

Kurdistan is the world of hundreds of thousands of villages which have vanished in the labyrinth of a cruel nature. Everything in this land is mirage. Its history is nothing more than a cloud of dust and its borders are not clear¹.

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The Kurdish Novel: Diaspora, Identity and Cultural Diversity.

Introduction

From a European perspective, the Kurdish novel has a short history: during the 1930s, “some Kurdish novels” written in Kurmanji “were published in the former Soviet Union”, but only at the end of the “twentieth century” did the novel “become an established literary” genre. Xeznedar states that the “emergence of the Kurdish literary productions started with poetry, lasting until the last decades of the nineteenth century”. It could be stated that the history of Kurdish literature is

¹ Elî Bextiyar, *Ewarey Perwane*, Rehend, Stockholm, 1998, pp. 121-122.

dominated by Kurdish poetry, which has a dominant role even in the diaspora². The “cultural renaissance, which coincided with the spread of national ideas, led to the appearance of Kurdish press (a Kurdish newspaper was founded in Cairo in 1898) and gave impetus to the use of prose” in general. In twentieth century Kurdish prose, short story, novel and drama flourished, even though poetry was the dominant literary production of that time, and had the upper hand, quantitatively and qualitatively³.

The Kurdish novel was slow to develop due to political and social barriers, denial “policy toward the Kurds”, and were “conducted by the newly formed nation states which governed” the separate parts of Kurdistan⁴. Thus, it could be stated that the Kurdish novel and literature, in general, are recent phenomena, as some scholars have pointed out, and are flourishing in modern time. Over the last five centuries Kurdistan, the area “inhabited mainly by Kurds, has never enjoyed political unity”: Kurds were governed for almost five centuries by at least two empires, the Safavid and Ottoman⁵. They could not rule themselves, and were absorbed and subjected to the cultural, economic and political system of the rulers. Following World War I, the Kurdish territory was divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the new nation states that emerged after the fall of Ottoman Empire. In modern times, Kurds never had a defined state and a united nation in a juridical sense, and did not enjoy a common political, administrative and economic unity. The aim of Turkish, Arabic and Persian nation states, was to absorb the modern Kurdish literature, culture and identity into the main cultural field. Therefore, the Kurds have been subjected to various political, social and cultural systems, and their literature developed without having “organic interrelations with each other”⁶. The absence of a Kurdish nationhood is one of the most visible developments of the Kurdish novel and poetry, within which the fragmented culture and the diversity of identities are reflected.

Kurdish literature: a minority literature produced in the language of the majority

The “emergence of nation states in the Middle-East”, based mostly on their ethnic foundation, deprived Kurds of their rights, including the right to speak their language in public in some parts of Kurdistan, and to receive an education in their mother-tongue⁷. In Iraqi Kurdistan of the 1920s, after the emergence of the new state, there was a limited possibility for Kurds to be educated in their language, which brought the slow flourishing of the Kurdish novel. Ahmadzadeh argues that “the Kurds are considered a nation-as-people”, because they are deprived of their own rights in their homeland, and in this context, as Even-Zohar points out, literature plays a great role

² Xeznedar Marif, 'Kurdish Prose (1945-1961)', *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, Volume II, 1996-1997, pp. 65.

³ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p. 139.

⁴ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, In search of a Kurdish novel that tells us who the Kurds are, *Iranian Studies* 40/5, December 2007, p. 579.

⁵ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p. 126.

⁶ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, In search of a Kurdish novel that tells us who the Kurds are, *Iranian Studies* 40/5, December 2007, p. 579.

⁷ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p. 66.

in social and cultural cohesion. In “some cases, people cannot speak about some nations and countries without referring to their literature”; “in spite of having no standard, well defined language”, the works are composed in various dialects and different orthographies⁸. Kurdish novels are composed at least in two major dialects, Sorani and Kurmanji, and are written according to three different orthographic systems: Arabic-Persian, Latin and Cyrillic. It can be stated that the fragmented character of the Kurdish society emerges through the diversity and inhomogeneity of its orthographic systems, and its literary production, where the latter is far from “being labelled a national literature with its attachment to a sovereign Kurdish nation state”⁹.

Due to the prohibition of Kurdish language, some of the Kurdish writers composed their works in the official and dominant languages of nation states that governed the Kurds, mainly in Arabic, Turkish and Persian. Kurdish literature can be seen as a minority literature produced in the language of the majority. This definition is applicable to the Kurdish case because there are many Kurdish writers who write in the official language of the countries which govern the Kurds. This fact has produced a debate among the Kurdish critics and intellectual circles on whether to consider these works as Kurdish literature¹⁰. Berwari (2012) argues that many Kurds write in non native languages (such as Persian, Arabic, Turkish, as well as European languages), but the content of their literary production reflects Kurdish culture, life and milieu: they reflect Kurdish life as in exile, and the Kurds’ struggle in the Middle-East¹¹.

