

Article

Our Fairytales: The Cost of Migration, National Myth, and Creative Labor in *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*

Chauntee' Schuler Irving

Fordham College at Lincoln Center, Fordham University, New York, NY 10023, USA; cirving2@fordham.edu

Abstract

Our Fairytales: The Cost of Migration, National Myth, and Creative Labor in Unser Deutschlandmärchen is a performance analysis that examines lived cultural narratives through the lens of the Maxim Gorki Theatre's production of Dinçer Güçyeter's autobiographical novel *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*. The impact on Turkish migrants in Germany and their descendants is explored through an investigation of primary production texts, migration and diaspora literature, and Turkish–German cultural commentary. A discussion of fairy tales and national mythos reveals the material contributions migrant communities often make to host nations through systemic endurance and cultural enrichment, frequently at the cost of forgoing “happily ever after.” The reformation of the traditional fairy tale recasts Turkish–German migrants as modern fairy-tale heroes who generate counter-cultural narratives through collective, intergenerational, and ethnographically inherited memory.

Keywords: migration; literature; diaspora; cultural preservation

1. Introduction: *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*

“Fairy tales are beautiful. Fairy tales are horrifying. Both can be said of Dinçer Güçyeter's *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*”—Gerrit Wustmann (Our German Fairytale: Reality, Crueller than [Wustmann 2022](#))

I encountered the theatrical production of *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*, translated as *Our German Fairy Tale*, at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin. Glimmering bright pink heels sat atop a grand piano at the opening of the show. The upstage curtains wavered with iridescent green, pink, and silver amidst the black lacquered stage, with two short platforms positioned upstage right and upstage left. The wall contained a large built-in chalkboard, and the overall aesthetic elicited the feeling of a dreamy, minimalistic cabaret. Dinçer, the central protagonist, walks slowly toward the piano, dressed in a full-length sequined black halter-top gown. He pauses, looks at the pink shoes, and begins to sing. With the downbeat of the electric guitar, Dinçer invites us into his real-life fairytale.

The opening's significance is revealed later in the production during a song entitled “I Was Your Prince, Wasn't I” when Dinçer sings:

“You loved to wear high-heeled shoes and that knee-length coat that fit you like a glove, framing your beautiful waist. How lovely you looked, a princess from a foreign land. . . In this rapture, it was inconceivable to me that you worked in a factory, not with those shoes. . .” ([Berliner Festspiele 2025](#))



Received: 31 December 2025

Revised: 25 January 2026

Accepted: 11 February 2026

Published: 16 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](#) license.

The theatrical production of *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* recounts Dinçer Güçyeter's family migration from Turkey to Germany. The story begins with his grandmother, Hanife, who gives birth to his mother, Fatma, and transitions quickly to Fatma as an adult amidst a difficult marriage in Anatolia. Fatma, in her exhaustion and desperate hope, prays to conceive a child, and Dinçer is born. She is determined to raise and keep her family together, even after the family migrates to Germany for better work opportunities. During Dinçer's childhood, Fatma and Dinçer's differences surface. As Dinçer approaches his teen and early adult years, he begins to wrestle with his identity in ways that trouble his ailing mother, who has given her body, dignity, and finances to keep the family afloat with work in a carburetor factory. Dinçer's motivation to pursue a creative life and eventually move away from his mother sets the tone for the final portion of the production. He spends years pursuing his interests in reading and writing while continuing to support himself through odd jobs, a decision that prioritizes his own personal creative journey above a more practical or lucrative career. However, he proceeds on his path of self-discovery, and the play ends with Dinçer and Fatma reuniting and acknowledging the brutal hardships and love that have remained and sustained their connection throughout the years. The motif of the pink heels as a symbol of the life his mother never had a chance to live resurfaces, and the story ends with a bittersweet moment acknowledging their distressing but courageous familial fairytale.

The Maxim Gorki Theatre production of *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* is based on Dinçer Güçyeter's book of the same title, which won the 2023 Leipzig Book Fair Prize. Güçyeter, a prominent poet (winner of the 2022 Peter Huchel Prize), publisher, and theater artist who also worked part-time as a forklift driver prior to the publication of his inaugural novel, crafts a biographical text that is intimate, poetic, and visual.

The book was well received, with reviewer Gerrit Wustmann writing in "Our German Fairytale: Reality, Crueller than Fiction" that the book is "...a tour de force. . . This is both a story of immigration and of the making of an artist, a deeply feminist but above all brutally open and unsparing book" (Wustmann 2022). Wustmann further describes the work as "...at times a quiet, tender, sensitive book, but often also angry, hurtful, and rebellious—a virtuoso linguistic artwork that you can't put down" (Wustmann 2022).

