

A Tapestry of Resilience: An Exploration of Famous Kurdish Literary Figures and Their Enduring Heritage

1. Introduction: A Rich Tapestry of Kurdish Literary Heritage

Kurdish literature, the cultural expression of over thirty million Kurds, embodies a rich and profound heritage that has often been overshadowed on the global stage due to historical political fragmentation and persistent suppression. The artistic and literary achievements of the Kurdish people have frequently remained unknown to the wider world, which has typically only focused on the Kurds during significant political events. Within this literary tradition, poetry has historically held a place of paramount importance, serving as a vital medium for the preservation of Kurdish identity, history, and collective experience. It has evolved over centuries, mirroring the struggles, aspirations, and resilience of the Kurdish people. Until the mid-20th century, poetry was the primary, and often sole, literary genre cultivated by Kurds.² The very survival and continuity of Kurdish literature and language owe a considerable debt to a vibrant oral tradition, characterized by its inherently poetic language, rich figurative expressions, and layers of meaning. This tradition included epic poems known as *lawj*, which often recounted tales of love or battle, and were performed by revered poets called *dengbêj*.³ Despite formidable historical challenges, including the systematic destruction of manuscripts and the suppression of the Kurdish language in various nation-states¹, Kurdish literature has demonstrated remarkable tenacity and continues to evolve and flourish in diverse forms.³ The Kurdish linguistic landscape is complex, with the language belonging to the northwestern Iranian branch of the Indo-European family.¹ It has never achieved complete unification, and its various dialects have given rise to distinct literary traditions. The main dialect groups include Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji) and Central Kurdish (Sorani), while the Gorani dialect also boasts a significant classical literary corpus.⁸ Zazaki (also known as Kirmanckî or Dimlî) is another distinct dialect that has seen an emergence of literary works, particularly in more recent times.⁴ The development of literature in each of these dialects has been shaped by differing geopolitical contexts and historical periods. For instance, Gorani literature primarily emerged and developed between the 15th and 19th centuries under the patronage of the Ardalan principality, situated within the Persian Empire. In contrast, Kurmanji literature flourished during a similar timeframe (15th to 19th centuries) in the Kurdish principalities of the Ottoman Empire, such as Botan. Sorani rose to literary prominence later, gaining significant traction in the 19th century, largely due to the cultural initiatives of the Baban principality.⁹

Socio-political factors have profoundly influenced the trajectory of Kurdish literary production. The division of the traditional Kurdish homeland among Turkey, Persia (Iran), Iraq, and Syria following World War I subjected the Kurdish people to various assimilationist policies and severe linguistic suppression. These circumstances forced many intellectuals into exile and indelibly shaped the thematic concerns of Kurdish literature, with resistance, identity, and longing for the homeland becoming recurrent motifs.¹ The very development of Kurdish literature often hinged on the limited freedoms and cultural rights granted within these newly formed states. Iraq, particularly under the British mandate, and later the Kurdish diaspora in Europe (most notably Sweden), became crucial centers for Kurdish cultural life, publishing, and literary innovation.⁶

The precarious political existence of the Kurds and the frequent suppression of their language and culture have imbued their literature with a functional significance that extends beyond mere aesthetic expression. In the absence of a unified state or robust political institutions, literature—particularly poetry and deeply rooted oral traditions—has served as a primary vehicle for the preservation of cultural identity, historical memory, and the articulation of a spirit of resistance.¹ From classical poets like Ehmedê Xanî, who explicitly used his literary works to call for Kurdish unity and lament their subjugation ², to modern writers like Sherko Bekas, who chronicled the horrors of the Anfal genocide ³, Kurdish literary figures have consistently engaged with the political and social realities of their people. This enduring commitment has transformed literature into a vital tool for cultural survival and national assertion.

Furthermore, the historical development of Kurdish literature reveals a dialectical relationship between patronage and literary vitality. The flourishing of specific Kurdish literary dialects was often intrinsically linked to the support and patronage of Kurdish principalities. The Ardalan principality, for example, was instrumental in the cultivation of Gorani literature , while Kurmanji found a fertile ground in Ottoman-era Kurdish principalities like Botan. The rise of Sorani as a major literary language in the 19th century was significantly propelled by the conscious efforts of the Baban principality to foster it as a distinct cultural marker.⁹ The subsequent decline and dismantling of these principalities led to a wane in traditional patronage, causing shifts in literary centers and the prominence of certain dialects.⁸ In more recent history, particularly in the 20th century, the Kurdish diaspora emerged as a new form of enabling environment, where intellectual and financial support, especially in European countries like Sweden, facilitated a renaissance in Kurdish literary production. This was particularly crucial for dialects like Kurmanji, which faced severe restrictions in Turkey.⁶ This historical pattern underscores a direct correlation between supportive political and social structures and the vibrancy, direction, and continuity of literary production in the diverse dialects of the Kurdish language.

Table 1: Major Kurdish Literary Dialects and Their Characteristics

Dialect	Historical Period of Literary Prominence	Key Geographical Areas of Use (Historical &	Notable Early Figures/Works or Key Characteristics
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		Contemporary)	
Gorani (Hawrami)	Classical: 15th-19th c. (oldest literary tradition by some accounts)	Ardalan principality (historical); Hawraman region (Iran/Iraq)	Ahl-e Haqq/Yarsan religious texts ; patronage of Ardalan princes ; poets like Mele Perîşan, Khana Qubadi, Mawlawi Tawagozi. ⁸
Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish)	Classical: 15th-19th c.; Modern revival: 20th c. onwards	Botan, Hakkari (historical Ottoman principalities); Turkey, Syria, parts of Iraq/Iran, diaspora	Ali Hariri, Melayê Cizîrî, Feqiyê Teyran, Ehmedê Xanî (<i>Mem û Zîn</i>) ² ; Cizre school of poetry ; Latin alphabet developed by Bedirxan. ²²
Sorani (Central Kurdish)	19th c. onwards	Baban principality (Sulaymaniyah region - historical); Iraqi Kurdistan, parts of Iran	Nalî (first <i>diwan</i> in Sorani) ⁹ ; patronage of Baban princes ; poets like Haji Qadir Koyi, Sheikh Rezza Talabani, Abdulla Goran (modern). ⁹
Zazaki (Kirmanckî/Dimlî)	Emerging literary works: late 19th c. (Mawlids), significant development from 1970s in diaspora	Eastern Turkey	Earliest texts are Mawlids (1899, 1933) ; modern literary cultivation primarily in diaspora, e.g., by Malmîsanij. ⁴
Laki/Luri	Early poetic forms (e.g., Baba Tahir, 11th c. - debated connection)	Western Iran (Lorestan, Ilam, Kermanshah)	Baba Tahir Hamadani (Luri/Laki dialect sometimes linked to Kurdish). ²

2. The Dawn of Kurdish Literature: Early Voices and Classical Masters (Pre-19th Century)

The origins of Kurdish poetry are deeply embedded in a rich oral tradition that predates Islamic influence, encompassing a vast repertoire of myths, legends, and folk tales. These narratives were meticulously preserved and transmitted by itinerant poet-singers known as *dengbêj*, whose performances, often accompanied by music, were central to communal life. This oral heritage served as a crucial reservoir of historical consciousness and cultural identity, particularly vital in periods of external pressure and political instability.¹ While the

precise timeline for the transition to written forms is subject to scholarly debate, the 11th-century dervish poet Baba Tahir Hamadani is often cited for his lyrical quatrains composed in a Luri dialect, which some scholars connect to the broader Kurdish linguistic continuum, marking an early phase of recorded poetic expression in the region.

The medieval period witnessed the more definitive emergence of written Kurdish literature, a development significantly shaped by the pervasive literary traditions of the Persian and Arabic Islamic worlds. According to some scholarly accounts, the earliest extant text definitively identified as Kurdish is a brief prayer written in the Armenian script, dating from the 15th century. The first more substantial literary texts in Kurdish are believed to have emerged in the late 16th century. This period laid the groundwork for a flourishing of classical Kurdish poetry, primarily in the Gorani and Kurmanji dialects, which would see its zenith in the works of masters who skillfully blended indigenous themes with sophisticated Perso-Arabic literary forms.

