

ARTICLE

Poetics of modernity and nationalism: Revisiting the emergence of modern Kurdish poetry

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Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK.Email: f.ghaderi@exeter.ac.uk**Abstract**

The emergence of modern Kurdish poetry marks a period of great significance in the history of Kurdish literature since it witnessed the advent of modernity, the rise of Kurdish nationalism, the fall of the Persian and Ottoman Empires, and the creation of the Middle East with no country for Kurds. In this article I examine the complex process of the poetic modernisation which unfolded over the oeuvres of generations of poets from the late 19th century till its culmination in the 1940s. I illustrate that modern Kurdish poetry was an aesthetic response to the advent of modernity and its socio-political implications such as nationalism in Kurdish society.

KEYWORDS

Hacı Qadirê Koyî, Kurdish modernity, Kurdish nationalism, modern Kurdish poetry, Pîremêrd, poetic modernisation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Kurdish literary tradition developed under the patronage of semi-autonomous Kurdish principalities in the Ottoman and the Persian Empires on a polydialectal structure. From the five dialect groups of the Kurdish language, Hawrami/Gorani, Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), Sorani (Central Kurdish), Southern Kurdish, and Zazaki/Kurmanjki (Haig & Öpengin, 2014), Hawrami, Kurmanji, and Sorani, developed strong literary traditions, in parallel, from the 15th and 16th century.¹ Nevertheless, evolving in fragile political environments, Kurdish languages and literatures have faced serious disruptions in its development so much so that two of its dialects, Hawrami and Zazaki, are recognised as “endangered” and “vulnerable” respectively, by UNESCO (Moseley, 2010, pp. 40–46).² The creation of the ‘Middle

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East' with no country for Kurds, intensified the minority and precarious position of the Kurdish language as Kurds faced various degrees of suppression, assimilation policies, and even language ban.

In the context of momentous political and social transformations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kurdish poetry, as the prime Kurdish literary genre, underwent a series of profound transformations and "poetic modernisation". The literary transformation was a gradual and complex process in which traditional forms were adapted to the conditions of modernity, and eventually the classical aesthetic system was challenged and replaced by a "modern" poetic system. This process, its context, and driving forces are the focus of this article, which is based on my doctoral dissertation.

The emergence of modern Kurdish poetry has been the subject of several studies in Kurdish which have largely presented modern poetry as a "radical" break with the past in the 1930s under the leadership of 'Ebdula Goran (1904–1962), the "father" of modern Kurdish poetry, and inspired by "foreign influence", be it modern Turkish literature or European literature. Inspired by Lotman's semiotic study of literary change (1976, 1977), Eisenstadt's notion of "multiple modernities" (2000), and informed by Pîrbal (2005) and Balekî (2005)'s studies of modern Kurdish poetry, I offer a more nuanced approach to the study of modern poetry and examine its emergence as a process of literary change that unfolded through the oeuvre of several poets, starting from the late 19th century and culminating in the 1940s. Exploring the gradual departure from the classical poetic system and identifying the context of this process, I argue that the motivations for the poetic change were primarily social and political. Modern Kurdish poetry, I contend, was an aesthetic response to the advent of modernity and its socio-political implications such as nationalism in Kurdish society. Modernity and nationalism as the dominant discourses and the driving sources of the change, resulted in the introduction of new perspectives and rhetoric, and subsequently changes in themes, motives, diction, and rhetorical devices. Following Eisenstadt (2000), I reject the classical Euro-centric definitions of modernity and the Western patterns of modernity as the only "authentic" modernity and illustrate in Kurdish modernity certain aspects of modernity which were considered most relevant to Kurds and the Kurdish society, such as education and nationalism, were selected, highlighted and adapted while some other aspects were deliberately evaded and glossed over.

To clarify my contribution and points of departure from studies on modern Kurdish poetry, a brief account of the scholarship is imperative. Eminent Kurdish literary critics Resûl (1990), Kakey Felah (1978), Hilmî (1988), Xeznedar (2005, pp. 13–14) argued that modern Kurdish poetry emerged after the First World War as a result of a sharp and "radical" break from classical poetry. In these studies, modern poetry is largely defined by its formal features, mainly abandoning the classical *aruz* metrical system³ and adopting syllabic metre (*hija*) instead, and experimenting with rhyme (Xeznedar, 2005, p. 28). While in classical poetry the metre, rhyme, and the length of the lines, in each line is exactly the same, modern poetry is typically identified by the diversity of metre and rhyme, and the irregularity of the length of the lines. Such identification presents modern poetry visually and aurally different from the classical.

While 'Ebdula Goran (1904–1962) is mostly credited as the 'initiator' of the movement, some critics have made the case for Şêx Nurî Şêx Satih (1896–1958) or Reşîd Necîb (1906–1968) as architects of modern poetry. In his doctoral dissertation, *A Comparative Study of Free Verse in Arabic and Kurdish: the Literary Careers of al-Sayyâb and Gôrân* (1985), Dahir Latif Karim credits both Şêx Nûrî and Goran as the "principal pioneers" of modern poetry (1985, p. 51), but argues that it was Goran "who continued and developed the new style" and "liberates Kurdish poetry from its total dependence on Arabic and Persian poetry and gives it an identity of its own" (p. 53). Karim argues that after the First World War, and the "spirit of self-determination" that followed, "[I]t was only natural that Kurdish poetry should follow the political current, and the younger poets found that they had things to say that could not be expressed within the framework of Classical poetry." (p. 49). This argument that new subjects could not be expressed in classical forms is reiterated in Kurdish literary criticism often without much clarification. While arguing that the classical period lasted until 1920, Karim contends that classical forms "were not immediately jettisoned; at first, the new features that distinguish this period were grafted on to them." (pp. 51–52). He proposes that the classical poetry was followed by "Romantic period", 1920–1945, and "Realist/social period" from 1945 to 1960. Comparable classifications have been offered by other Kurdish critics such as Hilmî (1988), that superimpose the paradigm of the Western literary evolution onto the development of Kurdish poetry.