The Goethe-Institut contextualizes the book's broader cultural impact, writing that *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* "gives a voice not only to the many guest workers who experienced racism and difficult working conditions, but also to female figures such as his own mother and grandmother, who endure so much simply to keep their fragile families intact" (Goethe-Institut 2023). Another review observes, "Though explicitly described as a novel, the book feels very personal and true to life—an intriguing portrayal of underrepresented life experiences and a powerful evocation of the intense and complex love between Dinçer and his mother" (New Books in German 2024).

Similar to the production, the book begins with an openness of textual space, providing a gradual literary path into Güçyeter's story. Page one reads, "Vater, Mutter, wohin jetzt mit mir."—*Father, Mother, where do I go now?* Page two contains only the phrase, "wohin mit dieser Geschichte."—*where do I go with this story?* (Güçyeter 2022).

The first chapter opens with Hanife introducing herself in the first person. The introduction is direct, as she explains who she is and her role in the story:

"Hanife ist mein Name. Ich bin die Tochter der Nomadin Ayşe und von Ömer Bey. Ömer Bey, der unter seinem Dach fünf Frauen für den Nachwuchs, für seinen Stamm sammelte. Ich werde euch kurz meine Geschichte erzählen, dann meine schwere Zunge meiner Tochter Fatma übergeben. Dinçer, mein Enkelsohn, er will es so."—*My name is Hanife. I am the daughter of the nomad Ayşe and Ömer Bey. Ömer Bey, who gathered five women under his roof to bear children for his tribe. I will*

briefly tell you my story, then I will pass the task of speaking to my daughter Fatma. My grandson, Dinçer, wants it that way. (Güçyeter 2022)

The chapters are interspersed with family photographs and songs as the narrative traces Hanife's journey from Anatolia to Yilmaz's (Dinçer's father) marriage to Fatma, and through their thirteen-year marriage prior to the birth of Dinçer—a child she prays desperately to conceive. Upon Fatma's arrival in Germany, she asks, amid the guest worker choir (*Gastarbeiterchor*), "Ist das hier meine Heimat, meine Erde, mein Ort? Soll ich hier die Lücke einer Leere füllen?"—*Is this my homeland, my land, my place? Am I supposed to fill the void of an emptiness here?* (Güçyeter 2022).

Poetically, Güçyeter writes songs among the prose such as *Das Lied des ungeborenen Kindes* (*The Song of the Unborn Child*), sung by Dinçer, who speaks of a fairy tale yet to come:

"Wir werden das Vergangene mit dem Kommenden verbinden und unser eigenes Märchen schreiben, Mutter. Seit dreitausend Jahren schweben unter dem Himmel die gleichen Geschichten. Die Geburt, der Tod, der Abschied, die Vereinigung, die Flucht . . . alle tanzen auf derselben Erde. Alle gleich und einzigartig. Vieles wurde im Mörser der Zeit zermahlen. Trotz allem haben wir der Unendlichkeit mehr Glauben geschenkt als dem Befristeten. Vielleicht war das auch der einzige Weg, vielleicht wurde das Leben allein deshalb erträglich."—*We will connect the past with the future and write our own fairy tale, Mother. For three thousand years, the same stories have floated beneath the sky. Birth, death, separation, reunion, escape . . . they all dance on the same earth. All alike and yet unique. Much has been ground to dust in the mortar of time. Despite everything, we have placed more faith in the infinite than in the finite. Perhaps that was the only way; perhaps that is the only reason life became bearable.* (Güçyeter 2022)

The family eventually moves to Nettetal, a place that appears bucolic on the surface but transforms into an evening pleasure den—what Güçyeter calls "Der obszöne Fleck der Stadt wird von Einheimischen mit 'Schweigen' bedeckt."—*The obscene stain on the city is covered up by locals with "silence."* (Güçyeter 2022)

The father, who has little voice in the text, continuously places the family's finances in jeopardy, leaving Fatma to work even more to cover the family's debts, with eventual aid and relief from a district judge who begins supporting Dinçer's writing pursuits. Dinçer leaves home to find himself and who he wants to become but eventually returns, riddled by guilt and continued questions of identity. Toward the end of the book, the central question resurfaces: were all the hardships worth it? Fatma speaks to the mythical Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

"Ein Traum oder ein Deutschlandmärchen. Eine Theaterbühne in Deutschland. Fatma trifft Ophelia.

F: Ist das meine Heimat, mein ganzer Verdienst, ist das der Preis nach allen Entbehrungen?"

