

Ragged Men on the Move: Poverty, Inertia and Friendship in Latife Tekin's *Swords of Ice*

(1989/tr.2007)

**Abstract:** Latife Tekin's *Swords of Ice* (1989/tr.2007) depicts the lives of Halilhan and his best friend Gogi, "ragged men" from Istanbul's "outer most belt" (18). Smart, spiritual, and naïve, Gogi tries to help Halilhan, although Halilhan tricks his brothers and misuses company funds to buy a second-hand red Volvo. While the Volvo is the *techné* for upward mobility, power and status, Halilhan recognizes that his well-tuned friendship with Gogi is vital to escape the poverty that their neighborhood imposes. This paper analyzes the friendship between Gogi and Halilhan, as they mark a fragile transgression of territorial boundaries, class norms, and socio-political values.

The history of the Turkish novel is the history of entanglements between East and West, modernity and tradition, spiritualism and realism. The newly formed Republic's insistence on molding a Western, modern and "civilized" nation with a forceful detachment from religion and spirituality created a precarious ground for Turkish literature, which has been characterized and analyzed solely through a study of influences and charges of imitation (Seyhan 15). Considering this history of entanglements, Latife Tekin radically separates herself from the two predominant styles of the modern Turkish novel: the realist tradition or social realism, which was criticized many times for imitating the Western traditions, and the village novel that tackles the struggles of Anatolian villagers (see Moran 2017). Tekin's writing inaugurates a completely new genre for Turkish literature where the lines between Western and Eastern traditions are blurred through the representations of shanty towns in the metropolis, migrant villagers in urban settings, and magical realism. Before Tekin's writing, the shanty towns or *gecekondus* (literal meaning in Turkish: built

overnight) never entered the literary space as an entity of their own (Altuğ 82). They would serve as background props or decorations of the big city.

Throughout her *oeuvre*, Tekin, who grew up in poverty in Istanbul, delves into the omitted residents of the *gecekondus*, or as she terms it, the class of “ragged men.” *Swords of Ice* illustrates the liminal life between the elite and modern center and poverty-driven periphery of the city. The novel follows the lives of two best friends, Halilhan and Gogi. Smart, spiritual, and naïve, Gogi tries to help Halilhan become “one of the men who controls the country’s economy” by founding a company (18). Conversely, Halilhan tricks his brothers, cheats on his wife, and misuses company funds to buy a second-hand red Volvo. The self-obsessed, Halilhan recognizes that his well-tuned friendship with Gogi is vital to escape the poverty that the slum community living imposes. This paper argues that their friendship marks a fragile transgression of geographical, generational, economic, and political boundaries.

Latife Tekin, born in 1957 in a small village of Kayseri, is one of seven children of a mother of Kurdish Arabic roots and a father who was a migrant worker in Istanbul.<sup>1</sup> She describes her childhood home as a multilingual environment adorned with Kurdish and Arabic songs, idioms, stories of djinns, magic spells and folkloric tales. Turkey was, and remains, an unevenly developed country; however, it was the military coup of 1980 that marked the culmination of the neoliberalization in Turkey, which pushed village and small-town residents into the city due to unemployment and economic disruption, putting an end to any potential improvement of the cultural, intellectual, and financial capital in rural areas (Glassford & Kara 465). The migration from village to city is not only a cultural shock for the rural migrants, but also an excruciating

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<sup>1</sup> All autobiographical information in this paragraph is taken from Özer’s collection of interviews with Tekin.

experience of alienation, loneliness, and poverty, as Tekin's biography also shows. After the transition to the city, her father gradually falls into unemployment, while her three brothers work on construction sites. As the only child who received higher education in the family, Tekin "instinctively" chooses to "write with the language spoken in her home" which is the broken and improper Turkish of rural immigrants adorned with folktales and magical stories (Özer 35-36). As a designated insider into the lives of the underprivileged, Tekin feels the urge to narrate the difference between the language of the city and language of rural migrants, and hence, become "the representative of destitute people in literature" (Ayhan 59).