Karim argues that the poetry that followed the classical period was nationalistic in theme and the theme and “the manner of expressing it were inspired largely by foreign example.” (pp. 49–50). The break with classicism, he contends, “was occasioned largely by their coming in contact with what was then known as the new movement in Turkish literature, particularly represented by the Udaba-I Fecri Ati school.” (pp. 51–52). Reducing transformations of Kurdish poetry to “foreign influence”, whether modern Turkish literature or “European” literature has become a cliché in Kurdish literary criticism. Saman Salah Hassan, in his doctoral dissertation, *Women and Literature: A Feminist Reading of Kurdish Women's Poetry* (2013), considers the emergence of modern Kurdish poetry as a “radical” change and notes, “[T]he long tradition and period of classical Kurdish poetry comes to a radical end with the emergence of a group of romantic and national Kurdish poets in the early years of the 20th century who were in relatively close contact with developments and changes in European literature and who felt the impact of modernity and of nation-building initiatives in the region.” (2013, p. 78). He argues that Kurdish poets “through reading and observing European literature and its literary movements were able to bring in fundamental changes to Kurdish poetry and liberate it from the classical form.” (2013, p. 78). Likewise, in his introduction to *Modern Kurdish Poetry. An Anthology & Introduction* (2006), Refîq Sabîr, prominent poet and literary critic, considers modern poetry to be merely the impact of Western literature through translations (2006). References to European literature as the inspiration of the changes in Kurdish poetry are prevalent in traditional literary criticism though have remained vague and unsubstantiated. Sabir argues that modernism “gained impetus during the late 1920s and early 1930s” and while he names Pîremêrd (1867–1950) and Şêx Nûrî as important figures in modernisation, he reiterates that the “dominant name in modern Kurdish poetry” is Goran who “implemented fundamental changes in Kurdish poetry regarding its content, language and verse metre.” (ibid., p. 20).

A review of the literature on modern Arabic and Persian poetry, for instance, reveals the prevalence of similar assumptions with regards to the emergence of modernity in poetry and the binary opposition of “classical” and “modern”. Badawi for instance defines modern Arabic poetry as the beginning of an attempt to liberate poetry from the fetters of strict prosody as a result of being exposed to poetry of French symbolists and English Romantics (1975, pp. 3–11). He explicitly uses the term “westernization” instead of modernisation in explaining the context of the emergence of modern poetry (ibid., p. 11). Likewise, in his ground-breaking study of modern Persian poetry, Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates that in traditional criticism classical Persian poetry is believed to have lasted until the “1920s—or 1930s or later”, and modern Persian poetry was the result of a sharp break with the past (2012, p. 1).

Ferhad Pîrbal, prominent Kurdish writer and literary critic, in his book, *Reg û Rişekani Taze Bûnewey Şêrî Kurdî 1898–1958* [The Roots of Renovating Kurdish Poetry 1898–1958, 2005], offered an alternative explanation of modern poetry as a process that started before ‘Ebdula Goran. What is particularly significant in his account is naming Hacî Qadir Koyî (?–1897) along with Şêx Nûrî and Pîremêrd as a pioneer of modern poetry. He also mentioned for the first time two Kurmanji poets, Ebdurehîm Rehmê Hekarî (1890–1958) and Qedrî Can (1911–1972), as contributors to modern Kurdish poetry. Pîrbal recognises Koyî’s contribution as a poet who tackled modern topics in traditional poetic forms like the *ghazal*⁴ or the *qasida*⁵ and labels his poetry “neoclassic”. In a similar vein, in his book entitled, *Simakanî Tazekirdinewey Şêrî Kurdî 1898–1932* (The Features of Renovating Kurdish Poetry, 1898–1932, 2005),² Yadigar Balekî illustrates the formal and thematic features of the poetic modernisation undertaken by Hacî Qadir Koyî, Hekarî, Mistefa Şewqî Qazizade (1865–1932) and others who published modern poems in Kurdish journals from 1920 to 1932. Building on these scholarships, I look for moments of departure from classical poetic conventions, in perspectives, themes, diction, rhetorical devices, as well formal features. Contrary to Pîrbal I consider Koyî and attempts at introducing new elements (thematic and formal) to classical forms, not a transition period but the very definition of modernisation. I also argue that the account of the influence of modern Turkish literature and European literature is somewhat exaggerated and while they provided inspiration at the later stages of modernisation, the driving forces of change were primarily social and political. I demonstrate plurality of perceptions and approaches to modernity in Kurdish poetry. Although Europe was the source of modernity for Kurdish intellectuals, the responses were diverse. Societies take different paths toward modernisation, therefore the equation of modernisation and westernisation is reductive and problematic. Informed by Ringer (2001) and Eisenstadt (2000), I illustrate

modernisation, including poetic modernisation, as a conscious, creative, and contested process of adaptation and negotiation between indigenous and external models.