Several foundational figures were instrumental in shaping this nascent literary tradition: Baba Tahir Hamadani (c. 1000/1010 – c. 1032/1055/1058)

An enigmatic 11th-century dervish poet hailing from Hamadan, Iran, Baba Tahir is celebrated for his poignant *do-beytîs* (quatrains).²⁷ His poetry, composed in what is variously described as a Luri or a Hamadani dialect of Persian, holds a complex position in relation to Kurdish literature. Some scholars, like Rahim Loqmani, assert that Baba Tahir's poetic language represents an old form of the Laki-Lori dialect of Kurdish, historically spoken in Hamadan. Others, such as L.P. Elwell-Sutton, theorize he wrote in a Hamadani dialect of Persian, which traditional sources often loosely termed Luri, while also noting its affinity with the dialect spoken by the Jews of Hamadan. The themes permeating his verses are deeply mystical, revolving around God, nature, humanity, and the virtues of simplicity and humility.²⁷ Works like "Kalamat e-Qesar" explore the nexus of mysticism, science, and wisdom, while "Saranjam" delves into mystic beliefs in Luri.²⁷ Although his direct classification as a "Kurdish" poet is debated, his work is frequently included in discussions of early poetic forms in dialects related to or considered part of the Kurdish linguistic family, particularly within the Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq) tradition, with which he is sometimes associated.² Baba Tahir's significance lies in his representation of one of the earliest known poetic voices from the wider Iranic linguistic sphere whose simple yet profound mystical verses achieved widespread and enduring appeal, and whose linguistic medium shares notable affinities with, and is sometimes claimed by, Kurdish literary history.²⁷

Ali Hariri (Elî Herîrî) (1009 – 1079/1080)

Born in the village of Harir in the Hakkari district of Bohtan, Ali Hariri is a seminal figure in Kurdish literary history. He is widely regarded as a pioneer of classical Kurdish Sufi literature and a foundational figure of the Kurdish literary tradition, composing his works in the Kurmanji dialect.¹⁹ Some sources even identify him as the first well-known Kurdish poet. Hariri's poetry primarily explored themes of love, with a particular emphasis on affection for Kurdistan, its stunning natural landscapes, and the beauty of its people. These thematic concerns became recurrent motifs for subsequent generations of Kurdish poets.⁶ Although information about his life is limited—he was first mentioned by the 17th-century poet Ehmedê Xanî—it is known that he died in Cizre, where his grave is still considered a sacred place of pilgrimage. Ali

Hariri's enduring importance stems from his role in establishing early literary themes and forms in Kurmanji poetry, laying a critical foundation upon which later poets would build.

Mele Perîşan (1356–1431)

A well-known poet and writer in the Gorani dialect, Mele Perîşan was a significant contributor to the older Gorani literary tradition.⁹ This tradition, which some scholars consider the oldest distinctively Kurdish literary stream, developed primarily under the patronage of the Ardlan principality. Mele Perîşan's work exemplifies the early flourishing of Gorani literature, highlighting its historical depth and distinct characteristics within the broader Kurdish literary landscape.

Mela Hesenê Bateyî (Melayê Bateyî) (1417–1491/1495)

Hailing from the Hakkari region, Mela Hesenê Bateyî was a prominent Kurmanji poet.⁹ He is best known as the author of *Mewlûda Kurmancî* (The Kurmanji Mawlid, or Birthday of the Prophet), a collection of poems that is also referred to more broadly as *Mawlud*, a compilation of verse and an anthology.⁹ Alongside figures like Ali Hariri, Melayê Cizîrî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Ehmedê Xanî, Bateyî is considered one of the founders of the Kurdish literary tradition.¹⁹ His *Mewlûd* became a widely recited and cherished religious and literary text within Kurdish communities, cementing his importance as an early and influential Kurmanji poet.

Melayê Cizîrî (Mela Ehmedê Cizîrî, Sheikh Ahmad Jaziri) (c. 1570–1640)

Born Ahmad Nîşanî in Cizre, the heart of the Bohtan region, Melayê Cizîrî stands as one of the most revered poets in classical Kurdish literature.² A master of the Kurmanji dialect, he was also a profound Sufi mystic. Despite his fluency in Arabic and Persian, he chose to express his literary genius exclusively in Kurdish. His poetic voice was significantly shaped by his deep engagement with classical Persian Sufi poets such as Hafez, Rumi, Saadi, and Jami.² Cizîrî's *Diwan* (collection of poems) is a monumental work, comprising over 2,000 verses (or approximately 120 poems in various forms like ghazal, qasida, and ruba'i), and is often compared in its depth and artistry to the masterpieces of his Persian influences.⁶ The thematic landscape of his poetry is rich with Sufi concepts: pure and mystical love, the intoxicating "wine of ecstasy," metaphysical rapture, the depiction of feminine beauty as a mirror reflecting Divine attributes, and the profound joys and sorrows inherent in the mystical path.²¹ His explicit love for Kurdistan also found expression in his verses. Melayê Cizîrî is credited with founding a distinct Kurdish literary school, and his work was deeply admired and emulated by later luminaries such as Ehmedê Xanî, Feqiyê Teyran, and Cigerxwîn.¹⁷ He was the first Kurdish poet known to have utilized the qasida (ode) genre and to compile a complete diwan. His significance is immense; he is a cornerstone of classical Kurmanji poetry, having established a sophisticated literary school and profoundly influencing the trajectory of Kurdish poetic expression for centuries.

Feqiyê Teyran (Mir Mihemed) (1590–1660)

Born Mir Mihemed in the Miks region of Hakkari, Feqiyê Teyran was a distinguished Kurmanji poet who may have studied under Melayê Cizîrî.² He is celebrated for a range of influential works, most notably *Zembîlfiroş* (The Basket Seller), his most significant piece, which is based on a popular love story. Other important works include *Şêxê Senan* (The Story of Sheikh San'an, 1621), *Qewlê Hespê Reş* (The Tale of the Black Horse), and *Beyta Dimdim*, which is considered the first literary account of the historic Battle of Dimdim.³ Feqiyê Teyran's poetic

style is characterized by its use of plain, accessible language, a skillful incorporation of folklore elements, a profound mysticism, and a preference for quatrains over couplets.¹⁹ His thematic concerns included divine love, knowledge, wisdom, the beauty of women and nature, and the Sufi concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being).¹⁹ He is recognized as a pioneer in Kurdish Sufi literature and stands as one of the key founders of the broader Kurdish literary tradition.¹⁹ Feqiyê Teyran's primary contribution lies in his masterful integration of folkloric narratives and motifs into written poetry, thereby enriching the Kurmanji literary canon with popular themes and accessible language.

Ehmedê Xanî (Ahmad Khani) (1650/1651–1707)

Born in the Hakkari region and later dying in Bayazid, Ehmedê Xanî is arguably the most renowned and influential of the classical Kurdish poets.² He held deep admiration for his predecessors Melayê Cizîrî and Feqiyê Teyran.¹³ Xanî's magnum opus, *Mem û Zîn*, completed in 1692, is a sweeping romantic epic composed of over 2,650 distichs (couplets) and is widely regarded as the Kurdish national epic.² This masterpiece intricately explores themes of love, loss, burgeoning national identity, and the fervent Kurdish aspirations for self-determination and independence.² *Mem û Zîn* is remarkable for its capacity to sustain dual interpretations: on one level, it functions as a mystical allegory of divine love, deeply influenced by the Persianate Sufi romance tradition exemplified by Nizami Ganjavi's *Layla and Majnun*; on another, it serves as a potent nationalist allegory, eloquently lamenting Kurdish disunity and their subjugation under foreign powers.² Xanî himself explicitly addressed the political plight of the Kurds and passionately advocated for unity and self-governance.² The epic also discusses themes of human love, sexuality, gender roles, and even instances of cross-dressing with a candor that contrasts with later societal norms in Kurdistan.³⁵ Beyond *Mem û Zîn*, Xanî authored other significant works, including *Nûbihara Biçûkan* (The Children's First Spring), a rhymed Arabic-Kurdish vocabulary designed for pedagogical purposes, and *Eqîdeya Îmanê* (The Creed of Faith), a religious poem. Both of these texts were widely used in Kurdish madrasas (religious schools) for education.¹³ Ehmedê Xanî's significance is monumental; he is a pivotal figure not only in Kurdish literature but also in the development of Kurdish national consciousness. *Mem û Zîn* remains a cornerstone of Kurdish cultural identity, and Xanî is revered as a proto-nationalist thinker who championed the Kurdish language and articulated a clear vision for Kurdish self-rule, masterfully bridging mystical literary traditions with an emerging national sentiment.

