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

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CHAPTER 13

On the Periphery and It Takes All Kinds: A Comparative Analysis

On the Periphery and *It Takes All Kinds* have periphery at their centre: as a theme and as a setting. Therefore, themes of alienation and isolation are central to both novels. However, in terms of plot as well as style and other formal characteristics, the two novels are considerably different. *Periphery* is a totally serious and rather grim novel, while *Kinds* is highly humorous and light-hearted. The former does not have a plot in the usual sense of the word, as it focuses on states of mind rather than events, while the latter has a plot, with well-defined central and kernel events, developed in a non-linear structure with flashbacks and digressions. In *Periphery*, the narration is almost transparent, creating a feeling as if the main character is talking about his own experiences in the third-person narration. There is neither an outsider's empathy, nor prejudice in this narration. On the other hand, *Kinds* introduces the perspectives of all the central characters, and the narrator also has a distinct presence throughout the novel. Yet the perspectives of the sisters, Zümrüt and Elmas, come to the fore, leaving a female mark on the novel. Life is not easy for these women, more difficult than it is for their men, since they carry their men on their shoulders. With elaborate realism, the novel opens a gate on life on the periphery as a closed circuit, primarily through the eyes of women.

13.1 Characters and Related Themes

The two novels take the life of first and/or second generation immigrants on the periphery of Istanbul as their subject matter in disparate ways, both in content and form. *Periphery* is a novel dominated by the perspective of the main character. This is a man, probably an intellectual, who comes from an immigrant family. He is a loner and he feels estranged from his family and relatives. He feels alienated in the city, which seems to him like a jungle. The reason for his alienation does not have anything to do with his background of coming from an immigrant family. He belongs to the centre as much as he belongs to the periphery, or better put he lacks a belonging to the centre as much as he lacks one to the periphery. The novel makes the readers see the city from his perspective, as a claustrophobic place, not only for immigrants and poor people but for everybody. It is an over-crowded, chaotic city, where the ultra-fast rhythm of life drives people wild.

A comparison between the class positions of the people in the two novels leads to an insight into the mechanisms of isolation and exclusion in these two versions of periphery. In *Periphery*, periphery is not equated with isolation. İncirköy and various other working-class neighbourhoods on the same railway route, seem to be connected with each other and with the

city since the people living in them are an active part of the labour-force, they produce for the city. In other words, the city needs them, and they are a part of it. On the other hand, in a place such as Kozluk, the labour potential is redundant and this results in the isolation of the place and its people. For the most part, Kozluk and its people are not needed by the city, therefore they cannot connect with the city, since they have no role in it. The men find odd jobs in the vicinity, the women go to houses in the gated communities nearby as daily cleaners and that's all. Additionally, physical location intensifies this situation: Kazlıçeşme, the model for İncirköy, is around ten kilometres from the central areas of the city such as Taksim or Beşiktaş, but Kozluk is implied to be much further out than that. Kozluk seems to be a representation of neighbourhoods near Hadımköy, which is forty-four kilometres from Taksim, and can best be described as the periphery of the periphery. When immigrants are far from their right to work in the urban context, the scale of isolation and exclusion is much greater.

The approaches of the two novels to the theme of urban identity is disparate. While in *Periphery*, immigrants mostly appear as members of the working class, in *Kinds* they are depicted as lumpen proletariat. While both Kozluk and İncirköy represent ex-shantytowns of Istanbul, where shanties were replaced with apartment buildings, mostly in the 1980s, they have significant differences. İncirköy, one of the primary locations of the setting in *Periphery*, is an old working-class neighbourhood mostly inhabited by workers who have been employed in the factories of Taşlıbağ. Eventually, these factories get removed from this area, but this does not change the identity of İncirköy as a working-class neighbourhood. In other words, the majority of İncirköy's population comprises immigrants who have managed to establish a life in Istanbul with steady jobs as labourers in the formal sector. Kozluk, the setting of *Kinds*, on the other hand, is mostly inhabited by people who can only find opportunities to work in the informal sector. At one point in the novel, it is mentioned that there is only one woman in Kozluk who has a “documented⁴⁹¹” (245) job which means a job with social security. Kozluk men are usually unemployed, and when they have jobs these are mostly informal and flexible. Simply put, İncirköy is a neighbourhood of the proletariat, while Kozluk's community is mainly lumpen-proletariat. The norm for İncirköy people is working hard, and, idlers, like İis, are a deviation from this norm; while the norm for Kozluk is a permanent unemployment, thus idlers are almost standard. This difference between the profiles of the two neighbourhoods' communities also lays the basis for the way the issue of crime appears

⁴⁹¹ “kağıtlı”

in the two novels. In both novels, idlers are portrayed as having a tendency to crime, mainly petty crime. In *Periphery*, this theme is briefly touched on in the story of İ̇s, whose crime, details of which are never given, does not seem to have any connection with any gang, either inside or outside of the neighbourhood. It does not seem to have any connection with the place he lives in either, rather it appears as an outcome of his eccentricity. In *Kinds*, crime has a quite central place in the story, since Cořkun, one of the main characters, has recently been let out of prison. His closest friends are also involved in petty crime. What is implied here is a tendency amongst the youngsters of Kozluk for forming gang-like groups, as there are many young people there with no jobs, no hopes for the future and no role models in life.

