient middle phase between two periods of human life. Almost 60 years later, another anthropologist, Victor Turner, further developed the concept by suggesting that examples of liminality, or a threshold state,

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can be tracked down in initiation rites of not only pre-industrial cultures but modern ones as well.

> Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or 'transition' are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying 'threshold' in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (re-aggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. (Turner, 1969: 94–5)

Of these three phases of any transitivity, due to its ambiguity and instability, the key state is the middle stage, liminality, because 'passengers' in the liminal realize that they transgress and therefore they are free from any boundaries set by their society and/or culture. Liminality is often characterized by ideas of invisibility, absence, wilderness and a fluid identity.

In his article 'Liminal to liminoid', Turner further indicates an affinity between the liminal experiences of tribal communities and modern consumerist societies in that the latter experience moments that he refers to as 'liminoid' where 'creative and productive events unfold' (Turner, 1974: 65). In *Image and Pilgrimage* (Turner and Turner, 1978), Turner introduces the concept of *communitas* which refers to the participants of liminality who hold a homogeneous status and become equal. Transgression and living in liminality can equip the participants with the opportunity of becoming 'neither this nor that and yet both' (Turner, 1967: 99) as well as the chance of being 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner, 1969: 95). Turner thus frees the concept of liminality from its anthropological connotations because he suggests that the liminal could take place at various moments and in various situations in the (post)modern world. As Salvador states, 'for Turner, and this is important for the later developments of the concept, liminality is not a thin line but an expanded zone' (2001: 108). The concept of liminality was easily adopted by scholars, and has been used to explore ambiguous and threshold states in a diverse number of literatures and literary periods.

Influenced by Turner's considerations, Irma Ratiani (2012: 1–17) claims that sociological and anthropological terms and theories can be used in relation to the analysis of literature.[1] An anthropological term like liminality can be used in relation to the analysis of literature because stories of rites of passage provide an interface between anthropology and literary studies. One can highlight the liminality of literature because it performs the function of a transitory phase between destructive reality governed by force and the other-worldly cosmos worked out by imagination. Literary applications of liminality have flourished all around the world since the 1980s. Liminality is a significant term in literary and cultural criticism, and it needs to be defined contextually, since its meaning may change from one textual, cultural and historical setting to another. Although what is implied by liminality is spatial, it is important to note here that liminality is about a process which is constantly dynamic – diachronic as well as synchronic.

Drawing on the terms borrowed from anthropology and cultural philosophy, this study will henceforth focus on the issue of the employment and function of these terms (liminality, liminoid, *communitas*, undecidability, aporia and binary oppositions) within a specific text, the contemporary Turkish work by Latife Tekin, *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills*.[2] The book is regarded as being centred on the notion of the threshold, and its principal theme is the idea of a crossover, a transgression or a creative potentiality of contact with the other in interstitial zones. Liminality in postmodern literature 'displays a creative if not aggressive tension with contemporary common-sense concepts of the "real", the "possible" and the "probable"' (Ruthner, 2012: 37). Therefore, for postmodern literature, the liminal relates to an intermediate position between stable classification, and embodies 'a pure realm of possibility' (Turner, 1967: 97) for hybridity, which undermines and overrules all hierarchies. In that vein, as an example of a postmodern novel from Turkish literature, *Berji Kristin* applies liminality as a position from which to think that the (re)conceptualization of reality, whether internal or external, is a matter of the transgression of boundaries, or an attempt to transcend the binary systems and offer the playfulness of signifiers instead. In this sense it represents 'a betwixt and between' or 'both' and 'neither' world that is ambiguous, intricate and in constant flux. In this respect, *Berji Kristin* seems to offer a reading which is against the grain of the rhetorical binary system, and looks at everything from the threshold.

Liminality in *Berji Kristin*

When Latife Tekin wrote the novel in 1984, it was received with great surprise because it was not like any other novel written in Turkish. Its subject, characters, theme, narrative tone and technique were all new in Turkish literary circles. Up to that time, the Turkish novel had been dominated by the realist tradition or social realism which tends to depict Western reality. It was a fearless attempt from Tekin to explore new ground and to transgress the barriers of fantasy and sexuality. In the introduction to the English translation of her novel, the translator Saliha Paker states that:

> When Latife Tekin's first book, *Dear Cheeky Death* came out in 1983 . . . it was hailed as 'magic'. This term implied a degree of astonishment on the part of the critical establishment: some affinity with Marquezian fiction, yes, but also something unique in the way a Turkish writer was exploiting fantasy which was not a means of escapism but of reconstructing an individual experience that was authentic and indigenous. (Paker, 1993: 9)

Three of Tekin's early novels[3] are usually considered to be texts of magical realism. Yet this is quite a controversial issue because Tekin herself has said in a conversation with Semih Gümüş and Ömer Türkeş that similarities can also be detected between her writing and some African or Indian authors (Tekin, 2011). Regarding Tekin's novel primarily as a work of magical realism is not sufficient to describe the substantiality of her novel because she closely connects different belief systems, traditions and cultures in her works. As Tekin herself cautions readers, it is misleading to read her novel as another example of magical realism and disregard real problems such as ecological insensitivity and discrimination against people living in-between. Her works in general are a

combination of Turkish and Kurdish legends, folk tales, songs, magic spells, elegies, jinn stories, epic tales, fables, tongue twisters and folk poetry written with a musical ear akin to Anatolian oral story-telling traditions.

Berji Kristin is not about a character, but about a community that tries to survive between traditional and modern ways of life in a carnivalesque way. Because of poverty, characters in the novel have to emigrate from the rural parts of Turkey to the outskirt of a modern urban space, which is not explicitly named, and they are condemned to live in a shanty town, built overnight by squatters and demolished by each day by the city authorities. This becomes an endless repetitive struggle between the squatters and the authorities. Living between the rich industrial modern city and the poor artisanal traditional village, the squatters lead a liminal life in a place composed of waste, garbage, refuse and remains.

Aesthetic dimension of liminality

The magical realism of *Berji Kristin* is an aesthetic dimension of liminality which provides the reader with a substantial aspect of magic and a very detailed realistic depiction of real-world problems (poverty, discrimination and ecological issues). The boundaries between the magical and the real world merge into each other and this union constitutes liminality.

That the novel problematizes the idea of rural migration and the encounter of migrants with modernity has already been pointed out by several critics. For instance, Hande Tekdemir claims that the magical realism of *Berji Kristin* allows readers access to a 'community in the peripheries and the traumatic experience of encountering modernity in the metropolis for the migrant population' (Tekdemir, 2011: 41). At this point, I would like to contribute to this dialogue and assert that Tekin's novel is less concerned about peripheries or metropolis/centre than with the slum/shanty town (*gecekondu*[4] in Turkish) that is presented as the liminal. The slum itself, as presented in the novel, becomes a character in its own right. That is to say, the novel mainly focuses on the liminality of a slum situated between the 'peripheral' village and the 'central' metropolis; what is emphasized is the liminality of the slum and its community.

At this point, it is essential to differentiate the liminal from the marginal. First of all, liminality as a concept and theory proves to be more advantageous because it offers a way of going beyond the debate focused on the polarized opposition between the 'centre' and the 'margin'. According to Quance,

> the margin holds a rather closed binary system that confronts center with margin in a sort of blind alley. Unlike margin and marginality, limen and liminality infer an open and plural system, an active dynamism and mediation, a place of transition and transformation. (2000: 8)

The squatters in Tekin's novel are not marginal because they are not in the closed binary system where the margin confronts the centre, and this confrontation is a dead end, a vicious circle. They are the liminal subjects representing an open and plural system, even a possibility of negotiating between the pairs in a binary; in time they comprise features of both rural and urban; they transcend both and theirs is an alternative existence, a

hybrid, liminal, 'third' one. There are several instances which exemplify their liminal rather than marginal personality. In the liminal zone of the slum, centre/city slips into the margin/periphery, and out of the mingling of these two a third, liminal option is born. To illustrate, the transformation of women in Garbage Hill from the beginning to the end of the novel displays an awareness of women in the liminal: the women of Garbage Hill are gradually influenced by the modern and urbanized model of women in the city (the centre) but at the same time they preserve their traditional and rural features, so in the slum a new type of woman is born, reflecting the coexistence of urban and rustic/pastoral in their identity.

