

**Research article**

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# The Narration of Contemporary Kurdish Politics in Jan Dost's Novels

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**Abstract:** This article explores the political novels of the renowned Kurdish author Jan Dost, focusing on how they narrate contemporary Kurdish politics and reflect the complex socio-political landscape of Kurdistan. While Dost is widely known for his historical novels, this study highlights his works that directly engage with recent political events in the region. Drawing parallels with epic and modern literary traditions that intertwine with war and political turmoil, the article situates Dost's novels within the broader context of political fiction. It argues that Dost's narratives provide a critical lens through which to examine power dynamics, social relations, and the ongoing struggles within Kurdish society. By analyzing the thematic content and narrative strategies in these novels, the article sheds light on Dost's contribution to Kurdish literature and his ability to capture the political consciousness of his time.

**Keywords:** Kurdish, identity, historical novel, fiction, fact, power

## 1 Introduction

The renowned Kurdish author Jan Dost was born on March 12, 1965, in Kobani. He graduated from Aleppo University in 1985. Since 2000, he has lived in Germany with his family. He is one of the few Kurdish novelists whose works are available in both main Kurdish dialects: Central Kurdish and Northern Kurdish. The frequent new editions of his novels in major languages of the Middle East, such as Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish, demonstrate his popularity among a wide range of readers. He predominantly writes historical novels, but he has also published a series of novels that directly address some of the major political events in Kurdistan in recent years. Dost's novels can be broadly divided into two categories based on their temporal settings. His historical novels are set in a historical context at least half a century or more before when they were written. These are discussed in an article titled "Resurrecting Silent Histories: A Journey through the Historical Novels of Kurdish Author Jan Dost."<sup>1</sup> His contemporary political novels explore contemporary political events in Kurdistan. These can simply be called his political novels. They are the focus of this article.

The connection between significant political and wartime events and literary works has long attracted scholarly attention. Both epic and modern works of literature have been closely intertwined with war. The most famous classical examples in epic narration are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which reflect the Trojan War. In modern times, some of the best-known examples in the novelistic discourse are Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This has led to a search for "history in literature" and the analysis of literary works inspired by wars or political turmoil. One interesting and significant work in this regard is Edward Quinn's *History in Literature*. In this "reader's guide," Quinn reflects on literary works, either in English or translated into English, that were inspired by

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1 See Ahmadzadeh 2024.

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the wars and political uprisings of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup> The political and military events in Kurdistan and the literary works that resulted from them are clearly interrelated. Any literary analysis of these novels must therefore be based on an awareness of the political and military history of the region.

## 2 Political novels

While the modern novel generally engages with politics, some novels explicitly highlight political and social issues in their narrative discourse. These political novels provide a fertile narrative ground for exploring social relations and power dynamics. Some of Jan Dost's novels discuss current political affairs in Kurdish society, giving readers an opportunity to see the ongoing power struggles and the ways in which various internal and external political forces interact around vital social, political, and ideological issues. Robert Boyer's comprehensive study of the post-World War II political novel shows that "a great many successful and demanding political novels have been produced in this period, a postmodern era often considered resistant to the political content of art." In his preface, Boyer argues that his study "testifies predominantly to the quality and variety of recent political fictions and their capacity to alter the way we think."<sup>3</sup> Boyer's observation can certainly be applied to Jan Dost's political novels as well. In addition, Boyer argues that while "any novel can be profitably examined as a political document," there is a type of novel that is particularly well suited to political interpretation. Boyer refers to this aspect of a literary text as "a book's sense of itself."<sup>4</sup> Jan Dost's novels explicitly invite such an interpretation.

### 2.1 *Kobani* [Kobani]<sup>5</sup>

The novel begins by portraying a typical day in Kobani, centering on the lives of a family who serve as the main characters. Heci Mislim Hemezirav, the head of the family, is preparing to go to the mosque for the Friday prayers. The household includes his two young sons, Baran and Lewend, one of his daughters, named Rewshen, his wife Xane, and his eldest son Mihemed Salih, along with his wife and children, all living under the same roof. Family quarrels between Xane and her daughter-in-law Ayshe add tension to the household dynamics. Meanwhile, their married daughter Xedice is expected to visit as a guest.

This initial portrayal aims to present the everyday life of a typical Kurdish family. However, the peaceful atmosphere is soon shattered as the city is engulfed in mortar shelling and gunfire. The fate of Heci Mislim's children becomes the central focus of the novel. Throughout the story, there are flashbacks that provide insight into the history of Kobani, which was founded in the early 20th century. Symbolically, Kobani represents the destiny of the Kurdish people following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of modern nation-states.

The author/narrator, Jan Dost, lives in Bochum, Germany. He receives a phone call from his brother-in-law informing him of his brother's passing in Istanbul. In the early morning hours after receiving the news, Jan reflects on the state of his large family, which is scattered around the world. He travels to Istanbul, where he reunites with some of his sisters and other relatives. Meanwhile, Kobani has been liberated, and Xelle, Jan's brother, is to be buried there. Unfortunately, Jan is unable to attend the funeral ceremony himself.

Heci Mislim, the father figure in the family, serves to represent the city's history. Born in 1945, he is 69 years old during the 2014 war. His father, Hemezirav, originally hails from Northern Kurdistan. After participating in Sheikh Said's revolt, Hemezirav relocates to the Kobani area and becomes one

<sup>2</sup> See Quinn 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Boyer 1985: prefix.

<sup>4</sup> Boyer 1985: 3.

<sup>5</sup> Dost 2017a, Boyers 1985: 3.

of the city's founders. However, Mislim is only four years old when his father passes away. Mislim's life unfolds alongside the political events in Syria, as the country undergoes formation and transformation. He goes through four marriages, and it is only in his fourth marriage that he finally becomes the father of a son. The family gradually expands over time.

Jan's description of the city prior to the invasion by ISIS provides a political backdrop to the unfolding events:

The cry for liberty reverberated through the earth and against the walls. Every Friday, a young man among the demonstrators would drive his old white pickup cab, known as the "Cab of the Revolution." The revolutionary slogans blared from a massive loudspeaker mounted on the back of the pickup cab, the powerful voices shaking the surrounding areas.<sup>6</sup>

Banga Azadiyê êdî erd û dîwar dihejandin. Camêrekî pîkaba xwe ya kevn û spî, ya ku dê navê wê bibe "pîkaba Şoresşê" her roja îne diajote nava xwepîşandanê. Bang û sloganên şoreş û azadiyê ji hoparlora mezin a li paşîya pîkabê derdeketin û kolan ji binê ve dihejandin.

The narrator's biased, degrading, and even humiliating attitude towards the demonstrations organized by the PKK followers in the city is evident in his portrayal of the events:

But, after a while, a strange phenomenon occurred that no one had ever seen before: Erdogan's demonstrators.

The youths gave this name to the demonstrations organized by some Kurds.

There were only a few who held placards with slogans like "Down with Erdoğan, long live Ocalan!" or "Free our sun!" "Our sun cannot be darkened."<sup>7</sup>

Lê piştî demekê diyardeyên ku kesekî nedipan hatin holê.

Muzaherê Erdogan.

Ciwanan wisa nav li wan xwepêşandanên ku hin kurdan li dardixistin, dikirin.

Çend heb derdiketin bi pankartên ku le ser nivîsî bûn: "Bimre Erdogan, Bijî Ocalan!" Yan jî: "Roja me berdin." "Roja me tarî nabe."