In *Periphery*, the gender aspect of immigration is not elaborated as an explicit theme. The novel simply hints that women's lives do not change much with the shift from the rural to the urban context. In *Kinds*, women's obsession with consumerism is depicted as the only way, to their mind, of adopting an urban identity.

13.2 Setting and Related Themes

In *Periphery*, near İ̇ncirköy there is Bakırkule, inspired by Bakırköy, an important centre of social and cultural life, while in *Kinds* there is no such urban centre for the people of Kozluk, where they can easily go without spending a lot of time and money. When the two novels are read comparatively, the relativity of the concept of periphery invites attention. Periphery as a location and periphery life can have significant differences, depending on one's standpoint. In *Periphery*, there are various references to the Byzantine and Greek past of Kazlıçeřme, the model for İ̇ncirköy. With a rich history and the legacy of a cosmopolitan heritage, this is a place with an identity. Therefore, although it is a periphery neighbourhood, it is a constituent of the identity of the city. On the other hand, Kozluk, inspired by ex-shantytowns nobody except for their dwellers know about, does not have a history and therefore an identity that can connect it with the history and identity of the city. This is another central factor in its isolation.

Despite that, the similarities of life in the settings of the two novels, as regards the unimplemented right to the city are significant. In both novels, limited access to municipal services comes to the fore as an important theme. Related to that, water and electricity cuts, as well as problems with industrial waste appear as motifs in *Kinds*. *Periphery* uses similar motifs, such as sewage problems and rats, to develop this theme as well as to reinforce a depressing atmosphere. Looked comparatively, *Kinds* develops this theme in its humorous

sarcastic manner, giving a message of the struggle for survival of the immigrants, while in *Periphery* such details stand out as central elements of the novel's dark imagery.

The need for urban recreational spaces, such as parks, is another aspect of the right to the city theme similarly elaborated through the setting in both novels. The opportunity, or the absence thereof, to benefit from public space, particularly green areas, is an important theme in both novels. In *Periphery*, parks have a central place in the lives of the main characters. In *Kinds*, the absence of parks and similar areas is noticeable, both in the incident of the picnic and in the appearance of the Kozluk Center, a shopping mall, as the locus of free-time activity in the neighbourhood, especially for youngsters. In both novels, the lack of community centres where adults, especially young individuals can meet new people and socialise with each other without spending money, where they can be productive with hobbies or get new skills, comes to the fore as another dimension of the limited recognition of the right to the city. This theme is endorsed through the empty and purposeless daily lives of the teenagers. Thus, idleness appears as an important motif in both novels, also connected with the theme of the right to work.

13.3 Additional Points

It might also be useful to add that various motifs related to the neo-liberalisation and globalisation of Istanbul enter the two novels, inevitably, since they are both set after the end of the 1980s. Urban rent is one such theme appearing in both novels: in *Periphery*, the removal of the leather industry from Kazlıçeşme implies it, while in *Kinds* it is given more direct expression, as Zümürüt explains that after the Kozluk Center was built, the apartments of Kozluk became more valuable (104). In this novel, gated communities appear as a motif related to both urban rent and urban fragmentation. Gentrification finds direct expression in *Periphery*, with descriptions of the changes in the Tünel neighbourhood, as the main character walks around in the area. The novel also introduces foreign immigrants and a large number of tourists as motifs related to the globalisation of the city. Urban poverty, another phenomenon related to the neo-liberal city, is also a strong theme in this novel, emphasised with the presence of children selling paper tissues, glue-sniffers, beggars and the homeless throughout the story.

13.4 Conclusion

The endings of both novels are in the centre of the city rather than on the periphery, which is an interesting similarity, despite all their differences examined above. Furthermore, in both endings, the characters contemplate life as they watch the Bosphorus, the ultimate

symbol of Istanbul's aura. In *Periphery*, the main character ends up in Beşiktaş after a long walk, and just as he is about to take a dolmuş to go back home, he changes his mind and stays. He starts gazing at the pier, the sea and the people around. Rather than what he thinks, what he sees is given in detail, inviting the reader to gaze at the same view with him as the waves hit the shore, emphasising a bond that connects people in the city as they gaze at the same view and reflect upon life. In the closure of *Kinds*, Zümrüt, her husband and their sons are in their pick-up on their way to visit relatives for the religious holiday. As they are driving over the Bosphorus Bridge, Cavit, mesmerised by the way the water runs in the Bosphorus, contemplates life with optimism, thinking that despite all the difficulties, he and his family are still standing. The novel, which is almost entirely set in Kozluk, stressing its disconnectedness with the centre of Istanbul, ends in the very centre of the city. Furthermore, the setting of this closure is not just any place in the centre of the city: it is on the Bosphorus Bridge which bonds two continents together, a powerful symbol of integration. As it comes to its close, the novel seems to imply a connection between the centre and the periphery, bringing its characters from Kozluk to the Bosphorus Bridge. Although the two novels develop the theme of centre and periphery in quite dissimilar ways, in their closure they seem to meet in a mutual message: the people of the periphery belong to Istanbul and Istanbul belongs to them, as much as it does to those living in its centre.