2 | THE ADVENT OF MODERNITY IN KURDISH POETRY

The third issue of *Kurdistan*, the first Kurdish periodical published in 1898, featured a *ghazal* by Hacî Qadirê Koyî (?–1897), Kurdish poet from Koye (now in Iraqi Kurdistan) who relocated to Istanbul in the late 19th century. The poem had been written on the cover page of a manuscript of *Mem û Zîn* [Mem and Zin], celebrated 17th century Kurdish epic. Witnessing immense social, political and cultural changes of the late Ottoman Empire, Koyî expressed his anxieties for the future of *Mem û Zîn* as paragon of classical poetry, and implicitly his own works:

Zemane resmî caranî nemawe
 çiraî nazim û muşî kujawe
 Le dewrî ême roman û cerîde
 Egerçî meqsede zanîni bawe
 Eman qedrî bizanin em kitêbe
 Le dinya êstekî hemtay nemawe (1898)
 The world does not follow the old customs,
 the light of poets and scribes is extinguished.
 These days novels and papers are fashionable.
 Pray, appreciate this book; it is peerless in this world.⁶

Koyî lamented that the world has changed and poets and scribes, the two main sources of authority in the past, had “their lights extinguished,” a Kurdish/Iranian expression that means leaving no heir, implying their lineage has come to an end. The arrival of the printing press had made scribes redundant and the emergence of the novel and newspaper, Koyî feared, threatened the centuries-old authority of poetry. Although no Kurdish novel was published in his lifetime,⁷ nor any Kurdish paper, elsewhere he grieved,

Sed qaîme qesîde kes naykîrê be pûfê
 Rojname û cerîde kewtote qîmet û şan (2007, p. 98)
 Hundreds of epistles and odes, no one will buy for a penny.
 [nowadays] papers and journals have a greater worth.

Questioning the relevance of poetry to the modern world by Kurdish poets and attempts to make it “relevant” is indeed the gist of modern poetic transformations.

Studying poetry of the late 19th century reveals the excitement of Kurdish poets by the technological advancement of Europe. In the absence of Kurdish newspapers, it was poetry that updated Kurdish people about the latest scientific discoveries and technological developments of Europe.

Poetry as a predominantly oral literary genre, did not rely on literacy and has been employed as an effective means of communication and transmission of knowledge for centuries. Tapping into these potentials of poetry, at the backdrop of the prevalence of illiteracy in the Kurdish society in the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (Hassanpour, 1992, p. 65), Kurdish literati began to devote their poems to “enlighten” the Kurds of the events of the “modern” world. This was a new function for poetry and resulted in the introduction of non-literary words, “extra-systemic” elements in Lotman’s words, to poetry. Words such “şemendefêr” (train), “telgiraf” (telegraph), and “elektrik” (electricity) were first introduced to the Kurdish language through poetry.

Despite his concerns and initial distress at the manifestations of modernity, Koyî, a madrasa-educated scholar, soon became a champion of modern technologies and discussed them more than any of his contemporaries in his poetry. While still in Istanbul, he famously wrote:

Sefer ender weten çi keşk deyrê
seyrî nakey şemendefer defrê

...

Telxirafîş telêke bêmaye

Muxbîrî rûy kullî dunyaye (Koyî, 2007, p. 197)

Why travel home? Don't you see trains are flying here?

...

Telegraph, a worthless wire, is a spy all over the world.

Aside from excitement, the perceived advances of "Europe" and the inevitable comparison with the state of the homeland was a new source of fear, anxiety, and apprehension. This is illustrated in the following *ghazal* by Esîrî (1895–1962):

Xetkî xorawa bizanî çi ezanin, wirr ebî

Geştî şar û karxane û kirdeyan key, sirr ebî

Seyrî wêrane û kelawey xakî Kurdistan bikey

Têdegey hafî gelit, enca le daxa mirr ebî (2006, p. 233)

Knowing what Europeans have discovered will leave you stunned.

Wandering through their cities, factories, and [seeing their] discoveries

will leave you numb.

[then] reflecting the ruined and crumbling state of Kurdistan

will leave you distraught, with grief.

Kurdish poetry of the late 19th and early 20th century is replete with such comparison, and the notions of envy, grief, but also implicit hope, recalling Fredric Jameson's comment that modernity is "an optical illusion nourished by envy and hope, by inferiority feelings and the need for emulation" (2002, p. 211). While adhering to the structural features of a classical *ghazal* such as the number of lines, rhyme, and metre, in above examples, they encompass new themes, and lexical and rhetorical elements. Such "combination of old and new elements", in Lotman's words, is one strategy that a literary system employs in dealing with the advent of "extra-systemic" elements (Lotman, 1977, p. 22). A text, Lotman maintained, needs to sustain the memory of the traditional construction for its innovations to be perceived (ibid.). While the above texts are recognisable as a *ghazal*, they present an "ambivalence" with their opening up to "new elements" and the presence of ambivalent texts is the sign of unfolding of the literary system in preparation for a dynamic leap (Lotman, 1977, p. 22).

While classical *ghazal* and *qasida* were understood to be the expression of private emotions and personal experiences,⁸ from the late 19th century, as above examples illustrate, they became sites of collective and public reflection, as well as means of enlightenment. Employing classical poetic forms such as *ghazal* and *qasida* to articulate new subjects and themes, though successfully implemented by Koyî, was a literary deviation in the late 19th century, nevertheless it became an acceptable and even a prevalent practice by the early decades of the 20th century.