—*A dream or a German fairy tale? A theatre stage in Germany. Fatma meets Ophelia.*

F: *Is this my homeland, the reward for all my efforts, the price after all the hardships?* (Güçyeter 2022)

The epilogue closes the book with both weariness and hope as Fatma states plainly:

"Fatma ist mein Name, die Gastarbeiterin, die Akkordbrecherin. Alles, was bei mir keine Sprache fand, soll auf euren Zungen die Seiten aufschlagen. Wenn ihr mir erlaubt, will ich euch einen kleinen Rat geben. Wir haben blind danach gestrebt, den Schmerz der Entwurzelung mit Eigentum, mit Geld zu heilen, vergebens . . . Ihr sollt besser leben, freier, ohne Ängste. Jede Last, jeder Schmerz

ist vergänglich, traut euch, habt keine Angst vor dem Leben. Dinçer, ich bin müde, setze diesem Märchen einen Punkt.”—*My name is Fatma, the guest worker, the piece-rate breaker. Everything that found no language in me should now open its pages on your tongues. If you will allow me, I would like to offer you a small piece of advice. We blindly tried to heal the pain of uprooting with property, with money—in vain. You should live better, more freely, without fear. Every burden, every pain is fleeting; dare to live, do not be afraid of life. Dinçer, I am tired—put a full stop to this fairy tale.* (Güçyeter 2022)

The main characters, Dinçer and Hanife/Fatma, portrayed by Taner Şahintürk and Sesede Terziyan, respectively, embodied the characters explicitly described in the novel with authenticity and depth. Terziyan possessed a smooth yet weighted mezzo-alto vocal timbre for both Hanife and Fatma that told the story of age, weariness, and at times, joy and hope. Hanife’s vocal quality tended toward more pleading with notes that reached higher octaves, while Fatma’s vocal quality tended toward a lower laryngeal, earthy quality that grounded the physical and vocal performance of Fatma’s physical decline. Her emotional acuity for scenes with Şahintürk was layered with contextual meaning, physical focus, and vocal precision. Her commanding presence provided a compelling core character to center the story.

Şahintürk was equally persuasive portraying Dinçer from youth through adulthood. “Mother!”, a lyric he sang often in a guttural rock tone that symbolized yearning and frustration. He frequently used the entire stage to exhibit breaking out of the perpetual obstacles plaguing his family while also conveying stages of physical growth and maturation. An apt musician, Şahintürk held the cordless microphone with the comfort of a rock star, sauntering around the stage and belting lyrics that connected his emotions to the text. Writing with a piece of chalk on the walled chalkboard was another heightened physical gesture Şahintürk used to emphatically express what the character of Dinçer was thinking or feeling in the moment. Both Şahintürk and Terziyan imbued each moment of connection, whether physical, vocal, or energetic, with sincerity, gravitas, and focus.

The lead actors are accompanied by a vibrant five-piece band led by composer Peer Neumann, whose traditional Turkish folk soundtrack, combined with contemporary German and English original music, enhanced the show’s memory narratives. Streamlined subtitles were shown on upper panels positioned on both sides of the stage, providing translations for the dialogue, original music, and musical covers spoken and sung in Turkish, German, and English.

Hakan Savaş Mican adapted the novel for the stage and directed the production with devised elements that evoked recognition of a retelling from present-day Dinçer who guides us back into the history of his personal tale. The acting style primarily positioned the acting aesthetic in hyper-realism within the directorial framework of fantasy and staged memories. The musicians performed on stage with the actors instead of musical pit, centering the importance of the musical number in the storytelling while often employing three languages (Turkish, German, and English) and various music genres (rock and Turkish folk music). The approach added a multifaceted aural and corporeal perspective to the tension the characters were experiencing while existing between their two worlds. Alissa Kolbusch’s glossy stage design highlighted the transient nature of Dinçer’s early years through a combination of minimalist factory motifs coupled with rock-and-roll accents that were also transitory. Sylvia Rieger’s effective costume design supported the transition through various decades of Fatma and Dinçer’s journey with simple costume pieces that contained muted browns and orange tones for the 1960s and 1970s era and gradually shifted to vibrant pinks and greens in the 1980s and 1990s.

The production was well received, with one reviewer writing, “What could have been a sad recounting of immigrants’ woes, it turns into a musical that keeps hope alive and pulls the audience into its orbit” (Jansen 2025). Another publication wrote, “Hakan Savaş Mican, who has repeatedly explored generational conflicts among Turkish migrants and their long-untold biographies, has adapted Dincer Gücyeter’s auto-fictional debut novel, creating an equally sensitive and dignified mother–son portrait for two exceptional actors. . . They both fill their characters with zest for life and ready wit, giving these two people—who have stayed close in spite of all their estrangement—a dry sense of humour and tear-wrenching ardency” (Berliner Festspiele 2025).

2. Migration and the “Guest Worker” Myth

As an artist and academic who has moved my multicultural family many times for work opportunities or lack thereof, I consider myself to be a labor migrant and was deeply intrigued by Dincer Gücyeter’s autobiographical work. The universality of migrancy, national mythos, and creative and cultural labor costs furthered my curiosity about Gücyeter’s story and its implications regarding Turkish migration and the sacrifices of cultural pluralism and identity. Like many families who migrate for work seeking a brighter future for their households and descendants, strenuous labor loads are often the means by which the family survives. A grandchild of Turkish migrants shares, “My grandmother worked in a food processing plant. Their days were work and little else. The most important thing was to make sure that their children would have a better life” (Hille 2021).

