

# Cross-Border Verses: Kurdish Literature and the Enduring Voice of a Nation

## I. Introduction: The Enduring Voice of a Nation

Kurdish literature constitutes a vital and enduring cultural heritage, yet it remains largely unknown to the global public, often overshadowed by the political turmoil that frequently brings the Kurdish people to international attention.<sup>1</sup> This literary tradition encompasses a rich and complex tapestry woven from diverse linguistic threads—including the main dialect groups of Kurmanji, Sorani, Southern Kurdish (Xwarîn/Palewani), Laki, Zazaki, and Gorani<sup>2</sup>—across distinct historical periods and varied socio-political contexts. Spanning the historical region of Kurdistan, now divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and extending into a significant global diaspora, Kurdish literature reflects the fragmented reality of its people.<sup>4</sup>

A defining characteristic of this tradition is the profound and continuous interplay between a powerful oral heritage, epitomized by the figure of the *dengbêj* (traditional bard), and a written tradition that has evolved over centuries, often under extremely challenging political circumstances.<sup>6</sup> The development of written literature did not supplant the oral tradition; rather, the two have coexisted and influenced each other, with oral forms providing foundational narratives, themes, and stylistic elements for written works, even into the modern era.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially, Kurdish literature serves as more than artistic expression; it functions as an essential repository and articulation of Kurdish identity, history, culture, and collective aspirations. For a nation navigating the complexities of statelessness and political fragmentation across imposed borders, literature often carries the weight of cultural preservation and resistance against assimilationist pressures.<sup>6</sup> The relative obscurity of Kurdish literature on the world stage is inextricably linked to the Kurds' precarious political situation.<sup>1</sup> The lack of a unified, sovereign state entity has historically hindered the institutional support, promotion, and international dissemination often afforded to national literatures. Consequently, any meaningful analysis of Kurdish literary development must acknowledge the persistent pressures of political marginalization, conflict, and censorship that have shaped its trajectory. This context often imbues the literature with a heightened sense of responsibility for maintaining cultural memory and articulating national consciousness.

This report aims to trace the historical and thematic contours of Kurdish literature, examining its journey from ancient oral roots and classical foundations through its modern and contemporary manifestations. It will analyze the contributions of key figures, the evolution of genres and themes, the significance of linguistic diversity and script politics, and the indelible impact of the political landscape on this resilient literary tradition.

## II. Echoes from the Past: Oral Traditions and Early

# Literary Beginnings

The foundations of Kurdish literature lie deep within a vibrant oral tradition that predates widespread literacy and has remained a vital cultural force throughout Kurdish history. Central to this tradition is the figure of the *dengbêj*.

## The Vital Role of the Dengbêj

The term *dengbêj* derives from the Kurdish words *deng* (voice) and *bêj* (the present tense of *gotin*, to tell), signifying a teller through voice.<sup>7</sup> These traditional folk singers, storytellers, and bards were the primary custodians of Kurdish collective memory and cultural expression for centuries.<sup>6</sup> Dengbêj performed extensive narrative songs and epics, known as *stran*, often unaccompanied by musical instruments, allowing for considerable freedom in verse creation and storytelling.<sup>7</sup> Their repertoire covered a vast range of human experience, including epic tales of love and war, heroic deeds, historical events, local romances, blood feuds, rebellions, and poignant mourning songs (*lawjê*), which were particularly renowned.<sup>6</sup>

Becoming a master *dengbêj* required years of apprenticeship, involving the memorization of hundreds of stories, poems, and epics, alongside the development of sophisticated improvisational skills.<sup>7</sup> The most talented Dengbêj not only preserved existing narratives but also created new ones, often drawing on the social realities and contemporary events of their communities, thus continuously enriching the oral archive.<sup>7</sup> They were fixtures at communal gatherings, weddings, and evening assemblies (*şevbêrk*), particularly during long winter nights, serving as entertainers, educators, and chroniclers.<sup>6</sup>

In a context marked by political instability, frequent displacement, and the lack of state-sponsored institutions for historical preservation or widespread Kurdish literacy, the Dengbêj assumed a role far exceeding that of mere performers. They became, in effect, "living libraries" and the "autobiography of society," preserving history, cultural identity, and linguistic heritage against formidable pressures of assimilation and state repression.<sup>7</sup> While written documents could be destroyed or banned, the living memory transmitted orally from master to apprentice proved remarkably resilient.<sup>7</sup> This elevated status underscores the profound responsibility vested in the oral tradition. The Dengbêj tradition, though challenged by modernization and past repression, has witnessed revival efforts in recent decades, including the establishment of dedicated cultural centers like the *Mala Dengbêjan* (House of Dengbêj) in cities such as Amed (Diyarbakır) and the documentation of their repertoires.<sup>7</sup>

## From Orality to Script: Influence on Written Forms

Kurdish literature, mirroring the development of many world literatures, originated in poetic forms deeply rooted in oral traditions that extend back to pre-Islamic times.<sup>6</sup> The Dengbêj tradition served as a foundational reservoir, providing not only specific narratives but also enduring themes (love, heroism, resistance, national identity, social commentary), narrative structures (particularly the epic form), and linguistic registers that profoundly shaped the emergence and evolution of written Kurdish poetry and prose.<sup>6</sup>

