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Kurdish fiction: From writing as resistance to aestheticised commitment | Kaveh Ghobadi [±]

Abstract

The establishment of modern Iran in 1925 accelerated a centralisation policy, which resulted in the oppression of Iran's national and cultural diversity. Under such unfavourable conditions, Kurdish fiction had a stuttering start with only three works since the publication of the first Kurdish novel in 1961 up until 1991, when the number of Kurdish fictional works produced in Iran began to increase steadily. This article addresses the question of commitment and aesthetics in Kurdish prose fiction by examining a short story collection and three novels published between 1961 and 2002. Whereas the earlier Kurdish writers primarily viewed fiction as a medium for cultural preservation and national liberation, around the turn of the 20th century a generation of Kurdish writers appeared who were as equally concerned with aesthetics as with politics.

Keywords: National liberation; modernism; aesthetics; Kurdish identity; Iranian Kurdistan.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

Çîroka kurdî: Ji nivîsîna berxwedanê bo pabendiyeye estetîk

Avakirina Îrana modern li sala 1925an lez da siyaseta navdikirinê, ku bû sebebê fetisandina cihêrengiya neteweyî û çandî ya Îranê. Li jêr şertên wisa xerab, destpêka çîrok û romanên kurdî gelek giran bû û bi tenê sê berhem çap bûn di navbera 1961 û 1991ê, dema ku berhemên edebî yên kurdî li Îranê her ku çû zêdetir bûn. Ev gotar berê xwe dide pîrsa pabendîya siyasî/îdeolojîk û estetîkê di edebiyata kurdî bi rêya tehlîla berhemeke kurteçîrokan û sê romanên di navbera 1961 û 2003 de çap bûyî. Di demekê de ku nivîskarên kurd yên pêşiyê edebiyat wek amrazêke parastina çandî û azadiya neteweyî diditin, li werçerxa sedsala 20an nişkekî nivîskarên kurd derhatin ku bi qasî siyaseta xwedanê xem û endîşeyên estetîk jî bûn.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Çîrokî kurdî: Le nûsînî berengarîyewe bo pabendbûnî cuwanînasî

Damezrandinî dewletî modêrnî Êran le 1925da siyasatî nawendindêtî xêratir kird. Emeş serkutkirdinî freyîy keltûrî û neteweyîy Êranî lêkewtewe. Le sayey em barûdoxe nalebareda, çîrokî kurdî seretayekî piçîrr piçîrrî hebû, le billawkirdinewey yekem romanî kurdî le sallî 1961 ta sallî 1991 tenha sê berhem billaw kirawetewe û le 1991 berhemî çîrokî kurdî le Êran destî be ziyadbûnî berdewam kird. Em babete kar leser pîrsî pabendbûn û cuwanînasî le çîrokî kurdîda dekat le rêgay hellsengandinî koberhemêkî kurteçîrok û sê roman ke le nêwan sallanî 1961 ta 2002da billaw kirawnetewe. Le katêkda cîlî pêşîy nûseranî Kurd be giştî çîrok nûsînyan wek amrazêk bo parastînî keltûr û rizgarîy niştîmanî debînî, le serûbendî hatînî sedey bîstemda neweyek le nûserî kurd peydabûn ke be heman radey siyasat bayexyan be cuwanînasîş deda.

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ABSTRACT IN ZAZAKI

Fîksîyonê kurdî: Nuştîşê xoverrodayoxkî ra ver bi wezîfeya estetîzekerdiye

Awankerdişê Îranê modernî yê serra 1925î bî sebebê sîyasetê merkezîkerdişî. Semedê nê sîyasetê merkezî ra zafrengîniya Îranî ya neteweyî û kulturî ameye bindestkerdene. Binê şertanê winasîyanê bêavantajan de, destpêkê fîksîyonê kurdî giran bî: mabênê serra 1961î, wexto ke romanê kurdî yo verên weşaniyabî, û serra 1991î, wexto ke Îran de weşanê eseranê fîksîyonî yê kurdî hêdî-hêdî aver şiyêne, tena hîrê eserî weşaniyabîyî. Na meqale persê wezîfedarî û estetîkî yê fîksîyonê kurdî ser o vîndena. Seba naye koleksîyonêkê hîkayeyan û hîrê romanê ke mabênê 1961 û 2002î de weşaniyayî, analîz benê. Nuştîxanê kurdî yê verênan fîksîyon heme çîyan ra ver sey wasîtaya muhafezekerdişê kulturî û xelasa neteweyîye diyêne. Labelê serê seserra 20. de neslê nuştîxanê kurdî yo newe vejîya meydan ke înan giraniya xo hem dayêne sîyasetî hem kî estetîkî ser.

Introduction

This article addresses the question of commitment and aesthetics in Kurdish fiction from Iranian Kurdistan since its emergence in 1961 to the present day by examining a short story and three novels from different periods. In this section, I will discuss the socio-political situation in Iran and its impact on the literary production in Iranian Kurdistan, followed by the theoretical framework informing this paper and a brief introduction of the selected texts.¹

Kurdish history is notoriously conflict-ridden and abounds with rebellions, failures, and massacres. It is a story that is still unfolding in most parts of Kurdistan. Following the demise of the Ottoman and Persian Empires, Kurds found themselves designated as minorities in the modern nation-states, which showed various levels of hostility and intolerance towards their culture and identity.² After the creation of modern Iran in 1925, both Reza Shah (1925–1941) and his son and successor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979), undertook a policy of denial and suppression towards the Kurdish language and

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² Iraqi Kurdistan became quasi-independent in 1991 after decades of severe war with different central governments (Yildiz, 2004). Following the establishment of modern Turkey in 1923 the Kurds were bitterly oppressed and their language and culture banned by the Turkish government. This relentless oppression has resulted in nearly four decades of warfare between the central government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). For more information, see Zeydanloğlu (2012). In Syria, the power vacuum following the civil war in 2011 provided Kurds with the opportunity to establish a de facto state. Before long they were attacked by ISIS and have ever since been at war with this group, and the future of their quasi-independence hangs in the balance. For more information, see Schmidinger (2018).

culture, which resulted in the prohibition or restriction of publication in the Kurdish language. In his attempt to set up a centralized modern national state, Reza Shah implemented “the exclusive use of the Persian language in education, administration, and the mass media” (Hassanpour, 1992: 126). Furthermore, he prohibited the use of the Kurdish language, first at school and then in public in both spoken and written forms. People could be humiliated and tortured on charges of simply speaking in Kurdish (McDowall, 2004: 225; Hassanpour, 1992: 126).

The Iranian Kurds’ situation slightly improved with the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941. His successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, undertook a less extreme measure against the Kurdish language and culture, especially “whenever the government was weak or threatened” to minimise the risk of rebellion in Kurdish areas (Hassanpour, 1992: 130). His government initiated and sponsored limited and controlled cultural activities, such as the “initiation and expansion of Kurdish broadcasting, limited publication in the Kurdish language,” which was mainly a response to developments in Iraq where the Kurdish population enjoyed far more cultural rights (*ibid.*). That said, none of these activities, as Sheyholislami (2012: 28) points out, enhanced “the status of Kurdish [language]. It was still considered a ‘dialect’ of Persian, was not taught in schools, and more importantly was not the medium of instruction in the formal school system.”

Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Kurds hoped to achieve their political and cultural rights. It soon became obvious that the new Islamic regime had not changed in terms of its attitude towards the “multilingual and multicultural nature of Iran” (Hassanpour, 1992: 131). They even refused to implement the limited cultural freedom stipulated in Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran:

[T]he official and common language and script of the people of Iran is Persian. Official documents, correspondence and statements, as well as textbooks, shall be written in this language and script, however, the use of local and ethnic languages in the press and mass media is allowed. The teaching of ethnic literature in the school, together with Persian language instruction, is also permitted. (Cited in Hassanpour, 1992: 131)

“The teaching of ethnic literature in the school” never took place in Iranian Kurdistan,³ but remarkably, publication in Kurdish, both private and state-sponsored increased after the revolution (Hassanpour, 1992: 131;

³ After a last-minute cancellation of the undergraduate programme in Kurdish Language and Literature at the University of Kurdistan in Sine (Sanandaj) in the academic year of 2003-2004, the module was re-inaugurated in the academic year of 2015-2016 (IRNA, 2015).