Germany is home to the largest population of people with Turkish roots outside of Turkey; however, the misrepresentation of the Turkish–German community continues to be a structural issue within Germany (Hille 2021). Turkish and German governments agreed to a labor treaty in 1961 that would bring Turkish workers to Germany for a period of two years without their families through an application process during the economic boom after World War II. The migrants were called guest workers, or *Gastarbeiter*. This agreement ended for many countries by 1973 due to economic decline (Prevezanos 2011). The guest workers were expected to return to Turkey after the two-year contract in order to avoid encouraging large-scale immigration from their countries of origin, which included Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia (Prevezanos 2011). However, many companies realized that the retraining process was too tedious and costly and soon invited Turkish workers to bring their families to Germany. As a result, over half of the Turkish guest workers remained in the country, forming generational communities despite their originally temporary designation (Prevezanos 2011).

Turkish contributions to German culture have been significant; however, German laws and policies did not shift to accommodate this transcultural reality. Contributors to *Humanity in Action* contextualize this issue by writing, “Even today, the social and economic problems of Turkish immigrants are considered to be the problems of ‘the Turks, the migrants,’ but are rarely addressed as social problems within German society or as a ‘German problem’” (Böttchner et al. 2009). The persistent othering remains an issue despite many children of Turkish guest workers identifying themselves as Turkish–German. The misrecognition of the Turkish community, therefore, functions as a structural condition rather than a temporary social misunderstanding.

Hille shares the story of Burak Yilmaz, a third-generation child of Turkish migrants, who states that his grandparents and family were not, and continue to not be, accepted by the German population. After experiencing racial abuse while attempting to vote during a recent election, Yilmaz laments, “Racism is still a part of everyday life. There are always pinpricks and provocations, sometimes several times a month” (Hille 2021). The permanence of Turkish–German life continues to compete with the guest worker myth,

which frames migrants as temporary labor rather than social participants. This tension extends beyond everyday interactions and into the cultural sectors of German society.

Ela Gezen, a prominent scholar in Turkish–German culture and theatre, advocates for the continued reclamation of heritage and identity in her co-authored article, “An Archive of Migration: The Ballhaus Naunynstraße in the 1980s.” Gezen and co-author Olivia Landry draw on the work of Azadeh Sharifi and Lizzie Stewart, writing, “At a moment when ‘postmigrant’ cultural production, in particular theatre, presents radical new forms and narratives, there has also been a move to reclaim a heritage and genealogy that assert, if not direct historical continuity, then at least conceptual influence” (Gezen and Landry 2023; Sharifi 2016; Stewart 2013). Their investigation of theorists Diana Taylor and Katrin Sieg also wrestles with the benefits and contradictions of “theatre as archive” (Gezen and Landry 2023) for the Turkish–German community, one that seeks to embrace artistic traditions and societal contributions while also acknowledging Sieg’s perception of the archive “as a metaphor for exclusionary power and immutability that speaks to the institutionalized tradition of German theatre; a tradition postmigrant theatre has sought to challenge” (Gezen and Landry 2023). Thus, postmigrant realities and identities continue to be asserted through both conventional and creative practices that simultaneously reclaim heritage and contest institutionalized exclusion.

The juxtaposed definition of German *Heimat*, or homeland, is further explored in *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum (Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare)*, a collection of essays crafted to write about the “. . .often-overlooked and yet undeniably existential aspects of real life from marginalized positionalities in Germany” (TRANSIT 2021). Collection editors Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah share, “. . .the concept of Heimat has never described a real place in Germany, but always, rather, the yearning for a particular ideal: a homogenous, white, Christian society in which men have the final say and women worry about childbirth—where other realities of life simply find no place” (TRANSIT 2021). In the essay “Visible” by Sasha Marianna Salzmann, they write, “Assimilation leads to a people’s ruin. Why then do we try to belong? What promises does it hold, to be just like everyone else, to ‘be normal’? And can we really believe, after all the experiences of the past century, that one will be protected as a minority within a community if one is quiet and behaves as inconspicuously as possible?” (TRANSIT 2021).

In Aydemir’s personal essay on community overexhaustion and mental health, she shares her personal story in “Work”: “I grew up in the Germany of the 1990s, where the contradictory slogans ‘foreigners are lazy’ and ‘foreigners take away our jobs’ were competing with one another—sometimes in the same mouths. In my own family—who had immigrated through the early 1970s labor recruitment treaties between West Germany and Turkey—no one could afford to be lazy or to take anyone else’s job away. . . . That migrant workers did not speak German and barely ‘integrated’ was not of interest back then. On the contrary: better they kept to themselves, lived together in the same neighborhoods, and practiced their ‘own’ culture and religion. It was easier to control them that way and send them back again when they were no longer needed” (TRANSIT 2021). She further acknowledged the unsettling reality that, despite having grown up in Germany and receiving naturalization approval, proof of social acceptance remained tethered to the maintenance of labor productivity and wages. Remarks such as “Of course we are diverse. We have Fatma after all!” (TRANSIT 2021) thus remained prevalent as symbols of anti-integration, even for the current generation.