A prime example of this connection is the seminal Kurdish epic, *Mem û Zîn*. This story existed within the oral tradition, likely known as *Memê Alan*, for generations before it was committed to writing in the 17th century by Ehmedê Xanî.<sup>8</sup> The transition from orality to written literature in the Kurdish context was not a straightforward, linear replacement but rather a dynamic and ongoing interaction. The oral tradition was not merely a historical precursor but remains a continuous source of cultural identity and literary inspiration. This is evident in the conscious efforts of modern Kurdish writers, such as Mehmed Uzun and Mehmet Dicle, who actively engage with and "heritagize" folkloric motifs and the Dengbêj legacy in their contemporary works, linking this heritage to language revitalization and modern literary expression.<sup>4</sup> Earlier, poets like Abdurrahim Rahmi Zapsu incorporated elements of spoken language into their poetry, further suggesting the influence of oral styles on written forms.<sup>1</sup>

## Nascent Written Literature

Pinpointing the precise origins of written Kurdish literature is challenging. While some linguistic theories connect Kurdish to the language of the Zoroastrian Avesta (composed perhaps as early as the 6th century BCE), and anecdotal accounts mention ancient documents written on deer skin (dated to 88-87 BCE) or a 10th-century "Maasiorati" alphabet, concrete and widely accepted evidence for extensive written Kurdish before the medieval period remains scarce and often debated.<sup>12</sup>

The earliest surviving and verifiable text written in Kurdish is generally considered to be a Christian prayer, translated into the Kurmanji dialect and transcribed using Armenian letters, dating from between 1430 and 1446.<sup>2</sup> More substantial literary works begin to appear from the 16th century onwards.<sup>2</sup>

Among the earliest named figures associated with written Kurdish poetry are:

- **Baba Tahir Hamadani** (born c. 1010): Often cited as one of the first Kurdish poets, he composed quatrains (*fahlavîyyat*) in a dialect identified by some scholars as Luri or related to Southern Kurdish.<sup>1</sup> While his position as the definitive starting point of written Kurdish literature is subject to scholarly debate, his work marks a significant early milestone.<sup>12</sup>
- **Balûl** (9th century): Recognized as the first well-known poet who wrote in the Gorani dialect of Kurdish. He was associated with the Yarsani (Ahl-e Haqq) faith, whose sacred texts were also composed in Gorani.<sup>2</sup>
- **Ali Hariri** (c. 1009/1010–1079/1080): An early poet credited with writing in the Kurmanji dialect. Details about his life and exact dating remain somewhat uncertain.<sup>1</sup>

The Gorani dialect served as an important early literary medium, particularly for the religious literature of the Yarsanis and within the court of the Ardalan emirate based in Sanandaj.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of literature in multiple dialects (Luri/Southern, Gorani, Kurmanji) from these early stages reflects the inherent linguistic diversity and the historical political and geographical fragmentation of the Kurdish people, foreshadowing later challenges in standardization and the development of a unified literary tradition.<sup>1</sup>

### III. The Classical Zenith (c. 16th-19th Centuries)

The period from the 16th to the 19th centuries witnessed a significant flourishing of written Kurdish literature, particularly in the Kurmanji and, later, Sorani dialects. This era saw the consolidation of distinct literary schools and the emergence of foundational figures whose works continue to resonate within Kurdish culture.

#### Kurmanji Renaissance (16th-18th C.)

Classical literature in the Kurmanji dialect thrived under the patronage of various Kurdish dynasties and emirates, such as those in Botan (Jazira) and Hakkari.<sup>1</sup> This period paralleled the literary developments in neighboring Persian and Arab cultures, with Kurdish poets composing works in established Islamic literary forms.<sup>1</sup> Key genres included the *diwan* (collection of poems), the *qasida* (ode, often panegyric or philosophical), the *ghazal* (lyric poem, typically on themes of love and mysticism), and the *mathnawi* (narrative poem in rhyming couplets).<sup>1</sup>

Major figures of this Kurmanji literary renaissance include:

- **Melayê Cizîrî** (1570–1640): A highly revered poet and Sufi mystic from the Jazira/Bohtan region, often considered the founder of the classical Kurmanji school of poetry.<sup>2</sup> He left behind a substantial *diwan* containing influential *qasidas* and *ghazals* known for their lyrical beauty and mystical depth, some of which remain popular today.<sup>1</sup>
- **Feqiyê Teyran** (1590–1660): Reputedly a student of Cizîrî, Teyran also composed *qasidas* and *ghazals* but is particularly noted for being the first known Kurdish poet to utilize the *mathnawi* form for narrative poetry.<sup>1</sup> His works include the well-known epic poem *Hikayeta Şêxê Sen'an* (The Story of Sheikh Sen'an) and the earliest known literary account of the Battle of Dimdim (1609–1610), a significant event in Kurdish history involving resistance against the Safavid Empire.<sup>2</sup> His poetry also touched upon themes of resistance and cultural revival.<sup>6</sup>
- **Mela Huseynê Bateyî** (fl. late 17th–mid-18th century): Hailing from Hakkari, Bateyî is famed for his *Mewlûda Kurmancî*, a poem celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, which achieved widespread popularity, even being adopted into the oral religious literature of the Yazidis.<sup>2</sup> He also authored works on morality and manners.<sup>2</sup>
- Other notable poets from this era include **Şerif Xan** (1682–1748) of the Hakkari ruling family, who wrote in both Kurmanji and Persian, and **Mûrad Xan** of Bayazid (1736–1778), known for his lyrical poetry.<sup>2</sup>