Sheyholislami, 2012: 33). “The rather relaxed policy on the use of Kurdish in broadcast and print media,” Hassanpour argues, “can be explained by the political situation prevailing in Kurdistan and the region” (1992: 131). Between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s and especially during the government of the reformist president Khatami (1997-2005) as many as twenty Kurdish periodicals were published (Sheyholislami, 2012: 33).⁴ With the end of Khatami’s presidency and Ahmadinejad’s coming to power, the relative cultural relaxation gave way to a relentless cultural oppression: most of the Kurdish periodicals, one after another, were shut down either due to “financial difficulties or political restrictions” (ibid.). Under such severe constraints, different genres in Kurdish literature suffered, but it was particularly difficult for Kurdish fiction, which was only born in the early sixties, to flourish and establish itself.⁵

The theoretical framework of this article is informed by Theodor W. Adorno’s writings on literature and aesthetics. Before Adorno, Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay, “What is Literature?,” addressed the question of commitment in literature. For him, the act of writing is to make a choice: the writer can either choose to make a change or remain indifferent to people’s sufferings. The prose writer, says Sartre (2001: 14), is someone who has chosen

[A] certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: ‘What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?’ The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change.

Sartre’s concept of *littérature engagée* stands in opposition to that of *l’art pour l’art*. The advocates of the latter view literature merely in aesthetic terms. Alain Robbe-Grillet, an influential theorist as well as the author of *Nouveau Roman*, holds a view of literature quite different from that of Sartre. For him, “art cannot be reduced to the status of a means in the service of a cause which transcends it, even if this cause were the most deserving, the most exalting” (1965: 37).

It appears that Adorno holds to the creed of *l’art pour l’art* when he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, his famous work published posthumously in 1970, “[i]f any social function can be ascribed to art at all, it is the function to have no

⁴ One can name, among others, Awêne, Aştî, Sirwan, Rojhellat, Merdum, Aso, Zîrêbar, Didgah, Riskan, Peyamî Kurdistan, Mehabad (Mahabad), and Pûşper. See Sheyholislami (2012: 33).

⁵ The section on Iran’s language policy towards its Kurdish population is a slightly modified version of the material in my PhD dissertation (Ghobadi, 2015).

function” (1984: 322). However, unlike Robbe-Grillet, he states that works of art stand in an interdependent relationship with society. In his view, *l'art pour l'art* “denies by its absolute claims that ineradicable connection with reality which is the polemical a priori of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real” (1980: 178). Adorno (1984: 352) ascribes a dual essence to art: as autonomous product and social phenomenon. His concept of the autonomy of art, as rightly pointed out by James M. Harding (1992: 183), is “double-edged”. By this he means that “[o]n the one hand, ... socio-historical change makes the separation of art and practical life unavoidable. But on the other, the separation does not denote the irrelevance of art to life.”

At the same time, Adorno calls into question Sartre’s conception of committed *littérature* as he distinguishes “commitment” from “tendency.” “Committed art in the proper sense,” he writes, “is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions ... but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (1980: 180). Adorno (1980: 180) further states that art does not necessarily set out alternatives, but only through its form can it go against the course of the world, “which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings.” To examine the relationship between politics and aesthetics in Kurdish fiction from Iran, I especially draw on Adorno’s perception of art as holding an interdependent relationship with society, of art as an antithesis to society which has to “elevate social criticism to the level of form” if it seeks to be committed without paling into propaganda (1984: 354).

It seems that the burden of commitment has especially affected the literature of the countries and nations who have experienced colonisation or suffered internal despotisms. As an example, one can mention francophone African and Arabic literature. Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier (2011) examine the notion of commitment and its transformation in contemporary francophone African literature. They maintain that commitment has been integral to and “continues to haunt” francophone African literature (19). However, the new generation of writers engaged in aesthetic experimentations with polyphony and approached “narratives as performance and re-creation” (181). This diversification of aesthetics has partly “made it possible for the writers to lift the burden of engagement and to shift from an engagée literature to an engaging literature” (137-38). In the same vein, Friederike Pannewick et al. (2015) in an edited volume attempt to revisit the relationship between art and politics in modern Arabic literary history. The volume examines historical and contemporary concepts of commitment and, “therein, how notions of ‘writing for a cause’ have been shaped, rejected, or re-actualized from the 1940s until today” (Albers et al., 2015: 10). Modern Arabic literary history, they write, has always been political. Yet, the older and younger generations of writers have held different perceptions of literary commitment. “The principal spark kindling controversy,” they note, “was the means of this commitment; at issue

was not whether literature should be committed to social and political causes but how it was to undertake this mission” (2015: 10).

In the case of Kurds, whose culture and national identity have been in peril, works of art can hardly be apolitical. It does not then come as a surprise that literature and politics have been indissoluble in modern Kurdish literary history. While most of the earlier works of prose fiction written by Iranian Kurds were overtly political, towards the end of the twentieth century a new generation of Kurdish writers in Iranian Kurdistan emerged who paid more attention to form. Yet for most of them, the question was not whether literature should be politically and socially committed or not. Rather, at issue for them was how to bridge politics and aesthetics.

Writing in Kurdish in all parts of Kurdistan, with the exception of Iraqi Kurdistan, is a tremendous challenge which takes a great deal of dedication and hard work. Since Kurdish is neither the language of instruction nor taught in schools in Kurdish-populated areas of Iran, those who can read and write in Kurdish are self-taught.⁶ As such, the very act of writing and reading in Kurdish *per se* is a political gesture. Writing and, to a lesser extent, reading in Kurdish could be viewed as resistance, cultural awareness, and national consciousness.

In this article, “Kurdish writer” refers to Iranian Kurdish writers and “Kurdish fiction” to the novels and short stories in the Sorani dialect written by them, unless stated otherwise. Likewise, by “Kurdish society” I mean the Kurdish region in Iran, unless stated otherwise. The selected texts examined in this paper are Rahim Qazi’s *Pêşmerge* [*Peshmerga*] (1961), Hassan Qizilji’s *Pêkenîni Geda* [*Begger’s laugh*] (1972), Fatah Amiri’s *Hawarebere* [*A Kurdish melody*] (1991),⁷ and Ata Nahae’s *Balindekanî Dem Ba* [*The Birds Soaring on the Wind*] (2002). I have examined *Pêkenîni Geda* and *Balindekanî Dem Ba* in more detail than the other two texts because I consider them to be more successful in terms of literary merits. Except for *Pêkenîni Geda*, which is a short story, the other texts are novels. One might ask according to what criteria these texts were selected and why a short story is examined along with three novels. As I will explain in more detail in the next section, up until 1991 there were only two novels and one short story collection published by Kurdish Iranian writers. With such a limited number of works of prose fiction, the choice of texts for this study was rather obvious, and I also decided to include Qizilji’s collection of short stories.

⁶ See footnote 2.

⁷ “Hawarebere” is the name of a melody which is played by *shimshal*, a Kurdish musical instrument similar to a flute.

The challenge of writing in Kurdish: three fictional works over three decades

Raheem Qazi's (1926–1991) *Pêşmerge* [*Peshmerga*] was the first work of fiction to be published by an Iranian Kurd. Published in Baghdad in 1961, it was also the first Sorani Kurdish novel.⁸ A decade later, in 1972, Hassan Qizilji (1914–1984) also published *Pêkenîni Geda* [*Beggar's Laugh*], a collection of short stories, in Baghdad.⁹ It took some 20 years for another fictional work to be produced by an Iranian Kurd. The history of Kurdish fiction in this period is marked by discontinuity and disruption: in a time span of 30 years from 1961 to 1991 only three fictional works were published. In this section I discuss the question of literary form and political concerns in these works.

