



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

'Non-Istanbulites' of Istanbul : the right to the city novels in Turkish literature from the 1960s to the present

Cengiz, N.B.

Citation

Cengiz, N. B. (2017, June 13). 'Non-Istanbulites' of Istanbul : the right to the city novels in Turkish literature from the 1960s to the present. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/49670>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/49670>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/49670> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Cengiz, N.B.

Title: 'Non-Istanbulites' of Istanbul : the right to the city novels in Turkish literature from the 1960s to the present

Issue Date: 2017-06-13

CHAPTER 10

Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills and Heavy Roman(i): A comparative analysis

Both *Hills* (1984) and *Roman(i)* (1990) are books based on an insider's perspective. They can be regarded as examples of the second phase of the Istanbul novels with immigrant characters, where either the first or the second-generation immigrant author writes about life in Istanbul as experienced by immigrants and their families. Temizyürek lists Tekin's works among the most significant novels dealing with first generation immigrants, while he refers to *Roman(i)* "as an example of the output of the second generation"³⁴⁹ (17). As discussed in the analyses of the novels, both in *Hills* and *Roman(i)* the autobiographical aspect is very much to the forefront, and critics as well as readers have been very much interested in this dimension in their reception of the novel.

In terms of their novelistic form, the two novels are extremely different. *Hills* is a highly experimental novel with an episodic structure, while *Roman(i)* has a simple and linear structure. The narration is unique in both novels in a similar way to each other. In *Hills*, the use of words from dialects by the narrator and in *Roman(i)* the use of slang by the narrator have the same effect: the narrator sounds like an insider, someone from the community she/he describes. Thus the insider approach is not only in the content but also in the form of the novels.

In *Hills*, the Hill folk, by some extraordinary alchemy, turn concepts of urban culture into a language of their own in their magical universe. Urban elements enter Flower Hill in a distorted form, as if in a phantasmagoria. It is mainly a rural culture in a semi-rural and semi-urban, amorphous setting, which could only be possible in a magic realist novel like this one. On the other hand, in *Roman(i)* slang, which is an urban phenomenon, is at the centre of the novel. At certain moments, through the main character's mother's beliefs and traditions, references to rural oral culture appear in its contents, but it has a minor place in the novel. The face of *Roman(i)* is turned to urban culture, while the face of *Hills* is turned to rural culture and its transformation in the city.

10.1 Characters and Related Themes

The community in Flower Hill are all first generation immigrants, while in Kolera, many of the characters, including the central character Gili, were born in Istanbul as the children of immigrants. Additionally, while in Flower Hill the Hill folk are immigrants who

³⁴⁹"ikinci kuşağın edebiyatının bir örneği . . . "

have very recently arrived in the city, the first generation immigrants who live in Kolera, such as Ali, have been in Istanbul for a long while. In addition to this, while Flower Hill is a closed circuit isolated from the rest of the city, Kolera is located in the centre of the city. This difference also has an impact on the characters' process of adopting an urban identity.

The Hill folk are portrayed in complete perplexity in *Hills*, completely unfamiliar with the life going on around them as if they have been dropped off from another planet by a spacecraft. They try to make sense of a union, a strike, the way men and women socialise on the picket line, protests and many other things. In contrast with that, the people of Kolera, apart from the housewives who spend their lives indoors, the peasants and bigots, feel at home in the city.

In *Hills*, which does not focus on a specific character, it is not possible to observe a character's dynamics as regards the urban identity, while in *Roman(i)* the urban identity of being a Kolerite is central to Gili's and Reco's characterisations. The urban identity of being a Kolerite as presented by Gili is somewhat nihilistic, very different from the urban identity signalled by Orhan Kemal. Gili commits suicide in the end and his father starts drug dealing to finance a new life in a rich neighbourhood. On the other hand, where Reco is concerned, the Kolerite identity is not equated with nihilism and an edgy life style, and quite in line with Orhan Kemal's ideal. Reco, as a Kolerite, taking full benefit from living in the city centre, meets people from different parts of Istanbul with different lifestyles, thus gets involved with culture and the arts and leftist politics. However, as he does this, he leaves Kolera. After a while, he comes back to his neighbourhood, and opens a cartoon library there as if showing youngsters there an alternative to killing time in the *bitirimhane*. The novel is ambivalent in its message about Reco. Does he keep his Kolerite identity, and enlarge it in the way it includes his new lifestyle and interests? Or does he simply replace his Kolerite identity with another sort of urban identity? Once he moves out, he no longer belongs to Kolera in the way he used to do in the past, the novel makes this clear. Still, this does not mean that he is punished because he left the place, nor is he depicted as a sell-out. At the end of the novel, Reco is the only character in the family who does not have a tragic ending. The reader is not told about his ending, it might as well be a positive one, a fact that brings a spark of hope to the novel.