#### Ehmedê Xanî (1650–1707) and Mem û Zîn

Standing as a towering figure within classical Kurdish literature is **Ehmedê Xanî**.<sup>1</sup> A multifaceted intellectual, scholar, mystic, and poet from the Hakkari region who later settled in Bayazid, Xanî is widely regarded not only as a literary master but also as a foundational figure in the development of Kurdish national consciousness.<sup>8</sup> His deliberate choice to write his major works in Kurmanji, rather than the dominant scholarly languages of Arabic or Persian,

was a significant statement advocating for the potential of the Kurdish language.<sup>1</sup>

Xanî's magnum opus is the epic poem **Mem û Zîn**, completed in 1692.<sup>13</sup> Based on an older folk tale likely transmitted through the Dengbêj tradition (*Memê Alan*), it is far more than a simple retelling.<sup>8</sup> The narrative recounts the tragic love story of Mem, of the Alan clan, and Zîn, the sister of the Emir of Botan. Their love, discovered during a Newroz festival, is ultimately destroyed by the machinations of the malevolent courtier Beko.<sup>8</sup> Mem dies in prison, and Zîn succumbs to grief upon his grave. They are buried side-by-side, but even in death, a thorny bush nourished by the buried Beko's blood grows between their graves, symbolizing the enduring forces that separated them.<sup>8</sup>

While incorporating elements of romance, adventure (Mem's magical horse, intervention by fairies), Sufi mysticism, and descriptions of social customs, the epic's enduring significance lies in its political undertones.<sup>8</sup> In the prologue (*dîbace*), Xanî deviates from the traditional panegyrics to rulers. Instead, he laments the political disunity and subjugation of the Kurds under the Ottoman and Safavid empires, explicitly expressing a longing for a sovereign Kurdish ruler who could unite the people, establish order, and champion the Kurdish language as a medium for science and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> By setting the story's beginning on Newroz, the Kurdish national new year, Xanî further imbued the work with national symbolism.<sup>1</sup> *Mem û Zîn* is widely considered the Kurdish national epic and is often interpreted as an allegory for the Kurdish nation's yearning for self-determination.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the epic, Xanî also authored *Nûbihara Biçûkan* (The Springtime of Children), a versified Arabic-Kurdish dictionary designed for pedagogical purposes, and *Eqîdeya Îmanê* (The Path of Faith), a poem outlining the tenets of Islamic belief, both of which were used in traditional Kurdish education for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

The classical period, exemplified by Xanî's work, demonstrates literature's crucial role in not only reflecting culture but actively shaping collective identity and political thought. Xanî built upon the sophisticated literary tradition established by predecessors like Cizîrî and Teyran, but consciously employed his art to articulate a nascent Kurdish national consciousness, reflecting on political realities and advocating for linguistic and cultural assertion.<sup>1</sup> The later embrace of *Mem û Zîn* as a foundational text for modern Kurdish nationalism highlights the enduring power of these classical works to inform political identity across generations.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Rise of Sorani (Late 18th-19th C.)**

While Kurmanji and Gorani had established literary traditions earlier, written literature in the Sorani dialect gained significant momentum primarily from the late 18th and early 19th centuries onwards.<sup>1</sup> Several factors may have contributed to this later development, including the established strength of the Kurmanji and Gorani literary traditions and perhaps the later rise of influential cultural and political centers in Sorani-speaking regions, such as the city of Sulaimanieh (founded in 1784).<sup>2</sup>

A pivotal figure in the elevation of Sorani as a literary language was **Nalî** (Mullah Khidir Ahmed Shawaysi Mikaili, 1798–1855).<sup>2</sup> Nalî was the first poet known to have compiled a complete *diwan* (collection of poems) in the Sorani dialect, marking a turning point in its literary history.<sup>2</sup>

His work, along with contemporaries like **Salim** (Abdulrahman Begi Sahibqiran) and **Kurdi** (Mustafa Begi Sahibqiran), solidified Sorani's place as a major vehicle for Kurdish poetic expression in the southern regions of Kurdistan.<sup>2</sup>

Later influential Sorani poets of the 19th century include **Haji Qadir Koyi** (1817–1897), whose work bridges the classical and modern periods, **Sheikh Reza Talabani** (1835–1909), **Mahwi** (Mala Mohammed Osman Balkhi, 1830–1906), and **Wafaei** (Mirza Abdulrahim Sablaghi, 1844–1902).<sup>1</sup> These poets often engaged with themes of cultural revival and resistance, reflecting the growing sense of Kurdish identity in the face of external pressures.<sup>6</sup>

The sequential emergence and flourishing of literary activity in different Kurdish dialects—Gorani, then Kurmanji, followed by Sorani—likely reflects the shifting centers of political power, cultural patronage, and intellectual activity within the fragmented landscape of Kurdistan over these centuries. This pattern underscores how literary development was intrinsically linked to the specific historical circumstances and regional dynamics experienced by different Kurdish communities.