Many outstanding Kurdish writers, like Ibrahim Yunisi and Salim Barakat, published their works in the “official language of the governing states; but the “common language of some national literature does not mean the same literature”¹². At the same time, Kurdish novels and poetry cannot be considered as part of a “national” and “unified” (Kurdish) literary discourse, since they have been produced in divided cultural, social, political and economic contexts, in different nations and different environments. Defining the boundaries of Kurdish literature is a highly problematic affair; given the absence of a Kurdish independent nation, a united Kurdish national literature with a shared language, orthography and thematic discourse could not develop. The policy of the nation states governing Kurds prevented the formation of a shared Kurdish cultural, linguistic and literary discourse, aiming at absorbing the Kurdish “diverse” identity, and making it an integral part of the national identity.

The lack of political freedom, national unity and linguistic diversity has shaped Kurdish literature and its fragmented character. Due to political conflicts, some Kurdish intellectuals have chosen the path of exile in Western countries, where they “have had the opportunity to publish their novels in their native dialects (Sorani and Kurmanji)”. In other cases they preferred to write in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Western languages, due to educational reasons, and for “the lack of a promising market”. It can be stated that Kurdish literature developed differently in each “non-Kurdish” state, in relation to the diverse cultural, social and political national contexts, resulting in

⁸ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, In search of a Kurdish novel that tells us who the Kurds are, *Iranian Studies* 40/5, December 2007, p. 580.

⁹ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p.176.

¹⁰ Ali Chooqee Eedo, Are novels written by Kurdish novelists in Arabic, Persian and Turkish considered Kurdish products in terms of content?, *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 1 (2), p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 31.

¹² Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p.128.

various literary themes and discourses¹³. Each nation state treated the Kurdish question in a different manner: from the outright denial policies towards Kurds (denying the right to identify themselves in a way different from the sovereignly declared identity), to some sort of acceptance and limited autonomy of Kurdish national rights¹⁴.

Delay in rise of the Kurdish Novel

The development of Kurdish literature, and in particular of the novel, has been influenced by social, cultural and economic factors, and also by the different policy of the various nation states toward the Kurdish issue. In this social and political context, every Kurdish reaction, “even the purely cultural ones”, was considered as hostile towards the sovereign powers of the different nation states governing the Kurds. Seeing as the literary and cultural production of the Kurds labelled as minority, was considered as hostile against the sovereign power, it could be stated in this context that “everything which has to do with Kurds is political”¹⁵. Being different from the “official” identity, and producing one’s own literature, was considered a political reaction against the sovereign power, so the development of Kurdish literature was highly influenced by political circumstances.

Kurdish political nationalism was closely linked to the rise and development of the Kurdish novel, which contributed to the construction of a national identity, and played a crucial role in the improvement of Kurdish culture. It was a national duty to promote and develop Kurdish culture, in turn literature, as pointed out by Anderson, it is “the nursery of nationality”, that enforces Kurdish nationalism¹⁶. The deny recognition of the Kurds demands and rights, the suppressive policy and absence of democratic conditions, obliged millions of Kurds to migrate and leave their homeland¹⁷. The diversity of identity of Kurds from the officially accepted sovereign identity, was not tolerated and object of severe restrictive politics. The large Kurdish migration “in western Turkey, throughout Europe and the Middle-East, in North America and Australia” has had a direct consequence on the Kurdish novel and literature¹⁸.

The diaspora played a significant role in the rise and development of the Kurdish literature and novel, and in the construction of a defined identity, as pointed out by Benedict Anderson. In this historic and political context, the Kurds exiled in Europe, Australia and USA, had the golden opportunity to contribute to the development of Kurdish literature and culture, through the establishment of institutions and significant cultural activities. Kurdish political parties financed the

¹³ Özlem Belçim Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan, Identity, Culture and Society*, I. B. Tauris, London & New York, 2015, p. 83.

¹⁴ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p.131.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 130.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons. Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, Verso, London & New York, 1998, p. 59.

¹⁷ The efforts of “establishing an autonomous Kurdistan have resulted in the revisions of demands for independence by political parties in the beginning of the 21st century”, contemporary issue which still remain unsolved, since Kurds have not yet obtained a unified Kurdish state. *Ibid.* 163.