At this point it might be meaningful to make a few comparisons between the two novels as regards the politicised atmosphere of the late 1970s and class struggle. In *Roman(i)*, Kolerites who are labourers have high visibility. They are not workers in factories, they are apprentices who are implied to be working informally. In *Hills*, the Hill folk are not depicted

as labourers, they are mostly unemployed, picking over the garbage to survive. In this sense, the people of Kolera are much closer to being part of the proletariat than the Hill folk. Both novels seem to be set a short while before the 12th of September coup, and the discourse of the radical left groups, with a vocabulary loaded with Marxist terms about class relations, appears as a comic element in both of them. While in *Hills* this motif is developed deeply as a criticism of the left for not being able to find a language in common with immigrants, in *Roman(i)* it appears only once with a humorous effect, when some teenagers in Kolera get completely lost as they are listening to a couple of radicals speaking passionately about capitalist exploitation (62). However, in *Roman(i)* not all the Kolerite people get confused about the radical left discourse. As the political polarisation of the country is experienced in the neighbourhood, some Kolerites, such as Gili's father, have sympathy for the left. On the other hand, the Flower Hill folk have a much more problematic relationship with the left, as discussed in the analysis chapter in detail. The ways these themes appear in the two novels emphasise their distinct messages in terms of the possibilities of an urban identity for immigrants.

In *Roman(i)* there are strong women, "heavy senior sisters" whose existence emphasises the urban culture in Kolera. In *Hills* there are no such women, apart from one, Tirintaz Fidan. In fact, Tirintaz Fidan in *Hills* and Puma Zehra in *Roman(i)* are very similar to each other, as both of them at one point feel a responsibility to educate the women of their neighbourhood. However, at the end of their duty, the women they inspire face quite opposite destinies: the women of Flower Hill who get enlightened by the teachings of Fidan get beaten by their husbands when they claim certain rights, while the women of Kolera following Zehra as their guru start to be treated equally to the men in some respects. Of course, this is a small group of Kolerite women, but still the way the theme gets developed is once again an emphasis on the strength of an urban perception in Kolera, as the results are rather different from the results of a similar incident in Flower Hill.

10.2. Setting and Related Themes

In both novels, the neighbourhood the novel is set in appears like the protagonist of the novel: Flower Hill in *Hills* and Kolera in *Roman(i)*. Belge, in his comment included in the analysis chapter above, stresses that Flower Hill appears like the protagonist in the novel ("Sevgili Arsız" 224). Similarly, Ecevit underscores that Kolera is created in *Roman(i)* "almost like an organic being which breathes"³⁵⁰ ("Metin Kaçan'dan" 215). In both novels,

³⁵⁰ "neredeysse soluk alıp veren organik bir canlı gibi"

events happening in the neighbourhood appear like phases the neighbourhood goes through akin to stages of character development. After each important development in the neighbourhood, the place seems to become more experienced, like a novelistic hero. Therefore, the way the neighbourhood develops and changes is a central issue, just like that of a character, in these two novels. In *Hills*, this becomes more striking since the reader follows Flower Hill from the day of the first shanties until the day it falls from grace, like the story of a character from the day of her birth until the time of her death. Additionally, the fact that in *Hills* there is no hero, no person as a central character, enforces Flower Hill's position as the protagonist of the novel; while in *Roman(i)* despite Kolera's significance in the novel, Gili is the protagonist. Additionally, unlike *Hills*, in *Roman(i)* the story of Kolera's development is not included: the reader is introduced to a 'mature' neighbourhood. Therefore, such a statement as that the role of the setting constitutes the main character of the novel is more valid for *Hills* than *Roman(i)*.