The narrator presents the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Kobani and its subsequent administration by the Kurds as a conspiracy orchestrated by the Syrian regime and the PKK. This point of view suggests a biased and conspiratorial narrative, possibly aimed at discrediting the actions and achievements of the Kurdish administration. The narrator suggests that the Syrian regime aimed to impose its own agenda on the Kurdish movement in Kobani by delegating power to PKK supporters in Syrian Kurdish cities.<sup>8</sup> This implies that the regime sought to manipulate the Kurdish movement and influence its goals and actions.<sup>9</sup>

Heci Mislim's seven children, Mihemed Salih, Mistefa, Lewend, Baran, Xedice, Metin, and Rewshen, all contribute their own stories to the overall narration of the novel. Their individual experiences and journeys provide different perspectives and outcomes that contribute to the narrative arc.

Mihemed Salih, the eldest son of Heci Mislim, is initially portrayed as apolitical and primarily driven by his ambition to become wealthy. He seeks opportunities abroad and temporarily works in Tunisia, showing a desire for a better life outside of Kobani. However, his priorities shift after the tragic death of his brother, Mistefa, who was serving in the Syrian army.

Following Mistefa's death, Mihemed Salih returns to Kobani and eventually marries Ayshe. Despite the ongoing war and the dangerous situation in the city, Mihemed Salih chooses to stay with his mother and family. However, his fate remains uncertain, as he becomes impossible for his wife Ayshe

6 Dost 2017a: 62.

7 This is, in fact, an allusion to the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, who is referred to as "the sun" by his followers. See Dost 2017a: 63.

8 For a concise yet detailed account of what happened in Kobani, see Grant (2018).

9 Dost 2017a: 67.

to reach. She repeatedly tries to contact him but only manages to speak to an unknown person claiming to be a YPG guerrilla, who found the phone in Heci Rashad's mosque.<sup>10</sup>

Lewend, driven by a desire to prevent civil war, makes the difficult decision to leave Kobani shortly after its administration is taken over by the Kurds. He seeks refuge in Hewler (Erbil), located in Southern Kurdistan, where he embarks on a career as a journalist for a Kurdish satellite TV station. However, tragedy befalls Lewend as he loses his life while participating in the liberation of Shingal, the city of the Yezidis in Southern Kurdistan.

Xedice, along with her husband Ibra and their child, embarks on a perilous journey to escape the chaos in Kobani. The crossing proves deadly as the treacherous waters claim the lives of both Ibra and their son, Dara. Devastated, Xedice finds herself in a Greek refugee camp, where a German group affiliated with the Red Cross offers assistance. With their help, she eventually reaches Germany, where she seeks solace and support through therapy with a psychologist.

Meanwhile, Rewshen, driven by a fierce determination to protect her homeland, joins the ranks of women fighters and actively participates in the defense of the city of Kobani. Her bravery comes at a high cost, however, as she is shot and killed during the intense fighting. The narrative paints a poignant picture of Rewshen's passing, likening her soaring spirit to a dove ascending higher and higher. This imagery brings to mind William Butler Yeats' renowned poem, "The Second Coming,"<sup>11</sup> evoking a sense of transcendence and poetic beauty in the face of tragedy.

In addition, the novel presents a deeply moving scene in which Arin Mirkhan decides to take her own life rather than fall into the hands of ISIS. The emotional weight of this moment resonates with readers, highlighting the profound choices that individuals must make in times of extreme peril.

Heci, after spending some time in the camp, gradually descends into madness. Tragically, on the day of his return to Kobani, he meets his death shortly after arriving home. Xane, his wife, had chosen to remain at home with Mihemed Salih. She tragically loses her life in her own room, as their house is mercilessly bombarded by ISIS fighters. Metin, having joined the PKK at the tender age of 15, returns to Kobani during the war and assumes a leadership role in the resistance against ISIS. However, Metin's life is cut short by the devastating effects of twin suicide bombings, resulting in his untimely demise.

Baran, captivated by his love for Susin, a teacher who used to work in Kobani but has returned to her hometown of Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, is determined to reunite with her. However, Baran's interest in music and drinking often leads him down a different path. Despite the risks, he embarks on a perilous journey to Raqqa with the intention of bringing Susin to Hewler in Southern Kurdistan. Tragically, Baran is captured along the way by ISIS, who brutalize and ultimately behead him.

Jan Dost's writing style exhibits a distinct blend of Romanticism and aestheticism, even when depicting times of war. In one instance, the concept of time is portrayed in a unique and evocative manner with the phrase "Saet jan u ribek," which translates as "A quarter past the pain."<sup>12</sup> This unconventional way of measuring time adds a poetic dimension to the narrative.

<sup>10</sup> During one of my personal interactions with the author, he mentioned that he had knowledge of a specific incident. He introduced me to a woman in Uppsala, Sweden, and suggested that I reach out to her for verification of a particular aspect of the novel. I had the opportunity to meet this woman, who told a story about her mother and brother, that was strikingly similar to the experiences of the characters Mihemed Salih and his mother in the novel. It is evident that the author has skillfully combined various elements from different accounts of the war in Kobani to craft his novel.

<sup>11</sup> "Turning and Turning in the widening gyre; The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold". "The Second Coming" on Poetry Foundation's website, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming>, retrieved May 31, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Dost 2017a: 17. This poetic language indeed evokes the poetic expression "a grief ago" by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, cf. Daniel 2003: 134.

Furthermore, when the narrator envisions returning to his home in Kobani, he becomes fascinated by the front door and the tales surrounding its acquisition. The door becomes a symbol of nostalgia and longing, prompting the narrator to contemplate its significance. In a romanticized portrayal, the narrator expresses a desire for the door to have its own capacity for language: 'If only this door could speak!'<sup>13</sup>

Rewshen's heartfelt letters to her boyfriend, Miran, provide a narrative of the ongoing battle against the ISIS invaders in the city, and through this epistolary device, the reader gains insight into the events unfolding in Kobani. In her letters, the indomitable spirit and unwavering determination of the resistance shines through. In addition, the letters subtly reveal the blossoming romance of the young Kurdish couple, emphasizing the complexities of love against the backdrop of war. One poignant line captures the essence of her emotions: "I love you, but the love I have for Kobani surpasses my love for you."<sup>14</sup>

On the day of Kobani's liberation, Ayshe gives birth to her third child in the camp. The newborn is named Hevi, symbolizing the hope that emerges amidst the prevailing hardship.

With the defeat of ISIS and the subsequent liberation of the city, the displaced refugees eagerly made their way back to their homeland. However, their anticipation quickly turned to despair as they were confronted with the sight of their beloved city in ruins. Ayshe's desperate attempts to orient herself proved futile as she gazed upon the unrecognizable landscape before her. The once familiar area now lay in ruins, its houses reduced to rubble and debris. What once were bustling lanes were now impassable paths, choked with concrete blocks and the remnants of demolished structures. The air itself seemed to carry a haunting mixture of smells – the acrid odor of explosives, the lingering stench of death, and the sickening aroma of burning remains. Ayshe stood amidst the rubble, overwhelmed by the profound destruction that surrounded her, her senses assailed by the somber reminders of a once-thriving neighborhood now consumed by devastation.<sup>15</sup>

Ziad, a Tunisian member of ISIS, is a multifaceted character in the narrative. Despite his affiliation with the extremist group, there are glimpses of his complex nature. One such instance is when he compassionately offers bread to a blind cat that roams the area. This small act of kindness serves as a window into Ziad's difficult childhood, haunted by memories of his stepfather's cruelty towards him and the tragic loss of his beloved cat. Motivated by the unrest in Tunisia and his religious fervor, Ziad joins the fight in Syria. However, as the weight of his actions and the horrors of war begin to take their toll, he experiences deep regret and remorse. Seeking retribution for what his stepfather had done to him in his childhood, Ziad confronts his stepfather in a powerful act of defiance before fleeing to Syria through the Turkish city of Antab.