Khana Qubadî (Xanay Qubadî) (1700–1759)

A distinguished Kurdish poet from the Jaff tribe, Khana Qubadî composed his works in the Gorani dialect, specifically its Hawrami variant.⁸ He was a prominent member of the Hawrami school of poetry, which flourished within the Ardalán principality. His most celebrated published work is *Şîrîn û Xesrew* (Shirin and Khosrow), an epic romance completed in 1740, which stands as one of the longest Kurdish epics.⁸ Despite his profound mastery of Persian language and literature, Khana Qubadî was a fervent advocate for the use of Kurdish (Gorani) in literary expression. He famously declared in verse that, for him, Kurdish was "sweeter than sugar," a testament to his commitment to his mother tongue.³⁹ His dedication to promoting Gorani was such that he reportedly had to flee the Ardalán region for the neighboring Baban principality due to his efforts in translating the Quran into Gorani. Khana Qubadî is a key

representative of the rich Gorani literary tradition. His championing of the Kurdish language for high literary purposes and his contribution of a major epic to the Kurdish canon underscore his importance and reflect the cultural vibrancy of the Ardan principality during his time.

The development of early Kurdish literature reveals a profound and symbiotic relationship with Sufism. Many of the most prominent classical Kurdish poets, including Ali Hariri¹⁹, Melayê Cizîrî¹⁷, Feqiyê Teyran, and Ehmedê Xanî¹³, were deeply immersed in Sufi thought and practice. Sufism provided not only a rich wellspring of thematic content—such as divine love, mysticism, and the allegorical interpretation of human experience—but also a crucial socio-cultural framework and network for literary production and dissemination. In an era with limited secular institutions for literary cultivation, madrasas (religious schools) and Sufi orders (tariqas) often served as vital centers of learning and poetic activity. The madrasa environment, frequently interconnected with Sufi scholarship, was particularly instrumental in nurturing Kurdish letters, as evidenced in the careers of figures like Xanî, whose didactic works were standard texts in these institutions.¹³ Thus, Sufism was not merely a peripheral thematic influence but an integral component of the intellectual and social infrastructure that fostered the growth of early Kurdish literary traditions.

Furthermore, classical Kurdish literature, especially within the Kurmanji and Gorani traditions, evolved in active dialogue with the broader "Persianate cosmopolis." This engagement is evident in the adoption and adaptation of established Perso-Arabic literary forms such as the *ghazal* (lyric poem), *qasida* (ode), and *mathnawi* (rhyming couplet epic), as well as shared metrical patterns and a common stock of poetic imagery.³ For instance, Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* explicitly acknowledges its connection to the *mathnawi* tradition and to Persian masters like Nizami Ganjavi.¹⁷ However, this participation in a wider literary culture was often accompanied by a conscious assertion of Kurdish linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. Figures like Xanî and Khana Qubadi, while demonstrating profound familiarity with Persianate models, purposefully employed these forms to articulate uniquely Kurdish concerns, experiences, and national aspirations.² This dynamic interplay—a simultaneous engagement with a prestigious cosmopolitan literary heritage and a deliberate effort to carve out a distinct vernacular space infused with local content and burgeoning national sentiment—constitutes a key characteristic of classical Kurdish literature.

3. The 19th Century: New Currents, Nationalist Stirrings, and the Rise of Sorani

The 19th century marked a transformative period for Kurdish literature, characterized by the burgeoning influence of nationalist thought and significant political realignments that deeply impacted literary themes and production. Within the Ottoman Empire, a nascent Kurdish national movement began to take shape, albeit often interwoven with existing tribal loyalties and structures. A crucial factor in this era was the dismantling of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities, such as Baban and Ardan, by the centralizing Ottoman and Qajar empires. This loss of local Kurdish rule engendered a profound sense of political upheaval and cultural

displacement, sentiments that found potent expression in the poetry of the time.

Paradoxically, the decline of traditional courtly patronage, which had long sustained poets, also created a space for greater artistic freedom, allowing writers to engage more directly and critically with personal, social, and national concerns. Poetry, in this context, increasingly became a vital arena for exploring, debating, and celebrating "Kurdishness". Themes of resistance against oppression, the revival of cultural heritage, the call for self-determination, and the urgent need for modernization, education, and enlightenment became prominent in the literary discourse.²

A defining linguistic development of this century was the emergence and consolidation of the Sorani dialect as a major literary language. While Kurmanji and Gorani already possessed established written traditions, Sorani rose to prominence largely through the conscious efforts of the Baban principality. Rulers like 'Abd al-Rahmān Pāshā Bābān actively encouraged the use of the Sulaimani dialect (the basis of Sorani) for literary purposes, aiming to establish a distinct cultural legacy for their domain, partly in response to the established Gorani tradition of the rival Ardalan principality. The city of Sulaimani, founded as the Baban capital, quickly became the vibrant center of this new Sorani literary movement. The poet Nalî is widely recognized as the first major literary figure to compile a *dîwan* (collection of poems) in Sorani, an achievement that marked a crucial turning point for the dialect's literary status.⁹ Following Nalî's pioneering work, other influential poets such as Salim, Kurdi, Haji Qadir Koyi, and Sheikh Rezza Talabani further solidified Sorani's position as a powerful medium for Kurdish literary expression.⁹

Key literary figures of this dynamic era include:

Mastoureh Ardalan (Mestûrey Erdelan) (1805–1848)

A remarkable figure from the Ardalan principality, Mah Sharaf Khanom Mastoureh Ardalan was a Kurdish poet, historian, and writer born in Sanandaj.⁸ She composed her works primarily in the Hawrami/Gorani dialect and Persian, though a few poems in Central Kurdish (Sorani) are also attributed to her. Mastoureh Ardalan is particularly renowned for authoring *Tarikh-i Ardalan* (The History of the Ardalan Dynasty), a significant historical chronicle that has led some to consider her the first female historiographer in the Middle East.⁴³ In addition to her historical work, she also penned a *Diwan* of poetry. Her poetry is noted for its candid expression of love and femininity, often challenging the prevailing patriarchal norms of her time and embodying what scholars have described as an "authentic feminine voice". Following the Qajar conquest of the Ardalan territory, Mastoureh and her family were forced into exile, eventually settling in Sulaymaniyah, then under the Baban principality. Her significance lies in her unique position as a prominent female literary and historical voice in 19th-century Kurdistan. Her contributions to Gorani poetry and Kurdish historiography are substantial, and her work offers a rare perspective that implicitly critiques restrictive gender roles.

Mawlawi Tawagozi (Mewlewî Tawegozi, Ma'dumi) (1806–1882/1883)

A leading Kurdish poet of the 19th century, Mawlawi Tawagozi wrote with great skill in Gorani (specifically the Hawrami dialect), as well as in Arabic and Persian.⁹ Born in Javanrud County, Iran, he became associated with the Naqshbandi Sufi order and maintained close ties with the Jaff tribe and the Ardalan state. The ghazal was his favored poetic genre, and while he was

influenced by classical Persian masters like Hafez and Rumi, he remained deeply loyal to the distinct literary traditions of Gorani. His poetry often explored themes of Sufism, love, and the natural world, with many poignant verses dedicated to the pain of losing his wife.¹⁸ Mawlawi's importance stems from his prolific output and his influential role in continuing and enriching the classical Gorani poetic tradition throughout the 19th century, particularly through his mastery of the ghazal and his profound Sufi-inspired themes.

Nalî (Mela Khidrî Ehmedî Şaweysî Mikâ'îlî) (1797/1800–1855/1856)

A highly prominent Kurdish poet, scholar, and linguist from the Sulaymaniyah region, Nalî is a towering figure in 19th-century Kurdish literature.³ He is celebrated for pioneering the use of Central Kurdish (Sorani) as a sophisticated literary language and is credited with founding the Sorani School of Kurdish poetry.¹¹ His *Diwan* was the first major collection of poems composed in Sorani.⁹ Nalî possessed a profound mastery of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and his poetry demonstrates an extensive knowledge of these literary traditions, earning him the honorific title of the "Kurdish Hafez".²⁴ His verses often featured intricate wordplay and, at times, code-switching with Arabic.²⁴ The themes explored in his *Diwan* (which, in Marîf Kheznedar's edition, includes 111 ghazals, 11 qasidas, and one quatrain) are diverse, encompassing passionate love (notably for a mysterious woman named Hebîbe, who became a legendary figure in Kurdish poetry), mystical reflections (though he sometimes expressed disdain for certain dervishes), assertions of Kurdish identity, praise for the Baban princes, celebration of the richness of the Kurdish language, and poignant laments for the loss of Kurdish independence.²⁴ Nalî's meticulous attention to poetic form and his innovative use of language were unparalleled in Kurdish poetry of his time. His transformative influence established Sorani as a major literary language, and his work provided compositional models that shaped generations of Sorani poets.