Pêşmerge is about the oppression of the Kurds by landlords and Reza Shah's regime from 1941 to 1945, which led to the formation of the first Kurdish political party in Iran, *Komeley Jiyanevey Kurdistan* [The Society for the Revival of Kurdistan], popularly known as *JK Society*.¹⁰ The protagonist, Pirot, is the young son of a poor farmer who has suffered tremendously at the hands of the landlord of the village. When his fiancée in the nearby village commits suicide after she was raped by the landlord of that village, Pirot takes revenge by killing her rapist. Following this incident, he has no option but to leave his village and takes refuge in the house of his father's friend, a JK Society member. Inspired by his host's speech about the sufferings of the Kurdish nation, Pirot decides to join the JK Society, where he becomes a nationalist hero fighting for the liberation of Kurdistan.

Pêşmerge is a linear and logically ordered narrative in which the events unfold one after another in a cause-and-effect manner. Like 19th-century European realist novels, it is stabilised by the presence of a third person omniscient

⁸ The first Kurdish novel, entitled *Şivanê Kurmanca* [*The Kurdish Shepherd*], was in the Kurmanji dialect written by Erebeh Şemo (1898–1978), known as Arab Shamilov in the Soviet Union, and published in Yerevan in 1935.

⁹ Qazi and Qizilji were both members of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) under the leadership of Qazi Mohammad in the Mahabad Republic in 1946. Qazi, along with a number of other students, was sent to the former Soviet Union to continue his studies, where he received a PhD in History. However, due to the fall of the Mahabad Republic he remained in Baku. After the 1979 revolution he returned to Iran and stayed there for a while. Before long he went back to Baku, where he died in 1991. Likewise, Qizilji had to flee to Iraq after the collapse of the Mahabad Republic. He found life in exile extremely harsh, having to work hard for his survival while fearing arrest and being handed to Iranian authorities by the Iraqi security police. Soon after the 1979 revolution, he returned to Iran, where he was arrested and imprisoned in 1983. After ten months in prison, he died for unknown reasons on September 28, 1985. It is believed that he might have faced mistreatment and torture by the Iranian security police. While Iranian Kurds were deprived of their very basic cultural rights during the 1960s and 1970s, the Iraqi Kurds enjoyed a relative cultural freedom, which enabled Qazi and Qizilji to publish their works in Baghdad.

¹⁰ Komala, or the JK Society, was established in September 1942 in Mahabad with the ultimate goal of the realization of an independent Kurdish state. It was dissolved in 1945 after the formation of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and its members were absorbed into the new party. For more information, see McDowall (2004: 240).

narrator and a trustworthy perspective (Stevenson: 1992: 25). The narrator's voice, which in effect is the implied author's voice, dominates the novel, and all other voices and conflicts are resolved through their subordination to his voice. The following passage from the novel illustrates its dominating political message:¹¹

This is the map of Kurdistan hanging on the wall. As you can see, the Kurdish homeland is now divided and remains under foreign rule. Our generation has a great responsibility in the 20th century which is a century of emancipation and achieving independence for the nations of the world. Today, despite the fact that Kurds are the most oppressed and deprived nation in the world, the will to liberate and gain independence is deeply rooted in our nation [...] efficiency, bravery, courage, and wisdom are all God-given gifts which Kurds are born with. Our party's duty is to channel these traits to liberate Kurdistan from its occupiers (Qazi, 1981: 105–106).¹²

In this passage and throughout the novel, Qazi romanticises Kurds and Kurdistan and invites all the Kurds to unite and stand up against the oppression of the Iranian government. Such patriotic rhetoric prevails in the novel, making it more like a political party manifesto than a work of art.

Whereas *Pêşmerge* in many passages is reduced to propaganda, *Pêkenîni Geda's* commitment, to borrow Adorno's words, remains "politically polyvalent" (1996: 188). Before Qizilji, Kurdish satire was predominantly in the form of *haji* and *hazî* poetry. While the former is a serious satire targeting a person or a group of people in a personal way, the latter refers to a less serious and more humorous type of satire. The Kurdish literary satire's movement from personal attack, moral instruction and punishment, reflects an alternative notion of satire in Kurdish literature, to use Charles A. Knight's words (2004: 14), as "an open and exploratory form, designed to pose questions and raise problems." It appears that, unlike poetry, satire in prose enabled Kurdish writers to reveal critical problems Kurdish society was grappling with, in an indirect, subtle, and ironic manner.¹³ Qizilji employs satire to raise questions about Kurdish traditions, Kurdish society, its social structure and hierarchy and the gap

¹¹ All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.

¹² Ew nexşeyey ke debînin bêreda helawesrawe, nexşey Kurdistanê, yanî niştîmanî Kurdewariye ke êsta be çîwar let beş kirawe we le jêr h'ukmatî bêganedaye. Çerxî bîstem ke çerxî rizgarî u serbexoyî wedest hênanî gelanî cihane, erkêkî zor gewrey le beramber neslî ewrokey netewey kurdda danawe. Ewroke netewey kurd le hemû neteweyêkî دنیا lêqewmawtir û paşewtûtir û beşxurawtîre, belam wêray ewe hest û birî rizgarî xwazi u serbestî wedest hênan zor be tundî le nêw netewekey êmeda regajoy kirdûwe [...] xo, bekarî u azayetî u netirsî u leyaqet û mîşûrîş nî'metîkî xudadaeye ke le regî kurdanewe serçawe degrê we le şîrî daykamnewe heldewerê.

¹³ On this topic, see Ghobadi, "Satire in Kurdish Literature" (forthcoming).

between the poor and the rich. However, what distinguishes him from his predecessors is his skilful use of parody and irony, which enables him to escape falling into the domain of propaganda and to avoid direct and overt political messages.

The short stories in *Pêkenîni Geda* begin by the narrator describing a prime character or a place where the story is set. In most of his stories, Qizilji employs a “mediating” narrator, one which has a minimal impact on the narration yet transmits the story to the reader. In “Serfitre”,¹⁴ for example, he adopts a more dramatic method in which the reader seems to see and hear the characters act and speak for themselves rather than describing the characters’ feelings and actions. So we mainly get to know characters in “Serfitre” and most of the other stories in *Pêkenîni Geda* through their own voices and actions. As the story unfolds, the narrator gradually gives way to dialogue between characters. In the opening passage, the narrator introduces to the reader the main character, Haji,¹⁵ in an ironic tone which is characteristic of Qizilji’s style:

Despite being busy, Haji still managed to say his prayers, not to mention Ramadan fasting. He was a wise man who was well aware of his acts in this world and in the hereafter. How clever of him! He shoots two birds with one stone in Ramadan. While fulfilling his religious duties and keeping God happy, he saves thirty meals at lunch time. God forbid, you don’t have to be poor to spend wisely; when you are a businessman you need to keep records. Think about it, regardless of how big your wealth, it has been accumulated penny by penny. Every penny has to be recorded. Thirty lunches for Haji’s household; with such big spending on food, this can save him at least 15 Dinars [...] He had heard from the Mullah that God increases the wealth of those who are grateful. So every night when saying his prayers he would thank God until his tongue wore out; and God had fulfilled his prayers by increasing his wealth day after day (Qizilji, 1985: 71).¹⁶

¹⁴ *Serfitre* or *zakat al-fitr* in Arabic is a mandatory charity given to the poor at the end of Ramadan. It can be paid in the form of supplying staple foods or it can be calculated in cash and paid in monetary terms. The total amount of *zakat al-fitr* is “equal to the amount it costs to feed a person in need for one day” (Atia, 2013: 13).

¹⁵ Haji, also spelled Hadji and Hajji, is an honorific title given to a Muslim who has made the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca.

