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Research article

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Resurrecting Silent Histories: A Journey through the Historical Novels of Kurdish Author Jan Dost

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Abstract: This article explores the historical novels of Kurdish author Jan Dost, highlighting their role in resurrecting and preserving the silent histories of the Kurdish people. By examining Dost's works through the lens of Georg Lukács's theory of the historical novel, the article delves into how Dost's narratives blend fiction with historical events to cultivate national consciousness and reconstruct Kurdish identity. The study discusses the evolution of the historical novel as a genre and its significance in Kurdish literature, emphasizing Dost's unique contributions. It argues that the nationalist themes and character portrayals in Dost's novels serve as a literary mechanism to reclaim Kurdish history, foster collective memory, and inspire cultural resilience. This analysis aims to understand the reasons behind the success and literary impact of Dost's works in the broader context of Kurdish and Middle Eastern literature.

Keywords: Kurdish novel, historical novel, identity, nation, fiction, Kurdish history

1 Introduction

The study of the past and the search for detailed information about people, events, and things has always been considered a crucial area of knowledge. This pervasive need has led to the study of the past being a topic of various disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. Throughout the history of human civilization, both oral and written forms of artistic and literary narrative have emerged as media for recounting the past. Although the romance was the predominant literary form for many centuries prior to the advent of modernity, it was subsequently replaced by the novel. Hegel famously stated that the novel was the epic of the bourgeoisie, encapsulating the spirit of the age.[1]

Social and epistemological transformations gave rise to a specific subgenre of the novel known as the historical novel, as theorized by Georg Lukács, in the early 19th century. George Lukács argues that "the historical novel in its origin, development, rise and decline follows inevitably upon the great social transformations of modern times."[2] This subgenre was dedicated to exploring and narrating historical events within a novelistic framework. At the same time, the Middle East was undergoing modernization and sociopolitical changes that led to the emergence of a modern literary discourse. The historical novel became one of the literary genres that emerged in the major Middle Eastern languages, such as Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and especially flourished in the early decades of the 20th century. In the context of Kurdish literature, the Kurdish historical novel found its place in the narrative discourse in the second half of the 20th century.

This article aims to shed light on Jan Dost's historical novels and their content. Through a close examination of Dost's works, the article seeks to analyze both their thematic content and their

1 Hegel 1988: 592.

2 Lukács 1989: 17.

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generic features.[3] Jan Dost was chosen for this study for two main reasons. First, he is the most prolific Kurdish novelist of recent years, and has made significant contributions to the literary landscape. Secondly, Dost is the only Kurdish novelist whose published novels are all available in both Northern and Central Kurdish, the main standardized varieties of the Kurdish language. After being published in Arabic or Northern Kurdish, his novels are translated into Central Kurdish. Widely distributed throughout Kurdistan, Dost's novels have garnered considerable attention and positive feedback across various Kurdish social and literary platforms, indicating their wide readership. By examining the literary and thematic characteristics of these novels, I aim to uncover the reasons behind their literary breakthrough and success.

The main argument of this paper is that the nationalist references in Dost's novels and their cultivation of national consciousness, although fictional, serve as devices for reclaiming the suppressed history of the Kurds. These elements also play a crucial role in the construction of a new Kurdish identity. By exploring historical events, these novels contribute to a deeper understanding of the Kurdish experience, and foster a sense of collective memory and resilience. They also inspire readers to reflect on their heritage, culture, and aspirations, ultimately shaping a renewed sense of identity within the Kurdish community. Emphasizing the type of characters used in the works of Scott, Pushkin and Tolstoy, Lukács argues that "the aim of the historical novel" is first and foremost "to portray the kind of individual destiny that can directly and at the same time typically express the problems of an epoch."[4] A relevant question regarding the characters in Jan Dost's novels can be whether they represent the problems of an epoch in Kurdish history.

2 The historical novel

The historical novel is rooted in the universal form of expression known as narrative, which has its origins in both oral storytelling traditions and the modern novel. While the former are gradually disappearing, the latter continues to thrive.[5] Storytelling in its oral form is indeed vanishing, a point strongly argued by Walter Benjamin in his 1932 essay "The Handkerchief."[6] Despite his nostalgic interest in oral storytelling, Benjamin suggests that modern aspects of life and extensive social and technological changes have shifted the concept of storytelling from the authority of traditional storytellers to fragmented experiences and methods of conveyance in modern times. Considering the period when Benjamin made his argument and the unprecedented technological changes in recent decades, his argument becomes even more persuasive.

Historiography and fiction have long been significant avenues for recording the past. In his poetics, Aristotle distinguishes between the historian and the poet, with the former recounting events that have occurred and the latter exploring events that could happen.[7] However, in recent decades, theoretical approaches to history and fiction have blurred the boundaries between the two, leading to an interesting convergence.[8]

Georg Lukács's contribution to the theorization of the historical novel is widely regarded as a classical framework for defining the genre. Lukács asserts that the historical novel emerged in the early 19th century, around the time of Napoleon's downfall, as exemplified by the publication of Scott's *Waverley* in 1814.[9] Lukács also comments on the earlier so-called historical novels of the 17th century, noting that they were historical only in terms of their external choice of theme and costume,

3 In another article, I discuss Dost's novels narrating contemporary Kurdish politics, see Ahmadzadeh 2023.
4 Lukács 1989: 284.
5 Goody 2006: 14.
6 Benjamin 2019: 42–45.
7 Aristotle 2006: 32.
8 Southgate 2009: x.
9 Lukács 1989: 19.

while their characters' psychology and manners were reflective of the author's era.[10] Based on Lukács's definition, it can be expected that a historical novel should portray the psychology of its characters and capture the manners of the period in which it is set.

The historical novel is often regarded as a "problematic hybrid form" that combines elements of fact and fiction.[11] It serves as a label for a specific type of novel within the broader genre. However, defining the historical novel proves to be just as challenging as defining the novel itself. Despite considerable theoretical efforts, consensus on a comprehensive definition of the novel as a genre remains elusive. Consequently, subdividing the genre only adds to the complexity of defining its various forms. Unable to agree on a functional definition of the novel, some literary theorists opt for a pragmatic approach, accepting as a novel any text labeled as such by its author or publisher.[12]

The relationship between the novel and reality has been a topic of interest since the early development of the genre. Literary theorists have rightly emphasized the "realistic aspect of the novel" in contrast to the "epic and mythic aspects of romance."[13] The evolution of the novel genre over the centuries has prompted literary theorists to introduce new concepts that explore the interplay between the novel and factual elements. For instance, Hawthorn refers to Truman Capote's notion of "faction" as a "portmanteau word" denoting a work that straddles the line between fact and fiction. These works primarily revolve around real events or individuals, but incorporate imagined details to enhance readability and create a sense of authenticity.[14]

As Carnes aptly notes, the historical novel is inherently contradictory: "a nonfictional fiction; a factual fantasy; a truthful deception."[15] Historical novels are generally expected to fulfill certain functional requirements, combining historical and literary features to create a compelling narrative that captures both the essence of the past and the conventions of storytelling.

According to Maxwell, the earliest examples of the historical novel can be traced back to Chinese literature, specifically during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1664). The Chinese presented fictionalized accounts of historical events, particularly in works like "Three Kingdoms" that were first published in the early 16th century. These narratives blended fiction with historical elements, providing readers with stories grounded in history.[16]

The development of the historical novel gained significant traction in France during the 17th century, with authors such as Madame de Lafayette contributing greatly to its flourishing. However, it was the arrival of Sir Walter Scott's works that solidified the historical novel as an influential and well-known genre. Scott's novels played a pivotal role in establishing the conventions and popularity of the historical novel form.

3 The Kurdish historical novel

The rise of the Kurdish novel can be traced back to the former Soviet Union, where migrant Kurds from the Ottoman Empire began publishing their first Kurdish novels in the early 1930s.[17] Within this collection of novels, there were several works that can be categorized as historical novels. Notable ex-

10 Lukács 1989: 381.
11 Maxwell 2011: 381.
12 Massie 1990: 1. According to Massie's pragmatic perspective, any text that has been categorized as a novel by its author or publisher should be acknowledged and treated as such.
13 See Wellek and Warren 1956: 216.
14 Hawthorn 1997: 64.
15 Carnes 2004: 14.
16 Maxwell 2011: 382.
17 For a detailed account of the Kurdish novel, its rise and development, see Ahmadzadeh 2003.

amples include Ali Abdulrahman's novels *Khate Xanim* (Miss Khate) (1956) and *Shar le Chiya* (Battle in the Mountains) (1989). These represent a few of the early Kurdish historical novels.[18]

Arab Shemo (1897–1978), often referred to as the father of the Kurdish novel, played a crucial role in the development of the Kurdish historical novel through his famous work, *Kela Dimdim* (Dimdim Castle). First published in 1966, this novel has become one of the most popular Kurdish historical novels. It has been republished many times since its original release, including a Central Kurdish version published by Aras Publishing House, Hewler, in 2010, and a Northern Kurdish version republished by Lise Publishing House, Istanbul, in 2007.