Hajî Qadir Koyî (Hacî Qadirî Koyî) (c. 1817–1897)

A significant Kurdish poet from Koy Sanjaq, Hajî Qadir Koyî wrote primarily in the Sorani dialect.² He is recognized for carrying forward the nationalistic spirit of earlier poets like Ehmedê Xanî in his writings.²⁵ Many scholars consider him a key architect of Kurdish nationalism and a pioneer of modern Kurdish poetry.²⁵ Koyî passionately advocated for the enlightenment of the Kurdish people, urging them to combat illiteracy and religious fanaticism. He encouraged a turn towards science, modern education, and engagement with the realities of contemporary society as means to achieve an independent Kurdistan.²⁵ He was a fervent promoter of the Kurdish language, imploring Kurds to establish magazines and newspapers in their mother tongue and famously defining a Kurd as one who speaks Kurdish.⁴ He often criticized traditional leaders and notables who neglected the Kurdish language and the fate of their people.⁴ His collected poetry is published under the title *Dîwanî Hacî Qadirî Koyî*. Hajî Qadir Koyî's primary significance lies in his powerful fusion of poetry with explicit nationalist advocacy and his unwavering call for modernization. He played a crucial role in shaping modern Kurdish national consciousness and promoting the Kurdish language as a tool for contemporary communication and nation-building.

Sheikh Rezza Talabani (Şêx Reza Talebanî) (1835–1910)

A Kurdish poet who composed works in Sorani, as well as in Arabic and Persian, Sheikh Rezza Talabani is known for his sharp satirical poetry.⁹ His verses often offered biting critiques of

religious figures, societal hypocrisy, and prevailing norms. Notably, his work also included explorations of homoerotic themes, which represented a significant and often controversial departure in the context of Kurdish verse at the time. Sheikh Rezza Talabani contributed to the Sorani literary movement with a distinct, often provocative voice, thereby expanding the thematic range and expressive possibilities of Kurdish poetry.

The political and social transformations of the 19th century, particularly the fall of the semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities like Baban and Ardan, served as a powerful, albeit paradoxical, catalyst for new literary expressions of Kurdish identity.¹¹ While this collapse represented a significant political setback and a loss of traditional patronage systems, it also spurred poets to engage more directly and often critically with the concepts of Kurdish identity, language, and national aspirations. Figures like Nalî expressed profound sorrow over the loss of Kurdish independence, while Haji Qadir Koyî vehemently called for Kurdish unity, independence, and the modernization of Kurdish society, often castigating traditional leaders whom he perceived as failing the nation.⁴ The pervasive theme of "exile"—both spiritual and physical—became a central motif, yet this experience was often transmuted into a form of "artistic arrival," as poets reinvigorated traditional forms and explored new content to articulate the Kurdish condition. This period demonstrates how a crisis in political structures can fuel a new wave of literary expression, one that is often more overtly nationalistic and socially critical than the court-patronized poetry of earlier eras.

A defining characteristic of the 19th-century Kurdish literary awakening, especially within the burgeoning Sorani tradition, was a conscious and concerted effort by leading poets to elevate the Kurdish language to the status of a sophisticated literary medium. This linguistic "nationalism" was a direct response to centuries of cultural marginalization and the dominance of Persian and Arabic in formal literary spheres. Nalî, for instance, is credited not only with pioneering Sorani as a literary language but also with establishing compositional rules and demonstrating its capacity for high artistic expression, often writing about the inherent richness of his native tongue.¹¹ Similarly, Haji Qadir Koyî relentlessly advocated for the widespread use of Kurdish in all aspects of modern life, including the publication of newspapers and magazines, and famously asserted that the Kurdish language was a fundamental marker of Kurdish identity.⁴ Even the Baban rulers themselves played a role in this linguistic shift, actively encouraging the transition from Gorani to Sorani for literary purposes as a means of forging their own distinct cultural legacy. This profound emphasis on language was not merely a philological concern; it was a foundational element of an emerging national consciousness and a critical component of literary modernization, demonstrating a clear understanding that cultural identity and linguistic vitality are inextricably linked.

4. The 20th Century: Modernization, Diaspora, and Diverse Literary Expressions

The 20th century heralded a period of profound transformation for Kurdish literature, marked by the development of new literary forms, intense political pressures, the rise of a significant diaspora, and crucial linguistic innovations. While poetry had been the predominant genre for

centuries, the 20th century saw the gradual emergence and eventual flourishing of Kurdish prose, including the novel and the short story. The first Kurdish short story appeared in 1913, followed by the first novel in 1935, though the substantial development of these prose forms occurred several decades later, often propelled by the efforts of Kurdish writers and intellectuals living in exile. Modern Kurdish poetry, meanwhile, began to diverge from purely classical Persianate models. Influential figures like Abdulla Goran looked towards modern Turkish poetry and Western literary movements for inspiration, introducing innovations such as blank verse, prose poems, and new rhyme schemes, thereby revolutionizing Kurdish poetic expression.²⁶ Throughout this tumultuous century, Kurdish poetry frequently served as an integral component of political uprisings and a powerful tool for social mobilization and the articulation of national aspirations.³

This period was also characterized by unprecedented challenges. The establishment of new nation-states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria) across the traditional Kurdish homeland led to systematic attacks on Kurdish literary heritage, including the destruction of manuscripts and the aggressive suppression of the Kurdish language.¹ These policies forced many Kurdish intellectuals into exile, creating a widespread diaspora. Paradoxically, this diaspora, particularly in European countries such as Sweden, evolved into a vital new center for Kurdish literary production, publishing, and language promotion. It provided a haven where dialects like Kurmanji, which faced severe restrictions in Turkey, could be cultivated and developed.⁶ Writers in exile frequently explored themes of identity, displacement, longing for the homeland, and the enduring struggle for cultural survival.⁵⁰

Linguistically, the 20th century witnessed groundbreaking innovations. Among the most significant was the development of a Latin-based Kurdish alphabet by Celadet Alî Bedirxan in 1932. This script, known as the Hawar alphabet (after his influential magazine), was designed for the Kurmanji dialect and rapidly gained popularity, becoming a crucial tool for modernizing and standardizing Kurmanji for broader literary and educational use.¹⁷ Concurrently, figures like Abdulla Goran in the Sorani-speaking regions worked towards creating a more unified Kurdish literary language, seeking to bridge the gap between Kurmanji and Sorani. These linguistic endeavors were fundamental to the modernization of Kurdish literature and its adaptation to contemporary needs.

Prominent literary figures who shaped Kurdish literature in the 20th century include:

Piramerd (Tewfîq Beg Mehmûd Axa) (1867–1950)

A multifaceted literary personality from the late Ottoman Empire and early Iraqi period, Piramerd was a poet, writer, playwright, and journalist.⁹ He is considered a transitional figure who bridged classical Kurdish literary traditions with emerging modern sensibilities. Piramerd made significant contributions to the development of Sorani literature and was a pioneer in Kurdish journalism, founding or editing influential newspapers such as Zheen (Life) and Zhyanawa (Revival). His work helped to popularize Sorani as a medium for diverse forms of cultural expression. His significance lies in his versatile contributions to Kurdish cultural life, encompassing poetry that often reflected folk wisdom, early attempts at drama, and foundational work in Sorani journalism.

Celadet Alî Bedirxan (Mîr Celadet) (1893–1951)

A Kurdish prince, diplomat, writer, linguist, journalist, and political activist, Celadet Alî Bedirxan was a monumental figure in the modernization of the Kurmanji dialect.⁹ In exile in Syria, he founded the highly influential cultural magazines Hawar (The Call, 1932-1943) and Ronahî (The Light, 1942-1945), which became pivotal platforms for the development of modern Kurmanji literature and the dissemination of Kurdish cultural and nationalist thought.²² His most enduring linguistic contribution was the design of the Latin-based Kurdish alphabet (often called the Hawar or Bedirxan alphabet) and the compilation of Bingehên gramera kurdmancî (The Basics of Kurmanji Grammar).¹⁷ Bedirxan was also deeply involved in Kurdish nationalist politics, serving as a leader in the Xoybûn (Independence) organization and the Ararat Republic movement.²² His work provided Kurmanji with a standardized, accessible script and a modern grammatical framework, profoundly impacting Kurdish language revitalization, literary development, and cultural identity in the 20th century and beyond.