## IV. Winds of Change: Modernization and New Literary Horizons (Late 19th - Mid 20th Century)

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a period of significant transformation for Kurdish literature, characterized by a shift towards modern themes, forms, and sensibilities, often intertwined with the rise of Kurdish nationalism and increased engagement with the wider world.

### Pioneers of Modernity

Several key figures stand out as catalysts for this transition:

- **Haci Qadir Koyi** (1817–1897): Though rooted in the classical tradition and writing in Sorani, Koyi is widely considered a foundational figure for modern Kurdish poetry.<sup>1</sup> While he employed established forms like the *ghazal* and *qasida*, the content of his poetry marked a departure. He addressed themes pertinent to modern national life, including the right to self-determination, the importance of the Kurdish language, awareness of technological advancements, and the need for education.<sup>1</sup> Koyi introduced a romanticizing and heroic imagery, moving away from the predominantly religious and ascetic focus of earlier poetry.<sup>1</sup> His work, published posthumously, signaled a critical turning point.<sup>1</sup>
- **Abdurrahim Rahmi Zapsu** (also known as Rahmi Hekkari, 1890–1958): Writing in the early 20th century, Zapsu further pushed the boundaries of Kurdish poetry. He consciously integrated elements of spoken Kurdish, moving away from the formal constraints of classical prosody.<sup>1</sup> His work emphasized rhythm and symbolism, focusing on contemporary political and social themes rather than classical subjects.<sup>1</sup> This introduction of vernacular elements and freer forms represented a move towards a more accessible and potentially democratized poetic expression, better suited for engaging with immediate social realities.

- **Abdulla Goran** (1904–1962): Often hailed as the "father of modern Kurdish poetry," Goran decisively broke with classical conventions in the Sorani dialect.<sup>2</sup> He is credited with pioneering the use of free verse (*şî'ri nwê* or new poetry) and prose poems in Kurdish, abandoning the strict quantitative *aruz* meter inherited from Arabic and Persian traditions.<sup>19</sup> Goran diversified poetic subject matter, focusing on themes of nature (often linked to the Kurdish homeland), love, social critique, and the Kurdish political predicament.<sup>20</sup> He employed myths and symbols, often drawn from Kurdish folklore, in innovative ways to comment on contemporary struggles and the conflict between oppression and resistance, giving them a political resonance distinct from their aesthetic use in classical poetry.<sup>20</sup>

## Catalysts for Change

The modernization of Kurdish literature was propelled by several interconnected factors:

- **The Rise of Kurdish Journalism:** Starting in 1898 with the publication of *Kurdistan* in Cairo, Kurdish newspapers and magazines began to emerge, albeit often sporadically and frequently facing suppression.<sup>1</sup> Journals like *Jin* (Life) in Istanbul and later *Hawar* (The Cry) in Syria provided crucial platforms for publishing new literary works, disseminating ideas, and fostering linguistic development.<sup>1</sup>
- **Expansion of Secular Education:** An increase in the number of Kurds attending state schools, as opposed to solely traditional religious madrasas, helped cultivate a more worldly and secular intellectual class receptive to modern ideas and literary forms.<sup>1</sup>
- **Influence of External Literary Trends:** Exposure to Western literature and thought, directly or indirectly, introduced concepts like Romanticism and Realism.<sup>16</sup> Kurdish intellectuals and literary historians began to analyze their own literary history through these lenses, although the direct applicability and periodization of these European movements within the Kurdish context remain complex and debated.<sup>16</sup> Figures like Izzadin Mustafa Rasul played a key role in introducing and discussing these concepts.<sup>16</sup>

## Evolution of Forms and Themes

While poetry remained the dominant genre until well into the 20th century, its forms and thematic concerns broadened considerably<sup>1</sup>:

- **Formal Diversification:** Alongside the enduring classical forms (*ghazal*, *qasida*), new poetic structures gained currency, including lyrical poems, sonnets, ballads, haikus, free verse, and other experimental forms.<sup>1</sup>
- **Thematic Expansion:** The focus shifted significantly towards themes reflecting contemporary realities and burgeoning national consciousness. Nationalism, resistance to oppression, the call for cultural and linguistic revival, social critique, the quest for identity, and the profound connection to the natural landscape of Kurdistan (often symbolized by elements like roses - *gul*, snow - *berf*, and mountains - *ciya*) became central motifs.<sup>1</sup> Love remained a potent theme, often intertwined with national or social concerns.<sup>22</sup> Folklore and mythology continued to be sources of inspiration, sometimes

reinterpreted with modern political implications.<sup>1</sup>

## Mapping Literary Movements

Kurdish literary historiography attempts to periodize these developments, though classifications can vary. Generally:

- Literature preceding the late 19th/early 20th century is termed **Classical** or **Diwan Literature**.<sup>16</sup>
- The early 20th century is often designated as the **Renewal Period** or **Renaissance** (*Nehda*), characterized by a conscious search for cultural and political identity and a break from classical constraints.<sup>16</sup>
- Concepts like **Romanticism** and **Realism** are often discussed as subsequent phases or modes, influenced by figures like Koyi and Goran, though scholars caution against imposing a rigid, European-style chronological succession onto the Kurdish literary trajectory.<sup>16</sup> Some also identify a **Neo-classical** phase bridging the classical and modern eras.<sup>16</sup>

The process of literary modernization in Kurdistan was thus deeply interwoven with the political and social currents of the time. The shift in themes towards national life, self-determination, and social critique, spearheaded by poets like Koyi and Goran, directly mirrored the rise of modern Kurdish nationalism and political mobilization, particularly in the turbulent aftermath of World War I.<sup>1</sup> The formal innovations, such as free verse and the use of vernacular language, can be understood not merely as aesthetic choices but as efforts to create literary forms more suited to expressing the urgent political and social realities of the modern era and potentially reaching a wider audience.<sup>1</sup>

## V. Literature Under Pressure: Politics, Language, and Identity

The trajectory of Kurdish literature in the 20th and 21st centuries cannot be understood apart from the profound impact of the political realities faced by the Kurdish people: statelessness, the division of their homeland, systematic oppression, and the struggle for cultural and linguistic survival.

### The Weight of Statelessness and Fragmentation

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent creation of new nation-states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria) formalized the division of the Kurdish homeland, adding Iran as another state entity ruling over a significant Kurdish population. This fragmentation imposed distinct political and cultural environments, leading to divergent paths for Kurdish language and literature in each state.<sup>1</sup> Statelessness became a defining condition, profoundly shaping literary expression.

Kurdish literature, particularly the novel, frequently grapples with the construction of "homeland" (Kurdistan) and Kurdish identity within this context of division and displacement.<sup>9</sup> Literary depictions of Kurdistan often reflect this fragmented reality, portraying it variously as



an idealized, lost paradise, a war-torn and destroyed landscape, or a space of ongoing struggle.<sup>9</sup> The psychological burden of statelessness manifests in recurring themes of nostalgia for an unattainable or lost home, alienation even within the homeland due to lack of sovereignty, detachment, and a pervasive sense of "outsideness".<sup>9</sup> This feeling underscores that "home" for many literary characters remains an elusive concept, deeply affected by political realities.

## Censorship, Linguicide, and Resistance

Across the states controlling Kurdistan, Kurdish language and literature have faced varying degrees of suppression, ranging from outright prohibition to marginalization:

- **Turkey:** Implemented the most severe assimilationist policies, legally banning the Kurdish language, its literature, and even the words "Kurd," "Kurdish," and "Kurdistan" for much of the 20th century (roughly 1925-1991).<sup>1</sup> Kurds were officially designated "Mountain Turks".<sup>24</sup> Although the explicit ban was lifted in 1991, significant restrictions on Kurdish language use in education and public life persist, and writers continue to face legal persecution.<sup>1</sup>
- **Syria:** Initially tolerated Kurdish to some extent, but later implemented bans on the language and cultural expression. Following the Syrian Civil War starting in 2011, Kurdish gained official status in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava), leading to a resurgence in publishing and education.<sup>1</sup>
- **Iraq:** The experience was mixed, with periods of intense persecution (including the Anfal genocide under Saddam Hussein) alternating with times when Kurdish media and education were permitted to varying degrees. Since the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1991, Kurdish (primarily Sorani) has held official language status alongside Arabic.<sup>1</sup>
- **Iran:** While never imposing an explicit, nationwide legal ban on the language comparable to Turkey's, Iran has consistently restricted the use of Kurdish in official domains and education, and Kurdish cultural and political activists, including writers, have faced censorship, imprisonment, and persecution.<sup>1</sup>

These repressive environments forced Kurdish writers into difficult positions. Many faced censorship, arrest, imprisonment, torture, and exile simply for writing in their language or addressing Kurdish themes.<sup>25</sup> Notable examples include the novelist Mehmed Uzun, forced into exile in Sweden for decades<sup>25</sup>; the poet and journalist Jalal Barzanji, imprisoned and tortured under Saddam Hussein<sup>29</sup>; and the writer Sharam Qawami, whose novels were banned in Iran, forcing him to publish in Iraq.<sup>27</sup> Publishing works in Kurdish often required clandestine efforts or reliance on presses in the diaspora or more permissive neighboring regions.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the very act of writing and publishing in Kurdish frequently became an act of political resistance and a crucial means of preserving cultural identity against state-sponsored attempts at erasure or "linguicide".<sup>4</sup> The political context thus acts not merely as a backdrop but as a powerful, shaping force on Kurdish literary production, influencing its themes, forms, language choices, and very possibility of existence.

