


ARTICLE

“Revolution is the Equality of Children and Adults”: Yaşar Kemal Interviews Street Children, 1975

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Abstract

In 1975, the world-famous novelist Yaşar Kemal (1923–2015) undertook a series of journalistic interviews with street children in Istanbul. The series, entitled “Children Are Human” (Çocuklar İnsandır), reflects the author’s rebellious attitude as well as the revolutionary spirit of hope in the 1970s in Turkey. Kemal’s ethnographic fieldwork with street children criticized the demotion of children to a less-than-human status when present among adults. He approached children’s rights from a human rights angle, stressing the humanity of children and that children’s rights are human rights. The methodological contribution of this research to the history of children and youth is its engagement with ethnography as historical source. His research provided children the opportunity to express their political subjectivities and their understanding of the major political questions of the time, specifically those of social justice, (in)equality, poverty, and ethnic violence encountered in their everyday interactions with politics in the country. Yaşar Kemal’s fieldwork notes and transcribed interviews also bring to light immense injustices within an intersectional framework of age, class, ethnicity, and gender. The author emphasizes that children’s political agency and their political protest is deeply rooted in their subordination and misery, but also in their dreams and hopes. Situating Yaşar Kemal’s “Children Are Human” in the context of the 1970s in Turkey, I hope to contribute to childhood studies with regard to the political agency of children as well as to the history of public intellectuals and newspapers in Turkey and to progressive representations of urban marginalization.

Keywords: children’s rights; history of children; Yaşar Kemal; political agency; urban marginalization

In 1975, the acclaimed novelist Yaşar Kemal (1923–2015) undertook a series of journalistic interviews with working children and street children, who also were often migrants and extremely poor. In one such conversation with a group of boys, Kemal asked their opinions about “what would save them.” One boy said, “The revolution will save us.” As Kemal further enquired about the possible meaning of this “revolution,” one boy said: “The revolution is the equality of children and adults.”¹ Kemal’s article series, published daily in the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* (Republic) in forty-one installments from 13 September to 26 October 1975, is strongly supportive of this young boy’s criticism of adultism, or, in other words, age discrimination.² The serial is entitled “Children Are Human” (Çocuklar İnsandır), and Kemal wrote first and foremost about the equality of adults and children:

¹Yaşar Kemal, “Neden çocuklar insandır?” *Cumhuriyet*, 13 September 1975, 4.

²Claire Breen, *Age Discrimination and Children’s Rights: Ensuring Equality and Acknowledging Difference* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

I don't treat children like kids. If I have a friendship, a relationship with a child, then he or she is my friend, not a child. I don't see them as children, I don't treat them like a different human species. Why? I never believed that children are like kids, in the way people treat them. They are fully-fledged (*basbayağı*) human beings.³

Yaşar Kemal's significance as an author, as a force in cultural and intellectual life, and as a public political figure needs to be established from the outset. Kemal was a world famous writer, one who has been translated into multiple languages, who received dozens of literary awards during his lifetime, and who was considered for the Nobel Prize. An outspoken political figure, Kemal publicly affirmed his Kurdish identity in a country where it was forcefully denied and challenged official state policy. He was a civil and human rights activist who defended social justice and socialism, and who did not hesitate to speak about taboo issues, especially those concerning the genocide of Armenians, the oppression of the Kurdish people, and racism in Turkey. As Sibel Irzık notes, Yaşar Kemal "entered the canon of 'world literature' as a dissident author—one who 'speaks for' the nation in 'speaking against' it."⁴ In Fethi Naci's words, "revolt" was his main principle as a novelist.⁵ According to Laurent Mignon, he has written "the epic of the subalterns."⁶

Born and raised in rural Adana in southeastern Turkey, Kemal could not complete secondary school and instead held down nearly forty jobs until 1950. He worked, among other things, as a shoemaker's apprentice, a petition writer (*arzuhalci*), a gas meter reader, an agricultural laborer, and a substitute teacher. In 1950, he served a short spell in prison for alleged communist activities. A year later, with the help and advice of several of Turkey's leading leftist intellectuals, especially Arif Dino and Orhan Kemal, he went to Istanbul and was given a job as a reporter for *Cumhuriyet*. He would mostly write serial articles in the genre of investigative journalism.⁷ It was at this point that he adopted the pen name of Yaşar Kemal.⁸ His short story collection *Yellow Heat* (*Sarı Sıcak*, 1952) and his first novel *Memed, My Hawk* (*İnce Memed*, 1955, vol. 1) also were serialized in *Cumhuriyet*.

Yaşar Kemal is well known both for the sociopolitical commitment of his narratives and for developing sophisticated written works based on oral traditions of folk literature and myths.⁹ When he did this fieldwork with street children in 1975 he was a world famous novelist and part of an international socialist and literary network. To express the struggle for social justice as an investigative reporter, newspaper series were a natural extension of Kemal's writing. Kemal often emphasized the importance of journalistic reporting for his novels. In 1956, after winning the Novel Award of the established literary journal, *Varlık* (Presence), for *Memed, My Hawk*, he stressed in an interview that "good reporting is done by good artists" and that "reporting is a branch of literature."¹⁰ In August 1975, he again underlined the importance of his journalism to his novels in an art and literature periodical, *Milliyet Sanat* (Nationhood Art [supplement]). He said, "the world's greatest reportage writers are also great novelists," as in the examples of "Hemingway, Ehrenburg, Sholokhov, Simonov, Kessler . . . Malaparte."¹¹

³The full quotation reads: "Ben çocuklara çocuk gibi davranmam. Bir çocuklar ilişkim, dostluğum, arkadaşlığım varsa, o benim arkadaşımıdır, çocuk değildir. Çocuk gibi bakmam. Aynı bir insan türü gibi bakmam. Niye bu böyle? İnanmadım hiçbir zaman çocukların, insanların çocuklara davrandığı gibi çocuk olduklarına. Basbayağı insandır onlar"; Kemal, "Neden çocuklar insandır?" 4.

⁴Sibel Irzık, "Yaşar Kemal's Island of Resistance," in *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music*, ed. Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy (New York: Routledge, 2013), 49–63, quote on 49.

⁵Fethi Naci, *Yaşar Kemal'in Romancılığı* (Istanbul: YKY, 2004), 78.

⁶Laurent Mignon, "Yaşar Kemal (October 1923–)," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Turkish Novelists Since 1960*, vol. 373, ed. Burcu Alkan and Çimen Günay-Erkol (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2014), 171.

⁷His first journey was to Diyarbakir in 1951, and his reports were serialized between 17 May and 20 July of that year. All Kemal's interview series from the 1950s and 1960s have been published in four volumes, as *Bu Diyar Baştan Başa* (Istanbul: YKY, 2004 [1971]).

⁸Mignon, "Yaşar Kemal," 161.

⁹Barry Tharaud, "Yaşar Kemal as a Global Phenomenon," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 14, no. 2 (2011): 197–202.

¹⁰Mustafa Baydar, "Yaşar Kemal Anlatıyor," *Varlık* 428, no. 1 (1956): 7–8.

¹¹Mignon, "Yaşar Kemal," 161.

As the author himself often remarked, children and older characters, especially women, were always quite central in his oeuvre. In a number of his novels, young children feature as the protagonists, and their coming-of-age is at the center of the plot. The life stories of some interviewed children later also became the core of some of his novels. The parallels are the most clear in his three-volume saga published as *The Saga of the Seagull* (Al Gözüüm Seyreyle Salih, 1976); *The Birds Have Also Gone* (Kuşlar da Gitti, 1978), and *The Sea-Crossed Fisherman* (Deniz Küstü, 1978).¹² In an essay from 1962, “Anatolian Child” (Anadolu Çocuğu), Yaşar Kemal asserted for the first time that “children and adults are equal.” Focusing on the lives of rural children, Kemal noted that adults and children lived identical lives in the circumstances of the village.¹³ Later, in his interview with Alain Bosquet, which was conducted in the form of translated letter exchanges in the 1980s, Kemal once again underscored the infantilization of children within urban bourgeois structures:

Nobody treated me like a child in the village. Or other children for that matter. . . . I realized that children were children when I left the village and came down to the city. Of course, we were children too. . . . But no one treated us in a degrading (*küçültücü*) way. In our village, children were also human. They did not separate us from the adults in many things. We used to listen to the great story-tellers (*destancı*) together with the adults until the morning. No one would tell us that these are children, they cannot understand these great epics.¹⁴

Yaşar Kemal’s discussion of the equality of children and adults needs to be situated vis-à-vis the limits imposed on children’s agency in modern, urban, nuclear family settings from the late 19th century onward. Scholarship on children and agency underlines how children often are not considered fully human and as less than adults.¹⁵ They are seen in a state of becoming; they are not considered complete and definable individuals until they come of age.¹⁶ As the novelist stressed, the idea that children could not be considered full-fledged human beings also was quite established in Turkey at the time.¹⁷ Kemal, in that sense, wrote against a certain social environment, in which children were either oppressed, mistreated, and beaten, or else drowned with compassion and care. In both cases, he argued, they were treated as “a different species” (*ayrı bir yaratık*) and not as equal human beings.¹⁸

¹²Kemal also noted that he started his *Nobody* (Kimsecik) trilogy—*Salman the Solitary* (Yağmurluk Kuşu, 1980); *Castle Gate* (Kale Kapısı, 1985); and *Sound of Blood* (Kanın Sesi, 1991)—that had been in his mind for years with the wealth of knowledge he collected during these interviews with children; Kemal, “Neden çocuklar insandır?” 4. It also is worth noting that a fourth volume, *Memed, My Hawk* (1989) goes back to Memed’s own childhood.