¹⁸ van Bruissen Martin, *The Kurds in Movement: Migration, Mobilisation, Communications and The Globalisation of the Kurdish Question*, Islamic Area Studies Project, Tokyo, 1999, p. 3.

cultural activities: they promoted the regeneration of Kurdish language and its standardisation, as well as the rise of literature, which in turn played a crucial role in the hands of Kurdish national movement, towards constructing a “national” identity. “Many of the most significant Kurdish cultural and political activities do not take place in Kurdistan but elsewhere (this is especially true of the Turkish part of Kurdistan)”¹⁹. The freedom to engage in cultural activities and to publish during the Kurdish diaspora, has been one of the “determining factors for the development of Kurdish literature”, particularly for the novel, resulting in a substantial number of publications, especially in Sweden.

The highest number of publications of Kurdish novels, journals, and cultural activities took place in Iraqi Kurdistan, in the former Soviet Union, more precisely in the Caucasus Republics, and in Sweden. The “Swedish school of Kurdish literature” has especially influenced the development of modern Kurdish literature and its language, resulting in 402 books in Kurmanji, published between 1971 and 1997, while in Turkey only 20 books were published between 1925 and 1980, as reported by Tayfun. In the 1980’s only a few novels had been published in the former Soviet Union, given the political obstacles of the fledgling Kurdish novel, as well as the boundaries between the four nation states that govern the Kurds. However, “in the 1980s the Kurdish novel took a step forward”, resulting in the publication of influential novels.

The publication of the first Kurdish novels

Modern Kurdish literature and novels have been influenced by Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literatures, among others, which in turn were affected by Western literature, through translated works, and by Middle-Eastern writers who were educated in the West, whose novels were also influenced by Western literature. During the twentieth century, Kurdish literature had hardly any direct contact with Western literature, instead the contact was through the Middle-Eastern literature, and the translated works in Arabic, Turkish and Persian, thus by literature of the nations that govern the Kurds. However, the situation of Kurds in the Soviet Union was different from other parts, for they had the opportunity to familiarize with modern western literature and modern literature in general. In the Soviet Union they could develop their own culture and express their identity through a rich cultural production, thus allowing the Kurdish novel to develop and flourish.

The scholar Resûl, alongside other renowned Kurdish scholars, considers Erebe Şemo's *Şivanê kurd (The Kurdish sheferd, 1927)* as the first Kurdish novel²⁰. The novel was published in 1935 after strict censorship, in Yerevan in the former Soviet Union, and in Beirut in the same year. The novel is based on the life of the writer, who was a Yazidi born near Kars, in Turkey, successively under Russian authority. During the World War I he functioned as an interpreter for the Russian Army in the Soviet Union; he was also the first Yazidi member of the Communist party²¹. During the thirties, the writer contributed to the development of a Latin based alphabet for the Kurdish language, at the Leningrad Institute of Oriental Studies, and to the development of Kurdish novel and literature. Erebe Şemo (1897-1978), also known as Arab Shamilov, has been considered

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 20.

²⁰ Resûl ‘Îzzeddîn Mistefa, Çîrokî Kurdî, in *Havîbûn*, No. 1, pp. 64-72.

²¹ John S. Guest, *Survival among the Kurds: A History of the Yezidis*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 201.

“the father of Kurdish novel” of the modern era, according to Kutlay; his novels are mainly written in line with socialist realism²². Among other novels of Şemo's, one could mention *Kurdê Elegozê* (*The Kurds of Elegozê*, 1958), *Jiyana Bextewar* (*Happy life*, 1969), *Hopo* (1969), the latter published in Baghdâd (1975) and in Sweden (1983). Other novelists could be mentioned, such as Egîdê Xudo and Hecîye Cindî, who contributed to the Kurdish novel in the former Soviet Union. The Kurdish novel evolved at the beginning of 1930s, due to the contribution of Kurmanji speaking Yazidi Kurds, who migrated to Russia from the Ottoman Empire after suffering religious discrimination. The production of novels in Russia shows the national support and sponsorship of cultural activities, especially after the October Revolution, and the contribution to the development of “diverse” literature.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the first Kurdish novel to be published (if we take into account the date of publication), is *Jani Gel* (*The Suffering people*), by the politician, writer and novelist Îbrahîm Eħmed (1914-2000), born in Sîlêmanî (Iraq). The novel was written in Sorani and published in 1969, edited in the Kurdish Journal *Rizgarî* in Baghdâd; in 1972 it was published in Sîlêmanî (Iraq), and in 1992 in Sweden, where it was transcribed into Kurmanji. In 1939, Îbrahîm became founder and editor of the Kurdish journal *Gelawêj*, published until 1947. In 1945 he was involved in politics, and became the chairman of Kurdistan Democratic Party in South Kurdistan, while in 1953 he became the Secretary General of the party. Due to his political engagement, he was given a two year prison sentence in 1947 by the Iraqi Regime Special Court. After his release, he contributed to Kurdish political and cultural activities, until 1975, when he decided to migrate in Britain. The novel *Jani Gel* was nevertheless written in 1956. Due to the political events of the time and the severe censorship, the writer was arrested, his book hidden by his relatives and published 13 years later. The writer set the novel in an Arabic environment, and gave the characters Arabic names instead of Kurdish ones. It was only in 1969 that he gave the characters Kurdish names. The novel was dedicated to the fighters of Algeria, however, the book is about the Kurdish war and the struggle for independence, and Kurdish aim of forming a Kurdish nation state.