Arab Shamilov (Erebê Şemo) (1897–1978)

A Yazidi Kurd from the Kars region (then Russian Empire, later Turkey), Arab Shamilov became a prominent novelist and scholar within the Soviet Union, particularly in Soviet Armenia.⁹ He is celebrated as the author of Şivanê Kurmanca (The Kurdish Shepherd), published in 1931 (though some sources state 1935). This work, based on his own life experiences and his journey towards communism, is widely considered the first novel written in the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.¹⁷ His other notable novels include Dimdim (1966), a historical novel inspired by the Kurdish folk epic about the Battle of Dimdim, and Jiyana Bextewer (Happy Life, 1959).⁵⁵ Shamilov also played a role in developing a Latin-based alphabet for Kurdish within the Soviet context in 1927 and was associated with the Kurdish newspaper Ria Taza (The New Path). His significance lies in his pioneering role as the father of the Kurmanji novel, and his contributions to the development of Kurdish literature and linguistics within the specific socio-political environment of the Soviet Union.

Cigerxwîn (Sheikhmous Hasan) (1903–1984)

One of the most prolific and influential Kurdish poets of the 20th century, Cigerxwîn (whose pen name means "bleeding liver") was also a writer, journalist, historian, and lexicographer.¹ Born in Hesar, near Mardin in the Ottoman Empire, he spent much of his life in Syria before dying in exile in Sweden.¹⁷ He wrote primarily in the Kurmanji dialect. His numerous poetry collections, including Dîwana yekem: Prîsk û Pêtî (First Diwan: Sparks and Flames, 1945), Sewra Azadî (The Revolution of Freedom, 1954), and Kîme Ez? (Who Am I?, 1973), resonated deeply with the Kurdish populace. Cigerxwîn's poetry is characterized by its accessible style, revolutionary fervor, and engagement with themes of nationalism, romanticism, social realism, anti-feudalism, and the quest for Kurdish freedom and social justice.¹ He also made significant linguistic contributions with his Destûra Zimanê Kurdî (Kurdish Grammar, 1961) and a two-part Kurdish Dictionary (1962), in addition to a work on Kurdish history, Tarîxa Kurdistan. An active participant in Kurdish political movements, including the Xoybûn party, Cigerxwîn faced imprisonment and exile for his beliefs. His impact was so profound that the period of his literary activity is often referred to as the "Cigerxwîn period" in Kurdish poetry, highlighting his role in shaping modern Kurdish cultural and national consciousness.

Abdulla Goran (1904–1962)

Born in Halabja, Iraqi Kurdistan, Abdulla Goran is widely acclaimed as the founder and father

of modern Kurdish poetry.⁹ He revolutionized Kurdish poetic forms and themes, breaking away from the strictures of classical Perso-Arabic prosody. Goran introduced significant stylistic innovations, including blank verse, the prose poem, and new, more flexible rhyme schemes, while abandoning the traditional aruz meter.²⁶ He skillfully combined elements of traditional Kurdish classical and folk verse with contemporary lyricism, diversifying the subject matter of Kurdish poetry. His work often explored themes of nature, women, love, and romanticism, drawing inspiration from English Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, as well as modern Turkish poetry.²⁶ Goran was also dedicated to linguistic development, working towards the unification of the Kurmanji and Sorani dialects into a single, cohesive Kurdish literary language. He was a skilled translator, rendering works from English, French, Persian, and Turkish into Kurdish. His collected works, notably *Diwanê Goran*, showcase his innovative spirit and profound impact on the course of 20th-century Kurdish literature, establishing a new trajectory for poetic expression in the Sorani dialect.

Hemin Mukriyani (Hêmin Mukriyanî) (1920/1921–1986)

A prominent Kurdish poet, journalist, translator, and literary critic from Iranian Kurdistan (Mahabad region), Hemin Mukriyani (pen name Hêmin) was a significant voice in modern Sorani Kurdish poetry.⁶ He was deeply involved in Kurdish national aspirations and was named a national poet of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946, alongside his close friend Hejar. His major poetry collections include *Tarîk û Rûn* (Darkness and Light, 1974) and *Naley Judaî* (The Cry of Separation, 1979). He also published *Paşerokî Mamosta Hêmin* (A Collection of Articles by Teacher Hemin, 1983).⁶² After the Iranian Revolution, Hemin founded the *Salaha-al-Din Ayyubi* Kurdish publishing house in Urmia and served as the editor of the influential literary journal *Sirwe* (Breeze) from its inception in 1985 until his death. His work is characterized by its lyrical quality, patriotic sentiment, and engagement with social issues, making him a beloved and respected figure in Iranian Kurdish literary circles.

Hejar (Abdurrahman Sharafkandî) (1920/1921–1990/1991)

Abdurrahman Sharafkandî, known by his pen name Hejar (meaning "poor" or "destitute"), was a towering intellectual figure in 20th-century Kurdish culture, renowned as a poet, writer, lexicographer, linguist, and translator.⁶ Born in Mahabad, Iranian Kurdistan, Hejar was also appointed an official poet of the Republic of Mahabad and maintained a close relationship with the Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani.⁶⁵ His poetic works, collected in his *Dîwana Bu Kurdistan* (Diwan for Kurdistan), express deep patriotic feeling and a commitment to the Kurdish cause.⁶⁵ Hejar's contributions as a translator were monumental; he rendered Ehmedê Xanî's *Mem û Zîn* from Kurmanji into Sorani, translated the Quran into Kurdish, brought Omar Khayyam's Quatrains from Persian into Kurdish with remarkable fidelity to the original rhythm, and translated Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* from Arabic into Persian, and the *Sharafnama* (History of the Kurds by Sharafkhan Bidlisi) from Persian into Sorani.⁶⁵ However, his most significant lexicographical achievement is *Henbane Borîne* (A Full Purse), a comprehensive and highly influential Kurdish-Kurdish-Persian dictionary that incorporates vocabulary from all major Kurdish dialects, serving as an invaluable resource for Kurdish language studies and preservation.⁶⁵ His autobiography, *Çêştî Micêvir* (The Exile's Meal), offers insights into his life and times.⁶³ Hejar's multifaceted work has left an indelible mark on Kurdish language, literature, and cultural identity.

Sherko Bekas (Şêrko Bêkes) (1940–2013)

One of the most celebrated and internationally recognized modern Kurdish poets, Sherko Bekas was born in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan, the son of the poet Fayak Bekas.³ He is widely regarded as a foundational figure in contemporary Kurdish poetry, known for his innovative style. Bekas introduced the "Rûwange" (vision) literary movement, which sought to break free from traditional poetic constraints such as rigid rhyme schemes, and he also pioneered the "poster poem" concept in Kurdish literature. His vast body of work explores themes of liberty, love, life, nature, and the political, cultural, and spiritual conditions of the Kurdish people, with a particular focus on resistance, exile, the Anfal genocide, and the Halabja chemical attack.³ His book-length poem *Derbendî Pepûle* (Butterfly Valley) is a powerful response to the Anfal campaign.¹² His collected works are published in a two-volume *Diwan*, and his poetry has been translated into over ten languages, bringing Kurdish experiences to a global audience.⁹ Bekas received numerous accolades, including the Tucholsky scholarship from the Swedish PEN Club in 1987 and the freedom prize of the city of Florence in the same year. His significance lies in his role as a leading voice of modern Kurdish poetry, whose innovative techniques and profound engagement with Kurdish suffering and resilience have made him an emblematic figure of Kurdish cultural resistance and artistic achievement.

Mehmed Uzun (1953–2007)

A highly influential Kurdish writer and novelist from Siverek, Turkey, Mehmed Uzun spent many years in exile in Sweden due to political persecution.¹ He is considered a pioneer of the modern Kurdish novel in the Kurmanji dialect, playing a crucial role in reviving Kurdish storytelling traditions and shaping a modern Kurdish literary language despite the severe legal prohibitions against the use of Kurdish in Turkey for much of his life. His novels, including *Tu* (You, 1985 – one of the first attempts at a modern Kurdish novel), *Mirina Kalekî Rind* (Death of a Nice Old Man, 1987), *Siya Evînê* (In the Shadow of a Lost Love, 1989), *Ronî Mîna Evînê Tarî* (Light like Love, Dark like Death, 1998), and *Bîra Qederê* (Memory of Destiny, 1995), explore themes of Kurdish identity, the experience of diaspora, national and individual struggles, modernity, nationalism, and subjectivity.¹ His later works moved towards depicting diverse and sometimes controversial Kurdish identities, thereby disrupting any assumption of a monolithic Kurdish identity. Uzun also proposed the concept of a "condensed language" rooted in the rich tradition of Kurdish proverbs, suited for people living under duress. He also edited the important *Antolojiya Edebiyata Kurdî* (Anthology of Kurdish Literature). Mehmed Uzun's work was instrumental in establishing modern Kurmanji prose, particularly the novel, and his explorations of the complexities of Kurdish identity in the face of oppression and exile garnered significant international recognition.