Kela Dimdim narrates factual events that took place in the 17th century, during the reign of the Safavid king Shah Abbas (r. 1588–1629), who ordered the destruction of Dimdim Castle by his forces. The novel presents a romanticized fictional account of the Kurdish resistance in the castle. After prolonged resistance, the leader of the Kurdish forces finally orders the entire castle to be blown up to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

It is worth noting that while the novel contains some anachronistic allusions, it is widely regarded as one of the most successful Kurdish historical novels, capturing the spirit of Kurdish resistance and depicting significant events from the past.[19]

4 Jan Dost

Jan Dost, born in Kobani on March 12, 1965, is a prominent Kurdish author who has made significant contributions to Kurdish literature. He completed his studies in Kobani before receiving a degree in biology from Halab/Aleppo University in 1985. Since 2000, he has lived in Germany. His extensive body of work includes poetry, translations, short stories, and novels. His literary output has been well received, and his novels have been translated into several languages, including both Central and Northern Kurdish (Sorani and Kurmanji).[20] Many of his novels are also available in Arabic and Persian, demonstrating their wide accessibility and appeal to diverse readerships. They are highly regarded for their romantic content, well-structured narratives and eloquent descriptive prose. These qualities contribute to the significant popularity of his works, providing readers with a pleasurable and engaging reading experience.

Jan Dost's literary contributions have made him a respected figure in Kurdish literature, and his ability to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps has allowed his works to reach and resonate with readers from diverse backgrounds.

4.1 *Mirname* [The Book of the Mir][21]

Mirname, revolves around the life of Ahmadi Xani (1651–1707), a renowned classical Kurdish poet known for his epic work, "Mem u Zin." The story is narrated from the perspective of Xani's relations

18 Fahriya Adsay's Master's thesis provides an in-depth analysis of Kurdish historical novels written in Northern Kurdish dialect. See Adsay 2013.

19 Hemin Mukiryani, a famous contemporary Kurdish poet and man of letters, wrote a comprehensive review that served as the introduction to the Central Kurdish version of the novel in 1975. The review, titled "Pesheki," [Preface] acknowledges the literary and aesthetic merits of the novel, while also pointing out its factual inaccuracies and anachronisms. As an esteemed literary figure, Mukiryani offered valuable insights into the novel's strengths and weaknesses, providing a critical assessment of its overall quality. See Mukiryani 2010.

20 He originally wrote the following novels in Arabic: *Mirname*, *Eshiqi Werger*, *Zengekani Roma*, *Xwenek beser Minarewe*, *Pase Sewzekey Heleb*, *Afrin: Koridori Aram, Sarburday Xebat, Ewan Chawerey Kaziwen* and *Destnusi Saint Petersburg*. They were later translated into both Central and Northern Kurdish. The following novels were originally written in Northern Kurdish: *Mijabad*, *Se Gav u Sedarek*, *Martini Bextewer* and *Kobani*. These have also been translated into Central Kurdish.

21 Dost 2014.

with the authorities of the principality in which he lived. The novel begins with the description of Xani's funeral ceremony in a rainy cemetery. Despite the downpour, Xani's coffin remains dry and light as men carry it through the wet weather. Two strangers attending the funeral attract attention, as does as the conspicuous absence of the Mir, the most important figure in the community. As the priest performs religious rituals, the rain turns into ink, creating a somber atmosphere. Rumors circulating among the participants intensify the gravity of the ceremony, and arouse the curiosity of the audience.

Throughout the narrative, the novel employs poetic and metaphorical language. Although Xani is a religious figure, his treatment of the various individuals who visit his home involves mystical and controversial behaviors. Among the visitors is Temoy Fasiq, an openly alcoholic man who praises Xani for his sincere and trustworthy demeanor. Unexpectedly, Xani asks Temo to bring him wine, surprising both the reader and Temo himself. The request defies expectations, considering Xani's status as a pious figure. However, Xani clarifies that he intends to mix the wine with the ink he uses to write "Mem u Zin," in order to express his struggles through a conscious fantasy and intoxicated ink.[22] This passage highlights the intriguing and thought-provoking aspects of *Mirname*. Xani's unconventional behavior and the symbolic use of wine and ink create a sense of mystery and fascination, motivating curious readers to delve deeper into the rest of the novel. In response to Temoy Fasiq's curiosity about the smell of his ink, he asserts:

I have mixed my agony and yearning with this ink. Didn't you really smell the burning?[23]

من ژان و حەسرەتی خۆم تێکەڵ بەم مەرەکەبە کردووە. چما تۆ بۆنی سووتانت نەکرد؟

Mirname contains various biographical details about Xani, although the lack of available written materials about his life raises questions about the justification for including such details in a historical novel. The author uses his imagination to depict the daily lives of the characters, but it can be misleading to mention events that cannot be proven. The novel includes anachronistic concepts and events, such as referring to Xani as an "intellectual," a term that originated much later, in 1898, leading readers to doubt its authenticity. The narrator mentions Xani's travels to Khoy and Maku, cities in the Safavid Empire, but it is nearly impossible to verify these specific details. Xani's critical reading of Jiziri's poems[24] presents him as a modern, 21st century literary critic, which is anachronistic. Xani criticizes Jiziri's appreciation of the Mir of his time, Mir Sharaf. This anachronistic approach is also evident when the narrator mentions the ethnic consciousness of the inhabitants of Bayezid. Shange, the girl Xani loves, makes a highly intellectual statement about her story of being forced to marry an elderly merchant in Maku. This is unlikely and incongruent with the social and ethnic consciousness of a peripheral city in the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, highlighting a disconnect in the author's portrayal of the character's intellectual capacity.[25]

In another case, the narrator claims that the book "Mam u Zin" is widely distributed among the people of the city and is considered a threat to the Ottoman state.[26] Given the history of printing in the Ottoman Empire, this claim is unrealistic. The widespread distribution of the book in manuscript form is also implausible due to the low literacy rate at the time and the difficulty of producing numerous manuscripts in a short period.

Stylistically, *Mirname* can be seen as a collection of interconnected short stories. Each episode presents a character's account of Xani's death and speculation about the possible murderer. The nar-

22 Dost, 2014: 34.

23 Dost, 2014: 35.

24 Jiziri (1570–1640), Sheikh Ahmad Jiziri, known as Melayê Jiziri, has been considered the most famous Kurdish classical poet.

25 Dost 2014: 58.

26 Dost 2014: 106.

ratives vary and sometimes contradict each other. It was generally believed that Xani was poisoned by the agents of the Mir, and several narratives discuss the possible methods of poisoning. This polyphonic aspect lends depth to the novel. However, the way in which these narratives are connected may raise questions about the central focus of the novel and the coherence between the narrations. Despite the multiple narratives of Xani's poisoning, the outcome remains vague, leaving the reader with unanswered questions: Who killed Xani? How was he killed? Was he truly ill? Was he poisoned gradually, to bring about his demise step by step? Does the idea of poisoning make Xani's suffering a symbolic allusion to the agonies of the Kurds, as stated in the preface to his work *Mam u Zin*? Does it reflect Xani's failed love for Shange and his mystical approach to existence and the world? These and other questions occupy the reader's mind, creating a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. However, the novel's rich content and imagination provide readers with a "text of bliss" that demands their active participation in the process of reading.[27]

4.2 *Se Gav u Sedarayak: Dwa Shawi Jiyani Shekh Saidi Piran*[28] [Three Steps and a Gallows: The Last Night of the Life of Sheikh Said of Piran]

The novel captures the poignant and detailed description of Sheikh Said's three steps towards the gallows, adopting a realistic and emotionally charged tone. While the title itself conveys the grim reality of Sheikh Said's execution, the narrator provides insight into the origin of the concept of "three steps." The title of the book is derived from a speech given by the renowned master mystic, Hallaj, as he faced his own execution:

> Three steps lead you to God: The first by distancing yourself from the world, the second by distancing yourself from the final world; with your third step you are with God.[29]
>
> سێ هەنگاو تۆ دەگەیەنێتە خودا، یەک لە دونیا دوور بکەوە، ئەوی دی لە ئاخیرەت، لەگەڵ سێیەمم هەنگاودا تۆ لای خواوەندی!

The narrator delves deeply into Sheikh Said's inner thoughts and emotions, exploring his personality and memories during the final night of his life. The detailed narration reveals Sheikh's thirst and discomfort, highlighting his awareness of a small piece of gravel in his left shoe. The two tired soldiers flanking him add to the somber atmosphere. Throughout the 208-page narrative, the focus remains primarily on Sheikh Said's recollections, which flood his mind during the brief time it takes him to complete the three steps towards the gallows.

The narrative seamlessly interweaves multiple perspectives and employs parallel storytelling. It juxtaposes Sheikh Said's current journey toward his execution with vivid flashbacks from his past. Through the rapid stream of thoughts in the Sheikh's mind, readers become familiar with the immediate surroundings in which he will spend the final moments of his life. For example, Sheikh Said's habitual practice of praying in the early morning offers a glimpse into his spiritual life when he states: "In a couple of hours, the muezzin of Baram Pasha Mosque will perform the call to prayer, but I will not hear it, and it will be the first time that I do not perform my morning prayer."[30]

This blending of the present and the past, and the rich portrayal of the Sheikh's inner world, create a captivating narrative that immerses the reader in the profound and contemplative atmosphere of his final moments.