During the second half of the 1980s, cultural activities and novel production were successful in the newly formed nation state of Iraq, and novelists such as Moħemmed Mukrî and Hisên 'Arif contributed to the growth of Kurdish literature, expanding the Kurdish novel, in Iraq and also in diaspora. Ahmadzadeh points out that the political and cultural situation of Kurds in Iraq is different from Syria, Turkey and other parts, “because of the particular situation of being ruled by the British mandate system during the formation of the Iraqi state, the issue of Kurdish identity has had, from the beginning, a completely different nature from the same Kurdish issue in the other parts of Kurdistan”²³. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the flourishing of Kurdish publications is due to the sponsoring of the Kurdish political parties, which facilitated the publication of poetry and novels, and provided political and economic support to the development of Kurdish works. Even so, “only during the last few years did Kurds have a chance [...] to publish books in Kurdish”²⁴. During the 1980s and 1990s a huge number of Iraqi Kurdish writers fled in exile, especially in Europe, where they could publish

²² Kutlay Naci, *Romana Kurdî*, Nudem, No. 18, 1996, p. 58.

²³ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p. 131; Ali Chooqee Eedo, *Are novels written by Kurdish novelists in Arabic, Persian and Turkish considered Kurdish products in terms of content?*, *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 1 (2), p.31.

²⁴ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *In search of a Kurdish novel that tells us who the Kurds are*, *Iranian Studies* 40/5, December 2007, p. 586.

their works without incurring in censorship. Among them, a large number of renowned writers could be mentioned, for example the novelists and poets Sherko Bekas, Abdullah Pashew, Ahmad Hardi, among others. The dominant themes in their works are national liberation, revolution, repression, exile, survival and suffering. Most of the Iraqi Kurdish writers are politically engaged with the Iraqi Kurdish nationalist movement, and they fled in exile in the West where their works have been published, and in some cases translated in European languages and in Arabic. The diaspora played an important role on Kurdish literature, which could develop and rise, and introduce new elements into Kurdish poetry and novels.

In Iran, the writer Rehîm Kâzi is considered the author of the first Kurdish novel in Sorani, based on the date of its publication (1961); indeed, prior to this date other novels in Sorani were written, however, due to political limitations, they were published only during the 1970s²⁵. Rehîm Kâzi's novel is entitled *Peşmerge (Partisan)*, it was published in Baghdâd in 1961. However, it was written in the Soviet Union where the writer sought exile from Iranian Kurdistan. Rehîm Kâzi wrote novels, short stories, articles; he was an intellectual, politically active in the Kurdish nationalist movement, as the previous writers mentioned. In 1946 he studied history in the former Soviet Union; after the fall of the Democratic Republic of Kurdistan, he decided to remain in the Soviet Union. The main themes in his novels are that of national liberation, the struggle of Kurds towards their achievements, and Kurdish national and cultural identity. Due to political reasons and cultural limitations, Kurdish novels written by Iranians could develop only in the 1990s, particularly thanks to the works published in exile²⁶. Hence, diaspora played a crucial role on the rise of Iranian Kurdish novel, due to the political and cultural openness in the West and support to cultural activities.

The same could be said for Turkey, where the Kurdish novel had the opportunity to rise and develop entirely in diaspora, since it was a crime to publish Kurdish works; however, during the beginning of the 1990s there was a partial opening to Kurdish cultural activities, that shows a slow change, despite its important impact in the cultural panorama. In 1977 Erebê Şemo's (1897-1978) *Şivanê kurd (The Kurdish sheferd, 1927)*, was the only Kurdish novel to be published in Istanbul until the 1990s. In Turkey, being a Kurd was a crime, thus denying the Kurds of their identity, culture and right to speak their language, at least until the early decade of the twentieth century. The same could be said about the Kurds in Syria, where they could not develop the Kurdish novel, culture and represent themselves, due to the strict policies of denial towards the "diverse" identity from the "official" majority identity. The Kurdish novels written by Syrians developed largely in diaspora; among them are: Helim Yusif, who lives in exile in Germany, where he wrote the novel *Sobarto* (1999), published in Turkey; Bavê Nazê, who lives exile in Moscow, where he wrote the novel *Çiyayen Bi Xwinê Avdayî (Mountains watered with Blood)*, among other works. The latter novel was also translated into Arabic and Russian, published in the former Soviet Union in 1981, and in Sweden in 1989.