Salim Barakat (born 1951)

A Kurdish-Syrian poet and novelist of immense originality, Salim Barakat writes primarily in Arabic, yet his work is deeply imbued with Kurdish themes, sensibilities, and mythos.¹ He is celebrated for his highly innovative and complex literary style, often described as a form of magical realism, and for his masterful use of a rich, sometimes archaic, Arabic lexicon that distinguishes him from his contemporaries.⁷⁴ His prose is characterized by "inventions, inspired images, striking metaphors, unexpected turns, poetic sparks, winged flights". Barakat

has published dozens of novels and poetry collections. His childhood memoir, *The Iron Grasshopper* (first published in Arabic in 1980), offers a poignant portrayal of growing up in a Kurdish town in Syria amidst political upheaval and cultural conflict.⁷³ Novels such as *Sages of Darkness* delve into Kurdish life through the intertwined workings of history, mythology, and memory, while *The Captives of Sinjar* addresses the tragic Yazidi genocide.⁷⁶ His works frequently explore themes of Kurdish childhood, political turmoil, cultural clashes, violence, discrimination, identity, the concept of homeland, mythology, and memory.⁷⁴ Salim Barakat is a highly distinctive and influential voice in contemporary Arabic literature, uniquely bringing Kurdish experiences and mythological landscapes into the Arabic literary sphere through a powerful and lyrical style. His choice to write primarily in Arabic while deeply engaging with Kurdish themes presents a complex and fascinating case of linguistic and cultural identity in a diasporic context.

Abdulla Pashew (Ebdulla Peşêw) (born 1946/1947)

A prominent contemporary Kurdish poet, Abdulla Pashew was born in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, and is widely regarded as one of the most popular and beloved living Kurdish poets.⁹ He published his first poem in 1963 and has since produced numerous collections, including *Sawlm Pola u Kanarish dur* (*My Oars are Iron, yet the Shore is Far*, 2019), and the two-volume collected works *Baraw Zardapar* (*Towards Twilight*, 2001) and *Hespim Hewrew Rikefim Chiya* (*My Horse is a Cloud, My Stirrup a Mountain*).⁷⁸ Pashew's poetry is known for its emotional depth, clarity, and engagement with enduring Kurdish themes such as exile, love, homeland, resistance, political critique, and human dignity.⁷⁸ He is fluent in English, Russian, and other languages, and has made significant contributions as a translator, bringing the works of Walt Whitman and Alexander Pushkin into Kurdish.¹² Pashew's work continues to resonate deeply with Kurdish audiences, and he is admired for his lyrical exploration of the Kurdish experience and his skilled translations that bridge cultural divides.

Yaşar Kemal (1923–2015)

A towering figure in Turkish literature, Yaşar Kemal was a novelist of Kurdish descent.¹² While he wrote his acclaimed works in Turkish, his novels, most famously the *İnce Memed* (*Memed, My Hawk*) series, often vividly depict the life, struggles, folklore, and landscapes of Kurdish and Anatolian people. These narratives brought Kurdish experiences and social justice issues to a broad Turkish and international readership. As noted by some scholars, early modern Kurdish writers like Kemal often chose to write in the official languages of the states they lived in (Turkish in his case) due to better access to publication, wider readership, and greater opportunities for recognition, especially during periods of severe restrictions on the Kurdish language. Although not writing in the Kurdish language, Yaşar Kemal's powerful and empathetic narratives of Kurdish life and his advocacy for human rights and cultural diversity have made him a profoundly significant literary figure for Kurds and have contributed immensely to global awareness and appreciation of Kurdish culture and social realities. The forced and voluntary exile of numerous Kurdish intellectuals throughout the 20th century, a direct consequence of political oppression and cultural suppression, paradoxically transformed into a crucible for literary modernization and preservation.¹ Diaspora communities, particularly in Europe, became new, vibrant centers for Kurdish literary activity. This environment fostered crucial linguistic innovations, such as Celadet Alî Bedirxan's

development of the Latin-based Kurmanji alphabet in Syria after leaving Turkey.²² It also nurtured the development of new literary genres, exemplified by the pioneering Kurmanji novels of Arab Shamilov in the Soviet Union¹⁷ and Mehmed Uzun in Sweden.⁵⁰ Countries like Sweden provided tangible support for Kurdish publishing, enabling a flourishing of literary works that might otherwise have been suppressed. Thus, the diaspora was not merely a place of refuge but an active and dynamic site for literary creation, innovation, and the safeguarding of literary traditions that were under severe threat in their homelands, often allowing for degrees of freedom of expression unavailable in the Kurdish regions themselves. A striking characteristic of 20th-century Kurdish literature is the deeply intertwined trajectory of literary production and political activism. For many, if not most, prominent Kurdish literary figures of this era, their artistic endeavors were inseparable from their engagement in political movements, nationalist aspirations, and tireless efforts to promote Kurdish rights, language, and culture. Celadet Alî Bedirxan was a leading figure in the Xoybûn organization and the Ararat Republic uprising.²² Arab Shamilov's early life was marked by his involvement with the Communist Party and the Russian Revolution, experiences that shaped his seminal novel.⁵⁵ Cigerxwîn was an active member of Xoybûn and other political parties, enduring imprisonment and exile for his unwavering activism. Hemin Mukriyani and Hejar were designated national poets of the Republic of Mahabad and remained deeply involved in Kurdish political and cultural movements throughout their lives.⁶² Sherko Bekas joined the Kurdish liberation movement and contributed his talents to its radio station, while Mehmed Uzun was himself a political refugee whose novels often chronicled the multifaceted struggles of the Kurdish people. This consistent pattern reveals that for a significant number of Kurdish writers, literature was not a detached, purely aesthetic pursuit but a vital, indispensable tool for political expression, cultural assertion, social critique, and the broader struggle for national liberation and human dignity.

5. Contemporary Kurdish Literature: New Horizons and Global Recognition (21st Century)

The 21st century has witnessed Kurdish literature navigating new horizons, characterized by diverse thematic explorations, stylistic innovations, and a growing presence on the international stage. Contemporary Kurdish authors continue to develop and expand the novel and short story genres, engaging with a wide array of subjects and employing varied literary approaches.⁸² A notable trend in recent Kurdish fiction is the use of magical realism, particularly evident in the acclaimed works of Bachtyar Ali. This mode allows writers to blend myth, fantasy, and often harsh socio-political realities into compelling narratives.⁷⁶ Themes of war, historical trauma (such as the Anfal genocide), displacement, exile, the complexities of identity, gender dynamics, and the enduring quest for justice remain prominent, reflecting the ongoing experiences and concerns of the Kurdish people.⁷

There is an encouraging and increasing presence of women poets and writers contributing their unique perspectives to the Kurdish literary landscape.⁷ Furthermore, contemporary Kurdish literature is marked by a willingness to experiment with narrative forms and a focus on

individual psychological experiences and moral dilemmas. This sometimes involves a move beyond purely national narratives to explore universal human conditions, fostering a dialogue with global literary currents.³⁸ Writers like Seyyed Qader Hedayati are recognized for their experimental approaches to fiction, while Chiya Parvizpur is noted for employing a distinctive "Kurdish surrealism rooted in political realities".

A significant aspect of contemporary Kurdish literature is its increasing translation into European and other world languages. This process, often driven by the dedicated efforts of individual translators and cultural activists, is slowly but steadily bringing Kurdish voices to a wider international readership and is itself a form of cultural activism. The emergence of bilingual Kurdish-English publications further facilitates this cross-cultural exchange. Consequently, figures such as Sherko Bekas, Mehmed Uzun, Bachtyar Ali, and Salim Barakat (though writing in Arabic) have gained considerable international recognition, with their works being read and studied far beyond the Kurdish regions.¹ Prestigious international literary awards, such as the Nelly Sachs Prize received by Bachtyar Ali, underscore this growing global presence and acclaim.⁸⁶

Key contemporary figures shaping 21st-century Kurdish literature include:

Bachtyar Ali (born 1960/1966)

A highly prominent contemporary novelist and poet from Iraqi Kurdistan (Sulaymaniyah), Bachtyar Ali currently resides in Germany.⁹ He is renowned for his masterful use of magical realism, intricate and multi-layered narratives, and profoundly poetic language. His works often explore complex themes of war, trauma, art, the possibility of reconciliation, and the enduring search for humanity within a ravaged Kurdistan.⁸⁴ His major novels include *Mergî Xuşkî Dûwem* (The Death of the Second Only Child, 1997), *Êwarey Perwane* (Parwana's Evening, 1998), *Duwahîn Henarî Dunya* (The Last Pomegranate of the World, 2002) – which has been translated into numerous languages, including a Persian version reprinted 14 times – *Ghezelnus û Baxekani Xeyal* (Ghazalrus and the Gardens of Imagination, 2008), *Koşkî Balinde Xemgînkan* (The Mansion of the Sad Birds, 2009), and *Mamê Jamshid Khan* (My Uncle Jamshid Khan).¹² Ali has received several prestigious awards, including the inaugural Hardi Literature Prize (2009), the Sherko Bekas Literature Prize (2014), the Nelly Sachs Prize (Germany, 2017), and the Hilde-Domin Prize for Literature in Exile (Germany, 2023).⁸⁶ His significance lies in his position as a leading voice in contemporary Kurdish fiction, whose unique blend of magical realism and profound engagement with Kurdish history, society, and human psychology has brought Kurdish narratives to a global audience.