Betrayed by Qasim, who has revealed his location to the enemy, Sheikh Said initially maintains his composure and reacts with tranquility, staying true to his ascetic nature. However, when Qasim

27 See Barthes 1975.

28 Dost 2016c.

29 Dost 2016c: 115. "The final world" ("Akharat") refers to the stage after life. In the mystical discourse it has been referred to as eternity.

30 Dost 2016c: 29.

humiliates him by using his beloved comb to groom his mustache and insults him further, a fire ignites within Sheikh Said. With a voice that carries to all the gendarmes and those under arrest, he retorts, "Qaso! You need a comb to groom your filthy soul, not your beard."

> "You, Sheikh Afendi! This comb no longer serves any purpose for you. You have reached the end, my dear." Qasim Jibri runs Sheikh's comb through his mustache.
> A raging fire ignites within Sheikh's chest. In a loud voice that carries to all the gendarmes and those under arrest, he retorts:
> – "Qaso! You need a comb to groom your filthy soul, not your beard".[31]

ها شێخ ئەفەندی! ئەو شانەیە ئیدی بەکەڵکی تۆ نایەت! تۆ گەیشتوویتە کۆتایی، حەیران. قاسمی جبری سمێڵی خۆی پێ شانە کرد!
کێوێک لە ئاگر لە هەناوی شێخدا بڵێسەی دا، بە دەنگێکی بەرز کە هەموو جەندرمە و گیراوان گوێیان لێی بوو، وتی:
—قاسۆ! تۆ شانەیەکت بۆ داهێنانی ڕۆحی ناپاکت پێویستە، نەک ڕیشت.[32]

As Sheikh takes his fateful steps toward the gallows, he seizes every moment to communicate with his God and express his grievances about his circumstances. He recalls reading in the Bible about Jesus, during his crucifixion, uttering in Aramaic, "Iloy Iloy! Lamma Shabaqtani?" meaning, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Sheikh wishes to say the same words to God but finds his tongue unable to move.[33]

Digging into his memories, Sheikh is transported back to his childhood years in Erzurum, where he once traveled with his father. It was during this journey that he met Antranik, the grandchild of Sarkis Boxosyani, an Armenian merchant. Sheikh Mahmud, Sheikh's father, had a close friendship with Sarkis.[34]

Throughout the narrative, Sheikh remains thirsty, longing for a sip of water to wet his parched throat. He has been fasting, and when he is arrested, he is denied water to break his fast. This reminds him of the time he couldn't drink the glass of water handed to him by Perixan, a girl who worked at his house. In addition to being thirsty, as he approaches the gallows he continually attempts to pose a question to God, but never manages to complete his inquiry. In the final moments of his life, just before his death, he only manages to ask, "Oh my God, why…"

There are about fifty gallows in the square, arranged for the Sheikh and his followers. The narrator sometimes uses metaphorical language to portray the Sheikh's condition. For example, to highlight the absence of support for the Sheikh and his movement, the narrator emphasizes that the rivers of Kurdistan seem indifferent to the Sheikh's thirst, illustrating that even the natural elements are unresponsive to his needs.

> The Tigris was oblivious to his thirst, flowing calmly as if there were no parched person nearby. Even the springs of the Euphrates were unaware of his longing for water. The Zab, Xabur, Sablax, and Jwanro rivers were all oblivious to his plight. How could the Thames, Sayan, or Volga know about his thirst?[35]

ڕووباری دیجلە ئاگای لە تینوێتیی ئەو نەبوو. ئەو چەمە بە تارامی دەڕۆیشت، هەر وەک ئەوەی کەسێکی تینوو لەو نزیکانەدا نەبێ. کانییەکانی فوراتیش ئاگایان لە تینوێتییەکەی نەبوو، ڕووباری زێ و خابوور، ڕووبارەکانی سابڵاخ و جوانڕۆ ئاگایان لەو نەبوو، ئەی چۆن سامەس و سایان و ڤۆڵگا ئاگایان لە تینوێتییەکەی ببوایە!

31 Calling him "Qaso" instead of "Qasim" is very humiliating, see Dost 2016c: 35.

32 Dost 2016c: 35.

33 Dost 2016c: 37.

34 This novel is intertextually linked with another of Dost's novels, *Mijabad*, in which Antranik reappears. In *Mijabad*, Antranik, an Ottoman soldier during World War I, deserts and joins the Russian army. Years later, he flees from the Russian army and seeks asylum in the Kurdish city of Kermanshah in Eastern Kurdistan. He eventually moves to Mahabad and works as a photographer. See Dost 2016c: 50.

35 Dost 2016c: 49–50.

From the moment of Sheikh Said's arrest, a deep hostility emanates from the Turkish soldiers toward him and his men. When one of the Sheikh's comrades in jail requests that the soldiers give him some water before taking him to the gallows, an officer sarcastically remarks, "Don't worry! He will drink water tonight in paradise. He will quench his thirst with Kawthar water served by the hands of angels."[36]

During Sheikh Said's final moments, recollecting the past years and events becomes a challenging task. The memories seem to be jumbled together, with months and events overlapping and disrupting the chronological order. Despite this difficulty, Sheikh Said's mind drifts back to his time at the religious school of Mush.

It is within the walls of this school that Sheikh Said learns of important figures such as Badirkhan Pasha and his revolt against the Ottomans. He also becomes familiar with Sheikh Ubaidulla Nahri and his Naqshbandi order, which plays a significant role in shaping the Sheikh's spiritual understanding.[37]

One particular teacher in the school becomes instrumental in shaping the Sheikh's personality and deepening his knowledge of Kurdish history. This teacher introduces the Sheikh to the *Sharafname,* emphasizing its importance as a resource for understanding the Kurds and their historical background.[38] For fifty years, he keeps Xani's Mem u Zin, a renowned Kurdish epic, close to his Quran. Inspired by these teachings, Sheikh Said devotes himself to the cause of Kurdish unity. He laments the lack of unity among the Kurds and admires Xani's efforts to raise awareness about this bitter reality. Despite his efforts, however, Sheikh Said acknowledges the lack of success in bringing the Kurdish tribes together. As he awaits his imminent execution, Sheikh Said reflects on these teachings and the struggles of his people, yearning for the unified Kurdish identity that has proven elusive throughout history.

As Sheikh Said takes his second step toward the gallows, his thoughts turn to Perixan, a young girl who used to serve in their home. He vividly recalls her remarkable height, which he compares to the flowing sweetness of honey. He reflects on the beauty of Perixan's stature, believing that even God himself might have created her in a moment of intoxication.[39]

Perixan's background is deeply intertwined with the aftermath of war. Her father, a Kurdish man, tragically falls in battle. Left widowed with an infant daughter, Perixan's mother seeks refuge and assistance in Palo, the headquarters of Sheikh Mahmud, Sheikh Said's father. With desperation gripping her, and no other options in sight, she turns to Sheikh Mahmud, placing her daughter's fate in his hands and appealing for his kindness. Tearfully, she offers Perixan's services to Sheikh Mahmud, saying, "My lord, we have none but ourselves. It's just me and my daughter, a widow and an infant, and our future lies solely in your benevolence. Please, allow her to serve you."[40]

The mention of Perixan symbolizes an emotional connection in Sheikh Said's life, representing his deep love and attachment to her. Her presence in his memories during this crucial moment underscores the significance of their relationship and the impact she had on his life. As Sheikh Said approaches the gallows, his thirst becomes a constant reminder, emphasized repeatedly throughout the narrative. He also carries a handkerchief given to him by Perixan, which he has kept in his pocket for half a century. As he is drawn closer to his execution, Sheikh Said longs to use the handkerchief to

36 Dost 2016c: 52. "Kawthar" is a reference to the famous spring in the holy city of Mecca, revered by Muslims. The water of this spring is regarded as sacred and holds significant religious symbolism in Islamic tradition.

37 Bedirxan Pasha (1803–1868) was the last Kurdish emir of the Bohtan Emirate within the territories of the Ottoman Empire. Sheikh Ubaidullah Nahri (d. 1883) was the leader of the Naqshbandi Order and led a major revolt against the Ottomans in 1880.

38 *Sharafname* is a famous history book written in Persian by Sharaf Khan Bidlisi, a Kurdish prince, in 1597. It is considered the oldest written history of the Kurds.

39 Dost 2016c: 57.

40 Dost 2016c: 93.

wipe away his sweat, but his hands are now bound by handcuffs, preventing him from doing so. This small detail highlights his helplessness and the constraints imposed on him in his final moments.

The portrayal of Sheikh's love for Perixan is depicted in a highly romanticized manner. He poetically compares Perixan's height to the hanging rope of the gallows, equating them both to the letter "Alef" in the Arabic alphabet.[41] Perixan's image assails Sheikh's mind without respite, her face being likened to a sparrow delicately pecking at the fig of his vivid imagination.[42] Sheikh recalls a significant event that marked the first glimpse of his love for Perixan. Years ago, as Perixan attempted to fetch water from the well to offer Sheikh a refreshing glass, she accidentally fell into the well. Sheikh, who happened to be nearby, witnessed the tragedy and rushed to save her. Despite his efforts and desperate cries for help, he was unable to rescue her in time. His followers responded promptly, but it was too late, and Perixan was lost forever. The memory of being unable to retrieve the glass of water from her hands on that fateful day still haunts Sheikh even after five decades, as he stands just one step away from the gallows, still consumed by his unquenched thirst.