It can be useful to remember that both Flower Hill and Kolera are fictional places inspired by actually existing neighbourhoods. However, in *Roman(i)*, the inspiration of Dolapdere in the creation of the fictional Kolera is much more direct and explicit than the case of Flower Hill in *Hills*. Although both Flower Hill and Kolera are neighbourhoods where immigrants and poor people live, they have significant differences from each other. Flower Hill is a shantytown on the periphery of the city, while Kolera is a poor neighbourhood in the city centre. The lifestyles experienced in the two places are almost entirely different. In Flower Hill, the Hill folk are isolated from the city centre and its urban atmosphere, where people from different walks of life come across each other. On the other hand, in Kolera the cosmopolitan heritage is a very central aspect of the life in the neighbourhood, and people from different religions and backgrounds live together there. Furthermore, the people of Kolera have a very close connection with Beyoğlu, the heart of culture and the arts, as well as the night-life of the city. Put simply, a significant portion of the Kolera people have adopted urban identities, with their lifestyles and perceptions, while in Flower Hill this is not the case at all. The Hill folk have yet to start their process of urbanisation. These central differences constitute the basis for the dissimilar elaboration of the idea of the right to the city in the two novels as discussed below.

Firstly, in both novels, there is a fight for place. In *Hills*, this theme is filtered through the right to housing: Flower Hill's people fight against the forces of the state, i.e. demolishers, to stay in their shanties, therefore to stay and live in the city. In *Roman(i)* there is a fight for place, too. This one is the fight of the good people of Kolera against the mafia who try to rule

the neighbourhood. In the former, the people of Flower Hill are deprived of the minimum physical conditions to survive in the city. In the latter, the people of Kolera had long before reached these minimum standards, some of them poor, some of them better off, they all have a roof over their head and earn enough to stand on their own two feet. Their existence in the city is not limited to being able to survive there, it is much more than that. Through Gili's life and inner world, the novel illustrates a way of being in the city which is close to what Lefebvre describes as "to inhabit", that is "to take part in social life" (76). Gili perceives his neighbourhood, therefore the whole of Istanbul, as the city as oeuvre, the central concept from Lefebvre as discussed earlier, as something created by all its inhabitants. His admiration of old buildings is a wonderful example of this perception, as discussed in the analysis of the novel. On the other hand, in *Hills* the city is not a place inhabited by the Hill folk, they simply try to stay alive there; a deeper connection with the city is not yet on the horizon. The absence of a central character in *Hills*, such as Gili in *Roman(i)*, reinforces this message of the novel. The city is not a place yet where immigrants can develop their identities in the way the anonymity of the urban context requires. They live as a community, as in the rural context. With this choice of not creating individual characters, the novel seems to imply the reciprocity between individuality and urban identity. Put simply, in *Hills* being part of a community, a trait of the rural context, is dominant, as opposed to the individuality of the urban context. On the other hand, in *Roman(i)*, the individual aspect, presented through Gili's story of growing up, is very much at the centre of the novel.

10.3 Additional Points

The two novels have differences that are noteworthy as regards their depictions of the otherised people of the country. In *Roman(i)*, the Roma appear with their positive and negative traits, while in *Hills* their image is closer to negative. When it comes to the non-Muslim minority, *Roman(i)*, with its characters, story and narration praises, without nostalgia, the non-Muslim minority of Istanbul as a central aspect of the cosmopolitan fabric of Istanbul. On the other hand, in *Hills*, the non-Muslim minority is presented in only one character in the novel: Mr. Izak, who is most probably Jewish, is depicted as a greedy factory owner. There is no reference to Alevites in *Roman(i)* while in *Hills*, as discussed in the analysis chapter in detail, the narrator's choice of words about Alevites does not represent a positive approach. Regarding the way crimes such as drugs and prostitution enter the novels, the two novels are again quite dissimilar. While in *Hills*, the people involved in them are solely symbols of

degeneration, *Roman(i)* refrains from depicting such people as a homogenous category and presents both bad and good characters involved with drugs and prostitution.

10.4 Conclusion

The differences in the approaches of the novels to the possibilities of urbanity are in line with the way the idea of the right to the city is developed. In *Hills*, immigrants who are trying to figure out the urban context are fighting for the material necessities in terms of the right to the city. While in *Roman(i)*, the right to the city is perceived in terms of the right to inhabit the city, to experience the city as oeuvre.

In conclusion, the two novels are similar in their use of an authentic language by the narrator, therefore abolishing a hierarchy between an urban narrator and immigrant characters. However, in terms of the messages they give about the process of adopting an urban identity and the struggle for the right to the city they are rather different from each other.