3. Fairytales as National Mythos and Adult Cultural Technology

“Once upon a time” is a familiar fairy tale device and invitation for the listener, beckoning both history and inheritance. However, the definition of what a fairytale is—and

the distinction between fairytales, fables, and folktales—is fraught and often contested. Some scholars believe fairytales must deal with magic; fables are stories passed down from oral traditions that contain animal characters; and folktales are similar but involve human subjects with lessons to teach us (Heiner 2020). One scholar surmises:

“My own definition of fairy tale goes something like this: A fairy tale is a story—literary or folk—that has a sense of the numinous, the feeling or sensation of the supernatural or the mysterious. But, and this is crucial, it is a story that happens in the past tense, and a story that is not tied to any specifics. If it happens ‘at the beginning of the world,’ then it is a myth. A story that names a specific ‘real’ person is a legend (even if it contains a magical occurrence). A story that happens in the future is a fantasy. Fairy tales are sometimes spiritual, but never religious.”

—Marcia Lane, *Picturing a Rose: A Way of Looking at Fairy Tales* (Lane 1993)

Tolkien has much to say about fairytales—or “fairy-stories”—and their definitions, writing:

“The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie. . . I will say only this: a ‘fairy-story’ is one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be. . . Faërie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician.”

—J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *Tree and Leaf* (Tolkien 1965)

Although the term “*fairy tale*” is polysemous in nature, the phrase is often utilized to depict a familiar and magical children’s story in which the protagonist overcomes various trials to establish an ending defined as “happily ever after.” However, the Brothers Grimm, two librarians of German descent from a poverty-stricken background, never intended their stories of hardship and trickery to be read by children due to their often horrifying and gruesome contexts (Zipes 2015). Their scholarship flourished primarily out of the need to care for their three younger siblings after the death of their parents amid financial pressures (Zipes 2015). As Jack Zipes explains, the Grimms believed that “the most natural and pure forms of culture—those which held the community together—were linguistic and based in history,” and that modern literature, although often remarkably rich, “was artificial and thus could not express the genuine essence of Volk culture that emanated naturally from experience and bound the people together” (Zipes 2015). Their national recognition, coupled with an eventual worldwide reputation, provided a central role in codifying written fairy tales, extracting stories from oral tradition, and elevating the culture of common people onto the page, thus enhancing Germany’s reputation and its desire to recast itself as a fairy-tale nation, even amid its tenuous socio-political history.

Bruno Bettelheim’s controversial yet widely recognized *The Struggle for Meaning* similarly argues that fairy tales are far more than anecdotal children’s stories. He contends that fairy tale structures provide psychological survival scripts for daily life, underdog struggles, and the reality that many children are isolated from extended family networks and centralized communities (Bettelheim 1977). In “*Why Grown-Ups Still Need Fairy Tales*,” Marguerite Johnson writes that fairy tales, along with the myths and mysteries of life, often shape our hopes and dreams for humanity (Johnson 2017). Although not a fairy tale, the lyric from the blockbuster musical *Hamilton*, “Immigrants, we get the job done!”, captures the romanticized version of the American national mythos. Meritocracy lives at the center of the national narrative that anyone from anywhere in the world can come to America, pick oneself up by their “bootstraps,” and achieve the American dream for their family and their future. Similarly, Aydemir recounts a similar dynamic in her essay, “. . .when I

look around, I don't see anyone in this country working as hard as (im)migrants. No one." (TRANSIT 2021).

The story of *Hamilton* and its theme "Immigrants, we get the job done!" sustains the notion that cultural evolution within a nation-state is celebrated through the infiltration of varied customs and traditions brought by those who come to the country for labor opportunities. Differences between U.S. and German national myths may be present in whether invited labor is encouraged to remain long-term and contribute to an emerging society and its socio-political culture, or alternatively, to exist as a "guest" with no intention of remaining or contributing culturally. However, regardless of advertising, both nation-states gain labor and support in building infrastructure without a promise of societal integration. Thus, the realities of cultural extraction, loss, and extreme fatigue belie migrants who come for the dream and remain for a figment of the illusion.

Immigrants and migrants from global communities often rely on comparable systemic myths to explain and adapt to new lives: a journey away from home, struggles along the way, moments of triumph, and the promise, often deferred, of happily ever after. Yet what is lost in reworking the national narrative is the continued dominance of the marginalized migrant community through systemic barriers to assimilation and opportunity. It therefore makes sense that Güçyeter frames his family's transcultural search for prosperity within an archetypal narrative structure. Dinçer's hero journey to discover identity beyond survival becomes a powerful framework for enduring distress, displacement, and injustice. Unfortunately, the culturally rich heritage that he and Fatima bring to Germany does not guarantee equal status or easy rewards, regardless of how much they contribute in terms of labor.