¹³“Köylerdeki çocuklar her yönleriyle büyüklerin tıpkısıdır. Onlar gibi yer, onlar gibi yatar, onlar gibi sorumlulukları vardır, onlar gibi, güçleri yettiğince çalışırlar. Köyün her bir işine büyükler gibi, büyükler kadar katılırlar”; Yaşar Kemal, “Anadolu Çocuğu,” in *Baldaki Tuz* (İstanbul, YKY, 2004 [1974]), 349.

¹⁴Yaşar Kemal, *Yaşar Kemal Kendini Anlatıyor: Alain Bosquet ile Görüşmeler* (İstanbul: YKY, 2014), 43.

¹⁵Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Mary Jo Maynes, “Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency and Narratives of Childhood,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 114–24.

¹⁶Harry Hendrick, “The Child as a Social Actor in Historical Sources: Problems of Identification and Interpretation,” in *Research With Children: Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Pia Christensen and Allison James (New York: Routledge, 2008), 40–63. Sarah Maza recently argued that the “essentially evanescent nature of childhood means that children’s activity in the past may best be conceptualized not as agency but as performance”; Sarah Maza, “The Kids Aren’t All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood,” *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1271.

¹⁷According to a legal scholar, a child is “an entity whose mental faculties have not yet developed, as in a full-fledged (*tam*) and mature (*olgun*) human being”; Naci Şensoy, “Çocuk Mahkemeleri ve Nezaret Altında Serbesti Sistemi,” *İş Mecmuası* 34 (1943): 141.

¹⁸“Anaların babaların çocuklara yaptıkları inanılmaz bir zulüm benim için. Aynı bir yaratılmış gibi bakıyorlar. Korkunç baskılar yapıyorlar. Baskılar, dayaklar, öğütler canından usandırıyor çocukları. Ya da şımarıyor, şefkatle, okşamayla. Çocuk insanlıktan çıkıyor her iki halde de”; Kemal, “Neden çocuklar insandır?” 4.

The mainstream representation of children's public engagements and political agency in 1970s Turkey delineates the boundaries of childhood and the boundaries of politics in Turkey. The stereotypical public discourse produced by mainstream journalists, politicians, and prosecutors portrayed politics as an adult sphere in which children had no legitimate place.¹⁹ Therefore, the construction of children and politics in Turkey was based on at least two denials. The first mechanism of children's exclusion from politics was the denial of their political agency, based on an essentialized conception of childhood as a phase of innocence, subordination, and victimhood.²⁰ Children's rational standpoint was constantly undermined by discussing them without giving them the voice to speak.²¹ Different versions and examples of politicization are simply overlooked, and children's actions are infantilized or crippled by an overemphasis on adult and parental manipulations. Second, from the other extreme, the exercise of political rights and exhibition of any act of political agency leads to what Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian defines as "unchildling."²² These children are simply expelled from their own childhoods, and their children's rights are denied. Portrayed most often as overly politicized "terrorists," criminals, or delinquents, they are then tortured, imprisoned, convicted, and killed with no regrets.²³

Recent research in childhood studies, on the other hand, repeatedly demonstrates that children have the skills and capacities to freely exercise their right of participation, that their actions may be deeply political and that there is a definite need to reconsider children's political agency in general.²⁴ Yaşar Kemal's ethnographic research with street children also

¹⁹Performative politics of the 23 April Children's Day ceremonies in Turkey have created the illusion that children were political subjects with a direct relation with the state. In yearly ceremonies, many elected or appointed officials leave their chairs to a child as part of the commemorations in their offices. However, during the yearly procedure, the children play an almost silent role of top-down political authority and do not raise any issues or practice "the right to be heard." Nazan Maksudyan, "Role-Playing, Unchilding, Victimization: Children and Politics in Turkey," in *Childhood in Turkey: Sociological, Educational and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Hilal H. Şen and Helaine Selin (New York: Springer, forthcoming).

²⁰Serdar Değirmencioğlu, "Demokraside Çocuk ve Gençlere Yer Açmak," *Sosyal Hizmet Dergisi* (2008): 23–33.

²¹In TV programs from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Barış Manço's "Adam Olacak Çocuk," in series, and in movies in which the main protagonists were children, it was actually possible to hear the voices of children, but they were allowed to speak only as long as they repeated and represented adult truths. In these programs, children are praised for their intelligence and knowledge, but are belittled by adult amazement toward the intelligent child ("Look at that little one"). Mustafa Ruhi Şirin, *Televizyon Çocuk ve Aile: Yeni Çocukluğun Televizyon Sarmalı* (Istanbul, İz Yayıncılık, 2006).

²²Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019). A similar argument is developed with regard to asylum seekers in Carly McLaughlin, "They Don't Look Like Children": Child Asylum-Seekers, the Dubs Amendment and the Politics of Childhood," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 11 (2018): 1757–73.

²³In past decades, new works on "political" children in Turkey have represented them as political agents and voiced them in progressive ways. See, for example, Haydar Darıcı, "Şiddet ve Özgürlük: Kürt Çocuklarının Siyaseti," *Toplum ve Kuram* 2, no. 1 (2009): 17–41; Delal Aydın, "'Tinerilerin' Bir Korku Nesnesi Olarak Temsili," *Toplum ve Kuram* 2, no.1 (2009): 43–52; Rojin Canan Akın and Funda Danışman, *Bildiğin Gibi Değil: 90'larda Güneydoğu'da Çocuk Olmak* (Metis Yayınları, 2012); Haydar Darıcı, "'Adults See Politics as a Game': Politics of Kurdish Children in Urban Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 775–90; Leyla Neyzi and Haydar Darıcı, *Özgürüm Ama Mecburiyet Var: Diyarbakırlı ve Muğlalı Gençler Anlatıyor* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2013); Elif M. Babül, "The Paradox of Protection: Human Rights, the Masculinist State, and the Moral Economy of Gratitude in Turkey," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 116–30; Deniz Yonucu, "Urban Vigilantism: A Study of Anti-Terror Law, Politics and Policing in Istanbul," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 3 (2018): 408–22; and Maksudyan, "Role-Playing, Unchilding, Victimization."

²⁴Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, "Performative Bodies, Tactical Agents and Political Selves: Rethinking the Political Geographies of Childhood," *Space and Polity* 11, no. 2 (2007): 121–36; Sana M. Nakata, "Elizabeth Eckford's Appearance at Little Rock: The Possibility of Children's Political Agency," *Politics* 28, no. 1 (2008): 19–25; E. K. M. Tisdall and Samantha Punch, "Not so 'New'? Looking Critically at Childhood Studies," *Children's Geographies* 10, no. 3 (2012): 249–64; Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Jouni Häkli, "Children and Young People's Politics in Everyday Life," *Space and Polity* 17, no. 1 (2013): 1–16; Layla Saleh, "'We Thought We Were Playing': Children's Participation in the Syrian Revolution," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14, no. 5 (2013): 80–95; Hae Won Jeong, "Lessons

needs to be seen as a bold attempt to bend the boundaries of childhood and the boundaries of politics in Turkey. Kemal not only put the children in the center of the narrative, making them the main actors of their own lives, speaking with their own voices; he also acknowledged their humanity, their human rights, and their political agency. Even before the declaration of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), he stressed the humanity of children and that children's rights were human rights. Furthermore, his interviews were a political intervention challenging both victimizing and unchilding discourses about street children, migration, poverty, and juvenile crime in Turkey. Together with delineating intersectional layers of their subordination and suffering, Kemal did not represent these children as disempowered victims. Instead, he emphasized that their political agency, protest, and resilience were deeply rooted in their miseries, dreams, and hopes.

As a social and cultural historian of the late Ottoman Empire and early republican Turkey, my primary sources have for the most part been written documents from the state archives; missionary archives, publications, and reports; court records; ego-documents and, to a certain extent, literature. Admittedly, unearthing source material on children and youth from the past is an arduous task. It is especially hard to trace children's own views on their life experiences, work, school, play, and their own childhoods. The interpretation of politics, political subjectivity, and agency also are rather elusive categories in the history of children and youth, especially for researchers focusing on the previous centuries. The discovery of Yaşar Kemal's ethnographic research on children in 1975 has been for me an archival treasure, in which the voices of children are recorded and preserved.