¹⁶ H’aci herçend serî zor qal bû, belam xwa helnagrê legel eweş serî biçwaye nwêji nedeçû. Rojûy remezanîş ewa hiç. Piawêki wirya u ‘aqil bû, h’isabî dinya u qiyameti xoy baş dezani. Zor çak lêy dabowe: Remezan hem ziyarete u hem ticaret. Xwaşî lê razi debê u jemi sî nîweroş degerêtewe. Xwa neka, dûr le giyanî H’aci, xo qise lewe niye piyaw her debê rût û nedar bê ta des pêwe bigrê. Piyaw ke bazirgan bû, ehli bazar bû. bazariş cêgay defter û h’isabe. Sermaye herçende zoriş bê, ke lêki deytewe her Fils Filse kewtote ser yek. Hemû Filsêk le deferdar cêgay xoy heye. Bo malî H’aci bew mexaric û derçûne zorewe, sî niwe roje be lanî kemewe deyrirde pazde Dinar. [...] Le melay bistibû her kes şukrane bijêr bê, Xwa boy ziyad dekat. Ca boye hemû şewêk

Nowhere in the above passage does Qizilji openly criticise Haji or his religious beliefs. Instead, he takes on an ironic and satirical tone to lay bare Haji's hypocrisy and debunk the myth that wealth is bestowed by God upon believers who pray for Him.

As the story unfolds, Qizilji skilfully portrays the character of Haji by describing him doing his prayers and breaking his fast, as we can see in the passage below:

On the evening of the 28th of Ramadan, Haji performed his Maghrib prayer (Sunset prayer) at the mosque and said his other prayers while he was heading home. As soon as he finished the last prayer, said 'in the name of God' and started breaking his fast [...] 'Bon appetite!' This was, after all, earned by the sweat of his brow. As is the custom, he started by swallowing sweets half-chewed. Three or four *baklava* stuck in his throat and nearly choked him. He washed them down with a glass of yogurt water,¹⁷ opening the way for him to gobble other things. He rushed for the plate of *qibooli*.¹⁸ With the help of okra lamb stew, the *qibooli* easily found its way through the hedge of Haji's beard and moustache into his mouth to slide down.

[...] Before long, He had polished his plate and patted his tummy. Then he turned to his wife and said:

- Hurry, bring me a cup of tea, I've got to go to mosque for praying.

- Haji! Did you pay your *serfitre*?

- God bless you wife! Thank heavens you reminded me. Damned Satan is doing every trick to sink our ship. All those years of praying and fasting could be wasted for nothing.¹⁹

bedem terawêhekewe ewendey zimani hêzî têda bû şukrî Xway dekirde. Xwaş lêy qibûl kirdbû, roj be roj be serîda riştibû.

¹⁷ Yogurt water, or mastaw in Kurdish, is a yogurt-based beverage which is popular in the Middle East.

¹⁸ *Qibooli* is a Kurdish meal in Mukiriyan, Iranian Kurdistan. Rice is the main ingredient of this meal.

¹⁹ Êwarey rojî bist û heştî Remezan H'acî le mizgewt nwêjî şêwanî be cema'et kird û bedem rêgawe wired do'akanî xwênd. Ke geyîste malewe, demi le axirîn do'a betal bû, bismilâyêkî kird û destî kird be berbang kirdnewe. Noşî giyanî bê berûbûy rencî şanî xoyetî. Wekû sunnetê, le şîrinewe paqlawey be nîwe ciwawî qûtada u rêzî lêgirt sê çîwar şîley paqlawe be sereweyê lika u henasey siwar bû. Be perdxêk mastaw şordiyewe u kokeyêkîşî bediwada kird. Rêga bo xwardinî dîke be tewawî kirayewe, pelamary dewrî qibûlî da, qibûlîyeke be yarmetî bamiye u goşt baştir xoy ko dekirde u be reh'etî be naw perjîni riş û simêlda xoy dekirde be demi H'acîda u away ew dîw debû.

Naw be naw perdxêk mastawey dexwardewe, (dûr le H'acî u berbangeke) şiftiyêkîşî dekirde mezey. Wekû werzêrêkî lêzan bijarêkî başî şîniyekey kird. Destêkî be rişîda hêna. Elh h'emdulîla, xwaye şukirî to. Rûy kirde xêzanî:

A xêrake çayêkim bo têke, ba fîryay cema'et terawê h'êke bikewim.

H'acî jin – hêsta serpuşî nwêjî şêwanî be serewe bû – piyaleyêk çay bo H'acî hêna:

H'acî! Erê serfitreket qeblandûwe?

Ya Rebî xwa cezay be xêrit bidatewe afret! Ç'a bû webîrit xistmewe. Hawar be malim! Şeytanî mel'ûn be hemû fêlêke xerîke renc bexesarman ka. Wextabû nwêj û rojûekeman be xorayî biçê.

In this passage, the incongruity between Haji's religious beliefs and his morals is well depicted. He devours his food with such a gusto that contradicts the premises underlying Ramadan as a month of fasting and communal prayer, as well as a period of introspection, purifying the soul, and helping the poor (Khan and Watson, 2010: 153).

For Haji, religion is devoid of spirituality. In effect, his relationship with God is a business-like one in the sense that he does all sorts of tricks to keep Him satisfied and secure his place in heaven. This is well depicted towards the end of the story. Haji decides to give his *serfitre* to Mirza, a distant relative who works for him in the shop. Haji informs Mirza, who has paid him a visit, of his decision. The following day in the shop, he asks Mirza to sit down to sort out their business:

Mirza, surprised by this request, asks: "What business?"

Haji: "Shouldn't I pay you one Dinar and three quarters?"

Mirza: "That's true, but why sort this out?"

Haji: "You talk as if you have just entered into the business. Everything needs to be recorded. Do not confuse business and friendship" (Qizilji, 1985: 76-77).²⁰

Haji then reminds Mirza that the previous winter he had given him his old boots, which he believes was worth 1 Dinar. He adds to this 200 Fils for a handful of loose tea Mirza spilt the other day,²¹ and another 800 Fils for two big wooden shoe boxes Mirza took home to make chairs. Haji concludes that Mirza now owes him 2 Dinars! He continues:

"I need to give you one Dinar and three quarters for my *serfitre*; now subtract it from 2 Dinars. You owe me 250 Fils. Take it as a gift from me for this Eid."

Mirza, while grinning: "Why not pay me your next year's *serfitre* with this 250 Fils?"

Haji: "We do next year's in its time. How could I now let you leave here empty handed so close to Eid?" (77-78).²²

²⁰ Mërza: H'isabî çî?

Çon h'isabî çî? To dû dinar çarekî kemit lay min heye.

Başe, itir eme h'isabî dewê?

To delêy emro hatûyte bazaŕ; çon h'isabî nawê? Hemû şîtêk h'isabî dewê. Biraman birayî, kîseman ciyayî.

²¹ Dinar is the monetary unit used in Iraq, which is comprised of 1000 *fils*. However, inflation rendered the *fils* obsolete after 1990 (Lane, 2008: 310).

²² H'acî: To Dînarêk û h'ewt sed û penca fils parey serfitret lay min heye, ewe le dû Dinareke derke. To rub'êkit dekewête ser. Ewiş cêjnane em jêjnet bê. Îtir bê h'isab.

Mirza (be zerdexenyêkewe): ca boçî bew rub'e Dînare serfitrey salêki dikem lê selem nakey?

H'acî: H'isabî salêki dike wextî xoy dekeyn. Êsta çon bê cêjnane u be destî betal dêlim le mih'el derkewî?