# The Politics of Script: Standardization Debates

Further complicating the Kurdish literary landscape is the use of multiple writing systems, largely divided along dialectal and geographical lines.<sup>1</sup> This diversity poses significant challenges to inter-dialectal communication and the development of a unified literary sphere.<sup>23</sup>

Table 1: Major Kurdish Writing Systems

Script Name	Base Alphabet	Primary Dialect(s) Used	Main Regions of Use	Key Features/History
Hawar / Bedirxan	Latin	Kurmanji, Zazaki	Turkey, Syria, Diaspora	Developed by Celadet Bedirxan (1932) via <i>Hawar</i> magazine; 31 letters; aims for phonetic consistency <sup>3</sup>
Sorani / Kurdish	Arabic	Sorani	Iraq (KRG), Iran	Modified Perso-Arabic script (33-34 letters); largely alphabetic (vowels written); standardized to some extent in KRG <sup>3</sup>
Cyrillic	Cyrillic	Kurmanji	Former Soviet Union (Armenia)	Introduced in 1946, replacing an earlier Latin script used in the 1920s-30s <sup>21</sup>
Armenian	Armenian	Kurmanji	Soviet Armenia (briefly)	Used from 1921-1929 before being replaced by Latin, then Cyrillic <sup>21</sup>

The two dominant scripts today are the Latin-based **Hawar alphabet** (also called Bedirxan alphabet) and the Arabic-based **Sorani alphabet**.

- The **Hawar alphabet** was systematically developed by Prince Celadet Bedirxan and colleagues in the 1930s, primarily through the influential journal *Hawar* published in Syria.<sup>4</sup> Bedirxan aimed to create a phonetically consistent script specifically tailored for Kurdish (Kurmanji), leveraging the familiarity many Kurds in Turkey already had with the

Turkish Latin alphabet adopted in 1928.<sup>21</sup> It is the standard script for Kurmanji today, predominantly used in Turkey and Syria, and by much of the diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

- The **Sorani alphabet** is an adaptation of the Perso-Arabic script.<sup>3</sup> Unlike standard Arabic or Persian *abjads* (where short vowels are often omitted or marked with diacritics), the Sorani script generally represents vowels more fully, making it closer to a true alphabet.<sup>21</sup> It became the standard script for Sorani Kurdish, particularly in Iraq and Iran.<sup>3</sup> Its adoption in Iraqi Kurdistan after World War I was influenced by various political and religious considerations.<sup>23</sup>

The divergence in script usage between the two largest Kurdish dialect groups, Kurmanji and Sorani, creates a significant internal barrier within the Kurdish literary world.<sup>3</sup> Readers fluent in one dialect and script often cannot easily access literature written in the other without specific learning, hindering the development of a truly pan-Kurdish literary discourse and market.<sup>23</sup> While modern technology like satellite television and the internet has increased cross-dialectal exposure<sup>32</sup>, the script divide remains a practical challenge.

Efforts towards **standardization** and the creation of a unified Kurdish alphabet have been discussed since the early 20th century but remain contentious.<sup>23</sup> The debate is often complicated by political factors, with arguments for or against a particular script (Latin vs. Arabic) sometimes becoming entangled with competing national visions or identities (e.g., secular versus religious symbolism) rather than focusing solely on linguistic practicality.<sup>23</sup> Proposals like the Kurdish Unified Alphabet (KUAL), based on international standards like ISO-8859-1, aim to create a single system capable of representing all dialects, thereby fostering unity while preserving diversity.<sup>23</sup> However, achieving consensus remains difficult. This internal linguistic fragmentation, rooted in historical development and political choices, adds another layer of complexity to the challenges Kurdish literature faces due to external state pressures.

## VI. The Contemporary Landscape (Mid 20th Century - Present)

From the mid-20th century onwards, Kurdish literature has continued to evolve, marked by the rise of the novel, the powerful voices of writers responding to conflict and exile, the diversification of themes and styles, the increasing visibility of women writers, and the distinct contributions of the Kurdish diaspora.

### The Kurdish Novel Takes Root

While poetry historically dominated Kurdish literary output, the 20th century saw the gradual emergence and consolidation of prose genres, most notably the novel.<sup>2</sup> This development gained significant momentum in the latter half of the century, often nurtured in the challenging environments of exile or post-conflict societies.

- **Mehmed Uzun** (1953–2007): A towering figure often credited with reviving and modernizing the Kurdish novel in the Kurmanji dialect.<sup>25</sup> Writing primarily during his long

exile in Sweden, Uzun produced a substantial body of work that established him as a foundational contemporary novelist.<sup>25</sup> His novels, such as *Tu* (You, 1985), *Siya Evînê* (Shadow of Love), *Mirina Kalekî Rind* (Death of a Nice Old Man), and *Ronî Mîna Evînê Tarî Mîna Mirinê* (Light like Love, Dark like Death), explore complex themes of Kurdish identity, the trauma and longing of exile, fragmented history, and the intricate relationship between love and political duty.<sup>4</sup> His work, which often faced bans and legal challenges in Turkey, played a crucial role in shaping a modern literary language for Kurmanji.<sup>25</sup>