Consequently, *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* functions as a migrant counter-fairy tale, standing in contrast to dominant cultural narrative implications that migrants can attain personal and communal fulfillment and success in a new land. In the traditional fairy tale form, migrants appear as heroic laborers whose work enriches the host nation, while the promised happily ever after remains deferred or denied. Children are left in a liminal state, caught between cultural loss, blended national identity, and inherited labor expectations. Thus, the definition of what a fairy tale is and what it can be is left to the leading migrant characters.

4. The Cost of Cultural and Creative Labor

The Turkish-German creative community specifically struggles with questions of identity despite its many contributions to the German artistic landscape. The Maxim Gorki Theatre is one of the most prominent institutions pioneering artistic work that grapples with the contradictions of European nationhood. The theatre is a leading postmigrant institution that celebrates groundbreaking work through its exploration of historical legacies from multicultural perspectives. Although the field of postmigrant research is an evolving landscape, Regina Römhild purports in her chapter "Postmigrant Europe: Discoveries beyond ethnic, national, and colonial boundaries" that, "The critical debate of postmigrant research was initially an intervention focused on Germany" and "The critical intervention, related to the concept of postmigration, was originally formulated by Shermin Langhoff within the world of theatre." (Römhild 2021). Thus, Langhoff's reformation of the migrant experience transitions away from centering on "...the 'Other,' but instead on the society created by the 'Other'" (Römhild 2021) and positions the theater and the stories told on stage as primarily players in the field of transnational studies and migrantology (Römhild 2021) as well as diasporic studies specifically with regard to Germany. The theatre's repertoire is described as art that "mixes a familiar German theater aesthetic—director-driven revivals of classics—with works that grapple with contemporary politics, particularly immigration"

(Shea 2015). The Gorki's homepage denotes a large part of its mission as an invitation "to a public space in which today's human condition and our conflict of identity will be reflected through the art of making theatre and watching theatre, in order to contribute to a thorough and patient debate about living together in today's diverse world" (Maxim Gorki Theater n.d.). Productions such as *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* appropriately suit the institution's vision.

However, many artists wrestle with whether to center migrant struggles in their work. Tuncay Kulaoğlu, a journalist, filmmaker, and co-founder of the film festival Turkey/Germany, argues, "Migration is just part of personal experience. The need to label something reflects society's desire to homogenize something that is not homogenous at all" (Böttchner et al. 2009). Shermin Langhoff, the artistic director of the Gorki since 2013 (Schmid 2018), has also acknowledged that within the theatre scene, a form of Turkophobia existed even in Turkish theatre itself (Böttchner et al. 2009). Actor and theatre practitioner Yilmaz Atmaca offers an alternative view, suggesting that theatre can provide a space to address these tensions implicitly, noting that participants are not forced to express opinions directly but may do so behind the mask of their role (Böttchner et al. 2009). It is within the cultural context of Turkish–German interconnection that Güçyeter's use of migrant-centered fairytale framing becomes significant. His work provides a communal portrayal of marginalized experiences while empowering personal narrative and self-expression.

Still, Wustman asserts that creativity becomes another burden for the family to bear, leaving Dinçer searching for his own language while honoring his story of origin (Wustmann 2022). As Yasemin Yildiz describes in her book *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, many Turkish immigrants are negotiating "traumatic (trans)national histories" (Yildiz 2011). We see that Dinçer's story is a creative navigation of "official history and private storytelling" (Yildiz 2011), which shares inherited collective memories while also esteeming the personal tale. Dinçer is wrestling with his Turkish–German identity while also attempting to become an artist. The cost of his desire for creative labor and cultural input is the loss of both national identities—through his mother's disapproval (Turkish) and his refusal to work in a designated migrant job (German). Instead, he takes the chance to exchange both, if not navigate a third identity as an artist—his chosen vocation and Dinçer's personally desired fairytale.

The piece centers matriarchal sacrifices and alludes to the unsung maternal labor that stabilizes migrant communities by guiding children to narrate and redefine their lives through tangible and imagined realities. The choice to center images that are traditionally considered hyperfeminine—high-heeled shoes and a sparkling sequined halter-top gown—featuring the grandmother, mother, and female voices on stage and in the band-supports Yildiz's postmonolingualism concept that motherhood is a preservation of culture and native identity, not just an evolution or assimilation into the chosen foreign culture. Fatma is the holder of the past and the present. Dinçer's rebellion to begin a new and specifically artistically focused life challenges Fatma's maternal wisdom and potentially jeopardizes their cultural inheritance and her self-sacrifice.

However, Dinçer and Fatma's challenges extend beyond physical topography, language, and inherited memory. The body also becomes a somatic battleground for Fatma when she sustains a work injury from the Mercedes carburetor factory. Her physical trauma diminishes her ability to financially provide, and her desperation for Dinçer to find suitable employment intensifies. Her tangible and metaphorical labor stripes are irreversible, further marking Turkish migrants as the ultimate "other" in Germany.