The novel is filled with fateful events that link together the lives of its characters. One such incident occurs when Baran tragically falls victim to Ziad's act of beheading. Remarkably, Ziad and Mihemed Salih had crossed paths during their time in Tunisia, and now Ziad finds himself in Mihemed Salih's ancestral home in Kobani, a twist of fate that carries weight and significance.

In the midst of the battle against ISIS, Metin inadvertently damages his own brother's house, where his mother and brother are seeking refuge. This accidental destruction serves as a poignant reminder of the unpredictability and interconnectedness of life's events, heightening the sense of tragedy and personal turmoil experienced by the characters.

Engaged in numerous battles and witnessing the devastating consequences of his choices, Ziad's conscience grows heavy. In a pivotal moment of reflection and despair, he finds himself in a mosque in Kobani, near the home of Mihemed Salih. There he succumbs to his grief, drowning his sorrows in alcohol and ultimately choosing to end his own life. This poignant portrayal of his sorrowful demise

<sup>13</sup> Dost 2017a: 226.

<sup>14</sup> Dost 2017a: 261.

<sup>15</sup> Dost 2017a: 386.

and transformative journey captures the complexity of human nature and the capacity for redemption in the midst of profound regret.

In terms of stylistic features, the novel effectively portrays the events that took place in Kobani before the invasion of ISIS and during the popular resistance against the invaders. The detailed and extensive depiction of these events, along with the numerous characters, who are not necessarily connected by a central narrative, can make it challenging for readers to follow the unfolding events. While most chapters are related, some of them stand alone, creating a fragmented structure.

The use of eclectic focalization in the novel's narration adds a polyphonic quality to the story. The author's own memories play an important role, intertwined with his imaginative portrayal of Kobani during the war. However, there are moments when the devices employed to depict the author's imaginings about Kobani during the war are not effectively implemented. This compromises the verisimilitude of the narrative and may hinder the reader's complete immersion in the story.

In the course of the novel, the author, Jan, appears several times in person. He is approached by the famous Kurdish singer Gulistan, who asks him to provide her with a poem for her performance. He also takes it upon himself to write to the German authorities, urging them to take action for the sake of Kobani. Jan also travels to Vienna and meets with Staffan De Mistura, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria.

Overall, the novel blends the author's personal experiences and his imagined portrayal of Kobani during the war. While certain aspects of the narrative may pose challenges to its credibility, the inclusion of Jan as a character and his interactions with various individuals add depth to the story and reflect the author's involvement and engagement with the events unfolding in *Kobani*.

In *Kobani*, as in Dost's other novels about Afrin and Amude, the political leanings of the narrator/author are conspicuous. An example of this can be observed when Jan's brother-in-law, Turan, converses with him, as the titles he chooses for the people he mentions are deliberately selective. Supporters of a particular political orientation are referred to with titles such as "Dr.," for instance "Dr. Izedin Temo," while others are mentioned without any titles. The narrator often adopts a comedic tone, occasionally mocking the ideas of Rewshen and Metin.

One might question the authenticity of some of the events in the novel. For example, the frequent telephone communication between characters both inside and outside of Kobani seems somewhat implausible. Given the backdrop of intense fighting, one might question the ease with which access to electricity and functioning telephone networks could be maintained.

## 2.2 *Khwenek beser Minarewe* [A drop of blood on the Minaret]<sup>16</sup>

The novel begins with a surrealistic image referred to as "the wounded fingers of God," which is depicted as follows:

When the residents of Amuda awoke on the final Friday of June, 2013, they were greeted with a horrifying sight unlike anything they had ever witnessed. The minaret of the grand mosque revealed a shocking spectacle, as its small crevices appeared to bleed, with blood streaming down its entire delicate height.<sup>17</sup>

خه لکی عامودا به یانی دوایین هه یینی حوزهرانی ۲۰۱۳ له خه وهه لسان، چاویان به دیمه نیککی تۆقینه ر کهوت، هه رگیز پیتشر دیمه نی واهایان نه دیوه؛ مناره که ی مژگه وتی گه وره، له ده لاقه بچو وکه کانیه وه خوینی لی ده چۆرا و به بالا زرافه کهیدا ده هاته خواره وه.

This astonishing sight is based on a real event that took place on the aforementioned date in the city of Amuda in Rojava, which is located in Western/Syrian Kurdistan. The narrator's initial angry tone permeates the entire novel. The narrator goes so far as to manipulate the name of the "security"

<sup>16</sup> Dost 2017b.

<sup>17</sup> Dost 2017b: 9.

forces in the city, using a derogatory term to convey a sense of disgust. The narrator claims that the "Ashawis" collaborate with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) as allies of the Syrian regime. The area controlled by the security forces is referred to as "the zone of death." Sa'd, one of the characters in the novel, describes the security forces as individuals whose hearts are as corrupt as their deceitful masks. He claims that there is a "damned treaty between the ruling powers of the Syrian state and the inhabitants of the cave." The latter part of the alleged pact, from the narrator's perspective, alludes to the PKK.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of the narrative style, there are two central characters in the story: Saleh, a "pessimistic novelist," and a poet. Both Saleh and the poet share a common animosity towards the administration in Rojava. According to Saleh, it was the security forces who opened fire on the participants in a protest demonstration, resulting in many deaths. Through Saleh's life and background, the narrator delves into the history of the Kurds and the formation of modern nation-states in the region after World War I. For example, the execution of Sheikh Said and his followers in Diyarbakir in 1925 is recalled, and Saleh's grandfather's escape from Diyarbakir to Amuda is highlighted.<sup>19</sup> In the final part of the novel, the author, Jan Dost, makes an appearance and reveals his technique of using Salih, the novelist, as an imaginary character to facilitate the narration of the story. This technique adds a sense of embedded storytelling to the narrative.

Mazyat, a young widow residing in Kamran's neighborhood in Sharan, faced the tragedy of losing her husband in the war. Having no children of her own, she found solace in the company of Kamran's mother. Over time, Mazyat's allure captured the attention of the young Kamran, leading to an unhealthy and abusive relationship between them. Tragically, Mazyat is later discovered lifeless in her home. Kamran's sexual encounter with Mazyat becomes a recurring topic in his dialogues, symbolized by the piece of chalk he holds.

As mentioned earlier, the core of the novel revolves around the retelling of the murder of six participants in a demonstration in Amuda in 1913. The relatively short time that elapsed between the event and the writing of the novel raises questions about its genre. On the one hand, we are aware that the narrative focuses on specific political events, and the author has even dedicated the novel to the "martyrs" who were killed by Kurdish militias aligned with the Syrian regime. On the other hand, due to the temporal proximity of the events and the author's personal experience of them, which he views through his own ideological and political lens, it is difficult to perceive the narrative as completely unbiased and impartial. In addition, the author informs the reader at the very beginning of the novel that the real names of the demonstrators who were killed have been left unchanged. This direct approach to the events, combined with their recent occurrence, makes it difficult to categorize the novel as strictly historical. Rather, it can be seen as a political novel that makes explicit reference to real events. This observation also applies to the other two novels by Dost, "Kobani" and "Afrin: The Quiet Corridor," that are discussed in this article.

