



Article

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Salim Barakat's novel, *Sages of Darkness*: "Who is Benav's son Bekas?"

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Abstract

In his novel *Sages of Darkness* (Fuqahā' al-Zalām), we encounter Salim Barakat as a writer of psychological realism, which this paper attempts to show by a comparison to Fyodor Dostoevsky's ground-breaking novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Barakat's main protagonist is a Kurdish Sufi Mullah, a protector of his rural community in al-Qamishli, Jazira in Ottoman times. With the sudden appearance of "dried up fields," Mullah Benav carries on with his undertone of murmured prayer and reliance on the techniques of Kurdish Sufi practice (somewhat similar to Jewish Kabbalistic practice) to solve the problem. And then, lo and behold, a fantastical event occurs with the birth of a baby son whom the Mullah calls "Bekas." *Sages of Darkness* has five long chapters of approximately fifty pages each, comparable to the original serial publication of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*. It introduces an aside on the psychological cause and result of child molestation by respected personages within the society and especially within the education system. The present paper uses quotations from the first fifty pages of *Sages of Darkness*. Long passages from the book are quoted because no English translation has as yet been published. I anticipate completing the translation in about 7 months.

Keywords: Salim Barakat, Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Kurdish realism, Kurdish Sufi Mullah, Kurdish novel, *Sages of Darkness*,

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Introduction

Salim Barakat's novel entitled *Fuqahā' al-Zalām* (Sages of Darkness) was drafted in 1985 (Cyprus) and published in a revised version by Al-Mada Publishing House (Baghdad) in 1994. As distinct from his previously published memoirs or autobiographical works, with his *Sages of Darkness* Barakat writes a true novel. Following through from memoir to novel, he seems to have deliberately traced the historical development of the novel. Moreover, with this novel he has successfully transitioned from writing Kurdish poetry to writing a genuinely Kurdish novel full of mysticism and poetry.

In accord with the conventions of drama, the author starts out by placing on stage his main protagonist, Mullah Benav. The Mullah (a title of respect) is a man with a proud lineage and a devoted family. He lives in a rural community in the outskirts of the small city of al-Qamishli, where he is respected and loved.

When the story opens, visitors are arriving from both the city proper and the neighboring communities at the Mullah's home for the celebration of the birth of the Mullah's new baby, Bekas. Visually, the courtyard, mud house and tumbledown shed, a dwelling place without electricity and modern conveniences stands in stark comparison to the enormous love and respect accorded the Mullah, a truly good and pious man.

However, Mullah Benav has a problem that prevents him from fully participating in the joy of the occasion. He is obsessed with the "dried-out fields" and the problem created due to the widespread pending hardship for one and all as a result. This issue goes round and round in his head, his thoughts racing and always returning to those unsolved figures pencilled into his notebooks. In a few rather obscure sentences, the author gives us a hint of the story about to unfold from when in a matter of hours his newborn baby grows to adulthood and stands before his parents (Mullah Benav and his young wife Brina), and the four young children from the Mullah's first wife:

Their children had eased the first strangeness that the parents hadn't managed to truly overcome. But then, this "Bekas" within two hours from the moment he was born had

closed in on the image of nurturing due him, nurturing that would have come from his parents as their offspring. He had blocked what the parents had in store for their child. Moreover, he had disengaged himself in such a way that bewilderment and astonishment would dictate their feelings.

"Bekas" has missed out on parental nurturing; significantly, he grew to maturity in a matter of hours! Moreover, he is born into a season with "dried-out fields." It immediately strikes the reader that the author is telling a story that affords more than an utterly realistic and remarkably penetrating description of a rural Kurdish community with "dried-out fields."

