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Salim Barakat's Sages of darkness : A Depiction of Kurdish Life in Late Ottoman Times

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Abstract

Sages of Darkness is considered one of Barakat's great work and by translating it into English Aviva Butt introducing him –and also a sight of Kurdish life in the late Ottoman period- to English readers. Barakat is no stranger to readers of Kurdish literature or even Turkish literature in Turkey, as his novels and poems have been translated into Kurdish and Turkish, including the book Sage of Darkness (Feqiyên Tariyê), which is the subject of this article and was translated into Kurdish by Jana Seyda and published by Avesta in 2013.

Keywords: Salim Barakat, Sages of Darkness, Aviva Butt, Kurdish Literature, Kurdish

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By Salim Barakat

Translated by Aviva Butt

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Introduction

Kurds have gained recognition worldwide in the last four decades greatly due to their efforts to change their political situation in the Middle East. Jumping to mind are the Syrian Kurds who fought against and played an important role in defeating ISIS. This of course was in order to protect the land where they have been living for centuries. During this time interest in Kurdish life, culture, and literature was both aroused and stimulated.

Due to the changed geo-political situation in the Middle East, Kurds suffered greatly in their ancestral territories in our modern times. As World War I came to a close in the first quarter of the 20th century, Kurds found themselves divided among various nation-states, territories that had been for example part of the Ottoman Empire. Especially Kurds living above and under the “railway” to Baghdad suffered dramatically. In one day, shared lands had become “serxet” (above the line) and “binxet” (below the line) respectively, part being in Turkey and part in Syria. The borders that separated them obliterated what was happening on the other side. Yet, they produced dedicated scholars and writers who in one way or another brought them closer than ever before. Salim Barakat is one of those dedicated writers, a writer from the “binxet.” His narrative *Sages of Darkness*, an experimental novel written in 1985 and rewritten in 1994 has only recently been translated into English by Aviva Butt. *Sages of Darkness* tells of Kurdish life in this late period of the Empire.

Salim Barakat (kr. Selîm Berekat), a Kurdish author writing in Arabic, is considered to be a modern *Arabic* author but his works are about Kurdish life, which he depicts in vivid detail.

Barakat was born in 1951 in al-Qamishli (kr. Qamişlo) located in the region called *Jazira* between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Currently, in any political discourse of the Kurdish unofficial government, this region is called North-East Syria. As mentioned above, though he is a Kurdish, and writing about Kurds and Kurdish life in his novels, poems, he writes in Arabic which can be considered to be a kind of “destiny” of Kurdish writers. The major reason behind the

use of Arabic can of course be the legal impediments and resultant situation for writers in Syria and elsewhere. As Butt writes:

Barakat, however, did not particularly admire attempts in the Kurdish language, which of course were hindered by the state of the language and accordingly linguistic limitations, and so Barakat writes in Arabic. (p. 12).

But it did not keep him from writing “about” Kurdish daily life, and also about some of the history. In Butt’s words:

To a great extent Barakat manages to supply the reader not only with a detailed description of daily life, but also with an artistic rendition of a miniscule of Kurdish history of the period. (p. 15).

Barakat, also known by the Kurdish pronunciation “Berekat” is no stranger to readers of Kurdish literature or even Turkish literature in Turkey, as his novels and poems have been translated into Kurdish and Turkish, including the book *Feqiyên Tariyê* (Sages of Darkness). It was translated into Kurdish by Jana Seyda and published by Avesta in 2013.

Sages of Darkness was already considered one of Barakat’s great works. By translating it into English, Aviva Butt introduces him—and also a glimpse of Kurdish life in the late Ottoman period—to English readers. On the other hand, it has to be said that her book is not only a translation, but with the “introduction” it has become a kind of academic evaluation. Butt analyses Barakat’s narrative as a modernistic novel with many historical and literary references in a very detailed way. Therefore the Introduction will be helpful to readers to understand the poetical nature of the narrative and its relationship to Islamic culture and the Quran itself as a starting point.

Barakat wrote his *Sages of Darkness* (Ar. فقهاء الظلام) in 1983-85, published in two versions, first in 1985 in Cyprus, after his moving to Cyprus, and then secondly in 1994 in Baghdad by Al-Mada Publishing House. Both versions have been translated into various languages including Hebrew. The Kurdish translation of the book, published in 2013, is from the former version.

The translation by Aviva Butt, done in consultation with its author is roughly speaking from the first edition of the 1994 version. It is the first time that someone has succeeded in translating it

into English. The English translation is important because it has been translated into English for an international readership, which by the way also situates Barakat as a mainstream poet.

Butt manages to describe the author's emotional atmosphere. One reason behind this success, in my opinion, is that prior to attempting the translation of *Sages of Darkness*, she had already published an introduction and anthology of highly successful translations of Salim Barakat's major poems and the Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish's major poems. Comparing the output of these two leading poets is a great accomplishment in itself.

As mentioned above, Butt evaluates *Sages of Darkness* in context of the literature, culture and history of Kurds. She compares this book, beautifully presented by Peter Lang Publishing, with Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* saying that just as "Dostoyevsky's novel is later considered the single major contribution or link in the transition from Romanticism to the modern realistic, psychological and philosophical novel, Barakat's poetic narrative plays a similar role in Kurdish literature (p.11)."

Barakat's novel can also be considered in the frame of psychological realism, but it *shifts from being psychological realism to become philosophical from beginning to end* (p.15).

As in the Arabic, *Sages of Darkness* is a Kurdish modernistic narrative illustrating the way of life of Kurdish communities in the late period of the Ottoman Empire, by way of mixing *fiction, fact or fictionalized fact, and written in a mix of poetry and prose*. Barakat uses symbols, fictionalizes fact, and also is getting help from history to describe the economic, social, cultural, an even political involvement of Kurdish tribal communities in that time. In this way, Barakat writes a modern novel. But even though Barakat's novel is modern, it has not been credited in mainstream literature, because of the political situation of Kurds. Again in Butt's words;

There is perhaps one basic reason why Sages of Darkness has been set aside and not been accorded credit in mainstream literature as being a remarkable achievement. That reason is because the Kurds have been disengaged from the concept of the nation-state (p.25).

With this translation into English, Butt introduces a modern Kurdish author to the reading public in a broad sense. On one hand, this can arouse interest in Kurdish life, culture, literature, and history. On the other hand, it can help circles engaged in literary criticism become aware of and

more familiar with Kurdish literature. I anticipate that those aspects will make the translation of Barakat's *Sages of Darkness* invaluable and will motivate other translators to work with Kurdish writers' work.