The lack of concrete historical documentation raises questions about the authenticity of the democratic ideas attributed to the Sheikh and whether they are products of the author's imagination. One such idea mentioned is Sheikh Said's issuance of a fatwa (religious decree) advocating for the protection and defense of Armenians.[43] However, without supporting historical evidence, it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of these claims.

The historical background provided by the narrator sheds light on the context in which Sheikh Said's rebellion takes place. The treaties of Sevres and Lausanne were significant events that had an impact on the political landscape of the region. The Azadi movement, consisting of influential Kurdish intellectuals based in Istanbul, sought to collaborate with Sheikh Said to organize a rebellion in Kurdistan against the central government. During this period, the Ottoman Empire was in decline, and the emergence of Ankara and the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk marked a shift in power. The secret meetings between Yusif Zia and Sheikh Said indicate their intention to coordinate an uprising, with the planned date set for March 21, 1925. However, the plan is derailed due to the premature arrest of Yusif Zia and Khalid Jabri by Turkish security forces.[44]

The novel concludes with a poignant and symbolic portrayal of the Sheikh's final moments. Despite the hardships and betrayals he has endured, Sheikh Said finds solace and reunion with Perixan in a transcendent encounter. The "Fourth Step" represents a departure from the three-step structure that has framed the narrative thus far, adding a layer of poetic and metaphorical depth to the story. Sheikh Said's meeting with Perixan, accompanied by a glass of water, symbolizes the fulfillment and quenching of his long-standing thirst. Their embrace signifies reunion and the resolution of their love story, bringing peace and closure. The white light enveloping everything suggests spiritual transcendence, hinting at the Sheikh's passage into the afterlife. The voice that speaks to the Sheikh at the end highlights the lingering question he had wanted to ask but could not fully articulate. This open-endedness leaves room for interpretation, inviting readers to reflect on the nature and significance of the Sheikh's unraised question.[45] Overall, the novel's conclusion artfully blends themes of love, longing, and spiritual contemplation, leaving the perception of the Sheikh's incomplete question to the reader's imagination.

41 Alef is the first letter in the Arabic, Persian and Kurdish alphabets. It looks like an upright vertical line: "ا". Here it is a metaphor for Perixan's height.

42 Dost 2016c: 111.

43 Dost 2016c: 126.

44 For a detailed account of Sheikh Said's rebellion, see Olson 1989, among many other sources.

45 Dost 2016c: 206, 208.

4.3 *Martini Bextewer* [The Blessed Martin][46]

Martini Bextewer is a novel by Jan Dost that explores the journey of a Western man named Martin in search of happiness and fulfillment in the Orient. Unlike Jan Dost's other novels, which are primarily set in the East, this novel begins in the West and gradually moves toward the East, emphasizing the protagonist's pursuit of spiritual and personal growth.

It is worth noting that *Martini Bextewer* is set in the same time period as another novel by Jan Dost called "Eshiq the Interpreter." As a result, there are certain characters who appear in both novels, creating a connection and continuity between the two stories. In this case, Martin and other characters can be found on the same boat that is carrying some young individuals to Rome, which serves as a link between the narratives.

Martini Bextewer is set in the 17th century, against the backdrop of a Europe that has recently emerged from the devastating Thirty Years' War and is now experiencing relative stability and peace. The novel delves into the social conditions of this era, focusing on the aftermath of the war and its impact on the lives of individuals.

The protagonist, Martin, encounters an elderly European veteran named Hans, who shares his own experiences and observations of the war's destructive consequences. According to Hans, the path to happiness lies in the East, where there is a sense of lightness, spirituality, and mysticism that welcomes visitors. This idea inspires Martin to embark on a long journey to the East in search of personal fulfillment and happiness.

During this time, there are efforts by both the Europeans and the Ottomans to end their conflicts and establish peace. The novel depicts a period in which negotiations are taking place between European countries and the Ottomans in the small Serbian city of Karlovac on January 26, 1699. The agreement reached between the two sides paves the way for European missionaries to travel to the East more freely than ever before.

Departing from his hometown of Herne in the winter of 1699, Martin embarks on an unknown adventure to the East. Unlike previous European travelers, who primarily wrote about their observations of the East, Martin intends to focus on his own life, daily experiences, behaviors, and innermost feelings and desires.

By emphasizing Martin's personal journey and his intention to write about his own experiences, the novel offers a unique perspective on the exploration of the East and the quest for happiness during this historical period.[47]

In *Martini Bextewer* the character of Martin is not based on a real person, but rather serves as a narrative device to represent the general discourse and experience of the 17th century. The novel captures the essence of the historical period, encompassing both Europe and the territories under the Ottoman Empire.

Similar to *Eshiq the Interpreter* and *The Bells of Rome*, the setting of *Martini Bextewer* reflects the specific time in which the story takes place, including the ethnic backgrounds of the characters. While the characters in the novel are not necessarily Kurds, they do belong to various ethnic groups that were present during the time of the empires, representing the diverse social fabric of the era.

By featuring characters from different ethnic backgrounds, the novel provides a broader perspective on the cultural and social dynamics of the 17th century, capturing the interactions and experiences of individuals from various parts of the world. This adds depth and richness to the narrative, allowing readers to gain insight into the complexities of the historical context in which the story unfolds.

Indeed, the encounter between East and West in *Martini Bextewer* reflects the Orientalist discourse prevalent at the time. The concept of Orientalism involves the construction by Europeans of an

46 Dost 2017b.
47 Dost 2017b: 68.

"Other" in order to define their own identity. The East is often depicted as mysterious, sensual, and exotic, while the West is portrayed as rational and conventional.[48]

Martin's exploration of the Orient takes place at a time when modernity is gaining momentum in Europe. One might ask why Martin seeks bliss and the "Book of Happiness" in the East at a time of progress and advancement in Europe. This exploration can be seen as a response to the tensions and complexities of modernity, as individuals like Martin seek alternative sources of fulfillment and meaning beyond the confines of Western civilization.

However, Martin's journey and actions in the East do not lead to a straightforward outcome. He becomes involved in various questionable activities, such as hunting elephants for ivory, engaging in the slave trade, and pursuing commercial ventures such as trading in paper and coffee. These actions ultimately render him unable to speak, symbolizing the conflicts and contradictions that arise from his encounter with the Orient.

To overcome his speechlessness and make sense of his experiences, Martin turns to writing and narrates his memories and struggles. This can be interpreted as a means for him to cope with the consequences of his actions and to reflect on the complexities of his journey, ultimately seeking some form of redemption or understanding in the process.

In *Martini Bextewer*, Martin's correspondence with his mentor Hans provides a means for him to reflect on his experiences and seek guidance during his journey. Some of these letters are written from Kurdish cities within the Ottoman Empire, such as Bayezid and Diyarbakir.

During his time in Bayezid, Martin meets Davud Yazdanyari, a Kurdish man who presents him with a book believed to contain the secrets of fortune. Davud, reminiscent of the wise old Hans, possesses knowledge and wisdom, and his character exudes sophistication and profound thoughts. It is through Davud that Martin learns a valuable lesson about the nature of fortune.

Davud tells Martin that the fortune he has been tirelessly seeking, and for which he left his home, is merely an illusion. He cautions Martin that the more he pursues it, the more he will feel thirst and distance from it.[49] This statement suggests that the true path to fulfillment and happiness may not be found in external pursuits or material gains, but rather within oneself.

When Martin returns home in 1708, after spending numerous years in the East and accumulating a wealth of experiences, he brings the book he received from Davud Yazdanyari back with him. Eager to explore its contents, Martin settles into a hotel and prepares to read the book.

As he engrosses himself in the book, a local student inquires about it. Intrigued by the student's curiosity, Martin shows the book to him. However, when Martin opens the book's hard leather cover, he is astonished to discover that all the pages have been reduced to ashes, as if they had recently been burned.

Startled and perhaps disappointed by this unexpected turn of events, Martin finds his tongue drying up. In an attempt to alleviate his discomfort, he reaches for his dried tongue with his fingers and discards it. However, despite the absence of his physical tongue, when the student asks Martin a question, he is able to answer effortlessly and speak without any impediment.

The final scene of the novel, in which Martin finds himself in a pub contemplating the notion that "all roads lead to emptiness,"[50] reflects a sense of existential despair and echoes the sentiment that Davud Yazdanyari had expressed to him during their meeting in Bayezid. This realization and the tone of the narration help to create a Kafkaesque atmosphere in the story.

48 One can see some of the traces of Edward Said's Orientalism in the way Martin experiences the East. See Edward Said's seminal work on the nature of Orientalism and its common features, especially its "historical" and "a-historical" "essences." See Said 1985: 96.

49 Dost 2017b: 293.

50 Dost 2017b: 300.

The concept of emptiness and Martin's disillusionment with seeking his fortune pervade his thoughts, suggesting a sense of futility and an inherent void that accompanies human existence. This existential theme echoes the works of Franz Kafka, who is known for his exploration of alienation, absurdity, and the existential condition.