Qizilji does not reduce fiction to a medium in the service of a cause beyond it. The socially critical dimension in his short stories lies more in its form rather than in its message, enabling him to achieve what Adorno (1984: 354) recommends for art: “If [art] is to live on, it must elevate social criticism to the level of form, de-emphasizing manifestly social content accordingly.” In most of his short stories, Qizilji has elevated “social criticism to the level of form” through ironic style and satirical tone.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has neither granted the Kurdish language state recognition, nor permitted its use in official education in Kurdish populated areas. Nonetheless, under its administration, publication in Kurdish, both private and state-sponsored, has increased remarkably. That said, getting a book published in Iran, regardless of its language, is a challenge for all Iranian writers. Iran’s strict press law and control of publication has put it among the top ten most censored countries (Freedom House, 2017). In this regard, Saeed Kamali Dehghan (2015) stated that, “The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is in charge of checking books. Anonymous censors ... work round-the-clock to examine texts for anything that could be considered obscene, inappropriate or politically unacceptable. They are masters of finding a needle in a haystack yet no one knows who they are.” It has to be mentioned that compared with their Persian counterparts, Kurdish writers writing in Kurdish face yet more difficulties in getting their books published. Fatah Amiri (2017), a Kurdish writer, in an interview with *Wishbe*, a weekly newspaper based in Iraqi Kurdistan, considers censorship and lack of financial support as two major obstacles Kurdish writers face. Yet the limited number of literary journals published after the revolution did play a significant role in encouraging Kurdish prose and literature in Iranian Kurdistan.²³ Before long, Amiri’s novel, titled *Hawarebere*, was published in 1992 as the first work of prose fiction published in Iran.

Amiri (b. 1961) in *Hawarebere* portrays country life in Iranian Kurdistan during the 1970s.²⁴ The novel is about a young man named Yare, sixteen or seventeen years of age, who has no family. He travels to another village away from his region in search of a job. The village head appoints him as his shepherd and accommodates him in his house. Yare amazes everyone with his great skills and experience despite his young age. Before long he wins the admiration and trust of the headman and the heart of his daughter. As the novel unfolds the two

²³ *Sirve* [Morning Breeze], a state-backed monthly literary and cultural magazine, was the first periodical in Kurdish to appear after the 1979 revolution with Mohammad Amin Sheikholeslami, the prominent Kurdish poet (better known as Hêmin, 1921–1986), as its editor. At first *Sirve* was published quarterly, but after a few years it became a monthly magazine. *Sirve* was closed down in 2010.

²⁴ Amiri was born in a village between Mahabad and Bukan in Iranian Kurdistan. He finished primary school in Mahabad and started working for an electricity company in Bukan. In the final years of Pahlavi regime Amiri was imprisoned for three years from 1976 until 1979 under the accusation of being a leftist separatist. He currently lives in Bukan.

beloveds are united in marriage. At the same time, the novel tells the story of a middle-age man named Mirza. He is a mysterious figure who every now and then visits the village where Yare lives, stays for a few days and disappears. Later in the novel it is revealed that Mirza was a civil servant who had a good life in the city (the novel does not mention which city he comes from), but abandoned his comfortable life to pursue democracy and social justice for the Kurds and other Iranians. The novel ends as Mirza explains to his friends that his whereabouts have been revealed to the Iranian government and he has to leave the village. This marks the beginning of Amiri's second novel, entitled *Mirza*, which is in effect the second volume of *Hawarebere*.

Hawarebere shares many similarities with *Pêşmerge*: it romanticises Kurdistan and propagates the Kurdish cause. Both novels have a linear narration and simple characterisation polarised into good and evil. As was the case with *Pêşmerge*, Amiri in *Hawarebere* does not explore *truth* by counterposing different voices and ideologies. *Truth* is already known to him; he only needs to disseminate it. As such, different voices are subsumed into one voice: that of an omniscient narrator. Whereas *Pêkenîni Geda* remains a successful work for its ironic style, satirical tone, and masterful characterisation, *Hawarebere* was rather a step backward to the departure point of Kurdish fiction in Iran in terms of formal features and narrative techniques.

Having said that, *Hawarebere* uses figurative language to convey the beauty of the Kurdish landscape and the passion of romantic love, something which is missing in *Pêşmerge*. Furthermore, Amiri's novel is as concerned with promoting the Kurdish language and culture as it is with raising national consciousness.²⁵ In other words, the author is well aware of the power of cultural heritage in creating a sense of unity and collective identity. His last novel, *Zindexew* [Nightmare, 2003], however, has a more complex structure, plot, and characterisation than *Hawarebere*, addressing more complex socio-political issues and relationships between the characters who live in city.

Kurdish fiction started to thrive by the 1990s as the Iranian government loosened its grip on cultural production in Kurdish. Furthermore, the establishment of a quasi-independent Kurdish region in Iraq and also the diaspora played a significant role in the development of Kurdish fiction in Iranian Kurdistan. Whereas Kurdish writers in the diaspora produced works of

²⁵ A 6-page glossary at the end of the novel shows the significance of the Kurdish language for Amiri and his effort to preserve special words pertaining to farming and animal husbandry. Providing glossaries at the end of literary works was a common practice among poets before Amiri, for the same purpose of promoting and preserving the Kurdish language in the absence of education in Kurdish and inclusive dictionaries. In the past two decades, however, the number of literary works with glossaries at their end has remarkably decreased.

fiction which were overtly political and mostly verged on propaganda,²⁶ the authors living in Iran started to pay more attention to formal and aesthetic aspects. This new generation of writers subscribed to modern and postmodern literary forms towards the end of the 1990s. Such a rapid shift from literary realism to literary modernism and postmodernism, on the one hand, could be accounted for by the shattering of the Kurdish dream of self-rule in Iran by the late 1980s and the frustration and disappointment that ensued. Soon after the Iranian revolution, in August 1979, Khomeini, the founder and supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, declared “a holy war against the Kurds” (Koochi-Kamali, 1992: 180). This left them with no choice but to resort to armed struggle. Consequently, the clashes between the Kurdish fighters and Iranian forces escalated, leading to drawn-out war. By 1993 the Kurdish forces had suffered “defeat on the battlefield, internal disarray and assassination” (McDowall, 2004: 277). On the other hand, this shift from literary realism to modernism and postmodernism was made possible by the Kurdish writers’ exposure to modernist and postmodernist fiction, mostly through translations of world fiction into Persian as well as modernist and postmodernist Persian texts. They experimented with new forms and innovative techniques in order to depict a fragmented subjectivity in search of meaning and lost values in a society which had turned materialistic. At the same time, a small number of Kurdish writers merely indulged in language games and playful self-reflexive formal games.²⁷ Ata Nahae was among the first Kurdish writers who experimented with formal techniques to reflect on the complexities of post-war Kurdish society. The next section examines his *Balindekanî Dem Ba* [*The Birds Soaring on the Wind*] (2002) as a quintessential Kurdish novel attempting to bridge politics and aesthetics.

Balindekanî Dem Ba: Aesthetic experimentation and fragmented subjectivity

Ata Nahae (b. 1960) was one of the first writers who experimented with modernist and postmodernist literary forms.²⁸ His first novel, *Gulî Şoran* [*Şoran Flower*] (1998), as Hashem Ahmadzadeh (2005: 32) rightly suggests, was a

²⁶ For example, one can name Siyamend Shekh Aghayi’s novel entitled *Firmesk u Xebat* [Tear and Struggle] (Sweden, 1992) and Teyfur’s *Jyan bedem Ziryanewe* [Life in the Storm] (Stockholm, 1993).

²⁷ Among others, one can mention Seyed Qader Hedayati’s novel entitled *Dengi Noxet* [The Sound of Full Stop] (2003) as an apolitical postmodernist text. In the novel, Hedayati teases the reader and parodies the traditional style, characterization, and plot without any reference to socio-political problems in Iranian Kurdistan.

²⁸ Nahae was born in Baneh, Kurdistan province in Iran. He completed his primary and secondary school education in the same city and later entered a teacher training college at Varamin in Tehran province. After two years he graduated from the college, at the time of the Iranian 1979 revolution, and started to work as a teacher in the villages of Iranian Kurdistan. Three years later he was dismissed under the new regime. Since then, he has been living in his hometown, Bane. Nahae started his literary career by publishing a collection of short stories entitled *Zirîke* [Scream] (1993/1372).

turning point in the Kurdish novel for its complex structure and use of modern narrative techniques. His second novel, *Balindekanî Dem Ba*, was a successful experimentation with (post)modernism that challenged the conventional perception of fiction and of reality, something that was unprecedented in the short history of Kurdish fiction in Iranian Kurdistan. *Girewî Bexîtî Helale: Divrojî Jîyanî Balindeyêkî Koçer* [*Gambling on Halala's Fortune: The Last Days of a Migrant Bird*], published five years later in 2007, was not linguistically and formally as radical as *Balindekanî Dem Ba* was.