Throughout the novel, one can discern a pervasive hostile and angry tone from the narrator and certain embedded characters. This is accompanied by a strong belief in conspiracy theories, which hinders the application of a cause-and-effect relationship in the narrative. According to the narrator, the entire concept of Rojava is rooted in a conspiratorial agreement between the authorities in Damascus and a group of Kurdish agents. The narrator suggests that these agents were strategically chosen to deceive the people with nationalist slogans and reinforce their tribal affiliations.<sup>20</sup> This conspiratorial approach extends to the events in Rojava, with the narrator claiming that the current politics

<sup>18</sup> Dost 2017b: 59.

<sup>19</sup> In Dost's novel *Kobani*, a similar event occurs when Haji Moslem escapes from Qars after the execution of Sheikh Said. Initially seeking refuge in Alaziz, he eventually makes his way to Kobani, where he becomes one of the city's founders.

<sup>20</sup> Dost 2017b: 307.

trace back to the 1970s, when the PKK was created by the Turks as a manipulative and provocative party to mislead the Kurdish liberation movement in Kurdistan.

Regardless of its validity or invalidity, this approach significantly impacts the aesthetic aspects of the novel. In contrast to Dost's other works, there is a notable absence of defamiliarization and other literary devices.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the lack of well-rounded characters has allowed flat characters to dominate the narrative.<sup>22</sup> Literary retellings of historical events typically emphasize the use of literary devices such as defamiliarization and multidimensional characters. However, this novel mainly focuses on presenting a political stance against a specific party. Rather than offering readers an aesthetic and literary account of the harrowing events in Syria, the entire novel unfolds as a series of conspiratorial theories.

### 2.3 *Pase Sewzekey Heleb* [The verdant bus from Aleppo]<sup>23</sup>

The relentless fighting in Aleppo has left the city in ruins. Various warring factions clashed, causing a surge in casualties. In response to the escalating violence, Turkey and Russia intervened to broker an agreement between the Syrian government and opposition groups on December 16, 2016. Under the terms of the agreement, the opposition groups, along with their families, were to evacuate Aleppo and relocate to Idlib. To facilitate this process, a long line of green buses patiently awaited the departure of the fighters and their families.

Among the passengers on one of these buses is a seventy-year-old man named Abu Leyla, whose family has suffered greatly because of the war. Once a prosperous entrepreneur who even dabbled in smuggling goods between Syria and Turkey, Abu Leyla had married a Kurdish woman from Afrin. His wife was recently killed in the bombing of the city's main hospital. She was in the hospital for an appendectomy when the tragic incident occurred.

As Abu Leyla waits for the bus to begin its journey, he finds himself engulfed in a whirlwind of thoughts. Through the bus window, he witnesses the desolate districts of the city and observes the aimless movements of desperate individuals. Meanwhile, inside the bus, he begins to notice various members of his family. The first to catch his eye is his wife, who sits beside him and recounts the harrowing details of her hospital experience and her untimely passing. When Abu Leyla turns his gaze to the back of the bus, he is confronted by a heart-wrenching sight. His sons, daughter, son-in-law, and grandchild solemnly approach him one by one, recounting their tragic tales of death.

Abu Leyla finds himself engulfed in a state of confusion, unable to distinguish between reality and illusion. The boundaries between the two have become blurred, leaving him questioning what he sees before him. In truth, most of the family members he perceives had already succumbed to the ravages of war. Through this literary device, the novel skillfully exposes the devastating impact of the Syrian war on Aleppo, delving into its intricate details.

Tragically, in addition to his eldest son, who was killed in Lebanon in the 1980s, Abu Leyla's other two sons fell victim to the civil war in Syria. Asem died trying to seek asylum in Europe, tragically falling from a boat and drowning at sea. Omar, caught between warring factions, ultimately met his fate in an airstrike. As the others share their stories of sorrow and loss, Abu Leyla's other son, Ali, plays mournful music on the bus.

21 This approach is reminiscent of the ideas proposed by the Russian Formalists, who emphasized the significance of defamiliarization in distinguishing between a purely journalistic approach and a literary construction of narrative. Almost a century ago, this was identified as a key technical aspect of any artwork. For further exploration of this topic, one can refer to Viktor Shklovsky's (1990: 1–14) "Theory of Prose."

22 E.M. Forster, in his work "Aspects of the Novel" published almost a century ago, aptly distinguished between flat and round characters in novels. In this particular novel, the prevalence of flat characters hinders the reader from fully experiencing a multidimensional portrayal of the events. For a more in-depth understanding of Forster's exploration of flat and round characters, see Forester 1990.

23 Dost 2020b.



Abu Leyla's son-in-law, Farhad, a dedicated physician, was forced to join ISIS and provide medical care to their wounded fighters. He was coerced into accompanying them to Kobani and later to Mosul, where he was forced to carry out the orders of the ISIS authorities. Farhad confides in his father-in-law about a disturbing encounter he had with ISIS members. They approached him with a horrific proposition: to forcibly restore the virginity of a young Kurdish slave girl from Shingal, with the intention of selling her as a virgin in the despicable slave market. They also insisted on pressuring him to cause miscarriages in pregnant women who had been brutally raped by ISIS members. When he flatly refused to perform these scandalous actions, ISIS falsely accused him of "blasphemy and being an enemy of God and the Prophet, and claimed that he deserved to die."<sup>24</sup> After witnessing countless acts of brutality and murder committed by the members of ISIS, Farhad could no longer bear the savagery that surrounded him. Driven by a sense of moral obligation, he made the courageous decision to defy their commands. Sadly, his defiance came at a heavy cost, as it ultimately led to his brutal beheading at the hands of ISIS.

Abu Leyla, hearing the story of his children and wife, finds himself shrouded in a thick fog that separates him from them. He hallucinates, losing sight of the border between reality and fantasy. Neither seeing nor hearing anything, he talks to himself:

Oh God, what kind of wilderness have you placed me in? Is what I am experiencing, the loss of my wife, children, son-in-law, and grandchild, a nightmare? Or am I perhaps having a nightmare right now? How can I know the truth?<sup>25</sup>

خودایه، چ سه رگردانییه که منت خستووته نئوییه وه؟ ئایا ئه وه ی به سه رم هات له نه مانی ژنه که م و منداله که م و زاوا و نه وه که م، کابووسه یان ئه وه تا ئیستا من له نئو کابووسیکی راسته قینه دا ده ژیم؟ چۆن په ی به راستی به م؟

As the bus continues its journey, Abu Leyla experiences a profound sense of helplessness. He suddenly realizes that the bus is moving forward without a driver at the wheel. Bats swoop around the bus, and Abu Leyla's faculties begin to deteriorate rapidly. He loses all control over his body; even his ability to open his eyes fades away. In this state, he becomes akin to a motionless statue made of wax.