The genre of *Sages of Darkness*

At this point, it is worth noting that as well as being an unusual fantasy about an unusual people, the Kurds, *Sages of Darkness* references the structure of the Russian novel *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, first published as a series in 1866 as a series in the journal "The Russian Messenger." *Crime and Punishment* was a contribution or link to the changeover from Romanticism to the modern realistic, psychological, and philosophical novel. To quote from an online manual entitled *Psychological Realism in Crime and Punishment*:

This research paper explores Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* using Socio-Psychological approach. The research highlights Dostoyevsky's heavy reliance on the use of psychological realism, a literary genre that emphasizes on the interior characterization, as well as the motives of the one, circumstances and internal action which is derivative from and creates external action. Such works can also be called as a work of "inner man". This paper shows the process of intricate play between psychology, literature and sociology. The research concludes that "Crime and Punishment" is a mixture of four genres of novels that are: psychological novel, the novel of character, the novel of detection and the philosophical novel. . . While the whole world was still reading popular romantic novels and love poems, Russia was leading a movement into the new realistic

approach to literature. Dostoyevsky was one of the forerunners of this movement, along with Gustave Flaubert in France and Mark Twain in America.²

There are various ways of understanding how the grown-up Bekas came to be. Let us hear the explanation that "Bekas" gives:

"Why don't you ask me how I grew so fast?" Kirzo opens his mouth, as if he had a question, but Bekas doesn't give him a chance to speak. The eyes of both parents glitter.

He continues, "Confound it!" and turns towards them to mutter: "How shall I explain what I have no control over? I'm as stunned as you are. Each hour, I placed before you others, individuals babbling alongside me about what was, year after year. They prattled so fast that my understanding of things I knew about you before my coming was uncertain and confused." He pauses, and adds: "My confusion is twofold: your confusion about me and my confusion about you. And indeed there is an issue we face together. To say the least, there is too little time left. Behold! In the afternoon, I'll be forty-years-old, and in the evening, fifty-years-old! . . .

Bekas son of Benav, the result of the sound of "babbling" as primordial thought becoming speech, enters the picture as Benav's son, or alter ego, and in any case Benav's emotional self. Bekas carries the burden of emptiness that Benav bears. That is, it is Benav's task to perpetuate the Kurdish civilization, awareness of this history and the culture that bears that history, the existence or in psychological terms, the "personality" of the Kurdish collective.³

It seems that the Mullah's youngest son Bekas does not himself understand what happened that he should grow up so rapidly. He knows, however, that he carries the burden of an ongoing ordeal, and a sort of bundle with the sound of the babbling explaining his personal history to him as he grew up. He struggles to open the bundle, but cannot. Ilya Kligas in his article "Shapes of History and the Enigmatic Hero in Dostoevsky: The Case of Crime and Punishment" writes: "Expressing the enigma of the protagonist and of Russia, is the radically accelerated time of the great deed anchored in the hero Raskolnikov. . .⁴ Here and elsewhere we have indications that

² Psychological Realism in *Crime and Punishment* (Manual).

<https://www.ipl.org/essay/Psychological-Realism-In-Crime-And-Punishment-PCCQSC6SQU> .

³ The Kurdish civilization, its culture and history has been largely buried in the "archives" of orality, and subsequently dug in deeper by nation-states eager to assert homogeneity in their respective "countries."

⁴ *Comparative Literature* 62:3(Summer 2010): 229.

Barakat makes use of Dostoevsky's structure. The "great deed" in *Crime and Punishment* in *Sages of Darkness* finds its equivalent as "the ordeal." Barakat as the third party narrator in his novel writes:

Thus, an eloquent extension limits the Mullah's history, and the history of his ancestors, to a blue void that has neither stop nor detour. A dumb distance in a square-with-corners dissolves and vanishes, and he and his wife are no more, and what remains is only a silence that mocks. "Let him marry," the mother whispered. The father roused, echoes her: "Let him marry. . ."⁵

Sages of Darkness is above all two types of writing: firstly, realism or even "dirty realism" to use the language of screenwriters. And secondly, it is a psychological novel, full of suspense. The story opens as follows:

A man-of-means, Mullah Benav Bin Kojarei aimed to appear as composed as usual. He smiled with confidence, his lips over big strong teeth. Then he raised his hands, and recited the opening prayer in a murmur. . . To the east was a mud house with adjoining rooms, each with a separate door that overlooked the courtyard. As for the southwest, there was a dilapidated shed with a roof of undulating wrought iron over a small area—given over to a lantern. Mullah Benav was walking towards one of the doors, leaving behind traces of yellow in the fluffy patches of snow, when suddenly he swerved to the right, and came to a standstill. . . The father, having completed his errand, then entered the house. He came out with a long knife in his hand, and headed for the shed.

The first ewe came out of the shed door, plummeting downwards—followed by a second, a third, and a fourth. They all came out tumbling and then fell. Their leaping, turning, and falling drew red sprinkles over the snow—then vaporizing from little red puddles. After that the wealthy Benav, excitedly came out together with his stained knife. Two men hurried to him and relieved him of it. They leaned on the ewes and skinned them.

⁵ The narrator is explaining that Kurdish history has vanished into a "blue void." The world of orality has vanished, and there is only a mocking silence, depicted as a jester, a clown through the choice of vocabulary, i.e. the root letters: مسافة بكما في مربع تذوب زواياه، وتمحي فلا تعودان، هو وامراته، واقعيين إلا بهذا الصمت المهزج.

When a woman ululated from a wing of the adjoining rooms, the wealthy Mullah raised his hand to signal to her to be quiet, and she fell silent. As he walked towards one of the doors, he said to her: "The whole world begets, and there is no first or foremost."⁶ He took off his shoes at the threshold, and entered. The men made room for him near the candescent gas stove. He sat down, turned to his left, and then to his right with a glance of satisfaction, at the same time nodding, as if responding to the congratulations with veiled thanks.

When reading the novel *Sages of Darkness*, one should set aside the concept of the "multi-layered" text," but rather think in terms of a kaleidoscopic narrative at the center of which is a father, the highly respected Mullah Benav and his son Bekas, "Bekas" being the emotional self of Benav. In other words, we are presented with something of a split personality in the figure of Benav (as with the protagonist Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's novel). This starts to make sense, if we understand that the author Salim Barakat as a poet epitomizes the Kurdish nation. The Mullah's or in other words Barakat's dilemma suggested by the descriptive words "dried-out fields" heralding a need for radical change is in this case recovery of the lost Kurdish culture and glorious civilization, in other words the "ordeal" of the story.

As said above, Barakat's novel is a psychological drama. Bekas' growing up in compressed time could be viewed as a function of the mental condition of racing thoughts, retold as a physical phenomenon. In general, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is a condition in which the person experiences obsessions or compulsions that are difficult to shake. These obsessions can take the form of "racing thoughts."

Thus, in *Sages of Darkness* the author displays his remarkable ability for writing description as he writes about life in what is clearly an old Kurdish community in the surrounds of the small city of al-Qamishli. The protagonist, Mullah Benav bears the burden of a kind of bundle of Kurdish existence shoved back into the obscure regions of a buried history from where it appears during the birth and rapid maturing of his newborn baby. About al-Qamishli, Matti Peled (d. 10 March 1995) who translated an early version of Barakat's novel writes:

⁶ الأول، translated as "first" or "foremost."

. . . Salim Barakat was born in 1951 in the city of al-Qamishli, in the Kurdish region of Jazira in the north of Syria that lies between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. When he was eighteen-years-old, he left his birthplace and never again returned. From then on he wrote poetry and prose, almost all the content of which was connected with his own Kurdish existence. . . In order to understand and appreciate his writings, one should be somewhat acquainted with Kurdish existence, which is special and different to all its fellows in the Middle East. First of all, one must remember that although the spoken language of the Kurds is Kurdish, this language is not known in Syria. . . And, it is among the most ancient of Middle Eastern languages, used for literary creativity in lands in which a great part of the Kurdish nation lives. . . We can deduce from this that although Salim Barakat writes in Arabic, he is not an Arabic writer. There is nothing of the trademark characterizing Arabic writers of our times.⁷