Balindekanî Dem Ba tells two stories in parallel: The story of a Kurdish writer, Mihreban, who, in turn, tells the story of Farhad; the former is told in colloquial language while the latter is narrated in a formal and poetic mode.²⁹ Mihreban is actively involved in protests and demonstrations during the latter months of Pahlavi rule and after the 1979 revolution. Despite the fact that he does not take up arms against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mihreban is arrested and jailed for a short time during the political turmoil ensuing the early years of revolution. He leaves the country for Europe soon after. However, after two decades or so he returns to his hometown in Iranian Kurdistan to write the story of Farhad, a student at Tehran University, where he participates in political activities against Mohammad Reza Shah's dictatorship. Eventually he is arrested by SAVAK (Organization of National Security and Information) and faces a long-term imprisonment.

The novel uses a traditional trope of exile and return, registering Mihreban's perception of a changed world. However, the political theme of the novel rests on a deeper ontological foundation – that truth/identity is always framed. The author achieves this through employing the techniques of metafiction with such skill that the link between political/philosophical purpose and aesthetics is indissoluble. Nahae's main concern in writing fiction is to explore his own identity, which might lead to knowing the "other." In an interview, his response to a question about his purpose in writing fiction was: "to me, writing is an attempt to find myself [...] What makes fiction outstanding for me is the fact that I can find my identity and the fragmented pieces of my being in it, and nothing else" (Yaqubi, 2009: 101–102). In *Balindekanî Dem Ba* he attempts to get a better perception of identity by showing the subtle nuances of language which might form or modify not only the protagonist's sense of his "self" and the "other", but that of the reader as well.

Abdolxaleq Yaqubi (2008) in his article, "*Balindekanî Dem Ba* u Deretaneke Gêraneweyêkî Postmodêrnîstî" [Postmodernist Narrative Techniques in *The Birds Soaring on the Wind*], argues that Nahae's *Balindekanî Dem Ba* could be

²⁹ This section in the present paper is a shorter and slightly modified version of a chapter in my PhD dissertation which analyses *Balindekanî Dem Ba* in more detail.

classified as a postmodern novel due to its unconventional presentation of time and narration. Yaqubi has examined the narrative techniques in this novel, which distinguishes it from a traditional linear narration, namely, “doubtful narration”, “two-layers narration”, “multifunctional narration”, “flawed narration”, and “narration in narration” (135-41). By using these narrative techniques, he argues, Nahae has produced a text rich with “uncertainty and indeterminacy” (135). However, as I will discuss below, some of the above narrative techniques mentioned by Yaqubi were in effect primarily used in modern, rather than postmodern, novels. The most salient feature which turns *Balindekanî Dem Ba* into a postmodern novel, is its use of metafictional technique, something which Yaqubi only mentions in passing.

The novel is deeply grounded in the premise of underlying metafiction – a text highlighting “its own status as a fictional construct by referring to itself” (Nicol, 2009: 16). One of the main themes in the novel is writing a novel. Throughout the novel, Nahae addresses, among other things, the relationship between the author and characters and his degree of control over them. He also involves the reader in the process of meaning-making.³⁰ Mihreban, who has started writing his new novel, soon realises that he is a character in someone else’s novel. The implied author frequently appears in the novel and discusses different subjects with the protagonist of his novel, Mihreban. As such, the boundaries between different worlds are “violated” in order to destabilize “ontological boundaries” and to challenge the notion of identity as a fixed, unified whole.³¹

The novel’s primary narrator, who is also the implied author, has limited control over the characters. He is presented as their creator, yet the moment the characters step onto the pages, they become independent of him. To take an example, in the scene where Mihreban is sick and shivers with cold in his bed, the primary narrator questions the relationship between the novelist and his characters:

I was scared and worried and didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to help him. I stood up and walked toward the window and opened the curtain. It was morning and the rain had stopped. The sky was clear [...] I wish someone would come. I wish I could ask someone to go to his place or phone somebody to help him.

³⁰ Writing a novel that foregrounds the very act of writing and lays bare its fictitiousness, however, has been experimented with by European and American writers long before Nahae. One can name, for example, Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957) and Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985) as the metafictional novels to which *Balindekanî Dem Ba* bears some similarities.

³¹ The renowned post-modernist American writer, Paul Auster, in *City of Glass* skilfully plays with names to challenge the notion of identity as a unified and fixed entity and at the same time to blur the boundaries between “self” and “other.”

I wish the writer could call on a character in his story. Can't he?
(Nahaee, 2006: 323-24).³²

There are two points that are worth mentioning here: firstly, Nahaee questions the traditional novelistic conventions; and secondly, he reminds readers that they are dealing with a fictional world that is not to be taken as either real or as the only one possible.

Balindekanî Dem Ba is a type of metafiction, which, borrowing Nicol's words, "actively indulge[s] in ... 'frame-breaking', where the frames through which the fictional world is presented to the reader are actually dismantled or shattered" (Nicol, 2009: 37). The frame-breaking in the novel is mainly conducted through dialogues between the primary narrator, as the (implied) author, and the protagonist:

Mihreban said: "You should have told me that those fragmented memories in my mind belong to a man's past that even he, himself, had forgotten. You should have told me from the very first day." The first day? He meant that day when we met each other, that day we came to know each other. First we were unknown and unfamiliar to one another; two persons from two different worlds, two individuals with two different languages. Two persons with two stories [...] I said: "I want to write your story." He was startled and said: "My story?" I said: "Mihreban's story. A man who after years of separation and exile has returned home and ..." He didn't let me finish my words. He said: "I have returned to write someone else's story. The story of [...]" I had said: "Farhad?" He thought about it. He wished to write Farhad's story for years. He said: "Do you know Farhad?" Then I laughed (Nahaee, 2006: 187).³³

In the above passage, it is revealed that Mihreban is merely a character in someone else's story. Through "frame-breaking" Nahaee has revealed the strategies and techniques which present the fictional world as real and natural.

³² Min tîrsa bûm. Nîgeran bûm. Nemdezanî debê çî bikem. Nemdezanî debê çon yarmetî bidem. Hestam û ser û xwarêkî jûrekem kird. Çûme ber pencereke u loyêkî perdekem heldayewe. Çêstengaw bû. Barişteke nemabû. Asman taw û saw bû [...] xozge kesêk dehat. Xozge demtwanî birom be şwên kesêkda, yan telefûn bo kesêk bikem. Xozge çiroknûs deytwanî telefûn bo kesêkî çîrokekey bika u bixwazê. Natwanê?

³³ Gotîbûy[Mihreban]: "To debû be minit bigotaye ew birewerye piçîr piçîr û parçe parçane ke le zeynî mînda keleke bûn, beşêk le rabirdûy pyawêkin ke xoy feramoşî kirdûn. Debû le yekem rojewe be minit bigotaye." Yekem roj? Mebestî ew roje bû ke yektîrman dîbû. Ew roje ke le yektîr aşkira bûbûyn. Sereta wek dû kesî le yek namo u nenasyaw rûberppy yektîr bûynewe. Dû kes le dû dinyay çiyawaz. Dû kes le dû zemanî cyawaz. Dû kes le dû çirokî ... gotîbûm: "min demewê çirokî to binûsim." Daçilekîbû. Gotîbûy: "çirokî min?" Gotîbûm: "çirokî mirheban. Pyawêk ke diwa sallanêk x'orbet û dîrî gerraewtewe w ..." Neyhêştîbû qîsekem tewaw bikem. Gutîbûy: "min geîrawmetewe çirokî kesêkî tîr binûsim. Çirokî ..." Gotîbûm: "Ferhad?" Bîrî kîrbûewe. Salanêk bû h'ezî kîrbû çirokî Ferhad binûsê. Gutîbûy: "to Ferhad denasî?" Ewsa min pêkenîbûm.