In this respect, the methodological contribution of this research to the history of children and youth is its engagement with ethnography as historical source. Recourse to the tools of the ethnographer to reconstruct an account of the past has been underscored since the 1970s by social and cultural historians.²⁵ The methodological reciprocity between the disciplines of history and anthropology also has taken the form of historical ethnography, in which researchers conduct ethnographic research within the archives, and with archival material.²⁶ Approaching ethnographic data—of others, and from earlier periods—as historical sources, on the other hand, is still marginal, despite their richness and their great potential. Yaşar Kemal's fieldwork notes and transcribed interviews provide a detailed and vibrant account of the lives of children: a tailor-made archive for a historian of children who is primarily interested in recovering children's political agency.

I define political agency not only as participation in social and political movements or institutional political processes, such as rights activism, political demonstrations, and public declarations. The political part is more broadly conceived to include the private or semiprivate spheres surrounding children in school, at work, and at home. The agency aspect goes beyond the liberal definition, which presumes a capacity to bring progressive change. Following the example of Judith Butler's "paradox of subjectivation" and Saba Mahmood's "docile agent," I stress that the possibility of resistance is located within the structure of power itself, that intersectional subjectivities lead to multiple forms of subordination (and so multiple types of agency), and that agency mostly constitutes the capacity to endure and suffer.²⁷ The children that Yaşar Kemal speaks with appear as politically aware

Gleaned from the Political Participation of Children in Bahrain Uprising, *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14, no. 5 (2013): 50–65.

²⁵The methodological school was called "ethnographic history" in the 1990s, but the name did not persist. See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1984); and E. P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," *Indian Historical Review* 3 (1977): 247–66.

²⁶Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 87–109; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁷Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–36.

individuals, each realizing that their plight is not a personal tragedy, but a structural issue. Kaya, for example, says that his story is worth telling (and being listened to) since he is not just any individual, but a “victim of the society.”²⁸ This nine-year-old son of a factory worker knows all about unionization and a labor strike that cost his father his job, causing his family to face starvation and forcing the boy to start selling balloons to children his own age to improve economic circumstances.²⁹ Sait, whose father is in the sanatorium in Heybeliada with an advanced lung disease, maintains his family by catching birds in Florya plain (later to be freed for a fee in Taksim, Sirkeci, or Eyüp Camii).³⁰ As a bird-catcher, he has great sympathy for the animals and for nature, and so is very critical of the huge construction project in the area, which will damage the birds’ natural habitat.³¹ Metin, one of the mystery boys who refuses to tell his story to Yaşar Kemal, speaks sensibly and knowledgeably about the lives and dignity of the sex workers he often encounters on the streets.³²

For his serial article, Yaşar Kemal spent more than three months during the summer of 1975 with dozens of street children in the hubs of Istanbul, on both the Asian and the European sides. He met them on trains and ferries, in parks and squares, in Harem (the main harbor and the central bus station), in front of the New Mosque (Yeni Camii) in Eminönü, in Sirkeci (the main train station with a harbor), in Kumkapı and Yenikapı along the old city walls by the sea, in Beyoğlu, in the central vegetable market (*hal*), and in the Children’s Bureau, the juvenile division of the Istanbul Police Department. His interest in recovering the voices of street children had already developed by the 1960s, when he approached the Children’s Bureau of the Istanbul Police Department about conducting interviews there.³³

The author did not simply interview children; he “became friends with children” (*dost, arkadaş oldum onlarla*) and met other children through their friends. Talking to them about their families, their daily routines, and their dreams, Kemal was interested in providing an empowering account of the lives of street children, which did not infantilize or victimize them. He became truly “involved in their lives” (*yaşamlarına karıştım*), such that they would welcome him into their daily activities, be it in the form of catching birds, looking for treasures under the water, or selling balloons.³⁴ In other words, he undertook a truly ethnographic project, in which he observed and interacted with the participants of his study in their real-life, daily circumstances. Even the most scared child would establish bonds of trust with him. His subjects were not afraid to show him the money they made, to open to him the gates of their hidden “treasures,” and to tell him their most intimate stories. He listened to (and recorded) these stories, comprising about 250 pages and hours of cassette recordings.

His interviews were published daily in the center-left Kemalist newspaper *Cumhuriyet* as forty-one installments between 13 September and 26 October 1975, regularly on page 4, the

²⁸Yaşar Kemal, “‘Tabii destan yapacaklar benim hayatımı. Ben ben değilim ki, toplumun kurbanıyım’ dedi Kaya,” *Cumhuriyet*, 16 September 1975, 4.

²⁹Yaşar Kemal, “Boynu bükük, ‘Bir çocuğun ne zevki olur ki?’ dedi,” *Cumhuriyet*, 18 September 1975, 4.

³⁰This is a now extinct “trade.” Until the 1980s, bird-catchers would walk around the streets or wait in the squares with their cages and people would purchase the birds to free them, believing that, as a good deed, this would purify them from their sins. While freeing the birds, the person would say, “Azat buzat beni cennet kapısında gözet” (You are freed, now watch for me at the gates of the heaven).

³¹Yaşar Kemal, “Mahalleli Allahın Saite acıdığına ve gökteki kuşları ona gönderdiğine inanıyordu,” *Cumhuriyet*, 20 September 1975, 4. Kemal works on the stories of bird-catchers with more detail in his 1978 novel, *The Birds Have Also Gone* (Kuşlar da Gitti).

³²Yaşar Kemal, “Nereden geliyordu, akşam hangi yöne gidiyordu . . .,” *Cumhuriyet*, 9 October 1975, 4; Yaşar Kemal, “Metine yemek ısmarladım, Ben az yemeliyim, zaten çok az yemek yerim,” dedi,” *Cumhuriyet*, 10 October 1975, 4.

³³The juvenile division of the Istanbul Police Department, or the Children’s Bureau, was established in 1962. I discuss its formation and main functions in the next section. Then the chief of the bureau, Nuran Sayın recounts that she refused Kemal in 1962 by teasing him that “she could not allow a leftist to do that reportage.” (*Bu röportajı senin gibi solcu birine vaptırmam*); Halil Nebiler, “İlgi, çocuğu sokaktan koparır,” *Cumhuriyet Dergi*, 25 January 1987, 6–7.

³⁴Yaşar Kemal, “Hepsinin bir macerası vardı, olmayanlar da uyduruyorlardı!” *Cumhuriyet*, 14 September 1975, 4.



FIGURE 1. Advertisement for the series “Çocuklar İnsandır” (Children Are Human): “Yaşar Kemal has written the real-life stories of destitute children.” Illustration by Turhan Selçuk. *Cumhuriyet*, 13 September 1975.

typical placement for serial articles.³⁵ Daily installments, often filling up the entire page, were separated into several subsections with dramatic subtitles and were accompanied by the illustrations of the well-known cartoonist Turhan Selçuk (1922–2010) and photographs by the world famous photographer Ara Güler (1928–2018). Advertisements for the series, also featuring illustrations and photographs, appeared several days prior (Figs. 1 and 2). The first installment, entitled “Why Are Children Human?” (Neden çocuklar insandır?), was actually the introduction to the series in the form of an interview with Kemal conducted by the poet and the literary editor of *Cumhuriyet* at the time, Kemal Özer (1935–2009). The following installments sometimes focused on one child, sometimes a small group of children, tracing their stories in a number of episodes.³⁶ As to literary style, the series reflected

³⁵The newspaper was not published on 6 and 7 September 1975, due to the Eid al-Fitr holidays.

³⁶The serial articles were published in their entirety in 1978 as a book, although with a different title and a different order than they had appeared in *Cumhuriyet*: Yaşar Kemal, *Allahın Askerleri* (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1978). In 2013, Yapı Kredi Publications (YKY) published the article series as a new book, but in the order of their original appearance in 1975: Yaşar Kemal, *Çocuklar İnsandır* (Istanbul: YKY, 2013).



FIGURE 2. Advertisement for the series “Çocuklar İnsandır” (Children Are Human) noting Turhan Selçuk as illustrator and Ara Güler as photographer. *Cumhuriyet*, 13 September 1975.

Kemal’s “childlike, fairytale-like narration, as if the narrator and the narrated were all people of the same world.”³⁷ Kemal was a “wordsmith”, and proved his mastery in dialogue writing, incorporating children’s street lingo and turns of phrase into written literature.³⁸

My analysis of Kemal’s treatment of street children underscores children’s involvement in matters of political and social change, either through outright rebellion, silent endurance, or playful ignorance. The first section dwells on discourses on children’s public presence in urban spaces, discussions on juvenile delinquency, and deserving and undeserving children. The following four sections, each with a child protagonist at its center, focus on street children’s interpretations of their own lives as viewed through four critical political issues. The section on Zilo, the only girl that Kemal interviewed, sheds light upon gendered layers of subordination at home, in the streets, and in all sorts of encounters. The next section about Oğuz brings to light issues of maltreatment and abuse within institutional care

³⁷Naci, *Yaşar Kemal’in Romancılığı*, 78.

³⁸Laurent Mignon emphasizes that Yaşar Kemal was a “wordsmith, who achieved an undeniable poetic verve in his prose by incorporating local vocabulary and turns of phrases into standard Turkish”; Mignon, “Yaşar Kemal,” 163.

mechanisms, as well as stressing individual and collective acts of resistance and solidarity, with both rational and affective motives. Muhterem Yoğuntaş's story discusses different forms of child labor in which poor and destitute children were employed and the extent and mechanisms of their exploitation. The last section on Selim engages with ethnic violence and forced migration in the form of the "evacuation" of Kurdish villages by the Turkish armed forces. As common stories, certain representative issues, such as poverty, urban-rural migration, police brutality, and sexual harassment, arise in all four sections. Yaşar Kemal's fieldwork with children provides an intersectional analysis of age, labor, ethnicity, migration, and gender that I pursue and highlight.