The present writer sees *Sages of Darkness* as being one of the "great" novels on the world stage, comparable to the first great novel of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*. It is also a turning point in Kurdish novel writing, which has a rather recent and also limited output in various languages. Hashem Ahmadzadeh introduces his article "In Search of a Kurdish Novel that Tells Us Who the Kurds Are," as follows:

*Despite the fact that during the 1930s some Kurdish novels were published in the former Soviet Union, it was only towards the end of the twentieth century that this literary genre became an established literary tradition among the Kurds. Due to various political factors, the Kurdish novel has not been identified with any nation-state. In fact, the concept of the Kurdish novel refers to all such literature written in Kurdish, regardless of different orthographies and dialects. Alongside the published novels in Kurdish, there have been some Kurdish writers who have written their novels in other languages. This article aims to look for a novel that contributes to the representation of the Kurds and their identity and political condition.*⁸

⁷ Salim Barakat, *Chokhmei HaAfayla* (*Sages of Darkness*) translated by Matti Peled from the original Arabic (Bison Press, Nicosia Cyprus, 1985), Hebrew translation with Afterword by Matti Peled (1994).

⁸ In *Iranian Studies*: Taylor and Francis (Dec 2007). www.jstor.org/stable/25597416.

In view of the first of the Kurdish novels having been written in Soviet Russia, as Ahmadzadeh says in the above quotation, it is not surprising that Barakat who has a penchant for starting from beginnings should turn to the greatest of early Russian novelists for guidance in the art of writing the novel. Ahmadzadeh acknowledges that Kurdish novels have been written in other languages, and mentions Barakat but fails to mention Barakat's detailed description of Kurdish life, in his first novel *Fuqahā' al-Zalām* (The Sages of Darkness).

The Hebrew translation of Barakat's above novel done from the original 1985 Arabic Cyprus publication was published only in 1994. This translation was from the first draft of the novel, as was the translation to French. Recently, I have been in contact with Salim Barakat, who is happy to have me translate his novel to English. He sent me a manuscript as published by Al-Mada Publishing House in 1994, after he had worked on the original manuscript of 1985. The Al-Mada manuscript has been translated to Catalan Spanish, and is currently distributed in its "2nd edition." The Al-Mada publication is loaded with poetical language and features that Barakat used in his poems during the intervening years (1985-1994) between the two Arabic publications. The book has therefore taken on an increased aura of mysticism, as well as connecting it to Barakat's success in using ancient structures and poetic devices that link him to the Kurdish archaic culture, and Kurdish literary achievements in antiquity's orality. The following passage from *Sages of Darkness* is permeated with Kurdish Sufi mysticism, and uses vocabulary from Barakat's poems:

"Your uncles," the father [Mullah Benav] said, "but. . . And then he slipped into the abyss of the carpet's blue square. Awakening, he shrugged: "Your uncles?"

"Are you joking? Say you're joking. They won't believe what we would say. Your mother and father haven't taken it in as yet! And who would give his daughter in the face of a lie, O Bekas! Eh. . .

The son replied: "It's your responsibility to try, O my Father. Time is short."

Then furious, the father said: "Whose time, I wonder? Who cares if the time is short or not? And why me?" With his finger, he pointed to his heart: "All of a sudden, I'm responsible. There's a limit to what a human being can bear. This ordeal that your brethren the starlings dreamed up—may it not exceed my limit! You hear. . . His heart

throbbed, and his cloak shook, as if the Mullah's whole body had been transmuted into a terrified heart.⁹

No," Bekas replied: "The matter is settled, and you'll do it, O my Father. Prepare me! A father knows everything, and guides us to a passageway [a passageway in Heaven]."¹⁰ And the Mullah surrendered to his innermost heart [i.e. his son], to what his heart said to him—what made the little wrinkles around his deep-set eyes deepen.