- **Bachtyar Ali** (b. 1960): A highly influential contemporary novelist, intellectual, and poet writing in the Sorani dialect, based in Germany since the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> Ali gained prominence with novels like *Mergî Taqaney Diwem* (The Death of the Second Only Child, 1997) and *Diwahemîn Henary Dûnya* (The Last Pomegranate of the World, 2002).<sup>33</sup> His novel *Xezelnûs û Baxekanî Xeyal* (Ghazalrus and the Gardens of Imagination) became the first Kurdish-language novel to be published in English translation (as *I Stared at the Night of the City*, 2016).<sup>33</sup> Ali frequently employs magical realism to delve into the complexities of post-conflict Kurdish society (particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan), exploring philosophical questions, power dynamics, the legacy of trauma (including the Anfal genocide), and social critique.<sup>33</sup> He has received significant international recognition, including Germany's Nelly Sachs Prize.<sup>33</sup>
- **Other Notable Novelists:** The contemporary scene includes figures like **Jan Dost** (b. 1965), whose works engage with current political affairs, such as the situation in Kobani, often exploring power struggles and ideological conflicts within Kurdish society<sup>2</sup>; **Selahattin Demirtaş** (b. 1973), the imprisoned politician who has published acclaimed collections of short stories and a novel<sup>18</sup>; and **Behrouz Boochani** (b. 1983), whose award-winning book *No Friend But the Mountains* was remarkably written via text messages while he was held in an Australian offshore detention center, documenting the experience of seeking asylum.<sup>2</sup>
- **The Bildungsroman Genre:** Some contemporary Kurdish novelists utilize the *Bildungsroman* (novel of formation or growth) to explore the development of individual and collective identity within marginalized and contested historical contexts. Writers like Sayyed Qadir Hedayati employ this genre to narrate the intricacies of Kurdish identity formation, giving voice to communities grappling with liminality and historical pressures.<sup>35</sup>

The flourishing of the Kurdish novel, particularly in contexts marked by exile and the aftermath of conflict, suggests a move towards more sustained and complex narrative forms capable of grappling with the nuances of historical trauma, memory, identity negotiation, and societal critique in ways that may go beyond the immediacy often associated with lyric poetry.<sup>25</sup>

## Voices of Resistance and Exile

Much contemporary Kurdish literature continues to be deeply informed by the experiences of political struggle, oppression, imprisonment, and exile.

- **Sherko Bekas** (1940–2013): A dominant figure in modern Sorani poetry, Bekas was the son of poet Fayak Bekas and actively involved in the Kurdish liberation movement.<sup>36</sup> He revolutionized Kurdish poetic form with the "Rûwange" (vision) movement, breaking from traditional metrical and rhyme constraints to create a more fluid and direct style.<sup>36</sup> His prolific output addresses themes of liberty, resistance, the horrors of political violence (including the Anfal genocide), love, and the beauty of nature, often intertwined with the Kurdish national struggle.<sup>6</sup> Bekas achieved significant international acclaim, with his works translated into many languages.<sup>36</sup>
- **Jalal Barzanji** (b. 1953): A poet and journalist whose experiences exemplify the risks faced by Kurdish writers. Imprisoned and tortured for three years (1986–1988) under Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq due to his writings advocating peace, democracy, and Kurdish rights, Barzanji later found refuge in Canada.<sup>29</sup> His memoir, *The Man in Blue Pyjamas* (2011), provides a harrowing account of his ordeal.<sup>29</sup> He became the first Writer-in-Exile for the city of Edmonton, continuing his work promoting cultural understanding.<sup>30</sup>
- **Literature of Exile:** The experience of living outside the homeland is a major theme in contemporary Kurdish literature. Writers in the diaspora often explore the complexities of constructing identity far from Kurdistan, grappling with feelings of nostalgia, alienation, the challenges of integration, and the enduring connection to the political struggles back home.<sup>9</sup> The homeland itself is often depicted through the lens of memory, sometimes idealized, sometimes lamented as lost or destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

## Expanding Themes and Styles

While the core concerns of identity, homeland, and resistance remain prominent, contemporary Kurdish literature exhibits a growing diversification in themes and stylistic approaches:

- **New Thematic Concerns:** Writers are increasingly exploring experiences related to urbanization, the complexities of modern city life, individual subjectivity and psychological depth, philosophical questions, environmental concerns, and the textures of everyday existence, moving beyond solely collective or political narratives.<sup>1</sup>
- **Stylistic Innovation:** Contemporary authors employ a wide range of literary techniques, including political fiction that dissects power structures<sup>34</sup>, the aforementioned magical realism<sup>33</sup>, experimental narrative structures (such as the script-like format and satirical elements in Cemile Şahin's *Kommando Ajax*<sup>31</sup>), and the adaptation of established genres like the Bildungsroman to the Kurdish context.<sup>35</sup> This engagement with global literary techniques suggests an effort to position Kurdish literature within a broader world literary conversation, using internationally recognizable forms to articulate specific Kurdish experiences and universal human concerns.