As another example of the fact that the liminal is more favourable than the marginal (and even central) in *Berji Kristin*, one can draw attention to the act of recycling and reprocessing urban waste. Touching upon environmental concerns from an eco-critical aspect, by means of the garbage trope, Tekin's novel also deals with the issue of liminality between the binary logic of 'progression' and 'regression'. The squatters' way of living in the slum is simply based on collecting and recycling garbage and waste, which simultaneously makes them experience a sense of belonging to their land. It is maintained in the novel as follows:

> In a moment the old plaster moulds and debris from the china factory turned into walls again . . . Plastic bags and baskets provided roofs for the huts; homes were built part rubble, part moulds, part shards . . . By night hut people had erected mounds from all kinds of materials they had salvaged during the day from the garbage: metal, stone, wood. (Tekin, 1993: 22)

Tekin introduces garbage and waste into literature, and as a reaction to social condemnation she changes or terminates the overdetermined social meanings of this garbage and waste. In the novel, Ergin claims, 'consumed and discarded objects remain in constant circulation, making the new redundant; what is prematurely devalued as garbage is reappointed, transformed and remobilized' (Ergin, 2017: 215), and this demonstrates that representations of garbage and waste in *Berji Kristin*'s liminal zone start to denote not marginal, but more favourable things which have both ecological[5] and socio-political significance. Garbage becomes a liminal epitome which is perceived as a valuable and rich resource for the squatters' survival. The squatters struggle to build homes out of old tin cans, they scavenge for food. Robert Stam maintains that garbage is 'the diasporised, heterotopic site of the promiscuous mingling of rich and poor, center and periphery, the industrial and the artisanal, the domestic and public' (Stam, 2003: 40). In the liminality of the slum, these binary oppositions are rendered empty signifiers, and by means of the acts of salvaging and recycling garbage and waste, the novel underlines the fact that the notions of progress and regress are unfeasible because of the impossibility of 'producing' a new reasonable meaning apart from recycling the old.

Subject dimension of liminality

Tekin's novel puts emphasis on subjectivity by turning frozen identities into fluid subjectivities. The subject dimension of liminality in *Berji Kristin* relates to the community that is described as 'the squatters' in the novel. Following Turner's understanding of liminality

'as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (Turner, 1967: 97), one can assert liminality as a state of in-betweenness and ambiguity that the squatters in the novel can appropriate. The squatters are hybrid subjects occupying a 'third space', to use Bhabha's term (1994: 56). Yet, from the outset, it is important to emphasize that although Turkey lacks a colonial history, some postcolonial terms and ideas are still applicable to investigating its history and literature because Turkey has always been at the crossroads of an important encounter between Western and Eastern cultural identities. Thus Tekin's novel depicts migrants in metropolitan areas who share common experiences with colonized societies without necessarily being postcolonial. The idea of confrontation between the traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban, the past and the present is a transnational fact and experience in our increasingly globalized world.

As stated above, the characters in the novel are migrants 'who left their villages to move in with their families in the city . . . in the hope of building a hut' (Tekin, 1993: 16). Tekin's depiction of the squatters also attracts attention because, unlike her predecessors, she neither marginalizes nor stereotypes them. On the contrary, through the narrative, she manages to portray their lives as their own. The squatters create not only a new life on garbage hills but also a collective and communal existence. Although several characters are introduced in the novel, none of them has their own voice. There is only the voice of the narrator which functions as the communal identity. The narrative voice represents, speaks for and reports all characters and events in the text. Lacking dialogue between characters and perhaps avoiding the very idea of dialogue, the novel (or the implied author) chooses to provide the reader with only the narrator's voice:

> One winter night, on a hill where the huge refuse bins came daily and dumped the city's waste, eight shelters were set up by lantern-light near the garbage heaps . . . By evening Rubbish Road had become a road of bricks and blocks and pitch paper. That night in snowfall and lantern-light a hundred more huts were erected in the snow. (Tekin, 1993: 15–16)

This type of narration identifies and underlines the same idea that attaches priority to the community over the individual in Tekin's novel. Other than these stereotypical characters, the shanty town itself, as mentioned before, becomes a character – maybe the most important one in the novel.

For slum dwellers, emigrating from villages means a kind of self-induced 'separation', in Turner's term (1969: 95). Leaving their villages behind causes a breach, a rupture or a trauma in their lives because they are 'no more' villagers but they are 'not yet' welcome in the city because their separation does not end with a 'reintegration'. Therefore, for slum dwellers the state of 'no more and not yet' (Turner, 1969: 97) is a constant liminal position. Their homes, or world, is continuously torn down and rebuilt. No matter how many times the authorities demolish the shanty town, the squatters, in a Sisyphean manner, keep rebuilding it until the demolishers finally give up and leave. Between the rural and the urban wildernesses, the squatters of the novel have to lead a liminal life trying to survive unemployment, poverty, homelessness, low hygiene standards and racial discrimination. Yet they endure these harsh conditions and survive.