The silver tobacco box was next to the blue square in the carpet. It was revolving of itself under Bekas' fidgeting fingers. And the father gazed at the tobacco box, searching for some solution. Bekas raised the box on the palm of his hand, and held it out to his father: "Roll a cigarette for me, O my Father."

"A cigarette?" the Mullah repeated, and reaches for the box as if in a trance.

"Yes, a cigarette."

The Mullah opened the box and rolled the diaphanous paper [a comparison to the "veil of Heaven"] over some tobacco.¹¹ Then he wet its edges with his tongue and it was ready. He presented it to Bekas, and lit the wick of the kerosene stove. And the son inhaled the smoke, filled his mouth without swallowing it, and calmly breathed it out.

To tell its Kurdish tale, *Sages of Darkness* is of necessity a multi-faceted text. This text uses poetic devices and even has indications of having been composed in bi-stiches. Moreover, Barakat is aware of the processes of creative thought, as seen in both his poetry and in his novel. And, the same "poem-of-his-being" that permeates this author's poetry is apparent in the novel. *Sages of Darkness* is thus both literature of the highest order—and an aware stepping stone from Barakat's written literary production carrying on from the Kurdish oral culture and its poetic output—to Barakat's modern novel.

⁹ Barakat is talking about a spiritual transmutation such as occurs in mysticism.

¹⁰ Passageway / منفذ hinting at the passageways of heaven—see Barakāt's poem *al-Mu'jam* (The Obscure). I have recently published a book on Salim Barakat's poems showing how his transition from orality and use of ancient structures has by-the-by produced the beginning of a new trend in modern Arabic poetry: Aviva Butt (2021), *Salim Barakat, Mahmud Darwish, and the Kurdish and Palestinian Similitude: Qamishli Extended*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021: 270pp. This book has an anthology of poems translated from the Arabic including the poem "The Obscure."

¹¹ The word "diaphanous" describes "the veil of Heaven" in Barakat's poem "The Obscure," and elsewhere. See the Anthology in A. Butt (2021).

As a modern novel, our times do not inhibit the author from writing detailed descriptions of the innermost and most private aspects of the way of life in a Kurdish Sufi family threatened with destitution but still clinging to their wealth. Thus, Barakat with his deep understanding of the prevalent psychology and personality of his own nation can offer his readers a description of the marriage ritual and successful consummation of an unlikely marriage. He describes the marriage between the retarded childish girl "Sinem," who is "Benav's" niece, and the modern Kurdish youth who is desperate to perpetuate Kurdish identity, in the shape and form of "Bekas." Bekas being Benav's super intelligent baby son, matures astoundingly fast due to his entire life cycle being only one day.¹² As a young man, Bekas pressures his father to arrange a quick, in fact "same day" marriage:

Kirzo leads his brother and his betrothed through the snow to the spare room, swiftly, leaving behind a crackling sound in the snow. He carries a kerosene lantern with a quivering flame. Opening the door, he enters behind them. He hangs the lantern on a nail in the wall, sets it down on the stove—lighting it with a rag moistened with diesel, hung to a long wire. When he's checked the flames in the tin bottom of the heater, he slips out.

The bedding laid out near the stove had been readied in haste, with the thick quilt in an untidy heap, and the scarlet sheet lying negligently placed near the pillow as if waiting for someone to lay it on the bed. Bekas sat down on top of the quilt. It looked to be high off the floor. He beckoned to Sinem to sit down, so she chose a place on the carpet near the stove, in her bare feet heading towards the tin, which was starting to glow. Once seated, she looked like a little child about to fall down only to be grabbed by someone before she'd hit her back on the ground. The idiotic smile served to transform and abstract. So that Bekas felt he was taking part in a sort of medieval shadow play.¹³ He stretched out his fingers,¹⁴ caressed her waist, and she wiggled and laughed. He crawled off the quilt, and tugged at her seductive headdress. Her black braids vibrated. He seemed a little scared, somewhat daunted, but the giggling girl's naivety, and her lightheartedness, made