Behrouz Boochani (born 1983)

A Kurdish-Iranian novelist, journalist, and filmmaker hailing from Ilam, Iran, Behrouz Boochani gained international acclaim for his autobiographical novel *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018).⁹ This powerful work was painstakingly written via text messages while he was detained in an Australian offshore detention center on Manus Island. The novel has won numerous prestigious literary awards in Australia and internationally. Boochani's work compellingly explores themes of displacement, indefinite detention, human rights violations, the resilience of the human spirit, and the brutal realities of the refugee experience. His significance lies in his ability to bring global attention to the plight of refugees

and asylum seekers through his innovative and deeply moving literary testimony, highlighting Kurdish experiences within this broader context of forced migration and statelessness.

Sara Omar (born 1986)

A novelist and poet from Slemani, Iraqi Kurdistan, Sara Omar is recognized as the first internationally acclaimed female novelist from this region.⁹ She is known for her courageous and unflinching novels, such as *Dødevaskeren* (The Dead Washer, 2017) and its sequel *Skyggedanseren* (Shadow Dancer, 2019). Her works tackle sensitive and critical issues including women's rights, honor killings, child abuse, and the deep-seated trauma resulting from life in patriarchal and conflict-ridden societies. Sara Omar's significance stems from her powerful contemporary female voice, which confronts challenging social and cultural taboos and has garnered international recognition for its bravery and literary merit.

Jan Dost (born 1965)

A Kurdish writer, novelist, and translator from Kobani, Syria, Jan Dost currently resides in Germany.⁹ He is notable for writing in both major Kurdish dialects, Kurmanji and Sorani. His novels often span historical periods and engage with contemporary political themes relevant to Kurdistan and the broader Middle East. His historical novels include *Mijabad* (Foggy City) and *Sê gav û sê darek* (Three Steps and a Gallows), while works like *Kobani* (2015) directly address recent traumatic events such as the ISIS siege of his hometown. Jan Dost's significance lies in his versatility as a contemporary novelist whose works bridge historical narratives with pressing modern political issues, contributing to the literary canons of both Kurmanji and Sorani Kurdish.

Other notable contemporary writers enriching the Kurdish literary scene include **Ferhad Shakely**, known as an editor and poet ; **Evin Ahmad**, author of *En dag ska jag bygga ett slott av pengar* (One Day I Will Build a Castle of Money) ; **Arkan Asaad**, author of *Stjärnlösa nätter* (Starless Nights) ; the filmmaker and writer **Hiner Saleem**, author of *My Father's Rifle: A Childhood in Kurdistan* ¹; **Seyyed Qader Hedayati** (born 1976), an experimental novelist from Bukan, Iran, with works like *Gabor* and *The Grave City* ; **Chiya Parvizpur** (born 1989), a writer and translator from Sanandaj, Iran, whose novels *The Smell of Wet Bricks* and *Twenty-Four Seconds of Shehin's Life* exemplify what he terms "Kurdish surrealism" ; **Firat Cewerî** (born 1959), a contemporary writer and novelist ⁹; **İbrahim Halil Baran** (born 1981), a poet, writer, and designer ⁹; and **Azad Zal** (born 1972), a writer, journalist, translator, poet, and linguist.⁹

The 21st century has seen the Kurdish novel rise to a position of particular prominence, serving as a key medium for contemporary Kurdish expression and a vital conduit for global dialogue. While poetry remains deeply ingrained in Kurdish culture, the novel, as developed by pioneers like Arab Shamilov and Mehmed Uzun in the 20th century ¹², has become an increasingly dominant form for exploring complex historical traumas, contemporary socio-political realities, and nuanced individual subjectivities. Contemporary novelists such as Bachtyar Ali, Jan Dost, Sara Omar, and Behrouz Boochani are primarily known for their prose narratives.¹⁷ The themes these authors tackle are often profound, addressing issues like the Anfal genocide, displacement, political oppression, and the intricate psychological landscapes of their characters.⁵⁰ The successful translation and international recognition of these novelists—evidenced by Bachtyar Ali's numerous awards, Behrouz Boochani's global impact,

and Sara Omar's critical acclaim—indicate the novel's powerful capacity to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.¹² This suggests a significant literary evolution where the novel, alongside the enduring tradition of poetry, now plays a crucial role in articulating the modern Kurdish experience and fostering a more profound international understanding of Kurdish culture and history.

Furthermore, the adoption of literary modes such as magical realism by Bachtyar Ali ⁷⁶ and what has been termed "Kurdish surrealism" by writers like Chiya Parvizpur can be interpreted as sophisticated artistic strategies for representing and coping with the often surreal, fragmented, and traumatic nature of Kurdish historical and contemporary political experiences. Kurdish history is replete with instances of profound violence, systemic displacement, and acute political upheaval—experiences that can seem to defy straightforward, conventional realist narration.¹ Literary modes like magical realism and surrealism allow for the seamless incorporation of folklore, myth, and the fantastic—elements that are already deeply embedded in the rich Kurdish oral tradition.¹ These approaches provide writers with the tools to articulate the unspeakable, to represent fractured identities and disrupted realities, and to critique oppressive systems indirectly or allegorically. Consequently, such literary strategies become particularly potent and resonant for authors grappling with the profound historical and ongoing traumas that have shaped the Kurdish collective experience.

6. Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy and Future of Kurdish Literature

Kurdish literature, in its journey from ancient oral roots and the classical poetic mastery of figures like Melayê Cizîrî and Ehmedê Xanî, through the modernist innovations of Abdulla Goran and Sherko Bekas, to the contemporary novelistic explorations of Bachtyar Ali and others, showcases a profound resilience and remarkable adaptability.¹ It has navigated a complex and often challenging terrain of diverse linguistic landscapes—encompassing Gorani, Kurmanji, Sorani, and other dialects—and has withstood immense socio-political pressures. Throughout its history, Kurdish literature has consistently served as a vital vessel for the preservation and assertion of cultural identity, historical memory, and artistic expression.¹ Thematic concerns within this rich tradition have evolved dynamically, from early Sufi mysticism and grand epic romances to encompass fervent nationalism, critical social realism, introspective modernism, post-colonial critiques, and poignant explorations of trauma, exile, and individual subjectivity.²

Despite its vibrancy, Kurdish literature continues to face ongoing challenges. Political pressures and language suppression persist in some regions where Kurds reside, hindering free literary expression and development.¹ The lack of consistent state and institutional funding for literary endeavors, coupled with the complexities of a linguistically fragmented landscape featuring multiple dialects and scripts, poses significant hurdles.¹ The "minority status" of the Kurdish language within larger nation-states that often promote a "one nation, one language" ideology remains a fundamental obstacle. Indeed, the marginal status of

Kurdish literature in the global arena has been largely attributed to the political condition of statelessness.

However, amidst these challenges, significant opportunities for Kurdish writers and their literature are emerging globally. Increasing efforts in translation are making Kurdish works accessible to wider international audiences. The strategic use of digital platforms is facilitating the dissemination of literary works beyond traditional gatekeepers. Moreover, there is a growing academic interest in Kurdish studies and literature, fostering scholarly engagement and critical appreciation.⁷ The Kurdish diaspora continues to be a crucial force, acting as a dynamic hub for literary production, publication, and promotion, often enjoying freedoms not available in the homeland.⁶ Concerted efforts to revitalize the Kurdish language through literature, the collection and study of folklore, and dedicated academic activism are vital for securing a vibrant future for this rich literary heritage.