The aim is to make readers conscious of the ways that narrative conventions are employed in order to shape their perception of themselves and of the world.

Brian McHale (1986) borrows and modifies Roman Jakobson's term "dominant" as a "conceptual tool" to explain the fundamental difference between modernist and postmodernist poetics. In his view, dominant is the "focusing component of a work of art" which "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" and "guarantees the integrity of the structure" (6). The "dominant" of *Balindekanî Dem Ba*, then, is ontological and at the same time epistemological; as such it could be identified with both modernist and postmodernist literature. In other words, it poses questions about the nature of reality (ontological) and how we get to know that reality (epistemological). To foreground the latter, it emphasizes perspective. Nahae's style in *Balindekanî Dem Ba* bears resemblance to that of Houshang Golshiri (1937–2000), the prominent Iranian writer, in his most famous novel, *Shazde Ehtejab* [*Prince Ehtejab*] (1968).³⁴ They both deploy, among other techniques, incomplete, mistaken, or limited points of view in order to try for *truth*.

Balindekanî Dem Ba does not present a finalised version of characters that are in possession of *coherent* and *autonomous* identities. Neither of the two narrators, the primary narrator and Mihreban in the second story, provides readers with clear-cut information about, for example, characters' personalities or their past lives, or a given account of their behaviour and motivations. Rather, the narrators either offer multiple possibilities for the characters' lives, thoughts, and behaviour or they cast doubt on what has just been mentioned about them. Below are some examples that illustrate Nahae's relativising approach.

I [primary narrator] said: "Leyla is a plan that Munîre and your niece, Neşmîl, have hatched for you." He raised his head. He saw me laughing through his cigarette smoke. Probably a mocking laughter and [...] he was not upset (Nahae, 2006: 206).³⁵

...

³⁴ Houshang Golshiri might be the most important Persian writer to have greatly affected Nahae's style and thought. His translation of Golshiri's masterpiece, *Shazde Ehtejab*, into Kurdish further proves his significance for Nahae. Soon after starting his career as a writer, as Hassan Mir'abedini says, Golshiri joined the other Iranian writers who had experimented with the new ideas promoted by The Nouveau Roman movement in France. Under the influence of this movement, Golshiri (cited in Mir'abedini, 2002: 672-673) viewed fiction as a medium through which he could achieve a better understanding of human beings, as he says in an interview: "My main concern in story-writing, given that humans are at the centre of fiction, is to get to know what it is to be "human." Despite being aware of the impossibility of knowing "human being," through using some techniques and by putting a distance [between the protagonist and reality by way of doubts and uncertainties] the writer still seeks to achieve it – which is doomed to failure."

³⁵ Gutim [primary narrator]: "Leyla xewnêke Munîreye xoşkit û Neşmîlî xoşkezat boyan dîwî." Serî hellbirî. Le pişt hewrî dükellî cigerekeyewe min pêdekenim. Renge pêkeninêkî galltecarryane w ... qells nebû.

The old woman had two married daughters; but she didn't have a son. Didn't she? She might have had a son. She might have had three or four sons who had died of smallpox in their childhood. Or probably one of them had survived smallpox and grown up, but later he might have drowned in a pond. Or he might have fallen off a mountain while he was with his father. Or [...] anyway, she was living alone. She has been living alone for several years, her daughters being busy with their lives and not able to take care of her as they should have (260-61).³⁶

He heard the phone ringing again. It startled him. Delighted, he went to pick it up. Delighted? (200)³⁷

He [Mihreban] had seen Leyla at Munîre's house by chance. By chance? It is also possible that their meeting was not accidental (201).³⁸

In the above examples the narration is fragmented, unfinished, and indeterminate. First and foremost, Nahae has avoided finalising the characters and the fictional world presented in the novel. By casting doubt on the reliability of the narrators' and characters' statements he seeks to convey to the reader the message that we no longer live in the world of objectivities and certainties, but are in a new world of subjectivity and radical uncertainties; so much so that the boundaries between fiction and reality are indistinguishable.

This ambiguity leaves the reader wondering which world is real: the world of the novel's primary narrator, that of Mihreban, or Farhad? Moreover, it is not clear whether they are three independent persons or three aspects of one person, which could be any one of them, as we can see in the following passage:

He [Mihreban] said: "Be careful, otherwise the story gets out of control." I [primary narrator] said: "Which story? Your story or Farhad's?" He thought to himself. He didn't know whether he is at his own home or at Farhad's. He was not sure whether he was living his own life or Farhad's forgotten moments. Probably none of them [...] "Or both of them" [Mihreban says]. He was startled by hearing his own words (206).³⁹

³⁶ Pîrêjin dû kiçî be şûy bû, belam kurî nebû. Neybwe? Renge bûbêti. Renge sê çîwar kurî bûbê u, le mindalîda be sûreje mirdbêtin. Renge yekyan le sûrejeş xelistibê, gewreş bûbê, belam diwatir le gomêkda xinkabê. Yan legel bawî le şaxêk hehdêrabîn. Yan ... herçî bû êsta be tenha deya. Çend salêk bû be tenha deya u kiçekanî be xem û meynetî jyanî xoyanda kewtibûn û, pêyan nedekra be qeder pêwîst lay lêbikenewe.

³⁷ Dîsan zîrey telefonekey bîst. Daçilekî. Be xoşiewe berew pîrî çû. Be xoşiyewe?

³⁸ Ew (Mihreban) Leylay le malî Munîre dibûwewe. Be rêkewt? Renge rêkewtiş nebûbê.

³⁹ Gutî: "wişyar nebî çîrokeke le girêjne derdeçê." Gutim: "kame çîrok? Çîrokî to yan çîrokî Ferhad?"

When the primary narrator asks “your story or Farhad’s?” it is suggested that the author of Farhad’s story is himself a character in someone else’s story. In the following sentence, however, Mihreban becomes one with Farhad—that is, author and character are one and the same person. In this way, Nahae has deconstructed the conventional author-text-reality relationship. Elsewhere in the novel when the primary narrator says: “So he [Mihreban] was at Farhad’s house. Farhad’s house or mine?” (208), it might strike the reader that the primary narrator is either Mihreban or Farhad or both—that is, they are fragmented aspects of each other. One interpretation could be that Farhad is the future Mihreban or the primary narrator, or both. Yet other interpretations are also valid: they could be three independent entities. These compositional strategies together with epistemological and ontological doubts have opened up the possibility of multiple voices and worlds in the novel.

The uncertainty underlying *Balindekanî Dem Ba* has enabled it to avoid making any final judgements on the characters. Nahae has not set a given discourse as the embodiment of *truth* dominating other discourses and ideologies. On the contrary, he orchestrates different languages and voices in such a way as to create a polyphonic novel, in the Bakhtinian sense: allowing for “[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1984: 6). Like earlier Kurdish writers, Nahae in *Balindekanî Dem Ba* expresses socio-political concerns. However, what distinguishes him from most of his predecessors is that he has not reduced his work to the mouthpiece of a given ideology or political party. In other words, he has not compromised literary aesthetics for political commitment.

Being abroad for years, the protagonist-narrator, Mihreban, had not witnessed the social, political, and cultural changes in Iranian Kurdistan. To his surprise, his friends and the whole city have changed dramatically. His friends become distant from their revolutionary ideals and are only concerned with their personal lives:

They [Mihreban’s friends] apologised for not coming to see him. Being busy with their lives and jobs and [...] they talked and laughed quietly. They were no longer the same young courageous men he had known. Those young men would not talk about their business and money. They would not talk of their jobs and their progress, of their houses, shops, cars and those of others [...] of their children’s future [...] they would not say that you have made a big mistake to return home. You have returned to these people who are so ignorant? How on earth have you returned from

Têfirkî. Neydezanî le mal û jûrî xoyetî yan le mal û jûrî Ferhad. Satekanî xoy deji yan sate feramoş bûwekanî Ferhad. Renge hiçyan...“yan herdûkyan.” [Mihreban says]. Lew qîsey xoy daçilekî.