Yet the focus on survival created tension for the next generation. The children of migrants wanted more than work; they wanted to dream of what their future could be in this new land, to become something wholly themselves that was not quite Turk-

ish and not fully German. Verena Niepel's work on reframing Turkish artist's work in Berlin, asks "What does an artwork that speaks of non-belonging look like?" and examines how, "Turkish artists take their feelings of non-belonging, materialize them, and empower themselves by developing a "visual past perfect" that speaks of their emotions." (Niepel 2024). Sonia Guiñansaca describes a similar dynamic of discovery within America's Dreamers. The term is defined and explained by the American Immigration Council as "...Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) was introduced in 2001. ...young undocumented immigrants have been referred to as 'Dreamers.' ... While the various versions of the bill have contained some key differences, they all would have provided a pathway to legal status for undocumented people who came to this country as children." (American Immigration Council 2024). Guiñansaca states, "Speaking very specifically from my generation of Dreamers, migrant communities are not allowed to imagine. It is still surprising for migrant communities to be seen as creatives and able to imagine for themselves" (Vasquez 2020).

For Dincer, he realizes he must become a cultural strategist by finding methods to survive while also pursuing his true self through art. The double act of cultural performance and identity that a migrant artist must contend with often takes its toll, leaving few options for personal, cultural, or creative breakthroughs. Dincer must use his German location to identify spaces where he can find paying work—albeit away from his mother—while continuing to explore the world and his deeper personhood and true vocation. Dincer uses the benefits of the Germany arts scene and work allowances to develop his artistry, introducing the concept of cultural work to the migrant chronicle rather than manual labor exclusively, hence creating his personal hard-earned modern fairy tale.

5. Conclusions: Reframing the Fairytale

By the end of the production of *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*, we realize that Dincer and Fatma's story is a fairytale in its truest and most original form. Life, identity, and the journeys one takes to follow their dreams and build a better life are far from easy and were originally told within communities to help people feel less alone. For that reason, it can only be assumed that the struggles that accompany the human condition, and especially the migrant, are why fairytales continue to persevere.

The irony embedded in Gücyeter's title language can allude to both a personal and collective retelling of a tale simultaneously. Fairy tales are assumed to be pure, exciting, and ultimately end happily. But most importantly, they are not supposed to be real—only probable lessons or potential implications. Conversely, Gücyeter repositions fairytales with this idealized structure as myths, similar to the Brothers Grimm. His tale asserts that fairytales address contemporary anxieties and connect 'others' locally and globally to universal truths that speak to specific human predicaments on a shared scale.

Through Gücyeter's conceptual framing of the fairytale, we can conclude that migration represents an evolution of the modern fairytale condition—the migrant hero emerges as a global archetype, dreams often shift from one generation to the next, and the shared logic suggests that there is often trial with little or no reward, and nothing is promised in the pursuit of a better life. Nonetheless, it is the pursuit of fairy tale life itself that is worth telling. As Aydemir's essay ascribes, "Migration is always a promise of a better future, a German Dream. My grandparents' German Dream was to set some money aside and buy a piece of land with it in Turkey. My parents' German Dream was to give their children access to higher education and to drive a big German car. And what is my German Dream?" (TRANSIT 2021). Dincer's dream is to become an artist and live a life that embraces every aspect of his Turkish, German, personal, and creative identity. Thus, *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* becomes the ultimate Turkish–German fairytale.

Recalling Bettelheim's perspective on why fairytales persist, *Unser Deutschlandmärchen* correctly reframes the fairytales' purpose to be a teacher of endurance, not comfort. Migrants are the modern fairytale heroes who overcome physical, mental, cultural, and existential challenges to build new lives and vibrant cultural pathways against all odds. Many migrants remain in the ongoing liminal journey of navigating multiple communities and day-to-day realities without the guarantee of closure. The Gorki's production is an essential disruption of the migrant myth and is a call for acknowledgment, transmutation, and systemic equity. Consequently, Dincer's counter-conventional fairytale dialectics shift from 'happily ever after' to continual creation, giving a reality-based perspective for migrants to traverse multifaceted identities within divergent communities.