The physical manifestation of this existential emptiness is represented by the foggy and grey weather that Martin encounters as he leaves the pub. The imagery of fog and greyness conveys a sense of ambiguity, confusion, and the dissolution of clear boundaries, reflecting the existential uncertainty and the lack of definitive meaning in Martin's journey.

This bleak and ambiguous ending, reminiscent of the disappearance of the protagonist Badin in *Mijabad* (discussed below), adds a sense of unresolved mystery and leaves the reader pondering the deeper implications of Martin's quest and the ultimate meaning of his experiences.

4.4 *Eshiqi Werger* [Eshiq the Interpreter][51]

The revelation of Eshiq's true identity as the narrator and main character of the novel adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to the story. He was born into a Muslim family in Antakya, a region under Ottoman rule, and his father has aspirations for him to study in Italy and become a translator. However, due to restrictions placed on Muslims traveling to Rome for education, his father arranges for him to go to Italy by assuming a Christian identity.

After obtaining a Christian identity card and joining a group of young Christian boys, Eshiq embarks on a journey that involves not only studying the language and culture, but also living under a false identity. This arrangement highlights the challenges and complexities faced by individuals seeking education and opportunities beyond the limitations imposed by their cultural and religious contexts.

As the story progresses, Eshiq's experiences and interactions in Rome shape his personal growth and cultural understanding. His longing for his beloved Jewish girl, Ester, and his yearning for home are recurring themes throughout the novel.

The novel belongs to the genre of historical fiction, which allows for the inclusion of both real and fictional characters within a well-defined historical context. Although Eshiq himself is a fictional character, his experiences and interactions with other characters in the novel provide insight into the social, cultural, and historical dynamics of the Ottoman Empire during the period.

The existence of imaginary and fictional characters in historical novels is not uncommon. Authors often use these characters to explore various aspects of the historical context they are portraying. By combining fictional and real characters, historical novels can offer a more nuanced and engaging narrative that combines historical accuracy with imaginative storytelling.[52]

The portrayal of the Ottoman millet system and the coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups in "Eshiqi Werger" reflect the cosmopolitan nature of the period. The novel provides insight into the social fabric of the Ottoman Empire, where people from different backgrounds lived side by side.

Regarding the memories dictated by the old interpreter, it is interesting to note the presence of individualistic features that may not be in line with the prevailing norms of his time. This could be attributed to the influence of the author, who transfers his own contemporary discourse to the perspective of the old interpreter. The blending of the author's contemporary views with the historical context adds a layer of complexity to the narrative.

The novel uses a linear storytelling approach, with episodes inserted as breaks in the main narrative. This technique allows for including additional episodes while still following a clear chronological order. The straightforward linear direction of the narrative emphasizes the coherence and conti-

51 Dost 2015.

52 Hawthorn 1997.

nuity of the protagonist's life journey. Based on the timeline given in the novel, Eshiq was born in 1688 and embarked on his journey to Rome in 1708. The novel concludes with him finishing his memoirs in 1763, at the age of 75.

The precise time references used in the novel, such as "a quarter," "at seven o'clock," or "half an hour," may indeed seem unusual for the mid-18th century in Eshiq's homeland.[53] While it is possible that people at that time had a sense of timekeeping, it is worth noting that the level of precision in timekeeping may not have been as commonplace as it is today.[54] The use of such exact time references could be seen as a narrative choice by the author to enhance the storytelling and create a more vivid and detailed atmosphere.

The inclusion of terms such as "wilat/welat" without distinguishing between the modern concepts of "land" and "country" is consistent with the broader setting of the novel, which takes place during the time of empires rather than the rise of nation-states. This suggests that the author may be intentionally employing anachronistic language to maintain historical accuracy and capture the nuances of the time period depicted in the novel.

4.5 *Zengekani Roma* [The Bells of Rome][55]

Zengekani Roma serves as a continuation or second volume of Eshiq's story, focusing on his prolonged stay in Rome. The involvement of a Kurdish translator and the author's willingness to follow up on the lives of the young travelers demonstrate the author's commitment to exploring the characters and their experiences in greater depth.

The contrasting feelings experienced by the characters upon their arrival in Rome, with the three Christian boys feeling happy and free while Eshiq feels a sense of loss and longing for the religious symbols of his village, indeed reflect the significance of religious identity during the time of empires. Eshiq's lamentation emphasizes his attachment to his religious and cultural background, highlighting the impact of displacement and the challenges of navigating a new and unfamiliar environment. This adds depth to Eshiq's character and contributes to the novel's exploration of cultural and religious identity.

Eshiq's lamentation expresses his deep longing for his homeland and the familiar elements of his village. The mention of missing his parents and the sound of the call to prayer highlights the importance of family and religious customs in his life. His attachment to the mosque and his longing for the sights and sounds of his village, including the stone, dust, and walls of the buildings, evoke a sense of nostalgia and a longing for the familiar surroundings that have shaped his identity.[56] These laments convey Eshiq's emotional struggle and the challenges he faces as he adjusts to a new and unfamiliar environment in Rome.

The faster pace of events in this volume of the novel creates a sense of urgency and a compressed timeline. As a result, the detailed depiction of daily life may not be as prominent as in the previous volume. Eshiq's conversion to Christianity marks a significant turning point in his life, yet the immediate consequences and reactions to this conversion are not extensively explored. The novel focuses more on the broader narrative arc and the subsequent events that unfold, rather than delving deeply into the specific repercussions of Eshiq's religious transformation.

Eshiq's lack of an inheritance and the loss of his home after his wife's death add to the challenges and hardships that he faces. These losses emphasize the precarious position in which he finds himself, estranged from his original identity and now also losing the tangible support and stability he once had.

53 See for example Dost 2014: 64, 67, 203.

54 For a detailed overview of technological and scientific achievements, including timekeeping, in the Islamic world, see Nasr 1968.

55 Dost 2016b.

56 Dost 2016b: 70.

The repetitions in the narrative, where events are first presented by the omniscient narrator and then recounted by Eshiq to his clerk, may serve to highlight the importance of these events to Eshiq and their impact on his life. It also allows for different perspectives and insights into the unfolding story. When the clerk questions the speed with which events are dictated, this could be seen as reflecting the challenges of accurately and comprehensively documenting and transcribing the complex and rapidly changing circumstances of Eshiq's life. At one point, the clerk reminds Eshiq:

> My Lord, it surprises me that you sometimes skip over the years without referring to the details. We used to write down a minor event that took a few minutes on a few pages. But tonight, you dictated to me the events of a few years in less than a single page.[57]

> گەورەم سەیرم دێت بەسەر ساڵەکاندا باز دەدەیت و وردەکارییەکان باس ناکەیت، پێشتر ڕووداوێکی بچووکمان لە پەڕەیەکی تەواو یان دوو پەڕە یان سێ پەڕەدا دەنووسییەوە، کە چەند خولەکێکی بردبوو، هەرچی ئەمشەوە ڕووداوەکانی ساڵانێکی زۆرت بە کەمتر لە پەڕەیەک پێ نووسیمەوە.

Eshiq's journey in Rome takes a major turn when he converts to Christianity and becomes integrated into the Christian community. However, he remains disconnected from his homeland and his past, choosing to stay in Rome rather than return home. His decision may be driven by resentment toward his father for separating him from his home and Ester, his beloved. During his time in Rome, Eshiq builds a life for himself. He works as an Arabic language instructor, engages in various occupations such as being a wine merchant, and forms a romantic relationship with a Christian woman whom he eventually marries. Despite his efforts, however, Eshiq and his wife do not have any children.

As the years pass, Eshiq realizes that a considerable amount of time has elapsed since he arrived in Rome. He becomes aware of the passage of fifty years and experiences the loss of his wife, who has now passed away. His lack of children further emphasizes the solitude and sense of transience that pervades his life.

Eshiq's return to his homeland and the events that follow bring a sense of resolution and closure to the novel. After spending more than fifty years in exile, Eshiq's contemplation and translation work, particularly his translation of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, enables him to confront his past sins and regrets. This introspection and newfound courage prompts him to make the decision to return home. Upon his arrival, Eshiq continues to write his memoirs, capturing the experiences and emotions of the years he spent in exile. However, an unexpected and exciting twist occurs when Ester, his long-lost love, pays him a visit. Her loyalty and enduring love for Eshiq over the years adds a poignant and heartfelt element to the story's conclusion.

In terms of narrative space, the novel provides a rare perspective for Kurdish literature. Typically, the lack of sea in the greater Kurdistan region has limited the portrayal of maritime settings in Kurdish novels. However, by delving into the time of empires, Dost has successfully introduced a watery setting to the Kurdish novel, expanding its thematic and geographical scope.[58]

4.6 *Mijabad* [The City of Mist][59]

The title of the novel is a translation of the Persian version of the name of the Kurdish city of Mahabad, in eastern/Iranian Kurdistan.[60] The main character and narrator is Badin. He was born in Amedi in Southern Kurdistan and later resides in Slemani, where he joins a Kurdish political party called Hiwa in the early 1940s. After the dissolution of Hiwa, he joins the Barzani forces and follows

57 Dost 2016b: 146.

58 In another article, I have discussed the role of oceans in the novel and its settings, see Ahmadzadeh 2019: 133–162.

59 Dost 2016a.

60 The author has replaced the first morpheme of the Persian name "mah," which can mean both "fog" and "nobles," with the Kurdish equivalent "Mij," which also means "fog or mist." The city was formerly known as Sablax/Sawijbilax, a Turkish word meaning "cold spring."

them to Mahabad in 1946, a few months after the establishment of the Kurdish Republic in that city. He remains there until the collapse of the Republic at the end of that year. He then plans to leave the city through the surrounding foggy mountains. Love and politics are two prominent themes in Badin's life as well as in the events depicted in the novel.