To describe the experiences of Tekin's characters who live in the liminal, we can borrow Turner's concept of *communitas* (Turner and Turner, 1978: 95) because he argues that:

> in this liminal phase of passage, symbols and rituals are applied in order to produce a degree of certainty to face the uncertainty that predominates there. This creates a sense of community for the participants who are traversing the threshold stage together; a *communitas* which is supposed to produce a new collective identity. (Turner and Turner, 1978: 95–6)

The liminal identity of the slum dwellers makes them part of a *communitas*. The randomness and free play of signifiers enable those in the shanty town to find new symbols, rituals, myths and tales which are also prone to a perpetual change and transformation in the fluid, unfixable and ludic world of the liminal. To illustrate: after a very tiresome winter during which the squatters have fought against the demolishers and the strong wind, the following occurred:

> When Flower Hill broke into blossom, the first thing to be erected by daylight was a mosque with a minaret made of tin plate, but the very day the mosque went up the night wind tore it apart and blew it away . . . But in spite of all the searching the minaret was never found. The discussion over the lost minaret lasted for days until finally a decision was reached to build a new one, and as a result of these discussions one more commandment was added to the Five Pillars of Islam, 'Thou shalt hold down the minaret at night.' It was decreed that children, the handicapped, nursing mothers and pregnant women would be excused from holding the minaret, and it would be counted a sin if they did. (Tekin, 1993: 26–7)

As this quotation suggests, the inhabitants come up with new rituals and tales in their slum life and bring about a homogenization of status and a strong sense of community. The Five Pillars of Islam mentioned in the quotation are the basic obligatory deeds of Islam: faith, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca. Adding one more commandment to the Five Pillars of Islam is also proof of the writer's intention to infuse her text with humour: otherwise it would end up as a very dark tale. Everything is experienced as a community and the thoughts and feelings about what they have gone through become the subject of songs, legends and tales throughout the novel.

Language dimension of liminality

In the novel language is one of the most significant tools of creating *communitas* in the liminal. Tekin scrutinizes the language and opens some cracks in it and from these interstices she attaches more meanings to ordinary words. As noted above, the slum dwellers in liminality realize that their world of meanings and references has been decentred and since they have lost their previous signifiers and symbols in the liminal zone, they feel the necessity of inventing signifiers to explain their current world. However, this does not mean attempting to look for new centres, because they understand how the meaning is socially and randomly constructed in logocentric thinking. As an example of a decentred reference or an emptied signifier, the words in the novel's title attract attention: Berji and Kristin. The title is meaningful because the text creates a surprising connection

between naïve village life and corrupt city life through the use of puns and subtle jokes. It is explained by the narrator that 'back in the village the community shepherd girls who used to milk the sheep that grazed out in the summer pastures at night were called "Berji Girls" by the community' (Tekin, 1993: 31). But in the slum girls who pick over more garbage are considered to be worthy of this very same title and called Berji. Kristin is the name given by local people to one of the woman characters in the novel, Crazy Gönül, who works as a prostitute. So, in the free play of signifiers, the slum hosts both Berji and Kristin, the representatives of the 'pure' and the 'decayed'. In other words, in the liminal zone of the slum the novel does not appeal to a distinct separation between the 'saved' and the 'damned'. In fact, both signifiers stop conveying any meaning in the metaphorical language system of the novel. The language which is turned into rumour in the novel underlines the fact that language is impotent and powerless to represent the shanty town.

Like the hybrid liminal identities of the squatters, their language is a hybrid and liminal language. The use of language in the novel underlines the liminality of the characters. In other words, Tekin, through her postmodernist use of language, both problematizes and challenges the embodiment of the unified subject as she replaces it with alternative voices. Tekin's novel can be considered experimental because of the way she uses language. The novel destabilizes and subverts the long-standing functions of language as a tool for expression and communication. Being aware of the fact that language ceases to convey meaning, she exploits the potential of both language and extra-lingual means of communication in the manner of several writers of *écriture-féminine*.

