



Salim Barakat's Genuine Novelistic Techniques: Sages of Darkness

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Abstract

The present study brings to light some of the original novelistic writing techniques that Salim Barakat evolved in his first novel entitled *Fuqahā' al-Zalām* (Sages of Darkness). With this novel, the author laid the foundation for techniques to be used in his subsequent novels. In the absence of an established Middle Eastern or Kurdish tradition of novel writing, Barakat had ample space to develop his own original techniques. He first published *Sages of Darkness* in 1985 in Nicosia Cyprus, and later published a second edition in Baghdad in 1994—with a further overlay of cinematic imagery and use of his own poetics and vocabulary as in his poems of the intervening period. An anthology of Barakat's poems in the original Arabic can now be read online. And there are also English translations in the Anthology of Aviva Butt's book of 20 September 2021 (see the References at the end of this article). A previous article on *Sages of Darkness* published in *IJOKS* 7 (1) (2022) attempted to establish the genre of Barakat's novel as psychological realism with philosophical and fantastical elements—the first 50 pages were examined. In this study, I will mention the frequent symbolic relationship of the environment to Kurdish life—as seen in the first approximately 120 pages. A completed English translation of *Sages of Darkness*, including the remaining 90 pages underway, will hopefully be published by early next year.

Keywords: Salim Barakat, *Sages of Darkness*, Kurdish novel, techniques in novel writing, development of the Kurdish novel

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Introduction

Sages of Darkness (1985 Nicosia Cyprus / Baghdad 1994 2nd ed) was Salim Barakat's first novel. He was an acclaimed Arabic poet at that time, and novel writing was in its infancy in Arabic and in general in the Middle East. Therefore, Barakat needed to find a suitable story and plot for his novel and also to develop the novelistic techniques needed to express his themes. He would no longer think in terms of a multi-layered text, but rather in terms of a text with a shift-in-meaning, the shift-in-meaning being a technique that he developed in regard to the vocabulary he had already put to use in his poems. Therefore, his novelistic text could be described not as multi-layered, but rather as "kaleidoscopic."

Thinking in terms of the cinematic: (1) Barakat's title *Sages of Darkness* sums up the book. It points to the Qur'an, Surah 33:72. And accordingly, his title expresses the idea that the world is full of fools, idiots, and also that there is both darkness and light as a physical phenomenon and symbol in our created world. These underlying themes are intertwined throughout the novel. (2) The story centers around the protagonist Mullah Benav, a Kurdish chieftain who takes on his shoulders the hardships of an Ottoman Kurdish tribe (extended family) and the surrounding community. Drought has brought on agricultural problems, and we soon learn that a decaying political scenario in a modern world presents insurmountable obstacles. 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. (3) And the plot unfolds in five episodes with a brilliant display of cinematic and novelistic techniques that say what Barakat wants to say. This study will focus on Barakat's original techniques. Barakat needed to evolve techniques that would become his "tools of the trade" for not only *Sages of Darkness*, but also for his forthcoming novels. The uniqueness and originality of his techniques have puzzled academics and so-called orientalist, and likewise the genre of the novel. My previous article on *Sages of Darkness* published in *IJOKS* 7 (1) (2022) attempted to establish the genre of Barakat's novel as psychological realism with philosophical and fantastical elements—the first 50 pages were examined. In this study, I will mention the frequent atmospheric scenic descriptions of vastness,

space, and high places, as well as fantastical scientific explanations. However, the basic genre can be reduced to psychological realism. In the book *Magical Realism and Literature* published as recently as 2020 by a reputable publisher, Cambridge University Press, the co-authors Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser perpetuate the erroneous perception that Barakat's novel is "magical realism." To quote: "One of the first fully-fledged magical realist novels in Arabic, *Sages of Darkness* (Syria, 1985), is written by a Kurd." They go on to argue that "its author, Salim Barakat, explores the infringement of the Syrian Arab Republic on Kurdish ancestral land. . . ." As for their argument, it seems that they did not read the book in the original. Moreover, to my knowledge, the 1985 publication of the novel was not published in Syria, but rather in Nicosia Cyprus where the author was living, and it would have been fair to mention that a later edition appeared in 1994.