The novel's unsettling and surrealistic scenes, along with its magical ending, skillfully capture the grim face of war. This resonates with David Lodge's perspective on authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, Salman Rushdie, and Milan Kundera, all of whom experienced significant historical upheavals and personal turmoil, leading them to believe that "a discourse of undisturbed realism" is inadequate for conveying their experiences.<sup>26</sup> The horrific consequences of the Syrian war and the unimaginable destruction it caused cannot be adequately depicted through a lens of realism alone. The elements of surrealism and magical realism serve as potent narrative devices to portray the shattered mental state of a man who has lost everything in the war.

Abu Leyla's family has been utterly decimated. His five-year-old grandchild was torn apart by bombs, his wife perished beneath the ruins of the hospital where she awaited an operation, and his daughter has been rendered unable to speak. "This war has stripped away love and callously discarded its remnants in the dark corners of alleys and neighborhoods."<sup>27</sup> In fact, it has disrupted reality itself, necessitating its portrayal with elements of a disturbed reality.

## 2.4 *Afrin: Koridori Aram* [Afrin: the quite corridor]<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to Jan Dost's other novels, "Afrin: The Quiet Corridor" focuses on the children. The protagonist of the story is a fourteen-year-old boy named Kamran, whose name ironically means

<sup>24</sup> Dost 2020b: 239.

<sup>25</sup> Dost 2020b: 244.

<sup>26</sup> Lodge 1992: 114.

<sup>27</sup> Dost 2020b: 143

<sup>28</sup> Dost 2020a.

"happy" and "successful" as a poignant commentary on the harsh reality of the war-torn region. The author dedicates the novel to "the children whose souls have been destroyed by the war." Consequently, the narrative not only revolves around a young character but is also presented through his fantasies and perspectives.

Kamran, the protagonist, faces a series of tragic events as a result of the war. His father, a physician, has been abducted by ISIS fighters, leaving the family in turmoil. His sister, Mayso, falls victim to the Turkish offensive and loses her life. The war takes a toll on Kamran's mother, leaving her unable to speak. Surrounded by devastation, Kamran's younger brother, Alan, is the sole surviving family member, now forced to endure life in refugee tents with his remaining relatives.

Afrin, one of the three cantons of Rojava, or Western/Syrian Kurdistan, was attacked during the Turkish army's invasion in March 2018. After months of shelling and siege, the city lay in ruins, and its inhabitants were forced to flee their homes in search of safety. Many sought refuge in the southern region of Kurdistan, near the Turkish-Syrian border. Kamran, along with his mother, uncle, and younger brother Alan, lived in the village of Sharan near the border before the war. They initially sought refuge in Afrin, but were eventually forced to flee again due to the invasion.

Kamran, who as a student took a piece of chalk from his classroom, carries it with him at all times and confides in it. The novel takes the form of Kamran's monologue with this piece of chalk, as he shares his deepest secrets and fears. He reveals his childhood struggles with bed-wetting and his desire to ride his bicycle, which he had to leave behind when they were displaced from their home. Kamran also reveals the heartbreaking loss that his mother, Leyla, experienced when her daughter was killed in the Turkish airstrikes, which left her unable to speak.

Kamran's monologues reveal that he and his family had previously sought asylum in Halab/Aleppo and Manbij during the escalating war. However, due to the intensification of the conflict in these areas, they were forced to leave once again. Following the attacks by the Turkish army, Kamran's family, along with others, began a journey from Afrin to the border of southern Kurdistan. During this journey, Kamran's uncle, Leyla's brother, adds a unique musical element to the narrative by playing his tambour, creating a somber and melancholic atmosphere on a rainy day.

The difficulties of living in a refugee camp take a nightmarish turn for Kamran when he finds himself transformed into a long piece of chalk. It's raining, and Kamran faces the imminent threat of melting away in the water. While his mother and younger brother Alan are sleeping, an intruder enters the tent and approaches Kamran's bed. Kamran soon realizes that it is Mazyet, who intends to harm him.<sup>29</sup> Later, Kamran's long-lost father appears, preparing for surgery. A heated conversation ensues between them. Kamran, now in his chalk form, expresses his fear of dissolving and disappearing forever. His father reassures him, emphasizing the eternity of things and the idea that nothing truly vanishes.

Existence is like a circle, encompassing everything within its boundaries—time, motion, space, and matter. Even the smallest particles, atoms, and the vast expanse of space take the form of a circle. Within this circle, people exist. So do not believe in the end, or in disappearance.

Yet, despite my father's words, I couldn't comprehend this. I felt myself melting away, disappearing. How could he claim that there is no such thing as disappearance? Isn't the dissolving of a piece of chalk in water a clear example of it?

I am fading away. That's the only truth I can perceive at this moment. Father, this is my end. This is the end of my story.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mazyat, a young widow residing in Kamran's neighborhood in Sharan, faced the tragedy of losing her husband in the war. Having no children of her own, she found solace in socializing with Kamran's mother. Over time, Mazyat's allure captured the attention of the young Kamran, leading to an unhealthy and abusive relationship between them. Tragically, Mazyat is later discovered lifeless in her home. Kamran's sexual encounter with Mazyat becomes a recurring topic in his dialogues, symbolized by the piece of chalk he holds.

<sup>30</sup> Dost 2020a: 196.

یانی هه‌بوون بازنه‌یه‌که. هه‌بوونی هه‌موو شت له بیچمی بازنه‌یه‌کدایه. زه‌مان و جوو له و شوین و مادده. خودی مادده، له ته‌تۆمه‌وه بگره تا گه‌ردوونی بی‌سنوور، بازنه‌یه. خه‌لک له نیو ته‌م بازنه‌دانه. هه‌ر بۆیه با باوه‌رت به شتی‌ک به ناوی کۆتایی، نه‌بی. پڕوا به توونا‌توون مه‌هینه. هیچ لهو قسانه‌ی باوکم تینه‌گه‌یشتم. ده‌تۆمه‌وه. توونا ده‌بووم. به یه‌کجاری توونا ده‌بووم. ده‌ی جا چۆن باوکم ده‌لی توونا‌بوون نییه؟ توونا‌بوون چیه‌ ته‌گه‌ر تۆنه‌وه‌ی پارچه‌ ته‌باشیری‌ک له ئاودا نه‌بی؟ من توونا ده‌بم. ته‌مه‌ ته‌و تاکه‌ راستیه‌یه‌ که له‌م ساته‌دا ده‌یی‌نم باوکه. کۆتایی منه. کۆتایی به‌سه‌ره‌اته‌که‌م.

The novel ends on a poignant note, depicting the tragic impact of incessant war on a young teenager. The pervasive theme of the abhorrent war and its stifling effect on Kamran and his friends is evident throughout the narrative. Deeply affected by the ravages of war, Kamran assumes the role of comforting his mother, shouldering the responsibility of providing solace. He frequently writes letters and reads them aloud to his mother, pretending that they have been sent by his father from an undisclosed location. Despite his mother's education, Kamran insists on reading the letters himself, preventing her from reading them independently.

## 2.5 *Serburdey Khabat* [Khabat's Life/the path of struggle]<sup>31</sup>

*Khabat's Life* stands out as a unique novel in Jan Dost's collection. Unlike his other works, it is notably shorter in length. With its allegorical and symbolic nature, it deviates from the conventional style found in his other novels. Although it is labeled a novel on the book cover, with its brevity and limited cast of characters it could even be classified as a novelette.