"There is an Army of Destitute Children in Istanbul"³⁹

The "child question" in Turkey, that is, the prevalence of poor and destitute children, living and working on the streets of urban centers like Istanbul, took the attention of journalists, scholars, private and public philanthropists, and the state from the 1920s and 1930s onward.⁴⁰ While discursively stressing the significance of children for the future of the nation, Kemalist-nationalist elites also differentiated between the deserving (objects of love and care) and undeserving (dangerous) children. As the Minister of Education Reşit Galip stated in a speech addressing children in 1933, the Turkish nation had no place for "lazy" or "immoral" children.⁴¹ In the Turkish Penal Code of 1926 (Law no. 765), which was in force until 2004, all those under the age of 18 were considered children, yet the minimum age of criminal responsibility was as low as 11.⁴²

The presence of unaccompanied children in public spaces was severely criticized in the discourse of the mainstream media, politicians, and jurists, using terms such as "moral abandonment," "neglect," and "vagrancy."⁴³ Furthermore, children who engaged in any activity on the streets were readily seen as delinquents and denied statutory protection as minors. The 1949 "Law of Children in Need of Protection" (no. 5387) abandoned "delinquent/criminal children" (*suçlu çocuk*) to the jurisdiction of the severe penal code and excluded them from the definition of "children in need of protection" (*korunma ihtiyacı olan çocuk*). This meant that those in the first category had to take care of themselves in the prisons where they were incarcerated or else survive in the streets, whereas deserving children were placed with a foster family or in an institution to receive care, protection, education, and financial assistance. The reformed 1957 law (no. 6972) expanded the definition of need to include "neglect by parents," but children who committed a crime would lose their right to state protection as minors on the grounds of their criminality.⁴⁴

³⁹"İstanbulda bir kimsesiz çocuk ordusu var . . ." in Yaşar Kemal, "Zilonun yerini söylemem, söyleyeyim de iyice kıştırın yaşamı zindan edin öyle mi? Hava alırsınız Zilo gibi . . . Naniiiiik . . ." *Cumhuriyet*, 30 September 1975, 4.

⁴⁰From the 19th century onward, the "dangerous child" in the form of a poor child, a street child, or an underage beggar created public anxiety in the Ottoman public. See Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 78–115. For more on children's rights in Turkey in the 1930s, see Kathryn Libal, "Child Poverty and Emerging Children's Rights Discourse in Early Republican Turkey," in *Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire and After*, ed. Ben C. Fortna (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 48–72.

⁴¹Nazan Çiçek, "Mapping the Turkish Republican Notion of Childhood and Juvenile Delinquency: The Story of Children's Courts in Turkey, 1940–1990," in *Juvenile Delinquency and the Limits of Western Influence, 1850–2000*, ed. Heather Ellis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 256.

⁴²Sevda Uluğtekin, *Çocuk Mahkemeleri ve Sosyal İnceleme Raporları* (Ankara: Türkiye Barolar Birliği, 2004), 51.

⁴³Özge Ertem, "Dilerim ki Sen de Bir Gün Sokaklardan Kurtulasın!": Çocuk Dergilerinde Sahil ve Sokak Çocukları," *Toplumsal Tarih* 274 (2016): 56–61. Ertem notes the class-based imagery of childhood in children's magazines the 1930s and 1940s. Rather than the ideal of the middle-class, hardworking, patriotic, virtuous, obedient child, there were poor, vagrant, street children who made terrible mistakes and fell from grace.

⁴⁴Çiçek, "Mapping the Turkish Republican Notion," 252–53. The Child Protection Law (no. 5395) of 2005 still differentiates between "child in need of protection" (*korunmaya ihtiyacı olan çocuk*) and the "child pushed to crime" (*suça sürüklenen çocuk*), preferring the former to the latter.

Manuel Lopez-Rey, the United Nations advisor on legal policy for the government of Turkey in the mid-1960s, noted the absence of specific children's courts and children's prisons in the country. He also was surprised that in the opinion of the public as well as the government juvenile delinquency was relatively unimportant.⁴⁵ What he missed was that children like the ones interviewed by Yaşar Kemal were almost non-children in the eyes of the police, courts, and social workers. Their status as children was jeopardized by their lives in the streets. With this perception of crime, social inequality and poverty were not problematized as causes, and "criminal children" were defined as "morally weak and psychologically imbalanced characters."⁴⁶

In her cultural analysis of the literary representation of "poor but honorable" children in the melodramatic and bestselling novels of Kemalettin Tuğcu (1902–96) from the 1950s and 1960s, Nurdan Gürbilek stresses that, in these plots, children's poverty, labor, and homelessness are not told with reference to social injustice, but as a personal misfortune that the child will overcome by hard work, good character, and virtue—without getting involved in crime or violence, without losing dignity and childhood.⁴⁷ Another novelist of the period and a friend and mentor of Yaşar Kemal, Orhan Kemal, on the other hand, told a different story, in which the poor child could not easily grow up unstained. In the face of great social transformations caused by the rural-urban migration and the strengthening of capitalist relations in the country, it was not that simple to be poor and not fall from grace.⁴⁸ In the early 1960s, Yaşar Kemal followed the footsteps of Orhan Kemal and was among those intellectuals and artists with socialist sensibilities who provided an alternative analysis of children, poverty, and crime. The May 1962 issue of the arts, literature, and theory journal *Yeni Ufuklar* (New Horizons) focused on "children inclined to crime" and suggested a structural analysis of juvenile delinquency.⁴⁹ The opening of the Children's Bureau (Çocuk Bürosu), the juvenile division of the Istanbul Police Department, in 1962 can be considered part of the same interest in social causes of crime.⁵⁰ The research of anthropologist Nephhan Saran, conducted with 3,700 children brought to the bureau in 1962–63, stressed poverty and migration as major socioeconomic determinants.⁵¹

Yet, in the 1970s, sweeping generalizations were still employed by those reflecting on these children's past lives and future prospects. Media articles speculated about the number of street children in Istanbul with a threatening tone and easily stigmatized them as "stray children" (*başiboş çocuklar*) and "destitute children" (*kimsesiz çocuk*), who were collected from the streets as if they were stray animals.⁵² Yaşar Kemal noted that the most recurrent prejudice was that these children were "beyond redemption":

I asked the children themselves, I asked the police, and they would all say nothing but, "They're corrupt (*bozulmuşlar*), they are incorrigible (*adam olmaz*)." They [the children] would all say nothing but "we are no good" (*bizden hayır yok*).⁵³

⁴⁵Manuel Lopez-Rey, *Crime: An Analytical Appraisal*, vol. 3 (London: Taylor and Francis, 1998 [1970]), 22.

⁴⁶Ercüment Baktır, "Suçlu Çocuklar," *Milliyet*, 16 February 1960, 2.

⁴⁷Nurdan Gürbilek, *Kötü Çocuk Türk* (Istanbul: Metis, 2001), 40–41; Nurdan Gürbilek, *Sessizin Payı* (Istanbul: Metis, 2015), 63–65.

⁴⁸Gürbilek, *Sessizin Payı*, 70–75.

⁴⁹The writers in the issue included Azra Erhat, Yaşar Kemal, and Gülten Kazgan; *Yeni Ufuklar* 11, no. 120 (1962).

⁵⁰After 1962 all children under the age of 18 who were brought to the police stations were sent to the bureau to be interviewed. A motorized search team also was assigned to the bureau to collect children from the streets. See Nuran Sayın, "Çocuk Bürosu Nasıl Çalışır," *Yeni Ufuklar* 11, no. 120 (1962), 50.

⁵¹Nephhan Saran, *İstanbul Şehrinde Polisle İlgisi Olan 18 Yaşında Küçük Çocukların Sosyo-Kültürel Özellikleri Hakkında Bir Araştırma (Doçentlik Tezi)* (Istanbul: Taş Matbaası: 1968), 73.

⁵²"Yaz gelince başiboş çocukların sayısı artıyor," *Milliyet*, 26 July 1977, 1; "2 Milyon Kimsesiz çocukta 1694'ü Bakım Yurtlarında," *Milliyet*, 1 September 1978, 6.

⁵³Kemal, "Tabii destan yapacaklar," 4.