In Amedi, young Badin has a love affair with his cousin, but his grandmother cautions him against pursuing a relationship because they were breast-fed together, which prohibits marriage between them. Disheartened, Badin leaves Amedi and relocates to Slemani, where he falls in love with Zhale Jaf. However, he discovers that Zhale has connections with the English authorities, which leads to the end of their relationship. In Mahabad, Badin's third love interest is Mizhde, a teacher whose father, Zulfo, hails from Northern Kurdistan and took part in a rebellion against the Turkish state in the 1930s. Zulfo leaves his wife and four-year-old Mizhde with Karim Shikak in Eastern Kurdistan, and returns to Northern Kurdistan to join the Ararat movement.[61]

Badin's mother, Hamest, is an Armenian woman, while his father, Yunes, fought alongside Sheikh Mahmud in Slemani.[62] The story of how Yunes and Hamest met is quite captivating. Yunes, along with his Armenian friend Antranik, served in the Ottoman army during WWI. Antranik surrenders to the Russians, while Yunes flees to Diyarbakir, where he meets Hamest, Antranik's daughter, at a friend's house. Yunes learns about her identity and marries Hamest before settling in Amedi, southern Kurdistan. Prior to Badin's birth, Yunes travels to Silemani to join Sheikh Mahmud's movement against the British presence in Southern Kurdistan. Yunes' father, Mela Qadir, had been executed by the Ottomans. Meanwhile, Antranik moves to Mahabad and becomes a photographer.

When Badin arrives in Mahabad, seeking employment as a teacher, he coincidentally meets his grandfather, Antranik. Having experienced numerous hardships in life, Antranik, has become a hedonistic and epicurean individual. Having lived alone for some 30 years, he considers vodka to be his country and his Armenia to be his shop.[63] During their extensive conversations, Antranik encourages Badin to live in the present and abstain from political activities. He even advises Badin against getting married.

In Mahabad, Badin soon finds himself in the company of literary men and forms friendships with renowned figures such as Hemin and Hezhar, who are celebrated as national poets, and Manaf Karimi, the Minister of Education of the Kurdish Republic. A keen observer of the cultural divisions within Kurdistan, Badin often criticizes the cultural and social conditions of Kurdish society. He notes that the works of poets such as Jiziri and Xani cannot be found in Mahabad, Hewler, Kerkuk, or Silemani, while the works of Haci Qadir, Salim, and Nali are missing in Amedi. This leads him to the following realization:

> Isn't it strange that one cannot find Jiziri, Faqe Teyran's Dîwans (collections of poems), and Xani's Mem û Zîn in this city? It was the same in Slemani, Kirkuk, and Hewlêr. In Amêdî, I could not find the works of Haji Qadir Koyi. The different parts of Kurdistan are like separate islands in an ocean. One needs ships, boats, and yachts to enable the inhabitants of one island to reach another.[64]

> مەگەر سەیر نییە کو دیوانێن جزیری، فەقێ تەیران، مەموزینی خانی لەو شارە پەیدا نابن؟ لە سلێمانی و هەولیر و کەرکوکیش هەر وابوو، لە ئامێدی چاوم بە بەرهەمەکانی حاجی قادری کۆیی و حەریق و سالم و نالی نەدەکەوت؟ ناوچەکانی کوردستان دەڵێی دوورگەن لەیەک پچڕاون و لەنێو دەریایەکدان، پێویستە کەڵەک و گەمییە و قەیاخ هەبن بۆ ئەوەی خەڵکی دوورگەیەک بگەیەنن دوورگەیەکی دیکە.

61 The Ararat Movement was a general label for the Kurdish uprisings following the defeat of Sheikh Said's revolt in 1925 in Northern Kurdistan under the leadership of a modern Kurdish organization, Xoybun. See White 2000: 77.

62 Sheikh Mahmud (1878–1956) was the leader of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Southern Kurdistan during the years following WWI.

63 Dost 2016a: 231.

64 Dost 2016a: 116.

The novel also contains frequent references to various Kurdish uprisings that occurred in different parts of Kurdistan, such as those led by Simko, Sheikh Said, Ihsan Nuri Pasha, Sheikh Mahmud, Sheikh Ahmad, Mela Mistefa, and Peshawa Ghazi, among others.[65] Badin also discusses the influence of various Kurdish tribal leaders and their destructive role in Kurdistan. However, there are some anachronistic references in the novel. For example, it is mentioned that Mizhde draws the flag of the "Komar" (Republic) on the blackboard. In reality, historical sources of the time do not mention such a word. The Kurdish term for Republic, "Komar," is relatively new, and gained popularity among Kurds only after the collapse of the Kurdish Republic.

Throughout the novel, a rhythmic and recurring sentence is spoken by a local wanderer known as Admiral, who ironically carries a bucket of water. He wanders through the city and cries out, "It is not going to happen without a sea." This statement alludes to a common belief among Kurds that the lack of access to open seas due to Kurdistan' geopolitical situation hinders their ability to establish an independent state. Additionally, when the narrator refers to the movement of the Barzanis from Southern Kurdistan toward Mahabad, he speaks of tens of thousands of people willing to follow Barzani to Eastern Kurdistan. However, historical sources indicate that the number of participants was in the hundreds, rather than the tens of thousands.[66]

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator emphasizes the importance of Mahabad and its role in the Kurdish nationalist movement. The structure of the novel, inspired by the name of the city's main square, "Four Lights," holds symbolic value in the Kurdish context and is divided into four parts.

The first part is represented by a faint yellow light, signifying the years after World War I. It is during this period that Badin is born. The second light shines more brightly, resembling a white star in the early morning, and coincides with the establishment of the Kurdish Republic. The third light accompanies a frenzied dance in the presence of the north wind, foreshadowing the eventual collapse of the Republic. Finally, the fourth light symbolizes the downfall of the Republic, intertwined with Badin's heartbreak over his failed love for Mizhde, who has now married Karim, the man entrusted with her care by Mizhde's father.

This fourth light reflects a time when the city becomes saturated with a sense of death. It is during this period that Ghazi Muhammad, the president of the Republic, is hanged along with two other officials of the Republic.[67] The events unfolding in both the public and private spheres lead Badin to decide to leave the city and seek solace in the enigmatic mist of the city of mist, Mahabad/Mijabad.

4.7 *Destnusi Petersburg*: *Jiyani Jabazidi* [The Petersburg Manuscript: The Life of Jabazidi][68]

The novel explores the lives of two important historical figures, Alexander Jaba and Mala Mahmud Bayezidi. The author skillfully combines their surnames to create an intriguing and meaningful portmanteau. The fortuitous overlap of syllables in their names makes the construction of this combined title both feasible and aesthetically pleasing. Remarkably, the merged surnames resonate harmoniously and evoke a pleasant musical quality in the Kurdish language.

In a brief introduction to the novel, Dost explains that his book revolves around the lives of two people, Alexander Jaba and Mela Mehmud Bayezidi, who came from different empires. Jaba (1803-1894) was born in Kraslava and served as the Russian consul in the Ottoman city of Erzurum, while Mela Mehmud Bayezidi (1797-1867) was born in Bayezid and held a prominent position as an influen-

65 These are some of the most influential Kurdish political leaders who led Kurdish revolts in different parts of Kurdistan from the early 20th century until the 1970s.

66 Dost 2016a: 67.

67 The leaders of the Kurdish Republic in Mahabad were executed in this square on January 10, 1947. The name of the square has become synonymous with the execution of the Qazis in Kurdish political and cultural discourse.

68 Dost 2020.

tial social and religious figure in Erzurum. Their paths crossed when Jaba, who was conducting research on the Kurds, sought Mela's assistance in obtaining Kurdish materials. They collaborated for about six years, with Jaba acting as Mela's patron. With Jaba's support, Mela wrote several works in Kurdish, including a manuscript on Kurdish history that took two years to complete. Jaba intended to send the manuscript to the Russian Academy in Saint Petersburg, but for unknown reasons, it never reached its destination. The novel delves into the fate of this manuscript, presenting a fictional narrative that seeks to unravel the mystery of what transpired.[69]

The author also shares insights into the methods he used as a novelist to uncover the details of Jaba's life. In a chapter aptly titled after the city itself, "Vilnius," we are immersed in the living memories of the city. Similar to other segments of the novel, an inanimate object breathes life into its own story, personifying itself to share tales of its past. In this chapter, Vilnius steps into the spotlight, eloquently narrating the story of its construction and evolution over time. The narrative gracefully unfolds as Vilnius delves into its rich history, highlighting pivotal moments, with a particular emphasis on the period when Jaba commenced his studies within its venerable walls. Drawing on these memories, the author acknowledges the blending of fiction and fact in the writing of the novel. "As novelists, we use our imagination to bring to life those events that historians and biographers often overlook," the author admits. "Through the creator's imagination, gaps in history are filled, and where fantasy and history converge, the novel is born."[70]

The narrative style of this novel sets it apart from Dost's other works. In the first part, the author describes how he embarks on a journey to Saint Petersburg to visit the Russian National Library. Through his social connections, he manages to find the library and, with the assistance of the staff, he locates all the manuscripts authored by Mela Mahmud in the section devoted to Oriental manuscripts.[71] However, the manuscript focusing on the history of the Kurds, believed to have been written in the early second half of the 19th century, is missing.