However, with *Swords of Ice*, Tekin transforms her literary practice and chooses to consider herself as a translator, rather than a writer. She states,

I find it more meaningful to think of myself as one who interprets, who translates the... 'tongueless' world of the dispossessed into the language of this world. (Tekin qtd. in Paker 147)

In *Swords of Ice* Tekin develops a narrative strategy using what she calls "stolen words," which are technical and financial terms that are used in improper ways and contexts. These fabricated words serve to emphasize how the people of the slum are denied access to the cultural and financial capital in order to grasp the language of the people "who control the economy" (Tekin, *Swords of Ice* 18). Thus, the dispossessed occupy this liminal space in between the magic of the slums and the reality of the struggle to earn money and prestige from the ruling class of Istanbul. By creating a unique writing style in *Swords of Ice*, Tekin transgresses the rules of hierarchy within literature. While literature as a highly gatekept space of aesthetic creation tries to eliminate the *gecekondus* from its central focus due to their so-called baseness and lack of cultural capital, as a translator

Tekin takes on the task of resistance by displacing the central language, and by extension, allowing the symbolic Other to materialize in this aesthetic space.

According to Hilal Durmus, Saliha Paker’s translation of *Swords of Ice* is one of the key factors that shapes Tekin’s changing authorial image (684). These stolen words in the source language pose a challenge when translating into other languages, and therefore, the novel resists to yield a convenient absorption into the global circulation of cultural products. Then, the English translation deserves a closer attention in order to understand Tekin’s task as a translator. The stolen words, colorful cultural idioms, and Turkified versions of foreign words are presented in italics in the translation, while the source text does not offer such a stylistic choice. I claim that as these stolen words are simply made up or they enter the Turkish language mostly as a result of westernization efforts (listed below), the source reader is simply assumed to recognize their foreignness. The target reader, on the other hand, is in need of guidance throughout the translation. Paker states that the decision to italicize these stolen words “were guided by an intention to foreground ‘difference,’” to render the translation more accessible (157-158). Based on this translation strategy, Durmus claims that Paker’s cues of contextualization reaffirms Tekin’s changing authorial image, while showing “how poverty and marginalization force the urban subalterns to invent a new language in their struggle with impenetrable barriers that prevent them from gaining agency and control in the outside world” (693).

<b>Target Text</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>imajinasyon</i>	imagination
Ekonomik model	economic model
enteresan	interesting
Kalite	Quality

Teknoloji	Technology
Kültür	culture

In “On the Use of Foreign Words,” Adorno explains that we should defend the “unyielding foreign words,” because they affirm our modern and reified society. Our distance to the foreign word engenders the potential to express the modern condition of alienation. However, the defense of the foreign word is not just for the present potential of the expression, but Adorno imagines that the foreign words might “explode” our imprisonment in the future. In the light of Adorno’s essay, Tekin’s “stolen words” throughout the novel signify the alienation of the “ragged men” who are disenfranchised financially and culturally. Instead of helping the “ragged men” form their own language, Tekin forces her characters to use Turkified versions of foreign words improperly as seen in the table above. The alienation marked in the language is also a symbolism of the ragged men’s social alienation within the metropolitan cityscape. Then, the words in italics present guidance for the target reader, indicating how the characters are trying to pierce through their disenfranchisement and alienation. Additionally, the difference that Tekin foregrounds in the source text is carried to the global literary sphere with Paker’s English translation, indicating a translation process of two-layers. This two-layered process not only puts forward the contrast between the city and the country, but also between the West and the East, the global and the local. That’s why, *Swords of Ice* resists the cultural flattening and homogenization of multivocality in its existence.

The novel tackles the disenfranchisement and alienation of ragged men through the focus of Halilhan and Gogi. Halilhan is presented as a newly emerging neoliberal and self-centered subject with his reckless attitude. Obsessed with himself, Halilhan uses the company money to buy

a second-hand Volvo. This second-hand red Volvo is just as askew as the language the “ragged” men speak: patchy and unfit for the metropolitan life “with rusty holes on every side...virtually collapsed” (Tekin 18). Nonetheless, Halilhan “transforms his sense of dispossession into the substance of a car...set[ing] him visibly apart from his fellow men in the neighborhood” (16). So, the Volvo serves as a semiprivate space, much like a friendship, which signifies a potential for upward mobility, power and status (Parla 545). In addition to the cosmopolitan and elite feeling of the car, Halilhan becomes mobile thanks to his car. Throughout the novel, he is mostly portrayed in the car, driving without a clear destination. He travels in and out of spaces of power and status fluidly, such as the night club. Parla analyzes the effect of Volvo on Halilhan, through the car, “he will share something with the inhabitants of that city which he watches from afar, from the outskirts where his bidonville is located; he will own the highest status symbol in his community; he will be Westernized” (545).