In his approach to children, the writer stood apart from the hegemonic discourse that expelled street children from their childhood. Kemal harshly criticized these arguments as “against humanity” (*insanlığa karşı*). Formulating the problem from a human rights perspective, he thought that the incorrigibility discourse was “against the essence of humankind” (*insan soyuna aykırı bir düşüncedir*).⁵⁴

From a global perspective, Yaşar Kemal’s ethnographic serials are rooted in an earlier history of media muckraking that transcended Turkey. Locally, Kemal followed the footsteps of Sabiha Sertel and Suad Derviş, who approached children’s rights and particularly street children from a class perspective in their journalism in the 1930s.⁵⁵ Apparently interview journalism was a tactic for revealing and critiquing social inequalities while bypassing state censors. The distinctiveness of Kemal’s work also lies in his attention to children as political subjects and to such sensitive issues as Kurdish identity, child labor, and gendered violence. Kemal’s contributions to his intellectual milieu, along with those of other contemporary members of the intelligentsia and activists of his time, notably Füzünan and Ece Ayhan, can be considered in the context of public criticism of the political and social construction of childhood and social policy.⁵⁶

“The Child is an Uncomfortable Person in Our World”: Gendered Layers of Subordination⁵⁷

There was an obvious gender imbalance among children living and working in the streets.⁵⁸ Zilo was the only girl who Yaşar Kemal included in his series (Fig. 3).⁵⁹ She was the twelve-year-old daughter of a Kurdish migrant, “speaking half Arabic, half Kurdish,” (*dili yarı Arap, yarı Kürtçeye çalan*) who had been working as a porter for the past twenty-five years around Eminönü, a trade and business hub on the shore of Ottoman walled city. Kemal met Zilo in the Children’s Bureau, where she was being held after being apprehended by the police and spending a few nights at the police station. She told him that she had been living in the streets for a while now, ever since she escaped home because of her stepmother’s cruelty. The stepmother would not give her food, would beat her really hard, and sometimes would not even allow her in the house. The incidents that she recounts explaining her rejection by her stepmother, the violence that she had endured, and her daily existence as a girl on the streets provide a rare gendered dimension of childhood.

One day Zilo met a group of Roma people in Dolapdere. Apparently Zilo was aware of the stereotypical discourse and discrimination against them, for she insisted that “God created them as Gypsies” (*çingene*), but they “became human” (*insan olmuşlar*).⁶⁰ Amazed with their music and dance, Zilo thought that they were so “overflowed with joy” (*sevinç taşınca*) that this pure elation would make everything else unimportant. She was fascinated and sure that she had never before met such good people in her life.⁶¹ With such good feelings toward them, she danced with them for a long time. When she thought about her sympathy for

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵A similar ethnographic series also was published by Suad Derviş in the 1930s; Libal, “Child Poverty and Emerging Children’s Rights,” 63–64.

⁵⁶Many of the poems in Ece Ayhan’s book, *State and Nature* (Devlet ve Tabiat, 1973) can be considered in this context. Füzünan’s works from the 1970s, namely *Boarding School* (Parasız Yatılı, 1971), *Blockade* (Kuşatma, 1972), and *My Movie Theaters* (Benim Sinemalarım, 1973), as well as her reportage on migrant workers in Germany, specifically focus on children and agency.

⁵⁷“Çocuk, dünyamızda rahatsız bir kişidir”; Kemal, “Neden çocuklar insandır?” 4.

⁵⁸Nephan Saran’s research on child offenders from 1958 to 1960 notes a great difference between the numbers of girls and boys, with the former being less than 5 percent of the total; Saran, *İstanbul Şehrinde*, 52, 91.

⁵⁹Zilo’s story lasts for ten days, from 21 to 30 September 1975, in *Cumhuriyet*.

⁶⁰Yaşar Kemal, “Zilo anasının ölümü üstüne birkaç çığlıktan başka bir şey anımsamıyordu,” *Cumhuriyet*, 21 September 1975, 4.

⁶¹Ibid. She says, “. . . ben hiç bir yerde bu Çingenelerden daha iyisini görmedim.”



FIGURE 3. Advertisement for the series “Çocuklar İnsandır” (Children Are Human) depicting Zilo and Yaşar Kemal. Illustration by Turhan Selçuk. *Cumhuriyet*, 12 September 1975.

them, she realized that “there is no adulthood and no childhood among the Gypsies, everyone is equal. Everyone is like an adult.”⁶² Yet, dancing publicly for hours with Gypsies in Dolapdere was unacceptable in the eyes of her stepmother, and Zilo was brutally beaten. She also ordered Zilo to leave the house and not come back.

Zilo started sleeping in empty lots, parks, and sometimes her aunt’s cellar. To make money, she sold bird food in the courtyard of the New Mosque. Passersby would buy fodder from her to toss to the birds as a good deed.⁶³ Kemal thought the tiny girl had a velvet voice, the voice of a woman’s warmth and affability. Soon after she had regular customers, young and old men who would sit on the stairs of the mosque, stare at her, and sigh from morning to evening. She did not mind if they simply looked at her, but she was disturbed if they harassed her or insistently made indecent proposals. Some men would come every day, offer her serious amounts of money, and promise other gifts and jewelry. Zilo interpreted

⁶²Ibid. “Çingenelerde büyüklük küçüklük yokmuş ki, herkes bir. Herkes büyük gibi. . . .”

⁶³Yaşar Kemal, “Zilo, polisi kırk günlük yoldan görse hemen tanıyiverir bu Allah vergisidir . . .,” *Cumhuriyet*, 23 September 1975, 4.

this constant unwanted attention as an attack on her freedom; she finally decided that picking pockets and collecting scraps was safer.⁶⁴

As she openly elaborated, “It is hard to be a girl, hard in this life. Being a girl is hard everywhere.”⁶⁵ Zilo would suffer, just like the boys on the street, from hunger, cold, and police violence. Yet, her subordination was twofold, as she lacked the solidarity of male counterparts. She knew that the street boys were not her friends, that they were threats to her as well. The main train station in Sirkeci and the train coaches were considered by children as relatively safe and warm. However, Zilo would not dare to go inside them. In the coaches, she risked harassment and molestation by the boys, if not worse. She would instead hide and sleep under the train cars, directly on the railroad tracks, between the rails. For a while, however, Zilo’s sleeping corner had been under the door curtain of the New Mosque. She was discovered there early one morning by a bald-headed, angry man, supposedly a faithful believer, who chased her all around Eminönü, shouting, “You have defiled my mosque, you wretched bitch, oh you wretched bitch!”⁶⁶ Even though the man declared Zilo an unchaste intruder and presented himself as the protector of a holy place, Zilo ran away from him, fearing that he would rape her. The scene between Zilo and the supposed believer reveals the moral threat that defined the public presence of destitute and vagrant girls. The major concern of the Istanbul Police Department about “street girls,” for example, was related to sexuality and girls’ possible engagement in prostitution.⁶⁷ The girls were considered in danger because of their sexuality; on the other hand, that same sexuality posed a moral danger to society.

The worst happened after Zilo confessed to her stepmother that she had been raped. One day, two girls that she knew from the streets made her drink some alcohol and took her to a movie theater.⁶⁸ There, the girls suddenly disappeared, and Zilo was left alone with two men sitting right behind her. She decided to leave the theater, but the men followed her to her aunt’s cellar, where she sometimes slept at night, and raped her. As if being betrayed—sold—by friends and being raped as a ten-year-old child was not cruel enough, Zilo also was tortured by her stepmother, who seared her vagina with an iron skewer heated on the stove.⁶⁹ Zilo recounted this incident a number of times for clarification, but her accounts varied with regard to her age, the friends who accompanied her, and the aftermath. Yaşar Kemal noted the significance of these silences and broken pieces of information while revisiting a traumatic experience. One thing, however, was clear enough: she had suffered from additional gendered layers of oppression and subordination that greatly differentiated her political subjectivity from that of the boys that Yaşar Kemal interviewed.

“Children are Desperately Longing People”: Resistance and Solidarity in Institutions⁷⁰

Ferenc Molnár’s novel, *The Children of Paul Street*, was translated into Turkish from its Hungarian original for the first time in 1944. The book became popular in Turkey after its publication in 1970 by a commercial publishing house. As noted earlier, literary works with child protagonists were popular at the time. One might also refer to adaptations of

⁶⁴Ibid. “Bir tane değil ki böylesi adamlar, otururlar merdivenlere sabahtan akşamlara dek, bakarlar, iç geçirirler. Erkektirler geçirsınler, baksınlar ama, sataşmasınlar değil mi herkes bu dünyada hür değil mi?”

⁶⁵“Kız olmak zor, zor bu hayatta. Kız olmak her yerde zor”; Kemal, “Zilonun yerini söylemem,” 4.

⁶⁶“Camimi kirlettin sen mendebur orospu, mendebur orospu”; Yaşar Kemal, “Zilo, bilseydi ki uçurtma çocukların da oyuncuğdır, bir değil, beş tane alırdı,” *Cumhuriyet*, 24 September 1975, 4.

⁶⁷After theft and bodily harm, “sexual offences” was the most frequent category of crime with which children were charged; Saran, *İstanbul Şehrinde*, 50.

⁶⁸The Children’s Bureau organized regular raids on movie theaters. In 1962–63, 135 children were “busted” in sexually inappropriate circumstances. Saran, *İstanbul Şehrinde*, 54.

⁶⁹Yaşar Kemal, “Zilo üvey anasının zulmünden adeta yılmıştı,” *Cumhuriyet*, 22 September 1975, 4.