As well as the advent of new lexica that reflected the introduction of new industry in the Empire, some existing concepts were assigned with new ideological overtones. For instance, key concepts such as "mîlet" (nation), "devlet/devlet" (state), "veten/weten" (homeland) adopted new signification that echoed the emergence of the nationalistic

discourse. As a case in point, “devlet/dewlet” in classical poetry meant “wealth” and “kingship”, as illustrated in the following verse by prominent classical poet Salim (1800–1866):

Axirî her dû la, dewlet û bê dewletî
 peykî ecel tey deka herçî feraz û nişîb (cited in ‘Arif, 2009, p. 401)
 Ultimately the rich (dewlet) and the poor (bê dewlet), both,
 will face the destiny (death) with the heights and the depths.

Nonetheless, Koyî employed “dewlet” as reference to the modern state:

Be xeyrî Romî û Înglîs û Rusî
 bêheddin dewletan nawyan binûsî
 Le cêy xoyan hestawin be xîret
 le dinya nawî xoyan nawe dewlet
 Serapa sahebî sikke û supahin
 wekû cem sahibî text û kulahin (2007, p. 195)
 Besides Rom (Ottoman Turkey), England and Russia, there are many other states (dewlet) if you record their names.
 They have risen with fervor and have called themselves states (dewlet).
 All possess coin and army, and like Jamshid⁹ have crown and throne.

Likewise, “veten/weten” referred to one's place of birth in classical poetry, however from the late 19th century it was extended to a larger geographical entity, with somewhat vague borders, that included places where Kurds live in. Gendered representation of homeland emerged in the early decades of the 20th century in poetry first, and later in the emerging genres of play and fiction, and it played a significant role in the development of the Kurdish nationalist discourse. The image of homeland as an ailing mother or a young woman, both in need of protection, provided Kurdish nationalists with a powerful tool to mobilise forces to defend homeland's “honour” (Ghaderi, 2016, p. 228).

Advocating national rights inspired by the Balkan liberation movements and the Armenian nationalism in the late 19th century, brought new themes and motives to poetry. Poetry began to play a key role in the construction of a Kurdish national memory by re/creating a heroic past, infusing nostalgia for the “lost golden days” of the semi-autonomous Kurdish emirates, the “time when Kurds were free”, celebrating prominent Kurdish figures, and inspiring a sense of pride in Kurdishness by romanticising the Kurds for their chivalry, bravery, and generosity:

Le gawan û şiwani Kurdekan yek
 Bese bo leşkirî sed kerre dû lek (Koyî, 2007, p. 68)
 Of Kurdish cowboys and shepherds, one
 suffices for an army of hundreds of thousands.

Promoting and glorifying the Kurdish language was another important theme that marked a significant shift in attitude toward the Kurdish language. Although Kurdish was used for centuries, it was not the main medium of poetic expression and it was deemed less eloquent than Arabic, Persian, and Turkish¹⁰; therefore, poets who chose to write in Kurdish often felt a need to explain their choice (Ghaderi, 2021, p. 718). In an oft-cited verse by Nalî (1800–1856), the most celebrated classical Kurdish Sorani poet, he states that he writes in Kurdish “on purpose” and he is doing so to “test” his ability to write “eloquent” poems in Kurdish, a task that he exceeded in:

Tebî şekkerbarî min Kurdî eger îna deka
 Îmtihanî xoye meqsûdî, le ‘emda wa deka (p. ...)
 If my sugar-bearing nature write in Kurdish

He does so on purpose, to test his abilities.

From the late 19th century, the hegemony of Persian and Arabic was challenged and the question of why write in Kurdish was replaced with “why not in Kurdish”. Koyî is the most notable figure in cultivating this new awareness toward Kurdish. He urged Kurdish intellectuals to cultivate their language and refrain from writing in non-Kurdish languages. He even scorned and ridiculed those who did not heed his advice (Ghaderi, 2016, pp. 114–115):

Yekser ‘ulema diruşt û wîrdî
Nayxwêninewe du herfî Kurdî
Ostadî xetî le em siyane
Wek dî le zubanî xoy nezane (Koyî, 2007, p. 219)
All our educated people, young and old, cannot read Kurdish.
All are masters of these three [Persian, Arabic, and Turkish],
when it comes to Kurdish, they are illiterate. (Ghaderi, 2021, p. 718)

Koyî famously compared writing and producing works in non-Kurdish languages to the efforts of bees and silk-worms: they produce honey and silk, he said, yet the outcome of their endeavors is exploited by “the Iranians and the Turks” (Ghaderi, 2016, p. 118). Koyî’s poems on Kurdish language and his criticism of Kurdish intellectuals for neglecting their language are among the most cited poems in the history of Kurdish poetry and have inspired generations. Promoting Kurdish language and lamenting its neglect by the elite became a principal theme of poetry throughout the 20th century.

Fascination with modernity and the emergence of Kurdish national consciousness as new subjects, introduced new diction into poetry and assigned some existing vocabularies new ideological significations. Although some innovations in form such as the adoption of couplet rhyme for the conventionally mono-rhymed *ghazal* and some experimentations with the *aruzî* metre were introduced (Batekî, 2005; Pîrbal, 2005), the classical poetic forms continued to be used for the expression of new themes and motives and became an established practice by the early decades of the 20th century.

3 | POETRY AS A MEDIUM OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Visible transformations in diction, imageries, themes, motives, and rhetoric by the early decades of the 20th century marked a new phase for poetry. The established themes of the classical poetry and its chivalrous language gradually began to be seen as “irrelevant” and “obsolete” and poets were urged to abandon them and instead pay attention to the “needs” of their nation, which is illustrated in the following quintain (*pênc xiştekî*) by Ehmed Muxtar Caf (1891–1935):

Şa’îrî Kurd bese, bes basî zuff û çaw biken
Kem xeyafî perçem û kakolî afozaw biken
Labiden kem basî sunbul ya liqî lawlaw biken
Êwe tedbîrêkî hafî qewmî dîtsûtaw biken
Zûbezû ta îş ledes derneçwe sa hewtê biden (Caf, 2020)
Kurdish poets, enough, enough with the talk of beautiful hair,
Stop fantasising about the dishevelled hair and lock.
Stop talking about hyacinth and the morning glory,
Heed the sorrowful state of the [Kurdish] nation
Make haste, hurry, do something before it’s too late.