The journey of Kurdish literature into the global spotlight presents a compelling paradox: a "stateless literature" is increasingly gaining an international voice. Despite the absence of a unified Kurdish state and the historical suppression that often accompanies statelessness, Kurdish literary works are finding their way to readers across the world through the dedicated efforts of translators, diaspora writers, and supportive scholars.¹ Contemporary figures like Bachtyar Ali, Sherko Bekas, Mehmed Uzun, Sara Omar, and Behrouz Boochani have achieved international recognition, their works translated and their contributions acknowledged through prestigious awards.⁷ This phenomenon powerfully demonstrates literature's intrinsic capacity to transcend political boundaries and assert cultural presence on a global stage. While political statelessness undoubtedly poses immense challenges, it can also fuel a potent literary drive for expression, identity affirmation, and recognition—a drive that, when coupled with the art of translation and the reach of global networks, can achieve significant international impact.

The act of translation itself, however, presents a complex dynamic for Kurdish literature, functioning as a potential double-edged sword. On one hand, translating Kurdish literary works into dominant state languages (such as Turkish, Persian, and Arabic) and major international languages (like English) is presented as an indispensable tool for revitalization, enhancing visibility, and fostering a sense of confidence and pride among Kurdish speakers. The success of Bachtyar Ali's novels in Persian translation is a case in point. Translation into European languages is often viewed as a form of cultural activism, promoting the language itself and preserving its literary heritage. On the other hand, this process carries inherent risks of subordination. For instance, in Türkiye, the rapid translation of Kurdish novels into Turkish has, at times, reportedly reduced the readership of the original Kurdish texts, thereby discouraging engagement with the source language among Kurds who may not be literate in their mother tongue. This raises legitimate concerns about the potential for translation to inadvertently contribute to assimilationist pressures if not managed carefully. This tension highlights a critical challenge: while translation is necessary for broader reach, cultural exchange, and literary preservation, it must be strategically balanced with robust efforts to promote literacy, education, and readership in the Kurdish language itself. This ensures that the original language is not further marginalized but rather strengthened through its

engagement with the global literary world. The very choice of language by Kurdish authors—whether to write in Kurdish or a dominant state language, as seen in the cases of Salim Barakat (Arabic) or Yaşar Kemal (Turkish)—also reflects this intricate dynamic of access, recognition, and the articulation of identity.¹

Ultimately, the enduring legacy of Kurdish literature lies in its profound resilience, its rich diversity across dialects and genres, and its unwavering commitment to giving voice to the Kurdish experience. Its future will likely be shaped by the continued negotiation of these complex challenges and opportunities, as Kurdish writers and their allies strive to ensure that this unique literary heritage not only survives but thrives on both local and global stages.

7. Works Cited

Appendix

Table 2: Chronological Overview of Selected Famous Kurdish Literary Figures

Literary Figure	Lifespan	Primary Dialect(s) Used	Most Notable Work(s)	Concise Note on Primary Contribution/Significance
Baba Tahir Hamadani	c. 1000-c. 1055	Luri/Hamadani (Persian)	<i>Do-beytîs</i> (Quatrains), <i>Kalamat e-Qesar</i>	Early mystical poet; debated connection to Kurdish literature via Luri/Laki dialects.
Ali Hariri (Elî Herîrî)	1009–1079/80	Kurmanji	Poems on love, Kurdistan, nature	Pioneer of classical Kurdish Sufi literature; foundational Kurmanji poet.
Mele Perîşan	1356–1431	Gorani	Poetry (specific works less documented)	Early Gorani poet, representing the old Gorani literary tradition.
Mela Hesenê Bateyî	1417–1491/95	Kurmanji	<i>Mewlûda Kurmancî</i> (Mawlid)	Author of a widely recited religious and literary text in Kurmanji.
Melayê Cizîrî	c. 1570–1640	Kurmanji	<i>Diwan</i> (Collection of Poems)	Towering classical Kurmanji Sufi poet; founded a literary school.

Feqiyê Teyran	1590–1660	Kurmanji	<i>Zembîlfiroş, Şêxê Senan, Beyta Dimdim</i>	Integrated folklore into written poetry; known for narrative poems.
Ehmedê Xanî	1650/51–1707	Kurmanji	<i>Mem û Zîn</i> (National Epic), <i>Nûbihara Biçûkan</i>	Author of the Kurdish national epic; pivotal figure in Kurdish literature and proto-nationalism.
Khana Qubadi	1700–1759	Gorani (Hawramî)	<i>Şîrîn û Xesrew</i>	Key Gorani poet; championed Kurdish for literary expression.
Mastoureh Ardalan	1805–1848	Gorani, Persian	<i>Tarîkh-i Ardalan</i> (History), <i>Diwan</i> (Poetry)	Prominent female historian and poet; expressed feminine voice.
Mawlawî Tawagozî	1806–1882/83	Gorani (Hawramî)	<i>Diwan</i> (Ghazals)	Influential Gorani Sufi poet of the 19th century.
Nalî	1797/1800–1855/56	Sorani	<i>Diwan</i> (first in Sorani)	Established Sorani as a major literary language; founded Sorani school of poetry.
Hajî Qadîr Koyî	c. 1817–1897	Sorani	<i>Dîwanî Hacî Qadîrî Koyî</i>	Linked poetry with nationalist advocacy and modernization.
Sheikh Rezza Talabani	1835–1910	Sorani	Satirical poetry	Contributed to Sorani literature with a distinct, critical voice.
Piramerd	1867–1950	Sorani	Poetry, plays, journalism (<i>Zheen, Zhyanawa</i>)	Transitional figure; contributed to Sorani literature and early journalism.
Celadet Alî Bedirxan	1893–1951	Kurmanji	<i>Hawar & Ronahî</i> magazines, <i>Bingehên gramera</i>	Modernized Kurmanji with Latin script and

			<i>kurdmancî</i> , Hawar Latin alphabet	grammar; pivotal for language revival.
Arab Shamilov (Erebê Şemo)	1897–1978	Kurmanji	<i>Şivanê Kurmanca</i> (First Kurmanji Novel), <i>Dimdim</i>	Father of the Kurmanji novel; key figure in Soviet Kurdish literature.
Cigerxwîn	1903–1984	Kurmanji	Numerous <i>Diwans</i> (e.g., <i>Kîme Ez?</i>), Kurdish Grammar & Dictionary	Highly influential modern poet; themes of revolution and social justice.
Abdulla Goran	1904–1962	Sorani	<i>Diwanê Goran</i> ; introduced blank verse, new forms	Founder of modern Kurdish poetry; revolutionized poetic style and themes.
Hemin Mukriyani	1920/21–1986	Sorani	<i>Tarîk û Rûn</i> , <i>Naley Judaî</i> , <i>Sirwe</i> journal	Prominent Sorani poet in Iran; national poet of Mahabad Republic.
Hejar (Abdurrahman Sharafkandi)	1920/21–1990/91	Sorani, Kurmanji	<i>Henbane Borîne</i> (Dictionary), translations of <i>Mem û Zîn</i> , Quran	Monumental contributions to lexicography, translation, and poetry.
Yaşar Kemal	1923–2015	Turkish	<i>İnce Memed</i> series	Turkish novelist of Kurdish descent; depicted Kurdish life and social justice.
Sherko Bekas	1940–2013	Sorani	<i>Diwan</i> , <i>Butterfly Valley</i>	Leading modern poet; innovative style, themes of Anfal, resistance.
Abdulla Pashew	b. 1946/47	Sorani	Numerous poetry collections (e.g., <i>Baraw Zardapar</i>)	Highly popular contemporary poet; themes of exile, homeland.

Salim Barakat	b. 1951	Arabic	<i>The Iron Grasshopper, Sages of Darkness,</i> numerous novels & poetry collections	Kurdish-Syrian writer in Arabic; innovative style, magical realism, Kurdish themes.
Mehmed Uzun	1953–2007	Kurmanji	<i>Tu, Siya Evînê, Ronî Mîna Evînê Tarî Mîna Mirinê</i>	Pioneer of modern Kurmanji novel; explored Kurdish identity and diaspora.
Bachtyar Ali	b. 1960/66	Sorani	<i>The Last Pomegranate of the World, My Uncle Jamshid Khan</i>	Leading contemporary novelist; known for magical realism and complex narratives.
Jan Dost	b. 1965	Kurmanji, Sorani	<i>Mijabad, Kobani</i>	Contemporary novelist; addresses historical and modern political themes.
Behrouz Boochani	b. 1983	English (orig. Persian)	<i>No Friend But the Mountains</i>	Kurdish-Iranian writer; brought global attention to refugee experiences.
Sara Omar	b. 1986	Danish	<i>Dødevaskeren</i> (The Dead Washer)	Internationally recognized female novelist from Iraqi Kurdistan; tackles women's rights.

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