Deprived people or, in Tekin's words, *yoksullar*, literally refers to those who lack. Yet here the idea of lack is not a reason to complain or grieve. On the contrary, lack is celebrated in Tekin's novel because it is regarded as the lack of control or a way to be free in the phallogocentric 'Symbolic Order' in Lacanian terms (1988: 29). As Helene Cixous claims,

> a feminine practice of writing . . . will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Cixous et al., 1976: 883)

Thus Tekin's language bears a resemblance to *écriture-féminine* in that it is circular, poetic, magical, liminal, rebellious and chaotic. Language in the novel is not wholly a language repressed by the symbolic language but it is semiotic or un-representational; it sometimes consists of mumbling, a rumour, or just sounds (see Gürbilek, 1998; Altuğ, 2010). But it is never silent. Playing with language, Tekin participates in constructing a women's language which liberates her characters (deprived people) from all sorts of oppression.

Situated between the officially recognized forms of communication (like linear and authoritative language as an epitome of the centre) and forms of extra-lingual communication (like mumbling belonging to those marginalized in peripheries), the slum dwellers use a hybrid way of communicating, a mixture of or an interface between language and silence that is exemplified by the idea of mumbling and rumour in the novel. The rumour

as another dimension of liminality – an alternative to language and silence – provides a sense of voice and communication for the slum dwellers and hence helps the squatters form a community. The indefinite and nebulous rumour flies across the pages of the novel circulating news about the community of Flower Hill. John Berger explains the importance of the rumour in the preface to the English translation of Tekin's novel as follows:

> Rumor is born of the irrepressible force of a community's imagination deprived of shelter or any guarantees. And Latife Tekin has found here the voice of rumor. I don't know how she found that shanty voice. But it came to her like genius. There are comparable pages by Joyce where he found the male voice of drunken rumor. Tekin's rumor is feminine and sober. (Berger, 1993: 8)

Rumour is significant in the novel in that it represents the dissolved self in the novel as an example of contemporary literature. As proposed by Jacques Derrida (1979, 1981) and Roland Barthes (2000), the self is split into multiple positions and voices in the post-Freudian and post-Nietzschean world.

Apart from the uncontrollable rumour, there are other sounds in the novel as an alternative form of communication. In fact, following the oral tradition, Tekin's text is filled with several sounds, and for the reader the experience of reading is transformed into an audial experience, as it were. As if listening to a series of fairy tales told by a *meddah*,[6] the reader hears the tales of *Keloğlan, Beybörek*, djinns, and fairies from Turkish folklore, the screams of seagulls, roaring and whistling of the wind, the sounds and cries of the squatters, the noise of factories and construction machinery. These sounds which undermine the binary logic between language and silence open a new dimension in the text where other (liminal) modes of communication can be possible not only between the characters but also between the reader and the text.

Conclusion

Reading Latife Tekin's *Berji Kristin* through the lens of the anthropological term liminality reveals how it can be used to understand Tekin's interest in enunciating the problems of liminal communities and in expressing her concern for the environment. The migrant culture presented in the novel is portrayed as surviving and flourishing on the threshold between urban and rural, which are reflected as epitomes of the centre and the margin or the real and the magical. Between these hierarchies, Tekin's novel introduces the liminal that is represented by the shanty town. Overturning these binaries, the shanty town both deconstructs and reformulates the relation between the centre and the margin. Due to its centreless or free structure and content, the novel lends itself to a reading of the liminality as a term in literary studies. The form of the novel is based on a liminal mode of the postmodern novel, namely magical realism.

The main idea foregrounded in the novel is highly political in that it is an attempt to warn the reader against totalitarian regimes and ecological threats. However, the novel offers hope at the end because both the continuous reconstruction of the huts in the shanty town and the lack of a definite ending serve as two metaphors for creativity,

productivity and transformation. Everything drifts in the whirlpool of *Berji Kristin*'s liminal reality and leads to many possibilities but not a conclusion.

Notes

1 See Kaya (2014) for an introductory study of liminality in Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's works.
2 Tekin (1993 [1983]). Throughout this study, all references to Tekin's novel are taken from the translation.
3 *Dear Shameless Death* (1983), *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills* (1984) and *Swords of Ice* (1989).
4 In Turkish, *gecekondu* refers to a squatters' house 'set up in a hurry at night'. Throughout this article, 'slum' and 'shanty town' will be used interchangeably to refer to a Turkish *gecekondu* neighbourhood.
5 Due to its environmental sensibilities, one can also use an eco-critical reading of the book. Because this study specifically analyses the liminality, I leave that for another time.
6 Eulogist or imitator in Turkish.

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