The disheveled hair of the beloved, hyacinth, and morning glory were established and recurring images in classical Kurdish poetry. Caf urges Kurdish poets to abandon these themes and motives in favour of the urgent task of attending to “the sorrowful state of the nation”. Such pleas make up a significant portion of Kurdish poetry in the first half of the 20th century. It was in this context that Esîrî (1895–1962), famously set his Diwan of 4000 lines on fire. After a trip to Istanbul in 1928 and in his own words “touched by the sight of modern buildings and factories and European technologies”, Esîrî found what he had written thus far—mostly classical lyrics—“irrelevant” (2006, p. 30). After a short pause when he “lost desire to write poetry” and became “sworn enemy of the lovers of the hair and beauty”, he embarked on writing poetry “relevant to the age”, that we know were mostly nationalistic in theme (Esîrî, 2006, pp. 30–31).

A “relevant” subject, and indeed one of the most discussed subjects in the early Kurdish periodicals, was education. Education was promoted as the cure for all ills of the Kurdish society and the path toward “independence” and “progress”. Kurdish society in the early 20th century was frequently portrayed as a “sleeping nation” which had “lost consciousness” while all other nations were awake and thriving (Ghaderi, 2021, p. 719). Against this backdrop, poets were assigned with a new responsibility to “awaken” their nation from “the sleep of ignorance” and bring them back to life. “Ignorance” was often discussed as the reason for all the sufferings of the Kurds. The following poem by Ebdurehîm Rehmê Hekarî (Zapsu), Kurdish nationalist poet and religious scholar, published in 1919 in the Kurdish periodical, *Jîn* is a case in point:

Ey cehl û nezanîn tuyî dijmin, tuyî xaîn
 Zulma teye hêlan hemî bê sen'et û bê dîn
 Qehra teye wêran kirîye, ah, vetenê min
 Kîna teye bê lane kirî cism û tenê min
 Servet te ji min standîye bê mal û diravin
 em maîne belengaz û feqîr, xane belavin (1919, p. 16).
 Oh ignorance, ignorance, you are the enemy, you are the traitor.
 It is your tyranny that has left us bereft of skill and faith.
 It is your cruelty which has ruined my homeland.
 It is your hatred that has deprived me of a refuge.
 You have taken our wealth; [you] have left us homeless and penniless.

Ignorance, Hekarî argued, caused the “loss of skill” and the “loss of faith”. The prospect of losing one's faith as a consequence of lack of knowledge, was a powerful way to advocate education, especially when advocated by an Islamic scholar. The plight of “ignorance” and “lack of knowledge” is then extended from an individual to a national level in the second line as it is blamed for the nation's “poverty” and “homelessness”, the lack of state.

Together with nationalism, education was the most appealing aspect of modernisation and were even equated with modernity. In promoting education and nationalism, Islamic rhetoric was employed. The pursuit of knowledge and education was in line with Islamic doctrine and the *Qur'anic* verses and *hadiths* were cited to embolden the argument. While “Europe” was admired for its scientific achievements, religious scholars and writers such as Hekarî took a more cautious approach in their references to “Europe”. Hekarî, for instance, refused to refer to modern technology as “European”. Instead, he referred to these advances as “the achievements of human being,” (1918). Likewise, he refused to recognise nationalism as an imported Western idea. For him, national rights are bestowed upon people by God and it is out of “ignorance” that Kurds do not enjoy self-rule:

When God created the world, He distributed his gifts among all nations, and did not exclude us, the Kurds. We were given the same as all other nations in the world. Now all nations are enjoying self-rule, while we do not know our rights yet, let alone demanding self-rule. We do not know what rights we have, and our neighboring nations have understood our ignorance. Our ignorance is their bliss. They

will usurp our inheritance and take our rights for themselves, and we will remain a deprived nation, subjugated and oppressed, because we do know our rights. (1985, pp. 309–310)

He argued that striving for national rights is a religious duty. The religious interpretation of nationalism and appropriating Islamic concepts such as “shehadat” (martyrdom) for Kurdish nationalistic discourse and venerating homeland, greatly contributed to its propagation. Their contributions, however, have been largely overlooked in the narratives of the evolution of Kurdish nationalist discourse. The religious rhetoric of the early decades of the 20th century, nevertheless, was replaced by a more secular vision toward the 1930s. Twenty years after the publication of Hekari’s poetry, when a group of Kurdish nationalists including Hekari’s own son-in-law, Musa Anter,¹¹ came together to found *Kürtleri Koruma Derne-i* (Association for the Protection of Kurds) they refused to declare allegiance to the cause over the *Qur’an*. Instead, they decided to take an oath over a Kurdish flag and a gun (cited in Aydın, 2005, pp. 68–69).

The new mission of poetry, advocating education and nationalism, required the adoption of a language simpler than the highly embellished and complex language of classical poetry. Modernist poets were encouraged to write in an accessible language that is “closer to people’s language”. The new direction of poetry and its new educational purpose, and the emergence and the development of prose transformed the poetic language into a direct and accessible one. The simplicity and accessibility of language became one of the defining features of modern poetry.