In the framework outlined in this article, the diversity of cultures, languages and socio-political conditions that the Kurds have been subjected to is quite visible, and it is clearly reflected

²⁵ Annika Rabo, Bo Utas, *The Role of the State in West Asia*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2006, p. 69.

²⁶ Elisabeth Özdalga, Daniella Kuzmanovic, *Novel and Nation in the Muslim World, Literary contributions and National Identities*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, p. 68.

in the Kurdish novelistic discourse. The novels are produced in the two main Kurdish dialects, written in at least three (modified) orthographic systems, and they are strongly influenced by the literature of the states governing the Kurds, respectively Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the nations where Kurds fled in exile. The themes of the novels reflect those of the Kurdish struggle to prove their existence, their struggle for liberation, the memories of suffering, and the nostalgia for the lost homeland. It could be stated that Kurd's struggle to defend their national and cultural identity plays a central role in the novels, as well as the oppression of the Kurds. From this perspective, Kurdish literature (and novels), cannot be labelled as a unified national literature, due to the fragmentation and diversity of cultures that have shaped and influenced the development of Kurdish literature. The “homogenizing” policy of the nation states towards the Kurdish ethnic minorities also plays a crucial role, which dictated the main “official” culture, identity and language. It seems reasonable to surmise that common feature of the Kurdish novel is that of Kurds aim for the formation of an independent land, where to express their culture and identity, reflecting Kurdish nationalist ideals.

Conclusion

The political vetoes against Kurdish societies in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, have prevented Kurdish culture, literature and novel writing from growing and improving, due to harsh governmental control. Kurds have been subjected to different political conditions and treatments over time, by the four states that govern Kurdistan, “from a pure and absolute denial to some sort of limited autonomy”²⁷. The lack of a united Kurdish nation state, and the absence of a standard language among Kurds, has shaped Kurdish identities, culture and in turn the Kurdish novel. As Anderson points out: “the interrelationship of the Kurdish cultural and political nationalism is a determining factor in the emergence of the Kurdish novel”²⁸. The failure of Kurdish nationalism in creating an independent and unified Kurdish nation state has made it challenging to identify a specific Kurdish literature: it could be stated that the various social “backgrounds lead to the production of the different literary discourses”²⁹. In general, the Kurdish novel and literature, “have not been identified” with a nation state, due to the political barriers, geographical divisions and the fragmentation of their homeland; in essence, Kurdish novels developed without an interrelation with each other.

Modern Kurdish novelistic discourse and poetry produced by migrants is compatible with diasporic discourse, which represents the nostalgia for a “lost home”, and the struggle for a “homeland”. The Kurdish literature and novel depicts specific characters and worlds, and narrates the struggle of Kurds and their suffering for the lack of recognition of their human, national and democratic rights. The themes revolve around political issues and social relationships: their fragmented world, the diversity of the Kurdish identity in the framework of Arabic, Turkish and Persian nation states and in exile. The condition of Kurds in former Soviet Union and in Iraq (after the Gulf War during in the 1990s), is a privileged one: the former Soviet Union sustained Kurdish cultural production, and the Kurdish administration in Iraq heavily sponsored the growth of the

²⁷ Ahmadzadeh Hashem, *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Uppsala, 2003, p. 129.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 168.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 135.

Kurdish novel and culture, yielding a rich written culture.

In the limited frame of this article, the background of the Kurdish novel has been traced, its late evolution due to political, cultural and ethnic reasons, in the newly-formed context of Middle-East nation states, and among the Kurds who fled in exile. The Kurdish novel arose in absence of an independent Kurdish nation state, which subjected it to different policies toward the Kurds, and treated it as a minority culture subjected by the majority culture. The novel developed in isolation, since there was no correspondence between the four parts of Kurdistan. The development of the novel was influenced by the literature of the sovereign nation states (Arabic, Turkish, Persian), which in turn were influenced by Western literature, especially in the process of modernisation. The cultural, political and economic diversity of the fragmented Kurdistan, have shaped the Kurdish novel and its development in the Middle-East, in the West and the Former Soviet Union, resulting in a substantial number of publications and high level cultural activities.

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