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The Muses Do not Remain Silent: A Love Story in the Service of Kurdish Nation-Building

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Even as the guns continued to roar in the mountains of Kurdistan, the muses refused to be silent. This year, the Kurds have produced a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Hasan Salah Soran, a poet, novelist and historian from Iran (what Kurdish activists like to call Eastern Kurdistan). Asked about his candidacy, Soran said that if he wins, the prize would be for all the Kurdish people and not just him. As it happened, he did not win. Nonetheless, the candidacy itself marked the international recognition of Kurdish literary work, of which Soran is an important representative. Indeed, Kurdish literature, and the writing of the Kurdish language in general, has made a very long and lengthy journey.

Kurdish literature in its written form is a very recent phenomenon. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only thirty-seven literary works were known to have survived over the course of the language's thousand-year history. Many obstacles stood in the way of written literary work: the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an, is written in Arabic; Kurdish speakers were surrounded by Arabic, Persian and Turkish-speaking neighbors whose languages were considered to be refined epitomes of high culture, thus influencing the language choices of Kurdish writers; and most importantly, it was only at the end of the 19th century that one witnessed the first steps towards the standardization of the Kurdish language. And yet up until present day, the Kurdish language is spoken in a number of different dialects, which some even say constitute distinct languages. Worse still, the language is written in three different alphabets, reflecting the Kurds' political fragmentation: the Arabic alphabet in Iraq, Iran and Syria, Cyrillic, in the regions of the former Soviet Union, and the Latin alphabet, in Turkey and the Kurdish European diaspora.

The Kurds consider the 17th century as the epoch of Kurdish revival. The person who most symbolises it is Ahmad Khani (1650-1706), a poet, philosopher and man of religion who sought to turn Kurdish into a written language, standing on a par with Persian and Arabic. His most renowned literary work is the epic *Mem U Zin*, which has

become the Kurdish national epic and subject of additional literary and cinematic work, including translations into numerous languages. On one level, this is a love story between Mem from the tribe of Alan and the princess Zin from a rival tribe whose brother was the prince of Botan, located in modern-day Turkey. Like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers could not consummate their love and died in a tragic way, due to the machination of Bakr, the evil figure in the story. Bakr himself tried to find refuge from the wrath of the people between the graves of the lovers but he was killed, and the blood which dripped from his body sent roots into the ground and became the thorn that continued to separate the lovers. On another level, the story symbolizes the situation of the Kurdish people who were separated by the Ottoman and Persian empires. Lamenting this situation, Khani expressed the hope that a king would appear in Kurdistan to unite the Kurds and change their destiny.

Khani's call to turn Kurdish into a living, written language continued to reverberate in modern times. However, the difficulties it met were even greater, as governments placed numerous obstacles in the way, and at times even forbid the use of Kurdish entirely. The result, according to the Kurdish political lexicon, was the linguicide of their language. Inevitably, such policies resulted in Kurdish writers employing the dominant languages of the particular states where they resided. Thus, for example, the famous Iraqi Kurdish poets Buland al-Haydari and Salim Barakat wrote in Arabic, while the Kurdish Turkish poetess Bejan Matur writes in Turkish.

Notwithstanding these formidable obstacles, Kurdish literature has flourished during the last two decades. The broad autonomy which the Kurds of Iraq gained after the 1991 Gulf war, coupled with the annulment of the law forbidding the Kurds in Turkey to employ the Kurdish language in the public sphere, contributed greatly to the spread of written Kurdish. No less important was the activity of Kurdish men of letters in the diaspora, who contributed immensely to the spread of Kurdish literary works, particularly in Europe. Many Kurdish intellectuals found refuge in Paris, where they founded in the early 1980s "l'institut Kurde", which is very active in promoting Kurdish culture and language. More recently, Sweden has replaced Paris as the "capital" of Kurdish literature, where many Kurdish works have been written or translated into European languages.

An important project of Kurdish intellectuals was the translation of literary works. Particularly noteworthy was the novel *Jan-I Gal (The Agony of People)*, published in Paris in 1994 as *Mal du peuple*, almost thirty years after it was initially written. Its author was Ibrahim Ahmad, a Kurdish intellectual and leading political figure in Iraqi Kurdistan in the mid-1950s and 1960s. The original Kurdish text was forbidden under the Ba'ath, but young people used to read it secretly. Now it can be read freely in Iraq. Moreover, it was turned into a successful film.

Like Khani, Ahmad combines literary motives with ideological-political ones. The novel's hero is Jwamer from Sulaymaniyya, who was imprisoned for ten years because of his *Kurdiyati* (Kurdish patriotism). When he finally was released from prison, he discovered that his wife had died while giving birth to a child, who had died as well. This terrible news had been kept secret from him by his friend and close relative, who did not want Ahmad to lose hope in prison. In any case, the severe conditions in which he found the Kurds convinced Jwamer to join the "National Army for Independence" and continue the struggle for his people. Like Khani, Ahmad

emphasizes the notion that throughout their history, the Kurds were subservient to other nations, and he too calls on them to break out of this vicious circle.

As with most nascent national movements, poetry is highly politicized and mobilized for the Kurdish cause. Poets like Sami Shores, Abdullah Pashew and Sherko Bekas stress the motive of freedom and independence in their works. One poem by Bekas, one of the most famous modern Kurdish poets, might give the general tenor:

Stormtide

The tide said to the fisherman:
There are many reasons
why my waves are in a rage.
The most important is
that I am for the freedom of the fish
and against
the net

Under the wide autonomy which the Kurds of Iraq enjoy, Kurdish writing has moved one step forward, now daring to criticize the government for its corruption, nepotism and other misdeeds. Such criticism, which in earlier times had at times cost the writers their lives, is no longer limited to journalists and now includes men of letters as well. A case in point is the novelist Bakhtyar Ali, who this past year published the novel *Gezalnus and the imaginative gardens*. The book is an allegorical story that is highly critical of the current Kurdish Regional Government. Interestingly enough, the publisher paid Bakhtyar the sum of \$25,000 and printed 10,000 copies of the book, amounts unheard of in Iraqi Kurdistan. In the past, writers had to print their books with their own money due to government censorship and a limited readership.

The spread of the internet among Kurdish societies is an additional new factor in the equation, enabling them to interact virtually and freely with each other across previously unbreachable “national” boundaries. When added to the other developments enumerated above, the Kurdish language no longer appears to be threatened by linguicide.

Overall, during the last century Kurdish literary work has witnessed a genuine revolution, from oral production only vaguely known in the world to a written corpus that is taking its place within the pantheon of world literature. The latest sign of this revolution is *Modern Kurdish Poetry: An anthology & introduction*, an English-language translation representing thirty different Kurdish poets of the twentieth century, published in Sweden in 2006. It is thus fair to say that the Kurdish voice is now engraved in letters.

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