¹² The life cycle is only a "bubble" within the cycle of existence as birth, death, resurrection, and life after death according to the Qur'an; see Walid Ahmad Saleh, "Death and Dying in the Qur'an," in *Troubling Topics, Sacred Texts: Readings in Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an*, ed. Roberta Serman Sabbath, Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter (2021): 345-355: 348.

¹³ The Arabic is "لعبة"—a medieval shadow play.

¹⁴ In modern cinema, Bekas' spread fingers would create shadowy "flames" on the wall, a sort of shadow play.

it easier for him to go on with his unveiling of the stranger. His instinctive gasps rang out, concealing a smile like hers. His hand had crept down from her shoulder to her breast, and she hadn't shied away. Watching his hand there made the saliva sparkle at the corners of her mouth.

He drew away from her embrace, and asked her in a gruff voice: "Do you know why you're here?"

Sages of Darkness as a fantastical and philosophical tale

After a night of love, Bekas disappears into the twilight zone. We then hear about his bride Sinem's unfortunate life as a retarded child, prior to her marriage. It would seem that she grew up in a world full of idiots. Actually, the author of *Sages of Darkness* intends to portray the world as he sees it, full of idiots. Sinem is quite innocent and like the heroine "Sonya" in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* appears as society's victim:

The ghost-like figure of Bekas wandered through the gray interlaces of night and snow, trying to study the circular horizon no more than two steps away. He crouched, unable to move forward, and closed his eyes, smiling at his image of Sinem. "Idiots, why did my father choose her?"

"I wanted someone to talk to." Then as if he'd come to terms with himself about his futile question, or justified it to himself: "And who could I have talked to other than that giggling girl? Everything was like what it should have been, except that I was born on a day of that kind." He was bareheaded except for hair that almost reached his shoulders, in wet, patchy tufts. He lifted his cloak over the top of his head.

Once in the twilight zone, there is a lead-up to Bekas' memories of his one-day life cycle as the newborn son of Mullah Benav:

Bekas curved his torso until his chest touched his thighs, and when he stood thus bent over, he succumbed to the vibration of a sleigh swaying like an enchanted canopy. It was none other than his sleigh, led through the snow by women who looked like Sinem. Then, after the sound of a commotion reached him, he abruptly raised his head. With one eye peering out of the opening of the cloak over his head, he saw a group of men surrounding

him. Behind them were luminous bluish mules, as if a light had penetrated from somewhere, near but hidden, and illuminated just the animals. From where they were, the men were dim, their long, shaggy beards reflecting a trail of violet light shining behind their backs. "I've arrived," he muttered to himself, then tightened an invisible bridle in his hand as if he were driving a chariot. The circle of men and mules ran farther apart, making way for Bekas' wives, who walked down a passageway between Benav Bin Kojarei's wives—sleighs sent on in advance, circling round.

The light flickered from the window of Kojarei's twenty-year-old son Benav. Then it went out, and the snowflakes outside the window that had been lit up were dimmed. As for the room with Bekas and his bride, the flickering light too was there lighting up snowflakes, as well as laughter an inch away. Inside, Sinem of the idiots, no longer sat fully clothed.

Then there is a build-up to an account of Sinem's memories:

She didn't ask the idiots why her husband was no longer, since she wasn't aware of it. She was pre-occupied with other of her memories, insignificant apparitions, haunting days that were equally insignificant. Actually, she struggled to relate to the complexity of similar situations that her body had undergone, starting with that pain Bekas caused by his enthusiastic intrusion into her hereditary secret from a first grandmother to her last mother.