Funding: Departmental funds from my home university were used for travel expenses but were not specified for this research article. This research received no additional external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used the version is ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5 series) for the purposes of initial data organization and standard editing feedback. The author has reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- American Immigration Council. 2024. The DREAM Act: An Overview; The DREAM Act, DACA, and Other Policies Designed to Protect Dreamers. *Fact Sheet*, May 8. Available online: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/dream-act-overview/> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Berliner Festspiele. 2025. *Theatertreffen 2025: Unser Deutschlandmärchen*. Available online: <https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/theatertreffen/programm/2025/10-inszenierungen/unser-deutschlandmaerchen> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Bettelheim, Bruno. 1977. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Knopf.
- Böttchner, Anika, Sara Burford, and Alison Morris Niebauer. 2009. Beyond Stereotypes: How Artists of Turkish Descent Deal with Identity in Germany. *Humanity in Action*. Available online: https://humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/beyond-stereotypes-how-artists-of-turkish-descent-deal-with-identity-in-germany (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Gezen, Ela, and Olivia Landry. 2023. An Archive of Migration: The Ballhaus Naunynstraße in the 1980s. *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques* 27. Available online: <https://www.critical-stages.org/27/an-archive-of-migration-the-ballhaus-naunynstrasse-in-the-1980s/> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Goethe-Institut. 2023. Fairytales of Our Germany. Available online: <https://www.goethe.de/ins/hon/en/bib/buc/623/24744166.html> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Güçyeter, Dinçer. 2022. *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*. Berlin: Mikrotex.
- Heiner, Heidi Anne. 2020. *What Is a Fairy Tale?* SurLaLune Fairy Tales. Available online: <https://www.surlalunefairytales.com/intro-pages/what-is-a-fairy-tale.html> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Hille, Peter. 2021. In 1961, Germany Needed Workers and Turks Answered the Call. *DW*. October 5. Available online: <https://www.dw.com/en/the-german-turkish-recruitment-agreement-60-years-on/a-59398455> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Jansen, Angelika. 2025. *Unser Deutschlandmärchen at Gorki Theater Berlin*. *Berkshire Fine Arts*. January 29. Available online: https://berkshirefinearts.com/01-29-2025_unser-deutschlandm-rchen-at-gorki-theater-berlin.htm (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Johnson, Marguerite. 2017. Friday Essay: Why Grown-Ups Still Need Fairy Tales. *The Conversation*. Available online: <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-why-grown-ups-still-need-fairy-tales-87078> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Lane, Marcia. 1993. *Picturing a Rose: A Way of Looking at Fairy Tales*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Maxim Gorki Theater. n.d. *Unser Deutschlandmärchen*. Available online: <https://www.gorki.de/en/unser-deutschlandmarchen> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- New Books in German. 2024. *Unser Deutschlandmärchen [Our German Fairytale]*. Available online: <https://www.new-books-in-german.com/recommendations/our-german-fairy-tale/?output=pdf> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Niepel, Verena. 2024. *Turkish Artists in Berlin: Creative Journeys of Non-Belonging*. Ph.D. thesis, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

- Prevezanos, Klaudia. 2011. Turkish guest workers transformed German society. *Deutsche Welle*. October 30. Available online: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-guest-workers-transformed-german-society/a-15489210> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Römhild, Regina. 2021. Postmigrant Europe: Discoveries beyond ethnic, national, and colonial boundaries. In *Postmigration: Art, Culture, and Politics in Contemporary Europe*. Edited by Anna Meera Gaonkar, Astrid Sophie Øst Hansen, Hans Christian Post and Moritz Schramm. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. Available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv371b2gk.5> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Schmid, Rebecca. 2018. Bringing Her Turkish Background to German Theater. *The New York Times*. March 7. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/arts/bringing-her-turkish-background-to-german-theater.html> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Sharifi, Azadeh. 2016. Theatre and migration: Documentation, influences, and perspectives in European theatre. In *Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe*. Edited by Manfred Brauneck and ITI Germany. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 321–415.
- Shea, Christopher D. 2015. Maxim Gorki Theater Leads an Immigrant Vanguard in Berlin. *The New York Times*. April 26. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/theater/maxim-gorki-theater-leads-an-immigrant-vanguard-in-berlin.html> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Stewart, Lizzie. 2013. Countermemory and the (Turkish-)German theatrical archive: Reading the documentary remains of Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Karagöz in Alamania* (1986). *TRANSIT: A Journal of Travel, Migration and Multiculturalism in the German-Speaking World* 8: 1–22. [CrossRef]
- Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1965. On fairy-stories. In *Tree and Leaf*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- TRANSIT. 2021. Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare (Eure Heimat ist Unser Albtraum). Edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah. Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi and Em Sandberg. *TRANSIT: A Journal of Travel, Migration and Multiculturalism in the German-Speaking World* 2020: 12. Available online: <https://escholarship.org/uc/transit/0/0> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Vasquez, Tina. 2020. What We Lose When Migrant Folks Are Pushed Away from Creative Work. *Prism Reports*. August 24. Available online: <https://prismreports.org/2020/08/24/what-we-lose-when-migrant-folks-are-pushed-away-from-creative-work/> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Wustmann, Gerrit. 2022. Our German Fairytale: Reality, Crueller Than Fiction. *Qantara.de*. December 6. Available online: <https://qantara.de/en/article/our-german-fairytale-reality-crueller-fiction> (accessed on 19 January 2026).
- Yildiz, Yasemin. 2011. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 144–52.
- Zipes, Jack. 2015. How the Brothers Grimm Saved Fairy Tales. *National Endowment for the Humanities*, March–April. Available online: <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/marchapril/feature/how-the-grimm-brothers-saved-the-fairy-tale> (accessed on 19 January 2026).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.