4 | EMULATING “EUROPE”: THE PENULTIMATE STAGE OF POETIC MODERNISATION

By 1920s, Kurdish poets had successfully appropriated the classical poetic forms and conventions for the expression of new subjects and themes. Employing the potentials of traditional poetic conventions for new social and political purposes introduced significant transformations to the classical poetic system. The interaction of old and new, “systemic” and “extra-systemic” elements, Lotman noted, shape the dynamism of a literary text. The struggle between old and new continues until the old is marginalised and “viewed as an irrelevant survival” and the “new aesthetic system, including new thematic preoccupations and formal divisions, gains currency” (cited in Karimi-Hakkak, 2012, p. 7). From the late 1920s, the relevance of the classical poetic system to the “modern” world was not only questioned, but also was labelled “unnatural” and was ridiculed. Pîremêrd, leading modernist poet, journalist, and playwright, reflecting on his career famously wrote: “I am ashamed of some of my older poems replete with exaggeration and bombast. There were popular metaphors in the past but reading them makes me cringe with embarrassment.” (Pîremêrd, 2009b, p. 18). He elaborated by citing examples of such metaphors:

The beloved turned into a monster you want to run away from. For instance, they [classical poets] have said: “her brow, like Rostam’s bow,¹² hair, like Zal’s lasso,¹³ eyelashes like Giv’s spears,¹⁴ and a dimple like Bijan’s well.”¹⁵ Now imagine how the bow of Rostam whose spears reached the Turanian camp from the Iranian soil, and the lasso of Zal, which was 150 meters long, and the depth of Bijan’s well, were all encapsulated in an image of a woman. Would it not be terribly scary? They [classical poets] have compared the delicate hair of the beloved to black snakes, her eyelashes to spears, and her figure to a cedar tree. What effects will visualising the beauty of the beloved using dangerous animals leave on one’s soul? (Pîremêrd, 2009b, p. 18)

Such embarrassment and shame about the hyperbolic language of the classical poetry was a new phenomenon in Kurdish poetry and marked a turning point in the course of its development. The new outlook was shared in Persian and Turkish literary discourses. Karimi-Hakkak, in his ground-breaking study of modern Persian poetry, noted that classical Persian poetry began to be seen as “unnatural and unrelated to real life experiences” (2012, p. 32).

Fascinated with “real” versus “imaginary”, Pîrmerêd, a prolific poet himself, took a disparaging attitude toward poetry in general and described writing poetry as the “profession of liars”. He recalled, with relief, that he had successfully convinced Mohemed Emîn Zekî Beg, modern historian, “not to waste his writing talent” on poetry when Zekî Beg shared a *qasida* with him, written to celebrate the birth of Pîremêrd’s son. “Thank God,” he wrote, “he [Zekî Beg] gave up that profession of liars and embarked on learning science and industry [*êlm û fen*] with which he has greatly served our nation.” (Pîremêrd, 2009b, p. 20). Writing poetry, thus, was deemed futile and irrelevant to reality, an idea that was discussed widely in the Kurdish periodicals. Nonetheless, Pîremêrd never stopped writing poetry because he acknowledged that poetry “turns imagination to thought and thought to action” (Pîremêrd, 2009b, p. 14). It was this potential to create thoughts and therefore action that defined poetry at this stage. Poetry was utilised as a force for action and change.

From the late 1920s and early 1930s, the earlier fascination with Europe’s scientific and technological developments was extended to everything “European”, including “European” cultures and literatures. “European” poets were perceived to “have turned away from using exaggeration and fantasies” and “write factually and materially” (Pîremêrd, 2009b, p. 18). Thus, emulation of a new aesthetic model, “European poetry”, was proposed. Studying references to “Europe” and “European poetry”, however, reveals that they were vague paradigms and somewhat “imaginary”. Karimi-Hakkak’s criticism of the “imaginary nature” of Iranian intellectuals’ understanding of “European literature” (2012, p. 33) is relevant to the Kurdish context. Kurdish poets’ knowledge of “European literature” was largely indirect and acquired through Turkish and Arabic translations. Yet, like their Iranian counterparts, they admired Europe and imagined “European literature” to have played a pivotal part in its advancement (Karimi-Hakkak, 2012, p. 33).

“Europe”, thus, became not only a source of inspiration for science and technology, but also for what was imagined to be advanced culture and literature. The following poem in which Pîremêrd imagined his hometown, Sulaimaniyah, with modern technology illustrate this new development:

Be baî şî’r û xeyaf kewtime pele û tek û taz
Le asmanî serfirazî, becarêk kewtme perwaz

...

Elektrîk le Berananewe heta Goyje
Telî beser şara rakêşrabû bebê peyje
Le rastî textî Silêmanê çiwarpênc ewendey mang
Giîtopî nûr, der û jûr, rûnak ekatewe, ta bang
Teresûdatî teleskobî, leser Omer Gidrûn
Lepêş qulley Îvil boy liwawe keşfî şî’ûn
Le Serçinarewe ta Tancero, le rîzî çem
Buxarî makîne rûy asmanî kirdûwe be tem
Le guîpewe çemî Xwacayê heta Şinriwê
be pêy tebî’etî begzade Montkarloy ewê
Be tavgey serî Zefm boçî nefêm Niyagare
Ewende be feyze, pîrîşkî kefî gewherbare
Esasî merkezî teyarexane lay Xurmat
Mowselatî le get Ewrûpa ekat îmka
Tunêl be naw goyje û Tarîdera wekû tûs
Xetî şemendeferî pê geyiye naw xakî Rûs

...