The story delves into the life and destiny of a female ant living in an ant colony who bears the name Khabat, which in Kurdish means "struggle." Notably, Khabat is a unisex name in Kurdish and is commonly used in everyday life. The term "khabatkar," derived from the same root, is significant because it refers to individuals who fervently fight and struggle for their land and people. It is even the name of a daily newspaper published by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq since April 4, 1959. The selection of such a name for the novel's protagonist serves as a symbolic allusion, highlighting the underlying themes and connections.

Driven by contemplation of her own fate, Khabat realizes that she is destined to lead a monotonous life, just like all the other female ants in the colony. This serves as a catalyst for Khabat, igniting a desire for radical change. Fatigued by the repetitive nature of her existence, consumed by tasks such as gathering supplies, safeguarding the larvae, and defending the queen, Khabat yearns for something more.

Khabat realizes that her path of liberation lies in venturing into a field known as the Field of Kordiseps. This mythical land holds the power to liberate ants through a peculiar phenomenon: the spores of mushrooms spread and take root in the bodies of ants. Inside an ant, these spores grow, causing a transformation that liberates the ant from its former existence, morphing it into a completely different being.

Departing from the world of the ant colony proves to be a more difficult undertaking than Khabat first imagined. Her close friends warn her about the multitude of dangers that await her in her quest for liberation. One of them, upon hearing of Khabat's intention states:

In fact, Khabat has gone completely mad! She is extremely dizzy and disoriented. How else could she leave our pleasant and satisfying city behind and put her life at risk by going to the field of the Kordiseps? No ant that has even accidentally set foot in that field has ever returned.<sup>32</sup>

کۆره‌ خه‌بات شیت بووه‌ شیت! هه‌ر فره‌ وێ و گێژه‌؛ ده‌نا چۆن به‌نیازه‌ شاره‌ دل‌نشین و خۆشنووده‌که‌مان جی به‌یالی، سه‌رکیشی به‌ ژبانی خۆیه‌وه‌ بکات و به‌جیته‌ نیو کێلگه‌ی کۆردی سیس؟! ئاخ‌ر هه‌ر می‌رووله‌یه‌ک گه‌ر ته‌نانه‌ت به‌ هه‌له‌یش رێی له‌و کێلگه‌یه‌ که‌وتی‌ت، نه‌گه‌راوه‌ته‌وه‌!

<sup>31</sup> Dost 2022b.

<sup>32</sup> Dost 2022: 32.

The narrator vividly describes the obstacles that Khabat encounters on her journey towards freedom. However, fueled by her unwavering determination, Khabat persists and triumphs over every obstacle she encounters.

After a long and arduous journey filled with countless trials and tribulations, Khabat finally arrives at the border between the ant colony and the mystical land of fungi known as Kordiseps, the threshold of her liberation. While she is lost in her many thoughts and contemplations, a mushroom spore serendipitously enters her body. This pivotal moment marks the culmination of Khabat's hesitation and doubt, as it signifies the realization of her long-held dream to abandon the ant colony and embark on her transformative journey in Kordiseps.<sup>33</sup>

Stylistically, the novel employs a highly descriptive and literary language that exhibits a distinctly poetic quality in the narration. Khabat's inner ideals are depicted with romanticized charm, evoking a sense of enchantment in the reader. The agonies she endures in her pursuit of freedom are portrayed in intricate detail, immersing the reader in her experiences. The allegorical features of the novel make it possible for Kurdish readers to interpret it in accordance with their own desire for freedom.

## 2.6 *Ewan Chawerey Kaziwen* [Anticipating the Dawn]<sup>34</sup>

At 517 pages, this novel stands as Jan Dost's longest literary work. In terms of content, it fearlessly confronts both the Turkish state and the PKK, marking an unprecedented departure within the realm of Kurdish literary discourse. Modern Kurdish narrative discourse has traditionally mainly revolved around critiquing the state apparatus of the countries where Kurds reside. In this work, however, the language and rhetoric employed are bold and confrontational in a different way.

From the very outset, an aphorism foreshadows the essence of the novel.

Dying for the sake of the homeland!

This slogan has ravaged the Kurds. So, why shouldn't we embrace the rallying cry of living for the sake of our beloved homeland?<sup>35</sup>

مردن له پیتناو نیشتمان!  
ئهم دروشمه کوردی وێران کرد. ئەدی بۆچی دروشمی ژیان له پیتناو نیشتمان بهرز نهکینهوه؟

Numerous scenes in the novel are so profoundly harrowing that a film based on it would require a warning to the audience. Children and people with heart conditions would be strongly advised not to see it. The novel opens with the scarcely audible words of a forty-year-old man the grievously wounded body of a young woman in her twenties.

After the liberation of Kobani from ISIS on January 26, 2015, and the significant voter turnout in the Kurdish cities during the June elections that year, there was widespread optimism about an improvement in the long-standing conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurds in Turkey. This hope was short-lived, however, as a devastating war between the two parties broke out in various Kurdish cities a few months later.<sup>36</sup>

This conflict, commonly known as the Trench War, resulted in the loss of many lives and extensive destruction in cities such as Cizre, Nusaybin, Diyarbakir, Sernex, and others.<sup>37</sup> The novel primar-

<sup>33</sup> This story may seem familiar to readers acquainted with Persian literature, since it is reminiscent of a children's book published in Iran in the 1960s. Notably, it was written by the renowned Iranian author Samad Behrangī, who belonged to a generation of Iranian revolutionaries fighting against the regime in the 1960s and 1970s. Translated into numerous languages, including several English versions, the story has garnered international recognition and acclaim. For a comprehensive review of the book, see Bassiri 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Dost 2022a.

<sup>35</sup> Dost 2022a: 15.

<sup>36</sup> For a relatively comprehensive account of the war, see Bozarslan 2016.

<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the situation in Southeast Turkey during this period, see "Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey," prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Hu-

ily focuses on this specific period of the war, delving into the experiences of those caught up in the chaos and devastation.

The protagonist of the novel is an author who, during his university years in the late 1980s, passionately supports a leftist Kurdish political party, namely the PKK in Northern Kurdistan. However, his active participation in the party leads to his imprisonment, where he is subjected to unimaginable torture, including the horrifying experience of castration. During his time in prison, he tragically witnesses his father's demise just outside the prison walls.

Upon regaining his freedom, he severs all connections with the party and gradually cultivates a profound disillusionment with its ideological principles. Only a few months after his release, his mother falls seriously ill and dies, adding to the immense emotional burden he carries. Having embraced a new identity as a poet and novelist, he adopts the Kurdish pen-name Amed. With a deep-seated opposition to any form of warfare, he stands firmly against both sides of the conflict, denouncing their actions with equal conviction. He is unwaveringly committed to promoting a peaceful strategy of resistance as a means of securing the rights and aspirations of the Kurdish community.

During a wedding ceremony, Amed meets a young girl who captures his heart, and he falls deeply in love with her. However, due to his castration in prison, he, like many other young prisoners, has lost his sexual ability. In a remarkable turn of events, after performing a Kurdish dance with the girl, whose name is Nishtiman, which symbolically translates as "homeland," he discovers a resurgence of his sexual potency. This miraculous occurrence fills him with awe and wonder.

Amed, is determined to cultivate a deeper connection with Nishtiman. He proposes marriage to her, longing for a life together. However, Nishtiman is determined to join the ranks of the Kurdish militant organization and participate in the struggle for the liberation of their homeland. Despite their passionate discussions, they are unable to convince each other of their respective viewpoints.