## Kurdish Women Writers

Historically marginalized within a predominantly male literary tradition, Kurdish women writers

have gained increasing visibility and voice, particularly since the relative political opening in Iraqi Kurdistan post-1991.<sup>38</sup>

- **Challenging Patriarchy:** Contemporary Kurdish women's poetry and prose often directly confront patriarchal structures, misogynistic laws, and social injustices faced by women within Kurdish society.<sup>38</sup> Their work constitutes a form of internal critique alongside the external political struggle, suggesting a multi-layered quest for liberation.
- **Themes:** Key themes include the realities of women's lives, the fight for gender justice, critiques of traditional norms, experiences of violence and suppression, as well as exile, identity, and resistance from a female perspective.<sup>38</sup> Their writing often symbolizes a "war" against entrenched patriarchy.<sup>38</sup>
- **Prominent Figures:**
  - **Cemile Şahin** (b. Germany): An interdisciplinary artist and writer whose novel *Kommando Ajax* (nominated for the prestigious Leipzig Book Prize 2025) innovatively blends the crime/heist genre with a poignant narrative of a Kurdish family's history of displacement from Dêrsim (North Kurdistan), exile, and resistance, foregrounding female characters and employing a unique cinematic style.<sup>31</sup> Her work often tackles historical and political themes related to Kurdistan, migration, and identity with sharp commentary and dark humor.<sup>31</sup>
  - **Sara Omar** (b. 1986, Iraqi Kurdistan): Recognized as the first internationally acclaimed female novelist from the Sulaymaniyah region of Iraqi Kurdistan, known for tackling sensitive issues related to women's rights and experiences.<sup>2</sup>
- **Diaspora and Homeland:** Studies indicate that both diasporic and homeland-based Kurdish women poets engage with similar core themes related to gender and society, though their specific forms and structures may differ.<sup>38</sup>

## Literature of the Diaspora

The extensive Kurdish diaspora, formed over decades of forced displacement, political persecution, and conflict across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, has cultivated its own distinct literary expressions.<sup>5</sup>

- **Identity and Belonging:** Diaspora literature frequently explores the process of identity formation in a stateless, transnational context. It examines how Kurdish identity is maintained, negotiated, and transformed across generations living outside the homeland.<sup>5</sup> Themes of dual belonging, cultural hybridity, intergenerational differences, and the struggle against assimilation are common.<sup>5</sup>
- **Connection to Homeland:** Despite geographical distance, a strong orientation towards the homeland often persists, manifesting as nostalgia, political activism, and engagement with events unfolding in Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> The concept of Kurdistan remains a powerful symbolic anchor, even if physical return is impossible or undesirable.<sup>9</sup>
- **Language Maintenance:** Preserving the Kurdish language (in its various dialects) is a central concern for diaspora communities and their writers, serving as a vital link to cultural heritage and collective identity.<sup>37</sup>

- **Statelessness as Identity:** Some analyses suggest that the condition of statelessness itself becomes an integral component of Kurdish diasporic identity, sometimes reclaimed from a purely negative connotation and used as a source of shared experience and empowerment.<sup>37</sup>

The contemporary Kurdish literary scene, both within Kurdistan and across the diaspora, is thus characterized by dynamism, resilience, and a growing engagement with diverse forms and themes, reflecting the complex realities of Kurdish life in the 21st century.

## VII. Conclusion: The Unbroken Thread

Kurdish literature, in its journey from the ancient resonant voice of the Dengbêj to the intricate, polyphonic novels emerging from contemporary Kurdistan and its global diaspora, stands as a testament to the remarkable resilience and adaptability of a culture under persistent pressure. It has navigated profound linguistic diversity across multiple dialects and scripts, endured decades of political suppression including censorship and linguicide, and grappled with the geographical and psychological fragmentation resulting from statelessness and displacement.<sup>1</sup> Through these challenges, it has not only survived but has continuously evolved, finding new forms and voices to articulate the Kurdish experience.

This literary tradition serves as far more than an artistic pursuit; it is a fundamental pillar supporting Kurdish cultural identity. It functions as a crucial vehicle for preserving endangered dialects, transmitting collective memory and history across generations often failed by official archives, negotiating the complexities of identity in both homeland and diaspora, and articulating shared aspirations, traumas, and resistance.<sup>6</sup> The intimate connection between Kurdish literature, both oral and written, and the Kurdish sense of self remains undeniable and deeply ingrained.

Contemporary trends point towards a dynamic and multifaceted future. The growing prominence of the novel allows for deeper explorations of history, society, and individual psychology.<sup>25</sup> The diversification of themes beyond the immediate political struggle to encompass urbanization, individuality, and philosophical inquiry suggests a broadening scope.<sup>1</sup> The increasingly assertive voices of Kurdish women writers are enriching the literary landscape by challenging internal patriarchal structures and adding crucial perspectives on gender, society, and liberation.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the ongoing dialogue between writers in the homeland and the diaspora continues to shape understandings of identity, belonging, and the meaning of "Kurdistan" itself.<sup>9</sup>

Significant challenges persist. The lack of a standardized writing system across major dialects remains a barrier to pan-Kurdish literary communication and unity.<sup>23</sup> Political pressures, censorship, and the precariousness of cultural rights in the states governing Kurdish regions continue to cast a shadow.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the unbroken thread of Kurdish literary expression endures. Its spirit, characterized by adaptation, resistance, and a profound connection to the Kurdish experience, continues to find new ways to weave the rich, complex, and often poignant story of the Kurdish people for themselves and the world.

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