Europe, the place for a happy life, to here? [...] he was sure that these men had forgotten the young men, had forgotten their desires, dreams, hopes and even the language of those young men; they had also forgotten him [...] (188–189).⁴⁰

This new society which is separated from its ideals bears some similarities to European modernity reflected in modernist writers' works at the turn of the twentieth century, an era in which the individual, as Jesse Matz (2004: 47) remarks, "came to feel less a part of the social whole, as fiction writers saw it, because the whole had lost touch with its ideals and better values. Social life had gone cold, materialistic, haphazard, and so the decent person could only feel isolated from it."

Mihreban cannot connect with a society devoid of high values and sublime ideals; accordingly, he finds himself in tragic loneliness and alienation. His old comrades and friends are now married and have children to take care of and feed. They are no longer those young men who once dreamed of changing the world: "Since he [Mihreban] has returned or probably since he has left here, everyone has become wise and talks of wise people; Baram and his wife, his sisters, Munîre and Rûnak and their husbands, his old friends and comrades, including Celalî" (189–190). His brother, Baram, mocks his dreams and ideals. He believes that he has ruined his life for nothing:

Baram, teasing, said: "The passage of time has changed them all. They have forgotten you and many others like you, they think only of money." He continued: "Among your friends, you and a few others like you were deceived. Encouraged by them, you quit your life, job, and your family and followed a childish dream. Then they turned their backs on you, your dream and your family [...]" (200).⁴¹

Mihreban is repulsed by his brother, his old friends, and the whole society. To Baram and many others in this society, a "wise" man does not ruin his personal life to follow childish dreams of justice, freedom, and democracy.

⁴⁰ Bo ewey neçûbûne lay daway lêbûrdinyan lê kirdbû. Girftarî... kêşey kar û jîyan û... aram û le ser xo diwa bûn û pêkewnibûn. Hîçyan lew kuçe genc û cerbezane neçûbû ke ew be cêy hêştibûn. Ew kuçe gencane basî kar û kasbî u qerz û qole u çek û siftayan nedekird. Basî mal û dûkan û maşîni xoyan û xelkî tir... basî dahatûy mindalekanyan... neyandegut kilawit ser çûwe gerawîte. Gerawîte bo naw em xelke ke le hîç nagen? Piyaw çon le ewrûpa, le nawendî xoşî u guzeranî xoşewe degefêtewe bo êre? Ew dilnya bû ew piyawane kuçe gencekanyan feramoş kirdbû. Hez û xewn û awat û tenanet şewey qise kirdnî kuçe gencekanîşyan feramûş kirdbû. Ewîşyan feramoş kirdbû...

⁴¹ Baram be tîz û tiwancewe deygut: "şeqî zemane hemûyanî goşîwe. Pare to u sedanî wek toy pê le bir birdûnetewe". Deygut: "le naw hemûyanda to kilawit ser çû. To u çend kesêkî wek to. Be qisey ewan waztan le jîyan û kes û kartan hêna u şwên xewnêkî mindalane kewtîn. Ewsa ewan piştyan le xotan û kes û kartan kird..."

Balindekanî Dem Ba presents Kurdish society as materialistic and devoid of sublime values, suggesting that people have lost their desire and enthusiasm for making socio-political changes. Except for Mihreban, all the characters in the novel, who once dreamt of changing the world, have lost their ambitions over time. Mihreban tells his sister, Rûnak, of his sufferings in exile, of the pain of rupture and separation, and of the sorrow of failing to fulfil his dreams. “The suffering of writing. Writing his own sorrows and desires and those of others. The sorrows and desires of women and men who lost their dreams and fantasies. Had lost the game. The game of life and love and...” (284).⁴²

Two of Mihreban’s friends, Celalî and Kûriş, for example, are among those who can no longer dream. Under the burden of family responsibilities, they have forgotten their dreams and ideals: “Despite having been married for many years, Celalî says [to Mihreban]: ‘since I can’t dream and fantasize, I feel I’m married and have three children’” (271). Apparently Celalî continued to dream even after his marriage. However, he finally stopped dreaming and became a “wise man.” Kûriş has also lost his capacity to dream. He was from an indigent family who despite all difficulties succeeded in passing the university entrance exam in Iran. However, his future was ruined when the new Islamic government forbade him to register at the university due to his political activities: “we ruined our life for a beautiful and humane dream,” Kûriş says to Mihreban (307).⁴³ The novel suggests that both Celalî and Kûriş have lost their agency by quitting their dreams under the harsh political, social, and economic circumstances of Iranian Kurdistan after the 1979 revolution. On the other hand, Mihreban is still capable of dreaming, which leads to his alienation in a society abounding with individuals unable to dream.

Conclusion

For much of the twentieth century, the unfavourable socio-political and economic circumstances in Iranian Kurdistan made it difficult for Kurdish prose fiction to establish itself. Under such circumstances it had a stuttering start with only three works in three decades since the publication of *Pêşmerge* in 1961. When the very existence of Kurdish language and culture was in danger, writing and publishing prose fiction, regardless of its literary quality, meant overcoming great adversity. It was within this context that in the first two Kurdish novels, *Pêşmerge* and *Hamarebere*, literature is used as a medium for national awaking and cultural preservation.

⁴² Lew azarane diwabû ke le xorbet kêşabûnî. Azarî dûrî u dabirran. Azarî wedî nehatinî xewn û xeyalekanî. Azarî nûsîn. Nûsînî xem û meraqî xoy û xelkî tir. Xem û meraqî ew jin û piyawane ke xewn û xeyalekanyan doşandibû. Gemekanyan doşandibû. Gemey jîyan û xoşewistî u...

⁴³ Êmemaman le pênanawî xewnekî xoş û insanîda awaman be ser hatiwe.

Pêşmerge abounds with patriotic rhetoric, calling on all the Kurds to unite to liberate Kurdistan. The novel's overtly political and ideological message makes it more like a political party manifesto than a work of art. Like *Pêşmerge*, *Hawarebere* romanticises Kurdistan and propagates the Kurdish cause. Both novels have a linear narration and simple characterisation polarised into good and evil. Unlike these two novels, it could be argued that Qizilji's *Pêkenîni Geda* is the first work of prose fiction in Iranian Kurdistan which avoids overtly political messages. Qizilji employs satire to raise questions about Kurdish traditions, its social structure and hierarchy, and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. However, what distinguishes him from his predecessors is his skilful use of parody and irony. In most of his short stories, he elevates "social criticism to the level of form" through ironic style and satirical tone.

Over the past two decades or so, however, the number of Kurdish works of prose fiction written by Iranian Kurds has steadily increased. Whereas writing and publishing literary works by Kurdish writers, both prose fiction and poetry, was a huge achievement *per se* before 1990, it is no longer the case: with the possibility of having their works published during the 1990s, though with considerable difficulty, the new generation of Kurdish writers paid unprecedented attention to narrative experimentation and formal aesthetics in their works. Unlike most of their predecessors, they abandoned simple realistic narration of the Kurdish people's sufferings, heroism, and romanticising of their homeland. Instead, they experimented with new forms and innovative techniques, some to create a new work of art in order to bridge commitment and aesthetics while a few others merely indulged in language games and playful self-reflexive formal games.

Balindekanî Dem Ba deals with and, at the same time, engages the reader in both epistemological and ontological questions. To tackle the former, Nahae employs a fragmented, incomplete, and unreliable narration, some of the defining features of the modernist novel, to show the subjective experience of reality and the fragmented and disrupted socio-political reality of Kurdish society. At the same time, by laying bare the very frame used to present the fictional world, he shows that reality as we experience it is always framed. The self-conscious and self-referential aspect of the novel involves the reader in the process of meaning-making and raises questions about the existence and nature of reality by violating the boundaries between real and fictional worlds. While reflecting on its fictionality and novelistic form, *Balindekanî Dem Ba* remains politically engaged and deals with the socio-political reality of Kurdish society. In other words, there appears to be an indissoluble link between aesthetics and politics in the novel, each determining the nature of the other.

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