On that embarrassing date, when she was twelve, Heindar's cart had rolled his bull into the courtyard of Sinem's home, which was not walled at the time, and was used as a marketplace for corn. Heindar used to rent out his bull for mating with quite a few cows, for a hundred piasters made of cheap heavy metal and three-quarters silver blend. Coins like these were repeatedly confused with pure silver government mint. The matter would not be remedied until after a long time. Each piaster would become worth more than its estimated value after a rise in the price of silver. And, then virtually all such currency was smuggled across the border in containers and virtually disappeared from the land. Eventually, the government exchanged that piaster for a coin similar in size, but of cheap nickel. The price of an egg rose, and doubled throughout the land.

Heindar entered with his bull, leading it on a rope and calling out: "Ye Folk of the House,¹⁵ where is your cow?"

And Sinem's mother replied to him from inside, dough covering her forearms up to the elbows: "Heindar, I'm busy. Sinem will show you the way." And she shouted to the girl who was pouring water from a jug over the flour: "Take him to the barn."

So Sinem ran outside, and the disturbing memories after that would never leave her. And she, with ridiculous hand gestures, guided Heindar to the bustling and rumbling waiting cow.

There wasn't anyone else, so obviously the mother couldn't have assigned the task to anyone except that fool of a girl. And that one, making weird hand gestures, guided Heindar to where the cow waited, roaring and bellowing. The cow's constant bellowing would have bothered the household and all its residents until they decided to hire Heindar's bull. The bull's task accomplished would bring peace of mind to the usually calm dairy. Only the bull could restore the balance for those usually meek givers of milk. When the man rolled his ox into the barn the girl followed him. With her arms spread and her torso curved as the barn had a low ceiling, instinct told her to confine three sheep to a corner, lest they panic, startled by the abrupt entry of the bull into their safe kingdom.

Heindar turned around, toward the now calmed-down cow with his ox. He gently urged the ox to get on with what would bring him a hundred piasters. The cow's eyes seem perfectly serene, and even had something of a smile at the corners. The bull's belly was experiencing an elongation that was getting firmer and firmer. The girl stared at that elongation with carefree childishness. The bull raised its front legs and set them on the back of the cow. Heindar, in turn stared. He stuttered and his jaw dropped open. He was looking at the girl. Then he slipped his left hand from his abdomen to below it, and the movement caught her eye. There was a bulge under Heindar's jilbaab,¹⁶ which had a wide leather belt tied around the waist. He smiled noxiously, breathed heavily, and whispered, "Come here," and she came closer.

¹⁵ *Ahl al-bayt*: a polite way of addressing the family and members of the household.

¹⁶ جلباب jilbaab / robe.

Encouraged, with a swift movement that raised the rounded head—he grabbed her hand, and put it under his jilbaab—he pressed her hand to the junction of his thighs, and she pressed down without a murmur.

The bull's brutish movements honed in on Heindar's panting. When the bull bounced off the cow, the girl instantly reacted. She withdrew her hand, and a hot flush covered her, as she went into convulsions. She struck him with her clenched fist, beat after beat. During which Heindar yanked down his kaffiyeh from the shoulder, and quickly wiped off the girl's hand. He replaced his kaffiyeh, and then hurriedly left with his bull.

The author goes on to show the psychological effects of the above experience after telling the tale of another of the most shocking events of child molestation that Sinem endured. Then as now, parents seem to disbelieve the signs their children exhibit in favor of trusting such highly respected professionals as "Sumou,"¹⁷ a sage of darkness, whom the children addressed as "Faqih."¹⁸ Sumou taught some school subjects and the reading of some quranic suras, such as Surah Ya-seen and the short suras. Sinem's parents decided to send their retarded daughter to his school, "and placed in her hand a Quran bound in gold. Maybe, just maybe a thread of memory would activate and she'd absorb something worthy of a girl approaching her fourteenth year—like when mist from water falls into a gutter. . .