In the introduction to the manuscript, the author discovers Peter Lerch's assessment of the French translation, penned by Jaba himself. According to Lerch, the introduction indicates that the manuscript, titled "Tawarikh Jadid Kurdistan" (The New Histories of Kurdistan), does not contain any substantial new content, except for some additional information on Kurdish dialects. Based on this, Dost speculates that the manuscript was probably safely transported to Jaba's new residence in Izmir after his retirement.[72]

Unable to locate the desired manuscript, the author/narrator turns to his own imagination as a refuge. In his mind, he entertains various hypotheses about the fate of the manuscript.[73] Perhaps it was hidden somewhere else or stolen by bandits who, unaware of its value, subsequently discarded it. Based on Lerch's evaluation of the translated introduction, the author speculates that the manuscript must have safely reached Jaba in Izmir, where it may have been kept in his library until his death in 1894. Alternatively, he considers the scenario that Jaba's wife may have sold it at a low price to a merchant or even disposed of it. The author's darkest thought is that the manuscript could have been destroyed by fire.[74]

69 Dost 2020: 6.

70 Dost 2020: 56.

71 In the course of his investigation, the author successfully identifies numerous manuscripts and published works attributed to Mela Mehmud. These valuable findings are housed in the compilation known as Jaba's Collected Works from the 1860s. Among the uncovered treasures are writings from the Kurdish tradition, a comprehensive Kurdish-French dictionary, and a Kurdish translation of *Sharafname* – the renowned historical text in Persian language dating back to 1598. Dost meticulously chronicles these discoveries in his novel, *Destnusi Petersburg* [The Petersburg Manuscript], pp. 14–15.

72 Dost 2020: 15–16.

73 Dost 2020: 14.

74 Dost 2020: 18.

As the author sits on the airplane, filled with disappointment at his unsuccessful search in Saint Petersburg, a glimmer of hope emerges. He contemplates the extraordinary idea that he might find the manuscript in the pages of his own novel. He believes that the act of writing about the fate of the manuscript in his novel could provide him with the answers he seeks. In the realm of fiction, he hopes to resolve the maddening questions that haunt him.

The novel employs a distinctive narrative style, with each chapter featuring a different narrator. From the very beginning, the story unfolds from the perspective of an unusual narrator – a piece of Samarkand paper, on which the manuscript would have been written. This paper recounts its own journey, describing how it eventually came into the hands of Mela Mahmud and spent some seven hundred days in his presence. This surrealistic approach to the narration grants agency to objects and individuals, allowing them to offer their unique points of view.

In his novel, the objects take the initiative of talking. A piece of paper from Samarkand, referred to as "Samarkand Paper," narrates its time being used by an author who wrote on it. The Samarkand Paper expresses its intention to recount Mela's state of mind during the two years he spent writing the book. In its narrative, it alludes to the story of an uprising led by a courageous Kurdish youth who refused to pay tribute to the Ottomans following the period of the Tanzimat reforms. Although the specific name of this uprising is not mentioned, it can be surmised that it refers to Badir Khan's uprising in the 1840s.[75]

The author exhibits an understanding of how Leo Tolstoy portrayed the war between the Ottomans and the Russians in Crimea. Through the perspective of a page in Mela's manuscript, we gain insight into how this war profoundly impacts Mela's life, especially through the loss of his brother, who was killed in the conflict. It is this tragic event that prompts Mela to return to Bayezid after living in Erzurum for three decades. The novel includes occasional quotations from Mela's thoughts on the Kurds, as expressed in his other works.[76] The book also provides glimpses of Mela's childhood and his education in both regions of Kurdistan, the areas under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and of the Qajar Empire.

The novel recounts Jaba's mission in Haifa in 1829, during which he encounters Josephine, an Orthodox woman with whom he falls in love and who he eventually marries. Despite facing opposition from both sides of their families, Jaba and Josephine defy societal expectations and choose to be together.

It is worth noting, however, that certain terms used in the narrative may not always accurately reflect the discourse of the time. For example, in justifying his collaboration with Jaba, Mela emphasizes the importance of recording the history of a "nation." He explicitly refers to the Kurds as a nation and expresses his goal of writing a history book to be published by Jaba. This deviates from the historical context, because even the Turks within the Ottoman Empire were not widely considered a nation at the time, except by a certain influential faction.

It is important to consider the possibility that the author used such language and terminology for the sake of narrative convenience or to convey certain ideas effectively, even if they do not correspond precisely to the historical nuances of the time period.

75 The Tanzimat, a period spanning from 1839 to 1876, was the era of reform in the Ottoman Empire. During this time, Badir Khan's revolt was defeated, marking the decline of the semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates within the Ottoman Empire. Badir Khan (1803-1868) was defeated in 1845 and subsequently exiled to Crete. For a brief account of this rebellion, see McDowall 2004: 45–47.

76 A notable example is found on pages 67-68, where we encounter Mela's perspective on the Kurds and their interrelations, including their treatment of each other and their tradition of seeking revenge. This excerpt is taken from Mela's work titled "Adat u Rusumatnamey Akraddiyye" (Kurdish Habits and Customs), edited by M. B. Rudenko and published in Moscow in 1963. Jan Dost has personally translated this book into Arabic, with the Arabic translation being published in Abu Dhabi in 2010.

In another instance, during Mela's later years he engages in a conversation with one of his grandsons, and the discourse extends beyond the cultural and political context of the time. The narrator seems to be deliberately constructing a history that cannot be supported by historical documents, suggesting a blend of fiction and imagination.

In a particular episode of the novel, the manuscript itself narrates its own journey, describing how it was compiled in Erzurum and later transported by droshky to Trabzon, from where it was intended to be sent on to the Imperial Library in Saint Petersburg. This narrative element adds an intriguing layer to the story by providing the manuscript's own point of view.

Although Jaba and Mela's relationship is based on official collaboration, their connection transcends mere professional cooperation. Although Jaba compensates Mela for his work, their interactions are portrayed as friendly and sincere. A poignant depiction of their last meeting exemplifies their close bond. During this encounter, Jaba proudly presents Mela with the French translation of his book on Kurdish customs, which had been published in Saint Petersburg in 1860. Jaba also offers Mela a rosary as a thoughtful gift, further underscoring the warmth and depth of their relationship.

Toward the end of the novel, the fate of the manuscript is finally revealed, providing an answer to the lingering question. As it turns out, three men, a Charkas, a Laz, and an Armenian, were responsible for transporting the droshky. However, their journey was interrupted by an encounter with a group of Kurdish bandits. Unable to find any valuable items such as money or gold in the droshky, the bandits discovered the manuscript wrapped in a piece of red cloth. Realizing that it contained historical content and was meant to be sent by mail, they mocked the postmen, insulted them, and cruelly tore the manuscript apart with malicious laughter. Then they burned the manuscript completely. The narrator's tone carries a sense of bitterness as the story reaches this sorrowful conclusion.

Earlier in the story, Mela talks to his grandson about the internal conflicts among the Kurds and the unfortunate reality that some Kurdish emirs collaborate with the enemies of their own people. In light of these episodes, the tragic story of the manuscript's destruction by a group of Kurdish bandits becomes all the more painful.

Mela emphasizes the importance of preserving historical archives as the foundation of a nation. He criticizes the Kurdish emirs for their ignorance and lack of understanding regarding the importance of history and its documentation. He expresses his disappointment in the Kurdish emirs for their disregard of knowledge and books, and conveys these sentiments to his grandson:

> I had hoped that someone in our own nation would have realized the importance of these matters and taken the initiative to establish great libraries in our cities.
>
> I, my son, have met many Kurdish emirs in my lifetime, yet I have never come across a single book, let alone a shelf full of books, in their residences. Instead, their courts were frequented only by minstrels and entertainers.[77] The Rojki Mirs of Bedlis might not make a reappearance in the history of the Kurds.
>
> ئاخ، خۆزگە کەسێک لە قەومی خۆمان ئاوڕی لەم شتانە دەدایەوە، کتێبخانەیەکی مەزنی لە شارێک لە شارەکانماندا ئاوا بکردایە، تاکو کتێبەکانمان، دەستنووسەکانمان لە ونبوون ڕزگار بوونایە.
>
> ئەز چوومە خزمەتی گەلەک میری کورد کوڕی خۆم، لە کۆشکی هیچیاندا ڕەفەی کتێبانم نەدیت. تەنانەت کتێبێکیش. ئەوان تەنیا دەنگبێژیان دەهێنایە جڤاتەکانیان. ڕەنگە میرانی ڕۆژکیی بەدلیس لە مێژووی کورددا دووبارە نەبنەوە.