⁷⁰“Çok özlem çeken insanlardır çocuklar”; Kemal, “Neden çocuklar insandır?” 4.

several novels of Kemalettin Tuğcu and Orhan Kemal to movies with child actors and actresses.⁷¹ In Molnár's novel, a gang of teenage boys are trying to protect their playground from the rival gang, the Redshirts. Possession of and playing with marbles is central to these children's lives and a significant part of the story. The novel starts when one of the leading characters, Nemecek, tells the rest of the group that the Redshirts stole all the marbles from the boys who were playing in Paul Street. The solidarities, struggles, and enigmatic power of play among children is best reflected in the narrative of Oğuz, one of Yaşar Kemal's interlocutors.⁷²

When Oğuz was seven years old, his father returned one day to their home in Mecidiyeköy, an early squatter neighborhood, stark naked. The man was a habitual gambler and this became the last straw, leading Oğuz's mother to leave him. The mother and son moved to Ankara, where Oğuz started to live with an unofficial foster family, as arranged by his mother, and went to primary school. His mother took a job as a "hotel clerk" in Tuna Palas. In the account of that period, Oğuz sometimes says that his mother was simply working, and at other times he hints that she was a sex worker.⁷³ At one time, explaining why a child would steal, as if talking about someone else, he says: "[For instance] the boy's mother has become a prostitute, of course, she was doing things with other men in hotels, but the mother would not want her seven- or eight-year-old son . . . to see her . . . doing things with men. So she gives him to that woman."⁷⁴

Suddenly, having lost not only the familiarity of his neighborhood and home, but also both parents, Oğuz felt very unhappy. He often ran away from his foster home and school, spending his entire day in an amusement park at the famous Youth Park (*Gençlik Parkı*), and he began to engage in petty theft in the form of sandwiches (the invention of the day), sweets, and toys. After he discovered a shooting booth, he was mesmerized by the prizes, especially a soft giraffe toy and a bag of shiny marbles that he stared at from morning till evening. One day he tried to steal them, but was caught and taken to the police station.⁷⁵ After this incident, he had spent his whole life in different orphans' asylums in Istanbul, mainly in Yeldeğirmeni (Kadıköy) and Mevlanakapı (Fatih).

The anecdotes of his childhood in such institutions make it clear that children in institutional settings had better chances of finding solidarity among their peers, which allowed them to act and resist authority. Escape, as Oğuz's narrative emphasizes, appears to be the most common form of resistance for orphans in institutions. Despite the imbalance of power between the orphanage administration and the children, children also devised other forms of resistance, disobedience, and opposition. Oğuz recounted how he would often speak up during meals and complain that the children were dying of hunger. Others would also join him and cry out that the teachers and the director were eating much better food.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the grim details of the daily life in orphanages, Oğuz's account also reserved a place for describing everyday activities, highlighting the importance of friendship, play, and fun in their lives. Oğuz said he used to hang out with five or six friends, with whom he established a bond when they were looting the kitchen or the food pantry. Because of ongoing hunger, petty theft was a common crime in orphanages. Children would usually band together to break into the pantry. Oğuz also confessed that they would steal meat from the kitchen or notebooks from the inventory to sell them in the

⁷¹There were several Tuğcu adaptations, including *Little Ayşe* (Ayşecik, 1960), *Armless Baby* (Kolsuz Bebek, 1961), and *Disgrace* (Yüz Karası, 1964). Movie producers also were fond of Orhan Kemal's works on children, such as *Guilty* (Suçlu, 1960), *Street Child* (Sokakların Çocuğu, 1965), and *A Girl from the Streets* (Sokaklardan Bir Kız, 1972). Gürbilek, *Sessizin Payı*, 65–66.

⁷²Oğuz's story lasts for six days, from 1 to 6 October 1975, in *Cumhuriyet*.

⁷³Yaşar Kemal, "Bekle' dedi, 'şimdi geleceğim' aradan dört, beş sene geçti . . .," *Cumhuriyet*, 1 October 1975, 4.

⁷⁴Yaşar Kemal, "Çocuk aç kaldı mı, oraya buraya saldırır . . .," *Cumhuriyet*, 3 October 1975, 4.

⁷⁵Yaşar Kemal, "Gençlik Parkında yepyeni bir dünya bulmuştu . . .," *Cumhuriyet*, 6 October 1975, 4.

⁷⁶Yaşar Kemal, "Çocuk aç kaldı mı," *Cumhuriyet*, 3 October 1975, 4.

market and make some money.⁷⁷ These adventures were narrated as a form of achievement that disrupted the monotony and gloominess of orphanage life. As he put it, however, his best days were those spent playing marbles on grounds close to the Yeldeğirmeni orphanage.

In his dreamy account of these games, marbles were the most beautiful things; there was nothing better to do in the world.⁷⁸ During his very first month in Yeldeğirmeni orphanage, he discovered “the field,” where dozens of children were immersed in their play, only to argue and fight, and then resume play with the utmost concentration. Oğuz was so fascinated by the game that he forgot the time, the orphanage, even to eat or drink. The next day, then every day for weeks, he would do nothing but watch the boys playing marbles. Soon enough, according to his narrative, he became the best player in the field, defeating all the other boys, winning hundreds of marbles a day. He would then sell the marbles back to their original owners and win them back again, sometimes for three rounds in the same day. He also would bring his shiny marbles to the orphanage and exchange them for extra food from his fellow orphans.

Marbles were for Oğuz a dream world, where he felt like a king, like he was “Atatürk’s son” (Atatürkün oğlu), since he was the best player and extremely proud of himself.⁷⁹ Oğuz said, “If marbles were not just a children’s game, I would easily earn a living until the day I die. I might have cars and apartments by now.”⁸⁰ The playing field was his escape, marbles were his protective shield against pain and sadness and a life of abandonment and destitution, in the orphanage and in the streets. His later exclusion from the game as an older boy was a tragedy in Oğuz’s life. He did not specify any age limit, but noted that no one plays with a big boy, since children always play the game with their peers (*taydaş*).

Children are “the Rebellion Within Humanity”: Child Labor and Exploitation⁸¹

The institutional infrastructures for unattended children remained rather scarce in Turkey. In 1978, the combined capacity of all the orphanages in the country was only 1,694 places.⁸² Orphans were mostly cared for through private means, taking the form of informal adoption (of mostly girls) and employment of boys in farms and workshops, where food and accommodation also were provided. Several of the boys that Yaşar Kemal interviewed had experiences of apprenticeship in different trades. Ten-year-old Muhterem Yoğuntaş, the only child with a surname, whom the writer met when he was working as a waiter in a coffeehouse, had tried his chances with many trade masters and journeymen.⁸³ His stories of employment and exploitation in these workshops reveal rich details about the working circumstances of migrant, poor, and destitute children in urban centers.⁸⁴

Muhterem lived with his parents in a rented shanty house by the city walls in Edirnekapı. They also had a stable and two horses, as his father was a cart driver, who was said to be earning well. His life changed suddenly when his father brutally murdered his mother and her supposed lover by beheading them.⁸⁵ Muhterem witnessed the killing from a corner

⁷⁷Yaşar Kemal, “Çok eziyet gördüm, onun için kimseye itimadım kalmadı hayatta,” *Cumhuriyet*, 4 October 1975, 4.

⁷⁸Yaşar Kemal, “Zengin çocukları ütüyor, dönüp yurttaki fakir çocuklara dağıtıyordu,” *Cumhuriyet*, 5 October 1975, 4.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*

⁸⁰*Ibid.* “İşte misket yalnız çocuk oyunu olmasaydı, ben ölünceye kadar hayatımı kazanmış gitmişim. Şimdiye arabalarım, apartmanlarım olurdu belkim de. . . .”

⁸¹“ . . . onlar insanlığın içindeki başkaldırmaydılar.” Kemal, “Hepsinin bir macerası vardı,” 4.

⁸²“2 Milyon Kimsesiz çocuktan 1694’ü Bakım Yurtlarında,” *Milliyet*, 1 September 1978, 6.

⁸³The fishing village in which Yaşar Kemal meets Muhterem and the coffee house in which Muhterem works are fictionalized in the author’s 1978 novel, *The Sea-Crossed Fisherman* (London: Collins Harvill, 1985).

⁸⁴Muhterem’s story lasts for seven days, from 20 to 26 October 1975, in *Cumhuriyet*. He is the last child featured in the entire series.