After school hours were over, Sumou punished anyone who was backward. . . In the last days of two months extemporaneous learning, Sinem again returned home late, as her parents had begun to expect. She had returned hopping on one foot every time. Her foot would barely touch the ground when as a result of the bamboo beatings she'd lift it up in pain. But, lo and behold, exactly eight days before the closure of that barren nest, dedicated to teaching correct language by means of memorization through hearing, she set off to return, walking with light-hearted steps, without any sign of pain, despite her being late.

No one had to understand the matter except for her, since she was freed from the punishment at a price determined by the sage, Sumou. And actually, the tyrannizer Sumou

¹⁷ Sumou: a quranic name ("Sumu" or "Sumou"). It means "exalted in rank."

¹⁸ Faqih / فقيه: a Muslim theologian also referred to as a "jurist" is versed in the religious law of Islam. The word "faqih" is in the English dictionary, but sometimes it seems preferable to use the word "sage" which translates the mishnaic Hebrew equivalent, חכם (hakham). The text in both cases is of course sarcastic, mocking, bitter.

had not kept on a "strongman" to grab his victim's legs for him to beat. He had asked just her to stay on, scowling in a way that made the other girls think that that naked room would soon be smashed: two walls to Gehenna, two walls to Heaven, and the ceiling would remain in place, suspended in the air, supported on the tongues of lizards breeding between wooden struts like the letters in their books. And how many of those lizards' young used to fall on open pages, or on laps as they sat still. A dumb wailing would crawl with them, bridled by the faqih's bamboo, which rose like a mast to save the world.

In the above passage, Barakat introduces a new "unimaginative symbol,"¹⁹ lizard symbolism.²⁰ The lizard has a long tongue; it becomes Barakat's symbol for lasciviousness. When he writes, "a dumb wailing would crawl with them [the lizards], bridled by the faqih's bamboo, which rose like a mast to save the world," Barakat is not only stressing the despicable hypocrisy of the "Faqih," (usually translated as "jurist"), but also succeeds in writing a supremely successful example of sarcasm.

On the below passage, still about Sumou's school, I invite my readers to give their opinions on the turn of events:

When Sinem was late, she no longer felt upset. As long as she satisfied the faqih—at what was to her an unworthy price. And if he had asked from the beginning, she would have responded so as to spare her dull mind a punishment that would inflame her feet with an almighty pain. The faqih says: "Lift your legs up," and you lift them up. He puts the bamboo aside, pulling it through his wide leather belt: "This is your new punishment." Then he touches her body, at its hot junction, with a gentle, hot something the girl doesn't see, but rather feels. As he bends over, he extends his stimulation and then gives out, like a calf mooing.

Conclusion

In his novel *Sages of Darkness*, Barakat deals with social issues, as do Dostoevsky and the Russian writers of Dostoevsky's generation who wrote what is now known as "socialist art." He expresses the idea that the world is a world full of fools, idiots. Supporting Barakat's theme is the

¹⁹ See A. Butt (2018), "The Unimaginative Symbols of Salim Barakat." <http://ijoks.com/> DOI: 10.21600/ijoks.383376 .

²⁰ Lizard symbolism is sometimes used as a love-provoking amulet, and etc.

quranic Surah 33:72, which translated by Saleh reads: "And we offered the Amanah to the Heavens, to the Earth and to the mountains, but they refused the burden and were afraid to receive it. Man undertook to bear it, but he has proved a sinner and a fool."²¹ In any case, it seems to the present writer that Barakat's theme points to the quranic text, and also that his theme is transparently applicable in the here-and-now when we have so much scientific knowledge, but still refuse to correct the wrong in many global issues, outstanding among them climate change. In any case, we will need to wait for the translation of the book to be completed to see how Salim Barakat, the most skilled of writers carries out the themes of his first 50 pages—his exposition. Of interest will be to see how much he uses the quranic text as a frame.

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²¹ Walid Ahmad Saleh, "Death and Dying in the Qur'an" (2021): 352.

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