Emane min be xeyaf, ya xew, kewa emdî
Hîwam be Xwaye, bo Kurd, berastî bête dî (Pîremêrd, 2009b, pp. 120–121).
With the wings of poetry and imagination I was flying high and swift,
There, the atmosphere was full of hope and light.

...

Sulaymaniyah is four times brighter than the moon, the electric bulbs light up the city till dawn.

Observation facilities and telescopes of Mount "Omar Gidrun" are second only to the Eiffel Tower's.

From "Sarchnar" to "Tanjaro" the steam of engines has dimmed the sky;

From "Golp" and "Xwajayi" river to "Shinroy", princes require "Monte Carlo" [Casino].

Why should I not call the "Zalm" waterfall "Niagara"? It is blissful; its splashing drops are like pearls.

An airport in "Xormal" has made travel to all Europe possible.

There are tunnels through "Goyje" and "Taridar" (mountains), the train reaches Russia.

...

What I see, whether in my imagination or in dreams, may God make true for the Kurds.

The poem which was published in *Jiyan* [life] newspaper (no. 447) in 1935, depicted a significantly different image of the homeland than its idyllic picture in classical poetry. In his fascination with technology, Pîremêrd even romanticised industrial pollution. Comparing the poem with a famous *qasida* written in the 19th century by Nalî, prominent classical Kurdish poet, in which he depicted Sulaimaniyah reveals departures from classical poetic conventions and how points of reference diverged from Islamic/Persianate mythology to Western references. Portraying the springs of his hometown Nalî wrote:

Ya çeşmesarî xatirî pirr feyzî 'arîfe

Yenbû'î nûrî dabirijênê le kêwî tûr (2001, pp. 187–180)

It is the spring of the mystic's blissful mind,

a fountain of lights flowing from Mount Tur.

Nalî resorted to religious mythology and compared the springs to "fountains of lights" at Mount Tur/Sinai where the Torah was revealed to Moses. Pîremêrd, however compared a waterfall in Kurdistan to the Niagara Falls to convey its magnificence. In Pîremêrd's modern picture of the homeland, all aspects of modernity even those aspects which were in conflict with the religious beliefs of the Kurdish people such as "casinos" is embraced and is considered inevitable. It is worth noting that the poem was published at the backdrop of the modernisation campaigns of Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Iran.

A related subject to the question of modernity, nationhood, and "progress" that was circulated and promoted via poetry was "women's question" and the image of "new woman" that modernist poets depicted. Women's education was endorsed, and it was argued that Kurdish society would not "progress" until it had educated women/mothers. Viewing women as the mothers of the nation was the prevalent thesis in the Kurdish, as well as Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, nationalistic discourse. But it was not just the women's intellect that became the subject of modernist and nationalist debates, but her physical appearance was deemed a visible marker of a society's "progress". Women were encouraged to unveil as it was associated with "progress" (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 133). Fayeq Bêkes (1905–1948) one of the leading modernist poets wrote in 1944:

Meîê min kiçim, toş wekû minî

Muhtacî 'ilm û fen û xiwêndinî

Mecbûrî îş û xizimet kirdinî

Heste têkoşe ta xiwênt germe

Serpoş firrê de çi wadey şerme (1944/2008, pp. 105–106)

Don't say, "I am a woman"- like me,

you need knowledge, skill, and education.

You have to work and serve.

Rise, endeavour, until your blood is warm.

Throw away the veil, there's no shame in that. (Ghaderi, 2021, p. 33)

Unveiling was also an attempt to dissociate the Kurdish culture from Arabic and Islamic culture, under the rising influence of the Aryan discourse in Iran in the 1930s.¹⁶ In the same vein, the pre-Islamic history of the Kurds was fashioned in contrast with earlier attempts to highlight the Kurdish contributions to the Islamic history (for instance in Hekarî's poetry).

As well as these new ideas and themes, experimentations with the metrical system and new rhyme schemes by Hekarî and Qedrî Can (Pîrbal, 2005; Baġekî, 2005), and exploring the syllabic metre, began to render Kurdish poetry visually different from the classical poetry from the late 1920s. The circulation of the syllabic metre was partly inspired by the new appreciation of folklore in the nation building project and folklore-collecting initiatives from the threshold of the 20th century. Syllabic metre had been used in Kurdish folklore and was therefore considered "the native metre" [*kêşî xomañî*]. For modernist poets who were trying to distance themselves from their classical predecessors by adopting a form and language "closer to the people", folklore—its language, form and content—was inspirational (Bochenska and Ghaderi, forthcoming 2022). Pîremêrd led one of the most elaborate initiatives and published Kurdish proverbs in rhyme in the Kurdish periodicals of *Jiyan* (Life) and *Jîn* [Life] from 1932 to 1950. These collections were later published as multi-volume book, making up one of the most comprehensive compilations of Sorani oral literature (Bochenska and Ghaderi, forthcoming 2022). Kurdish writers were encouraged to revitalise Kurdish folklore and mythology through poetry and other emerging literary genres.¹⁷ Taking inspiration from the folk tradition was also at the heart of the Five Syllabists poets in modern Turkish poetry (Mignon, 2010a, pp. 83–85), which is likely to have been a source of inspiration for modernist Kurdish poets. Abandoning *aruz* and adopting syllabic metre soon became the most visible marker of modern poetry and it was hailed as "national" (*neteweyî*) metre (Goran, 2002, p. 28) while *aruz* was branded as "foreign" and "inauthentic" (Îlhanîzade, 1973, p. 252). Furthermore, the language purification campaign (purging Kurdish of Persian, Turkish, and Arabic loanwords) that emerged after the World War I (Hassanpour, 1999, p. 70) gained popularity in the 1930s and 1940s and poets such as Şêx Nûrî Şêx Sañih¹⁸ and Goran played key role in the movement. As such, visible transformations in both form and content emerged in the 1940s.