⁸⁵It is very probable that the murder was reported in the news. According to a news item from April 1971, a cart driver killed his 24-year-old wife out of jealousy by beheading her in front of his children. The couple had been married for seven years; “Çocuklarının önünde karısının kafasını gövdesinden ayırdı,” *Milliyet*, 7 April 1971, 3.

of the stable, where he stayed glued, as stiff as a stone, for two days. Nobody looked for him, and he found himself suddenly on the streets, constantly hungry and looking for food. Muhterem first lived with some petty thieves in *Sirkeci* (*Sirkeci bitirimleri*), but he did not like that they usually robbed the poor and were always swearing. He started working at a vegetable market as a porter. One day, he saw the man that hired him, Fahri Abi, moaning and covered in blood presumably due to an assault. Remembering the murder of his mother, he fled the market. Muhterem then started working as an apprentice for man who sold grilled fish, sleeping in his *taka* (small fishing boat) on the Golden Horn. He was quite content—he had food to eat and a place to stay—until the man tried to rape him one night. As a result, he returned to the streets.⁸⁶

At a moment when he was starving and in total despair, Muhterem met a certain Hamdi, who offered him an apprentice job in the docks in Ayyansaray to make and repair small fishing boats. The master liked Muhterem's work and regularly increased his weekly allowance. Hamdi's part was no act of charity, as he would appropriate half of the weekly wages Muhterem received from the master.⁸⁷ But Muhterem did not mind, as he believed Hamdi naturally deserved something in return for finding him a job and a place to stay. However, a wave of labor consciousness and revolt built up in the workshop. A hard-working, experienced apprentice named Dursun organized all the other apprentices for collective action against Hamdi. Despite his attempts to awaken the boys, Dursun realized that Muhterem and many others did not have the courage to stand up to Hamdi. To end this exploitative bond, Dursun threatened Hamdi, ordering him to stop appropriating the wages of the apprentices. Hamdi responded by pulling out his knife and stabbing Dursun in the hand. Muhterem, escaping once again from bloodshed, found himself again homeless, jobless, and penniless.

Like many other children in Kemal's series, Muhterem was collected from the streets and spent a few days in the Children's Bureau, where he was brutally beaten by the director. The author harshly criticizes the extent of violence inherent to the disciplinary methods of the social services in the country. He was highly critical of the chief of the bureau, Hüseyin Bey, who had a reputation for violence. He called Hüseyin "wild faced" (*azgın suratlı*) and "a man like a concentration camp director" (*temerküz kampı müdürü olacak bir adam*).⁸⁸ Without any clear motive, Muhterem was then dropped in the courtyard of Şehzade Mosque, where he slept inside a few days until he woke up with a dream of becoming apprentice to an iron-smith.⁸⁹ Master Zahit became an obsession for him and he stalked the man morning and night. He watched him from outside of his shop, fascinated by the skill with which he bent and shaped the iron. He also secretly observed Master Zahit from outside his shanty house, as he roasted meat for himself, made a tomato salad, and poured a glass of rakı. The master then played the *baglama*, singing and dancing, while Muhterem listened from outside and also danced to the music. After several such days, the master stopped him and angrily asked why Muhterem was following him. When Muhterem told him that he wanted to become his apprentice, the master discouraged him, telling him that he hated apprentices—just like his own master. He told him that one cannot work with a master who does not like apprentices. It would ruin his life and eat up his soul.⁹⁰

Despite his warning, Master Zahit took on Muhterem as an apprentice, and literally tortured the child. Always repeating the same words, that his master "would also do it

⁸⁶Yaşar Kemal, "Babası anasını öldürmüştü Muhteremin. Her şeyi unutmuştu, kanı unutamıyordu, her yanı çığlıktı, ahırın köşesine saklandı iki gün kaskatı orada kaldı . . .," *Cumhuriyet*, 23 October 1975, 4.

⁸⁷Yaşar Kemal, "Hamdi diye biri vardı, acımasız bir çarık ticareti sürdürüyordu," *Cumhuriyet*, 22 October 1975, 4.

⁸⁸After several visits to the bureau while interviewing Zilo, Hüseyin told Kemal that they received orders prohibiting the writer from interviewing children without an accompanying police officer; Kemal, "Zilonun yerini söylemem," 4.

⁸⁹Yaşar Kemal, "Büyüülü bir ustanın peşine takılmıştı, tek isteği onun çırağı olabilmektir," *Cumhuriyet*, 24 October 1975, 4.

⁹⁰Yaşar Kemal, "Bütün parasını ustayı seyrede ede tüketmiş ve aç kalmıştı," *Cumhuriyet*, 25 October 1975, 4.

like that,” he slapped him without reason; he did not give him food for several days; or he locked him inside the shop at night such that he was in terrible pain by morning for holding his pee all night. The so-called master also did not really teach Muhterem anything, he only let him polish some scrap metal. Then one day he ordered Muhterem to turn a piece of iron into an anchor in three days. The boy struggled for two days, fighting with the iron and the foundry work without making progress. On the last day, Zahit finished the work himself, while Muhterem sat watching, as if hypnotized. That night he did not sleep and shaped a beautiful anchor. In the morning his master arrived, looked at the anchor, but then set about his own work, unaffected. He then delivered the most unexpected speech:

Muhterem Yoğuntas, if I were you . . . I would kill myself. This world is not worth this much effort, such mastery, and skill. If I had known that this world is such an empty, useless place, I would have killed myself at your age.⁹¹

Muhterem learned day by day and became a skillful ironsmith. Still, his master repeated the same words each time he finished something. “Aaaaah, if I were at your age, I would kill myself. One should kill himself during his childhood so that he should not suffer so much. Ooooooh, how good it is to kill oneself during childhood.”⁹² Muhterem tried hard to ignore these words. Yet, one day after finishing a piece and looking at his work with happiness, he could no longer stomach the same speech from Zahit. He hit the man with the hammer he was holding and left the workshop with his the master lying there.

Unlike children in institutional settings, poor and destitute apprentices in workshops did not have opportunities for solidarity and resistance. Muhterem was completely alone in Master Zahit’s workshop, where he was constantly mistreated, if not tortured. As Yaşar Kemal stresses in his first article introducing the series, orphan asylums of the state were usually filthier than children’s “sleeping places” in Sirkeci and job opportunities as an apprentice brought nothing but exploitation and trouble.⁹³ Still, Muhterem had found fellow apprentices in the boat repair workshop allowing a dynamic of acting together, and he managed to rebel on his own when necessary.

“Could Humans be Afraid of Humans, Would Humans Ever Eat Humans”: Ethnic Violence and Forced Migration⁹⁴

From early in his writing career, Yaşar Kemal, as a Kurd himself, was one of the first intellectuals in Turkey to question the treatment of the Kurds in the country. In an article published in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1995, Kemal lamented their persecution, openly writing that the Turkish state has not only tried to kill their language and culture, but also was committing a crime against humanity with its war on the civil population, villages, and even forests in the region.⁹⁵ Among his interviews with street children, the story of Selim is particularly enlightening about the plight of Kurdish people and the brutality of the so-called “village evacuations” (köy boşaltma).⁹⁶ Selim tells how his village was burnt down and the inhabitants forced by the Turkish gendarmes to evacuate. In dreamlike

⁹¹“Muhterem Yoğuntas, ben senin yerinde olsaydım . . . Ben kendimi öldürürdüm. Bu dünya bu kadar gayrete, böyle bir ustalığa, hünere değmez. Bilsydim ki, bu dünya böyle, böyle boş, işe yaramaz senin yaşındayken kendimi öldürürdüm”; in Yaşar Kemal, “Usta ‘Senin yerinde olsaydım kendimi öldürürdüm, bu kadar gayrete değmez’ dedi, o da tutu çekici fırlattı suratına,” *Cumhuriyet*, 26 October 1975, 4.

⁹²“Aaaaah, senin yanında olsam, kendimi öldürürdüm. İnsan daha çocukluktan kendini öldürmeli ki, bu kadar belayı çekmemeli. Ooooooh, çocuklukta kendini öldürmek ne iyi. . . .”

⁹³Kemal, “Neden çocuklar insandır?” 4.

⁹⁴“İnsan insandan korkar mı, insan insanı yer mi hiç?”; Yaşar Kemal, “İnsanlar birbirlerini durmadan öldürseler yeselerdi bu kadar çok insan olur muydu?” *Cumhuriyet*, 16 October 1975, 4.

⁹⁵Yaşar Kemal, “Feldzug der Lügen,” *Der Spiegel*, 9 January 1995, 134–38.

⁹⁶Selim’s interview appears in six articles, on 10–11 and 16–19 October 1975.

flashbacks, he describes a large pit full of dead bodies, crying women pulling their hair out, and faces covered in blood:

Gazelles have been all burned. The plain has been coal-black, burnt and devastated . . . the earth, the sky, everywhere is coal-black. It smells of burnt fat, burnt meat, burnt grass, burnt soil. Everything is burnt. . . the village is also smoking. Everything in the village has been burnt, people, cows, horses, everything. The village has been surrounded by the gendarmes. They let fly bullets.⁹⁷

With some men of his village and some twenty to thirty children, Selim escaped and lived for a time in the mountains. Even though the men gave most of their scarce food to the children, they still got very hungry and cold on the rocky hills. For fear of the gendarmes, they dared not come down and go into the villages on the plain.⁹⁸ In the middle of his nightmarish narrative, often broken with interruptions and confused details, he remembered himself getting off a truck in a big city that he soon learned was Adana. Selim's story is the story of the displacement of thousands of Kurds to the metropolitan areas of Turkey, especially Adana.⁹⁹ Similar to many Kurdish peasants who had been forcefully displaced, Selim began working as a cotton picker. He went to the field with a nice Kurdish family from Adiyaman who let him stay in their tent. They worked hard, but Selim had no complaints since the family also spoke Kurdish and offered him lentil soup every morning and evening. His idyllic Çukurova days, also the setting for Yaşar Kemal's childhood and youth and his most famous work, *Memed, My Hawk*, ended when he witnessed the rape of the young girl in their tent and her brutal murder by decapitation. No longer able to stay in the cotton fields, Selim returned to the city center of Adana.