Eventually, during a period of escalating conflict, Nishtiman arrives at Amed's home in Cizre. Accompanied by her armed comrades, she urges Amed to evacuate his house so they can use it as a base for their resistance against the oppressive regime. Before they part ways, Nishtiman entrusts Amed with a pair of notebooks, and implores him not to read their contents until the war has reached its culmination.

Amed leaves his home and takes up residence in the sacred mausoleum of Melay Ciziri (1570–1640), a celebrated Kurdish poet. Within the hallowed confines of this historic site, he finds refuge throughout the entire 78-day duration of the war. It is here that he channels his creative energy into crafting a novel that explores the poet's profound love for a young woman named Selma.

Amid the hardships of the war, Amed's thoughts predominantly revolve around Nishtiman, yet his contemplations extend beyond his personal longing. His writings delve into a myriad of crucial social, literary, and political issues. Among his main concerns are the political domain, the ravages of war, and the destiny of the Kurdish people, all of which occupy a central place in his contemplations.

In light of this harsh reality, Amed passionately denounces the PKK for resorting to violent methods of resistance, and instead advocates for a peaceful strategy in the pursuit of Kurdish rights. Firm in his belief that lasting progress and justice can be achieved through non-violent means, he challenges the prevailing discourse and promotes a path of peaceful resistance against a tumultuous and conflicted backdrop.

While recognizing the Turkish state as the primary obstacle to the realization of the Kurds' democratic rights, Amed is unsparing in his criticism of the PKK for its use of violent methods. His incisive observations lay bare the organization's shortcomings and emphasize the need for a more peaceful and inclusive approach to realizing the legitimate aspirations of the Kurdish community.

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man Rights. [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR\\_South-East\\_TurkeyReport\\_10March2017.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf), retrieved November 6, 2023.

The novel employs a dynamic blend of the present and the past, skillfully weaving metaphor and defamiliarization to engage the characters in thought-provoking dialogue. Perceptive readers will uncover intriguing glimpses of the author's personal experiences, suggesting an autobiographical dimension to the narrative. However, the author deliberately maintains a measured distance from the events, introducing characters who defy societal norms prevalent within certain segments of Kurdish communities. This politicized perspective at times overshadows the novel's literary merits, relegating it to a space of common political discourse that may strike a familiar chord within Kurdish societies.

Sexuality plays a significant role in the novel and is intricately woven into the lives of many of the characters. Amed has endured such brutal torture that he is no longer able to engage in sexual activity. Nishtiman endured the distressing experience of being abused by her uncle, Kemal, while her father was in prison. It is revealed that Kemal, in a deeply unfortunate turn of events, was also a victim of sexual abuse perpetrated by one of his father's religious students. Kemal admits to seeking revenge by subjecting his niece to regular and abusive treatment, exacting retribution for his own childhood suffering on the unfortunate Nishtiman.<sup>38</sup>

Nishtiman's father was involved in criminal activities with the bandit mafia, in collaboration with Turkish military officers. Tragically, her uncle takes his own life upon returning from military service. Confronted with the horrifying sight of her naked uncle's lifeless body hanging in their underground space, Nishtiman notices the absence of his sexual organs.<sup>39</sup>

Kemal recounts an intriguing experience during his military service, where he encounters a Turkish Sufi who persuades him to embark on the path of Sufism and repentance. Upon his return, however, Kemal realizes that his own masculinity is diminishing and eventually being replaced by female sexual characteristics.<sup>40</sup> The issue of sexuality even extends to bulls, as they experience a loss of reproductive ability following the 1980 coup d'état.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely, as Nishtiman bravely fights against the Turkish state in the trenches of Cizre, she witnesses a transformation in her own body, observing her female genitalia transforming into a male penis.<sup>42</sup> The narrative takes another chilling turn when a villager, recounting the story of the brutal massacre in his village, mentions that he lost his own male genitalia in an explosion during a wedding ceremony.<sup>43</sup>

A committed feminist, Nishtiman has been active in addressing and combating cases of sexual harassment within families. She has worked tirelessly to raise awareness among girls and women and empower them to stand up against all forms of assault that threaten their dignity and integrity.<sup>44</sup>

Amed shares a strong bond with his father, whose writings impart valuable knowledge about their Kurdish heritage and the mistreatment they endured under Turkish nationalists after the establishment of the Turkish republic. His father's texts provide comprehensive accounts of Kurdish uprisings and the harsh treatment they faced at the hands of the state. Throughout their correspondence, Amed's father consistently encourages him to follow the path of peaceful activism, drawing inspiration from figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

While Nishtiman is positioned in ambush in the trench, Amed sits not too far away in Ciziri's mausoleum. He regularly indulges in wine while penning his novel, which revolves around Ciziri's affection for Selma. In addition, he documents his first-hand experience of the war and contemplates

<sup>38</sup> Dost 2022a: 150.

<sup>39</sup> Dost 2022a: 105.

<sup>40</sup> When examining Kemal and Nishtiman's emotional responses to the changes in their sexual organs, it becomes apparent that they harbor conflicting desires. This aspect is of great importance for studying the material from a psychoanalytical perspective, delving into the realms of diverse social, political, and gender identities.

<sup>41</sup> Dost 2022a: 252.

<sup>42</sup> Dost 2022a: 58.

<sup>43</sup> Dost 2022a: 243.

<sup>44</sup> Dost 2022a: 124.

the nature of warfare and Nishtiman's struggle against the state. Despite his animosity towards the party, Amed harbors no ill will toward the fighters, whom he believes have been deceived by the party. Amed sees this as a striking contradiction, as he is writing a novel centered on love in the midst of his involvement in the deeply despised war.<sup>45</sup>

Upon learning of the deaths of guerrillas and many civilians in the trenches of Cizre, Amed, who is now contemplating the sad news of destruction and murder, voices his grievances:

Why has the regime's colonialist mentality towards the Kurdish nation not changed, despite the death of thirty thousand people since the start of the armed movement in 1984? How is it that the party that has led the armed struggle for thirty-seven years and has monopolized the struggle against the regime without allowing any other side to participate has not been able to change anything? Why has it not tolerated an effective peaceful struggle based on non-violence, which has a clear positive outcome?<sup>46</sup>

چۆن سێ هەزار کوژراو، لەوێتە بزووتنەوەی چەکداری لە ساڵی ١٩٨٤ دەستی پێ کردوو، مێشکی کۆلتۆنالیزم پرژیمی نەگۆریوێه که مامەلە ی گەلی کوردی پێ دەکات؟ باشە ئەم حیزبە که سێ و حەوت ساڵە ململانیی چەکداری بەرپا دەکات و خەباتی قۆرخ کردوو و نایەلێت هیچ لایەنێکی دیکە لە خەباتەدا بەشدار بن، بۆچی نەیتوانیوه هیچ شتێک بگۆریت؟ بۆچی پێی نەداوه خەباتێکی ئاشتییانە ی کاریگەر، پشتنهستور بە ناتوندوتیژی سەر بگریت که ئاکامه‌که‌ی سه‌لمیندراوه؟

The formal aspects of the novel require thorough editing, as there are several obvious inaccuracies. For example, there is an error regarding the combat between Achilles and Hector. The novel states that Hector dragged Achilles' dead body, but it is actually the other way around. Also, the novel mentions that Bobby Sands' hunger strike lasted 20 days, when it actually lasted for 66 days<sup>47</sup>. The novel erroneously states that the character Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* pulls a big fish behind him, when, in fact, the fish has already been devoured by the sharks.<sup>48</sup> The novel also misrepresents the PKK leader's ceasefire order and the killing of two soldiers in Urfa. The explosion in Suruc caused by ISIS occurred in 2015, while the ceasefire took place in 2013.<sup>49</sup> Finally, there are inconsistencies in the references to Amed's castration, with different time periods being mentioned: 25 years (page 222), half a century (page 218), and almost 30 years (page 223). These discrepancies need to be addressed and corrected for the sake of accuracy in the novel.