Although the Volvo gives Halilhan a sense of mobility and blurs the borders between slums and the city, he realizes that his permanent success is tied to his friendship with Gogi (84). Not only because Gogi is the only person who reminds Halilhan of his humanity outside of the neoliberal regime, but also because Gogi is smart and personable. For example, he manages to convince Halilhan’s family, who hate each other and don’t trust Halilhan, to go into business with Halilhan again (43). While Halilhan is moving fluidly from the peripheries to the city centre, he never really belonging anywhere. Gogi’s nature, on the other hand, is defined by confinement and inertia. His presence in the novel is always depicted through confined spaces, such as his home which is adorned with symbols of eternal stillness, ancient gravestones (43). He has to even spend three days in solitary confinement because Halilhan spends all the company money from their investor. Because of his time in jail, Gogi’s marriage prospects are ruined, along with his only

chance of achieving a social status upgrade through matrimony. At the end of the novel, their friendship is terminated symbolically because the isolation of their friendship comes to an end when Gogi becomes friends with Halilhan's brother, Mesut.

It is interesting that throughout the novel, the friendship of Gogi and Halilhan holds great potential to transgress boundaries and save them from their poverty; and yet, they end up where the readers found them in the beginning of the novel: in poverty, confinement, and shanty towns. After Halilhan's tricks and recklessness, Gogi completely closes himself to this friendship. He dedicates himself to a spiritual project where he tries to invent a box that can collect *enerji* (meaning energy mass). Halilhan, on the other hand, drives away into the city in his Volvo after the loss of his friend. Their friendship, just like their characters, is parodied, indicating the downfall even from the start, because neither Halilhan will become a truly neoliberal privileged citizen of the Western Turkish Republic, nor Gogi will transform into a well-known spiritual and intellectual person. Tekin demonstrates, with every page of the novel, that any aspiration or dream that ragged men have cannot be manifested or acquired through the objects of the neoliberal machine. Even their language is marked as "stolen" indicating that the unbelonging, displacement of identity and vernacular.

In my analysis of the failure of friendship and its connection to the larger political environment at the time, Meltem Gürle's very influential analysis of the Turkish hero proves to be valuable. She states that the Turkish citizen, and Turkish novelistic hero alike, "cannot situate themselves in the project of modernism" because of the complete erasure of any spiritualism from the collective memory; however, "[n]either can they totally reject the regime" as the regime possesses their existence like a "father-state" (98). "The outside world, therefore, becomes not only hostile but also equally desirable"; and therefore, "the Turkish formation story almost never

closes with a transformation that offers reconciliation between the individual and society” (ibid.). Gürle’s analysis of the Turkish hero relates to Gogi and Halilhan’s failure of friendship as well, as they cannot come to terms with their position in society nor can they transform themselves and their friendship into productive parts in neoliberal system. As the title indicates, Tekin’s heroes are forced to fight poverty, slums, and alienation with swords of ice, left defeated and hopeless as their swords dissolve under the sun. Then, their transformation is as unrealistic as their escape from poverty by using stolen words and second-hand Volvos. Just like the italics in the translation, their friendship once again foregrounds their eternal difference from the elite in metropole.

In conclusion, Latife Tekin as the translator of the dispossessed draws her readers attention to the oppressive structures that are consciously built around the shanty town dwellers. The ragged men, as they are rendered invisible in the aftermath of 1980s coup, struggle to find the balance between their dreams, which are imposed by the Westernization project of the Turkish republic, and their lived experience of the poverty and disenfranchisement that this neoliberal project brings. While Tekin renders the “ragged men” visible to the readers who watch them from afar, she rejects any improvement on the “ragged men’s” life.

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