Hanging out around the main rail station, he became good friends with another boy, Süleyman, who took him under his wing and introduced him to the world of petty theft and smuggling.¹⁰⁰ The duo then took a train to Istanbul, where Selim became "a keen thief" (*keskin bir hırsız*), a master pickpocket and robber, even though he remained in a constant state of fear. In his own narrative, and in what his friends Ali and Metin related about him, this fear was central to Selim's existence. His fear almost cost him his life, when his body stiffened in the winter cold by a street lamp that he chose to sleep under for fear of the dark in children's hidden shelters.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, Selim could easily storm into a coffeehouse or an apartment building and blatantly steal electronics or other valuables—while at the same time being dead scared of the waiter or the doorman, whom he took for a serial killer.¹⁰²

The trauma of the attack on their village, seeing his family members and relatives slaughtered and the villagers' painful exodus, in Selim's mind turned into a huge man with a big moustache trying to strangle him both when he was asleep and awake, in the city and on the road, day and night.¹⁰³ Even though his friends knew Selim's heartbreaking story, many of them took it with a grain of salt. As Yaşar Kemal came to understand with time, Selim narrated his adventures almost in the genre of an epic, as a mixture of the truth with dreams (or

⁹⁷"Ceylanlar hep yanmışlar. Ova kapkara kesilmiş, yanmış ört olmuş . . . yer gök, her yer kapkara. Yanmış yağ, yanmış et, yanmış ot, toprak kokuyor. Her şey yanmış. . . köy de tütüyor. Köyde ne varsa yanmış, insanlar, inekler, atlar, her şey yanmış. Candarmalar sarmışlar köyü. Ver ediyorlar kurşunu." Yaşar Kemal, "Selim bir açlığını bir de üşüdüğünü biliyordu," *Cumhuriyet*, 18 October 1975, 4.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹For a detailed analysis of the impact of forced migration on children and youth, see Haydar Darıcı, "Politics of Privacy: Forced Migration and the Spatial Struggle of the Kurdish Youth," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 13, no. 4 (2011): 457–74; Darıcı, "Adults See Politics as a Game."

¹⁰⁰Yaşar Kemal, "Öyle bir hırsız oluyor ki Selim, İstanbul'da yok onun üstüne," *Cumhuriyet*, 19 October 1975, 4.

¹⁰¹Yaşar Kemal, "insanoğlu arkadaşlığın kıymetini bilmiş olsaydı, insanoğlu böyle eşek olur da birbirini yer miydi," *Cumhuriyet*, 11 October 1975, 4.

¹⁰²Kemal, "İnsanlar birbirlerini durmadan öldürseler," 4.

¹⁰³Kemal, "Öyle bir hırsız oluyor ki Selim," 4.

nightmares), sometimes telling the truth as a dream, and a dream as the truth.¹⁰⁴ Having written several adaptations of Turkish folk literature and epic novels himself, Kemal was convinced that all narration blended reality with imagination and that humans were living in two intertwined worlds at the same time.¹⁰⁵ In the 1970s, literary critiques wrote that his poetic language and approach and the epic dimensions of his fusion of folkloric elements and social history were a precursor to magical realism.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

The 1970s in Turkey was a decade of extremes, swinging wildly between hope and disenchantment. Squeezed between two military interventions, shaped by social polarization and political violence, impoverished by rampant inflation, redefined through migration and urban marginalization, the political and social atmosphere of Turkey still promised hope. Widespread workers' strikes of 15–16 June 1970; the awareness of ethnic violence against Kurds; the embracement of second-wave feminism; an active and organized youth; the creation of artistic forms of resistance; and the emergence of urban politics as a specific arena of political struggle also were part of the 1970s in Turkey. It is notable that many babies born in the 1970s were named Devrim (revolution) or Umut (hope), affirming the optimism of their revolutionary parents.

Yaşar Kemal's ethnographic fieldwork with street children in Istanbul in 1975 also was connected to that revolutionary spirit of hope. Reflecting the world-famous author's rebellious attitude, the series was both visionary and revolutionary. This would translate into a double revolution in the experiences and lives of children. First of all, Kemal argued against the exclusion of children from life as it is and their demotion to a less-than-human status when present among adults. Second, Kemal approached children's rights from a human rights perspective, stressing the humanity of children and that children's rights were human rights at a pivotal moment before the passage of the Law on Juvenile Courts in Turkey (no. 2253, 1979), the adoption of the Law on Social Services and Child Protection Agency (no. 2828, 1983), and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Despite institutional and legal improvement on paper, the implementation of children's rights in Turkey was quite slow and discontinuous. The first juvenile courts were established in two cities toward the end of 1987, and only six courts were established before 2005.¹⁰⁷ The UN Convention was only ratified in 1994, with reservations on three specific articles (17, 29, and 30), which addressed issues of children's rights to assert an ethnic or cultural heritage.¹⁰⁸

Situating Yaşar Kemal's "Children Are Human" within the larger context of the 1970s in Turkey, I hope to contribute to childhood studies as related to the political agency of children, as well as to the history of public intellectuals and newspapers in Turkey and to progressive representations of urban marginalization. As a champion of human rights, Yaşar Kemal understood and emphasized that children's political agency and political protest were deeply rooted in their subordination and misery, but also in their dreams and hopes. Ending the series with Muhterem's story, he emphasized his "celebration of individual rebellion" and the possibility of resistance located within the structure of power itself.¹⁰⁹ By having an honest conversation with poor and destitute street children about their daily lives and their childhood, Kemal provided them the opportunity to express their political subjectivities and everyday interactions with politics in the country. His interviews with

¹⁰⁴Yaşar Kemal, "Metin, Selim ve Ali hep bir demirdenmiş . . .," *Cumhuriyet*, 17 October 1975, 4.

¹⁰⁵Kemal, "Neden çocuklar insandır?" 4.

¹⁰⁶Mignon, "Yaşar Kemal," 162, 166.

¹⁰⁷Türkiye Barolar Birliği, "Ceza Sorumluluğunun Değerlendirmesi Rehberi," UNICEF, 2010, 7, http://cocukhaklari.barobirlik.org.tr/dokuman/egitimbasvuru_basvuru/cezatorumlulugunun.pdf.

¹⁰⁸Kathryn Libal, "Children's Rights in Turkey," *Human Rights Review* 3, no.1 (2001): 35–44.

¹⁰⁹Mignon, "Yaşar Kemal," 163.

children bring to light immense injustices within an intersectional framework of age, class, ethnicity, and gender; frequent sexual abuse and maltreatment of women and children; physical violence and brutality that children suffered at police stations, the Children's Bureau, state orphanages, and in private households; and the inhumane living and working conditions of destitute children in Istanbul. This article's methodological contribution to the study of the history of children and youth is its approach to available sources and its incorporation of ethnography as a historical source. Yaşar Kemal's fieldwork notes and transcribed interviews open channels through which we can begin to appreciate children's understanding of the major political questions of the time, specifically social justice, (in) equality, poverty, and ethnic violence.

"Children Are Human" also marked Yaşar Kemal's return to *Cumhuriyet* in 1975, twelve years after he had been fired for political reasons in 1963.¹¹⁰ The serial articles both reflected and inspired a certain reformist discourse on children's rights and welfare that developed in the 1960s and flourished in the 1970s. However, they also appeared at a point in time when revolutionary hope was becoming bitter and turning into disenchantment. Ironically, shortly after the serialization of "Children Are Human," the author left the country to spend the rest of the decade in exile (from 1976 to 1980), as if he also sensed that his hope was misplaced.¹¹¹ Without doubt, Yaşar Kemal's interest in children continued after this series. Not only did the life stories of some interviewed children become the core of several of his novels, but he also continued to advocate the value and significance of treating children equally throughout his life.¹¹² Nonetheless, his visionary attitude of children's political agency remains unfulfilled to this day.

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¹¹⁰Kemal was informed in 1963, when he was in England to learn English, that he had been fired. Apparently the newspaper was pressured by the minority government of İsmet İnönü to purge its left-wing writers. Mignon, "Yaşar Kemal," 167.

¹¹¹In 1976, Kemal went to Paris to attend an event in his honor. This trip was followed by further travels to the Soviet Union, the United States, and Belgium. In 1977, he first moved to Bulgaria and then to Stockholm, where he stayed for six months. He returned to Turkey in 1978, but then went back to Stockholm again and lived there until 1980. Ramazan Çiftlikçi, "Yaşar Kemal (1923–2015)," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, accessed 26 September 2021, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/yasar-kemal>.

¹¹²One later example is seen in a BBC documentary series about writers. Yaşar Kemal's episode was called "Childhood," a narration of the story of his own childhood but also emphasizing his "children are human" mantra. *Bookmark* season 10, episode 7, 20 January 1993. The episode can be watched on BBC News Türkçe's YouTube channel, at <https://youtu.be/uPiCGZY1MrA>.

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