5 | CONCLUSION

Koyî feared that the advent of modernity and the emergence of newspaper and novel meant the end of centuries-old authority of poetry. Indeed, the relevance of poetry was questioned in the early decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, as illustrated in this article, modernity did not diminish the status of poetry but rather reinforced it as a powerful means of enlightenment and resistance.

Modern Kurdish poetry emerged in response to the advent of modernity and nationalism in Kurdish society. The emergence of modern Kurdish poetry was a gradual process of change in which traditional forms were adapted to the conditions of modernity. This gradual evolution was a natural expression of the fact that poetry was both read by the intelligentsia and also communicated orally to the common people who were largely illiterate. Although translation of European poetry opened new horizons to Kurdish poets in the later stages of the poetic modernisation, its influence on the emergence of modern Kurdish poetry has been exaggerated in traditional Kurdish literary criticism. The motivations for the poetic change were largely social and political.

Modern poetry was the literary form that accompanied the emergence of Kurdish nationalism. The formation of the "imagined community" of Kurds could not rely on print media because of the high rate of illiteracy, Kurdish newspapers' limited circulation, and the economic and political difficulties of printing in Kurdish.¹⁹ Early Kurdish periodicals, even up to the 1950s, were mainly funded by individuals and were not profitable. It was, therefore, poetry that provided the discursive means of constructing and disseminating nationalism. Throughout the 20th century, modern

poetry has been an integral part of Kurdish political uprisings and revolutions and an effective tool for mobilising forces and continues to be the site of resistance.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Zazaki and Southern Kurdish varieties developed later in the late 19th and the 20th century.
- ² Hawrami literary language developed into a 'literary koine' in the 17th and the 18th centuries (Blau, 1996, p. 21; Hassanpour, 1990, p. 68; Minorsky, 1943, p. 76), but it declined dramatically following the fall of the Ardalans principality, its patrons, in the 19th century (Ghaderi, 2017, p. 33).
- ³ Aruz (arûz) is the metrical system used by the Arab poets since pre-Islamic times and it has been adopted in Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Kurdish poetry.
- ⁴ *Ghazal* is a short mono-rhymed lyric poem of seven to 14 lines and almost synonymous with love poetry.
- ⁵ *Qasida* is an elegiac, laudatory, or satiric poem in Arabic and Persianate literatures. It is "an older and more developed form than the *ghazal*" and resembles *ghazal* in form and is also in mono-rhyme but can vary greatly in length and usually contains three distinct thematic parts (De Fouchécour, 2006).
- ⁶ All translations in this article are the author's.
- ⁷ The first Kurdish novel was published in 1935 and fiction began to flourish only in the 1980s.
- ⁸ Ezîz Gerdî, prominent Kurdish literary critic, explains that *ghazal* is about love, worldly or divine, and the poet's feelings and emotions in relation to himself/herself, but *qasida* expresses the poet's emotions in relation to an external element such as patron or nature (1999, p. 257).
- ⁹ Mythical Iranian king, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/jamsid-ii>
- ¹⁰ For instance, Mela Muhammed Ibn al-'Haj, the author of *Mehdî Name* (The Book of Mahdi), one of the first known texts in Sorani Kurdish, wrote: "*Nezmim kird be qewllî sehîh/be lefzî Kurdî nafesih*": I wrote [the poem] in truth, in the ineloquent language of Kurdish (cited in Xeznedar, 2005, p. 51).
- ¹¹ Musa Anter (1920–1992) was influential Kurdish writer, poet, journalist and activist who was assassinated in 1992 in Turkey.
- ¹² Rostam is the greatest Iranian hero of the pre-Islamic period and a leading figure in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Iranian epic.
- ¹³ Zal is the legendary king of Sistân, father of Rostam, and a prominent figure in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.
- ¹⁴ Famous Iranian knight in *Shahnameh*.
- ¹⁵ Bijan is a famous Iranian hero who fell in love with the daughter of the King of Turan, Manijeh, and was cast into a pit by the king of Turan in revenge. For more detail see Ferdowsi (1967). *The Epic of the Kings, Shah-Nama the national epic of Persian*.
- ¹⁶ The Aryan discourse that came to permeate the entire corpus of Orientalist writing on Iran and India in the course of the 19th century and provided the nationalist ideologues of Iran with an appealing model of history (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, pp. 452–454) and the impression that they were equal to Europeans (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, p. 472).
- ¹⁷ Pîremêrd for instance, wrote four plays that were all based on Kurdish mythical and historical stories: *Mem û Zîn* [Mem and Zin, 1935], *Dwanze Swarî Merîwan* [The Twelve Horsemen of Marivan, 1935], *Şerîf Hemewend* [Sharif of Hamawand, 1936], and *Cirokî Mehmûd Ax'ay Şewekel* [The Story of Mahmoud Agha Shewakal, 1942].
- ¹⁸ Şêx Nûrî Şêx Satîh's (2008) poetry collection include a section entitled "pure Kurdish" [*Kurd petî*] poems.
- ¹⁹ A glance at Kurdish publishers' memoirs reveals the financial difficulties they were facing in running the Kurdish periodicals. Pîremêrd for instance complained that his paper, *Jîyan* (later known as *Jîn*), had only few paying subscribers (2009a,b, p. 17).

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