The novel employs a variety of narrative voices, including objects and locations, to convey different aspects of the story. The river Dvina, for example, whimsically recounts the enchanting tale of August Jaba's birth in Kraslava, intertwining it with the historical backdrop of Poland and its complex relationship with Russia, enriched with religious and cultural nuances. Similarly, the city of Kraslava reveals the ancestral lineage and noble heritage of Jaba's family, telling how Poland was divided under various local powers in the 18th century. Jaba's ancestors had hoped that Napoleon's

77 Dost 2020: 173.

campaign against Russia would lead to Poland's liberation, but the French emperor's defeat only bolstered Russia's dominance, undermining Poland's quest for freedom.

In one part of the novel, the Neva River, which flows through Saint Petersburg, takes on the role of a narrator, telling about Jaba's education at Petersburg University in 1824. It is during this time that Jaba developed a deep interest in the Kurdish language and decided to conduct research on it. The reason for his choice of Kurdish over other Oriental languages remains unknown to many. Could it be attributed to Poland and Kurdistan's shared experience of political oppression during that period?[78]

> No one knew of his enthusiasm for the East and its literature, or why he especially chose the Kurds from among all the other nations of the East and made them the subject of his research. Perhaps it was because both the Polish and Kurdish nations had been oppressed and divided by three powers, and most of their uprisings had ended in failure, bloodshed, and defeat.[79]

> کەس نەیدانیی شەیدایی بۆ ڕۆژهەڵات و وێژەکەی نەزانی! هەروەها کەسیش نەیزانی چما ئەو بۆ بە تایبەت کوردی لە ناو ئەو هەموو گەلانەی ڕۆژهەڵاتدا هەڵبژارد و کردیە مژاری لێکۆڵینەوەی خۆی! دەبی لەبەر ئەوە نەبووبێت میللەتی پۆڵۆنی و کورد پەرێشان و بەردەستی سێ لایەنە و پارچە پارچە بوون و زۆریی ڕاپەڕینەکانیان بە شکست و سەرنەکەوتن و خوێن کۆتاییان هاتووە؟

The narrator attempts to answer the question by alluding to the Kurds' geographical location and the competing interests of local powers. The geopolitical positioning of the Kurds, situated along the border between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, piqued the interest of the Russian foreign policy department. The possibility of utilizing the Kurds as a means to counter the Ottomans led the Russians to keenly focus on them.[80]

Throughout the novel, the author skillfully weaves together the historical contexts of the Russians, Qajars, and Ottomans, showing how their conflicts and wars directly affect the lives of the main characters. The narrative incorporates a combination of fictional and factual elaborations that, while not always directly related to the development of the story and its main characters, provide fascinating glimpses of the historical background.

The castle of Ishaq Pasha offers insight into Mela Mahmud Bayezid's origins and tribal background, drawing on the castle's memories and historical sources to illuminate the events surrounding the arrival of the Ottomans in the region and the emergence of the Kurdish emirates. The novel sometimes presents a stereotypical perspective, portraying the Kurds as a passionate and volatile people who resolve their conflicts with aggression. Another notable stylistic element of the novel is its triple-layered narrative approach. As objects or individuals recount the events, reference is made to both rumors and historians, adding depth and dimension to the storytelling.

When Jaba meets Mela Mahmud in Erzurum, he asks for his help in writing a book on Kurdish history. At first, Mela is reluctant, having lost his brother to the Russians in the Crimean War. However, Jaba persuades him by revealing his Polish heritage and emphasizing that a book about the Kurds would serve to introduce their culture to the world, which further inspires Mela to become involved in the project.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The rise of the Kurdish historical novel can be traced back to a few works by Kurdish novelists from the former Soviet Union. In the latter decades of the 20th century, there were successful historical novels published in Kurdistan and within the Kurdish Diaspora. Distinguished Kurdish authors such

78 Dost 2020: 68.
79 Dost 2020: 68.
80 Dost 2020: 73.

as Ata Nahayee, Mehmed Uzun, Bakhtiyar Ali, etc., have contributed to this literary trend. However, it was not until the second decade of the 21st century that it could truly celebrate its development. Kurdish novels are mainly characterized by their highly politicized nature, which makes it difficult to categorize them solely as historical novels or as socio-political novels addressing the contemporary situation of the Kurds and their territory. Although the ratio of history to fiction and their degree of their blending in Jan Dost's historical novels may vary, his novels undeniably have a profound impact on readers who inevitably seek historical facts in these fictionalized works. Only a few of these historical novels delve into events that occurred several centuries ago. In the early stages of the Kurdish fictional discourse, only a handful of novels dealt with issues from the distant past. A notable example is Ereb Shemo's 1966 novel "*Dimdim,*" which deals with events of the 17th century and the Kurdish resistance against the oppressive policies of the Safavid king Shah Abbas the Great. However, because it was published in the former Soviet Union, it did not reach Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan. It took about ten years for it to be translated into Central Kurdish and printed with modified Arabic/Aramaic fonts, which allowed Kurds from Southern and Eastern Kurdistan to read it despite political and cultural challenges.

Dost's novels demonstrate a deliberate intention to extensively explore historical subjects related to the Kurds. Susan C. Brantly criticizes Anglophone criticism suggesting that "the era of creating national historical novels" has ended,[81] and Dost's novels, along with other Kurdish historical novels, serve to support Brantly's opinion.

Bonnano discusses the temporal distance between novelists and the historical periods depicted in their novels, asserting that the historical novel is a genre in which the story is set in a period that precedes the author's own time, often by a significant number of years, and requires substantial research on the part of the author into the details of that period.[82] Adherence to this criterion is crucial in preventing novelists from displaying overt bias in their treatment of contemporary political affairs. With this criterion in mind, it can be concluded that most of Dost's novels can clearly be classified as historical novels. These include titles such as *Mirname*, *Mijabad*, *Sehengav u Sedareyek*, *Eshiqi Werger*, *Zengekani Roma*, *Martini Bextewer*, and *Destnusi Petersburg*. All of these are set at least 50 years before the time of their writing. They serve as resources that contribute to the exploration of the truth about the Kurds and their history.

In his research on postcolonial novels, Dalley states that he "looked to historical novels, above all, to discover truths about the world in which I was living, and how it took its present form."[83] Similarly, the novels discussed in this paper provide readers with similar resources and purposes, offering insights into the Kurdish experience and history.

The historical topics explored in Dost's novels align with de Groot's assertion that historical novelists primarily focus on their own geographical, national, and ethnographic backgrounds.[84] However, there are instances where transnational subjects beyond the author's immediate context are also addressed. Dost presents a mixture of real and fictional characters. While historical figures are portrayed, such as Xani, Sheikh Said, Barzani, Jaba, and Bayezidi, others, such as Eshiq and Martin, are purely imaginary. This combination of real and fictional characters is consistent with the general nature of historical novels, which often include either real historical figures or entirely invented ones.

Dost's novels educate Kurdish readers about their suppressed history under the rule of surrounding modern nation-states. Similar to Chinua Achebe's hope that his novels would educate African readers about, and challenge, the colonialist portrayal of their ancestors as savages,[85] Dost's novels

81 Brantly 2017: 12.
82 Bonanno 2009: 928.
83 Dalley 2014: 14.
84 de Groot 2009: 95, 97.
85 Achebe 1975: 45.

aim to illuminate the realities of sociopolitical developments in the Kurdish region over the past few centuries. The rise of nationalism in the late 19th century and the subsequent establishment of modern nation-states in the region in the early 20th century resulted in the systematic denial of Kurdish identity and their democratic rights. By highlighting the lives and struggles of historical Kurdish personalities, Dost provides insight into the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the region's recent history.

Brantly rightly asserts that Achebe presents "his version of history – notwithstanding its fictionality – as true, or at least as more true than the racist lies it supplanted."[86] The same can be said of Dost's historical novels. They offer an alternative perspective that challenges the oppressive policies toward the Kurds propagated in the official discourses of neighboring countries. By revising historical events, they contribute to the awakening of Kurdish consciousness regarding their national and democratic rights. Dost's historical novels effectively contextualize different periods of Kurdish history, providing readers with emotionally engaging narratives that enable them to gain a more comprehensive understanding and interpretation of their past.

In an analysis of the interrelations between novels and history, LaCapra argues that novels help to contextualize the factual data that historians present in their narratives.[87] Novels offer a unique narrative form that enhances our understanding of history by providing a more nuanced exploration of historical events. Unlike traditional historical narratives, novels delve into the emotional, psychological, and experiential dimensions of history. Through literary techniques such as characterization, dialogue, and plot development, novels humanize historical events and foster empathy for the past.

By contextualizing factual data within a narrative framework, novels deepen our engagement with historical events and the people involved. They reveal the complexity of the motivations, moral dilemmas, and subjective experiences of historical figures. In this way, novels offer an alternative perspective that complements traditional historical accounts. By highlighting the lives and struggles of Kurdish historical figures, Jan Dost's novels provide insight into the social, political, and cultural dynamics of the region's history and its impact on the Kurdish people.

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86 Brantly 2017: 14.

87 LaCapra 1985: 115–134.

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