While previous works by Jan Dost may have contained subtle references to the politics of the PKK, this particular novel exhibits a conspicuous degree of outrage towards them. It contains frequent direct insults aimed at the leaders of the PKK, positioning them as the primary cause of the current situation.<sup>50</sup>

### 3 Discussion and conclusions

The ongoing conflicts in many Kurdish cities over the past two decades have provided Jan Dost with an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on their impact on the daily lives of the inhabitants. In an essay on the significance of cities in the development of novelistic discourse, Irving Howe argues that "the city's proliferation of casual and secondary relationships offers new possibilities" to novelists.<sup>51</sup> Comparing Homer and Joyce in terms of how cities contribute to their novels, Howe states, "the experiences of Ulysses, for which Homer had to arrange complicated journeys, Joyce can pack into a

45 Dost 2022a: 513.

46 Dost 2022a: 509.

47 Dost 2022a: 475.

48 Dost 2022a: 29.

49 Dost 2022a: 123.

50 Dost 2022a: 123, 215, 247.

51 Howe 1990: 309.

day's wandering through a single city".<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Jan Dost, like Joyce, has had the opportunity to observe Kurdish cities in the extraordinary state of war. The agonizing stories of his characters provide readers with a rare chance to experience the harsh realities of life during war and social conflict.

The novels of Jan Dost studied in this article are inherently political and focus on contemporary events in recent years in five Kurdish cities: Kobani, Amude, Afrin, Aleppo, and Cizre.<sup>53</sup> While the first four cities are located in Rojava/Western/Syrian Kurdistan, the last one is located in Northern/Turkish Kurdistan. All these cities have faced devastating wars in recent years and have played a major role in the formation of Kurdish politics and identity.

These novels are not strictly historical novels, but they can serve as historical narratives for future generations because they provide insights into the past, present, and future through the lens of human experience. A striking example of this is George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, published in 1949. After the real year 1984 had passed, readers approached the novel from a historical perspective, meticulously analyzing its themes and predictions, and their relevance to the era in which it was written.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, Dost's political novels can transcend their original context and be interpreted as historical works because they speak to the enduring human condition. As time passes and events unfold, readers gain new insights into the novels they read and the societies in which they were written. These literary productions not only provide entertainment, but also offer profound reflections on the complex world around us. The connections between the themes of the novels and the sociopolitical conditions of Kurdistan make the novels promoters of change. Lennard J. Davis's argument about the "nexus between news and novels" highlights the importance of Dost's novels in disseminating current political and literary discourses in Kurdistan. Davis writes that "the nexus between news and novels is a powerful one because it allows us to see that fictional narratives, by participating in a journalistic discourse, are also part of an information-dissemination system that is by definition social."<sup>55</sup>

Dost's novels are narrated in a straightforward, direct manner, avoiding complicated narrative techniques. Milan Kundera, reflecting on the eighteenth-century novelistic tradition, distinguishes between two of its most prominent practitioners: Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne. He associates Richardson with a linear structure, as exemplified by his novel *Clarissa*, while Sterne is known for his metafictional techniques, as seen in his *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>56</sup> Jan Dost's novels draw primarily on Richardson's didactic patterns, eschewing Sterne's experimental approach. This results in straightforward, traditional novels that lack the stylistic innovations of Sterne's work.

A notable discrepancy between Jan Dost's historical and political novels lies in his detached approach to the former and his engaged attitude to the latter. This is probably due to the lack of diverse Kurdish political movements at the time periods of his historical novels. The modern Kurdish political landscape is largely a product of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While early Kurdish political organizations were united in their goal of securing democratic rights for Kurds within a self-governing political entity, those that emerged after the establishment of modern nation-states in the Middle East were divided with regard to their ultimate political goals. This resulted in protracted disagreements and internal diversity within Kurdish political organizations regarding their political manifestos and the relationships between different parts of Kurdistan. As a result, he portrays the Kurds as an entity united against their oppressors. However, in his political novels, which are set in the present day, the Kurdish political parties are differentiated according to their ideological affiliations. Dost is unable to fully detach himself from his own political convictions. When a particular political event does not

52 Howe 1990: 309.

53 One of the novels, *Serburdey Khabat* (Khabat's Life/the Path of Struggle), has an allegorical style and does not depict any specific Kurdish city.

54 For a detailed analysis of Orwell's *1984* and its social, historical, and ideological features, see Claeys 2010.

55 Davis 1980: 144.

56 See Kundera 1986 and 1996.



align with his desired outcome, he condemns it as anti-Kurdish. The divided political landscape of Kurdistan is reflected in the divided subjectivity of Dost's characters and their world.

The central theme of Jan Dost's political novels is the hostility towards the Kurds of the established nation-states that govern Kurdish territories. This animosity was highlighted more than ever before by the political events following the Arab Spring in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The arrival of ISIS in the early years of this decade intensified the massacre of Kurds in both southern/Iraqi and western/Syrian Kurdistan. Among the most brutal and widely publicized of these massacres was the invasion of the Kurdish city of Shingal, where the Ezidi/Yazidi Kurds were brutally targeted for elimination. While this event has not been depicted in Dost's novels, other Kurdish novelists have dealt with it.<sup>57</sup>

In parallel with the attacks carried out by ISIS, the Turkish state demonstrated its longstanding animosity toward the Kurds by attacking cities such as Kobani, Afrin, Aleppo<sup>58</sup>, and Cizre. The conditions in each of these cities during the battles have become the subject of four separate novels by Dost. One of the Kurdish cities in Rojava/Syrian Kurdistan, Amuda, is unique in having been portrayed as oppressed by the Kurdish ruling authority. The novel *Khwenek beser Minarewe* (A Drop of Blood on the Minaret) depicts the Kurdish inhabitants of a city who have been denied their freedom of speech by the local Kurdish administration.

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57 A Kurdish novelist from Southern Kurdistan, Karim Kake, highlighted the tragic plight of the Ezidi Kurds of Shingal in his 2022 novel, *Shangla Haye le min* (Shingal, Alas from Me). His dramatic and sorrowful narrative recounts not only the 2014 massacre of Ezidi Kurds by ISIS, but also the many other massacres they have suffered over the past few centuries. The Ezidis' non-Islamic religion and their status as a minority that has more or less preserved elements of pre-Islamic religions have fueled bitter animosity against them from Islamists. This has resulted in approximately 80 massacres of Ezidis by the Ottomans and local Islamic groups throughout history. Another famous novel about the massacre of the Ezidis was written in Arabic by Salim Barakat. It has also been translated into Persian. See Barakat 2022 and Ahmadzadeh 2022.

58 In fact, it is a Syrian city with a considerable Kurdish population. The Kurds were specifically targeted by pro-Turkish Islamists.

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