Some Examples of Barakat's Novelistic Techniques

As the English translation of *Sages of Darkness* has yet to become available, I use long quotations from the first 120 pages of what will be about 220-250 pages when published. As will be shown, Barakat can write straight out suspense, an action driven tale. On the other hand, in keeping with modern stage, he uses fully rounded characters and includes character driven passages. The main protagonist is Mullah Benav. In his "one and only" situation as "mullah," head of an extended family, he must maintain the standards of moral excellence and composure as expected by the community. When an overwhelming problem outside the reach of how things "should be" upsets the ongoing well-being of the community, the Mullah starts talking to his alter ego. Benav's alter ego takes the shape of his much yearned for full-grown son who is wiser than himself and able to cope with the immediate realities of drought and economic hardship when he cannot. Bekas, his son, appears to him on the plateau of a high slope where the crowd have just congregated to bury what they think is the Mullah's deceased infant, ostensibly his newborn son:

He was so startled by his son's familiar voice that the box almost fell from his hand. He wrapped two and gave one to his son. And then, he held out his kerosene lighter and lit the cigarette for Bekas and lit his own. The Mullah's jaw was shaking from the cold, but he managed to speak: "Where have you been?"

"With them. I was with them."

Confused, the Mullah asked: "With whom?" Bekas raised his eyebrows in astonishment, as if his father should know what he meant. But the Mullah raised his eyebrows in turn, in expectation of an explanation.

And then, Bekas said: "Why did you come to this place, O my Father?"

"Why?" The Mullah whispered exasperated. Then he raised his voice: "Your grave is over there. We came to bury you. We buried your pillow, and the deed is done," he paused and inhaled the smoke from his lit cigarette. "That's why I'm here."

And his son informed him with his usual calm: "I'm alive. . . As for the pillow, I don't understand."

Another person who needs "Bekas," is the Mullah's son Kirzo, who is ten years old. Kirzo is the eldest boy of the Mullah's four children from his first wife. He is a wonderful boy who is of course very close to his father, and Kirzo accepts Bekas without querying his status as older brother. When Bekas disappears, Kirzo does not jump to conclusions and assume that his brother has died. On the contrary, the young boy—who is also courageous beyond compare and like the Mullah given to contemplation—wanders in the wilderness so-to-speak and converses with the apparition of Bekas:

Kirzo drew near. For a moment, the boy stared, astounded. Then, he let out a muffled scream: "Bekas, Bekas!"

Bekas raised his pale hands to his face and wiped away the rest of the snow. His face too was pale, his beard without color, bluish. He smiled, or perhaps it seemed so to Kirzo, who now reined in his feelings.

Kirzo whispered: "What are you doing here?"

Bekas said dryly: "And where should I be?"

"At home," the boy replied.

"Why should I be at home?" Bekas gestured towards the white expanse.

Kirzo turned around and was outmanoeuvred by his brother's reply. He chose a simple answer: "Aren't you cold?"

Kirzo was cold. His teeth chattered, and he had put his hands under his armpits to warm them. Bekas didn't turn his pale eyes away from his brother's face, as if awaiting a

tale that the boy had tried to conceal. But Kirzo couldn't make sense of anything, and that was it. Suddenly he remembered the reason for his presence, which loosened his tongue:

"I was supposed to go to the house of Avdei Sarei to tell him that you're dead."

Bekas raised his eyebrows, as if to say, "so?"

So, the boy added: "My father said you're dead." Then, smiling suddenly as if he had solved a riddle, Kirzo said: "Let's go home, you're not dead." But instantly his face revealed how important another question that came to mind: "Why did my father lie, Bekas?"

Bekas replied: "My father doesn't lie, Kirzo. You have to inform my grandfather, Avdei Sarei, urgently. Did you forget?"

The boy's lips went blue: "What should I tell Avdei?"

Bekas replied: "He died. Say to him, Bekas is dead."

Kirzo's shriek hovered over his drawn lips: "You're lying like my father!"

The issue of whether or not the Mullah had lied is of all importance. As Mullah, Benav epitomizes the admirable virtues which are a matter of self-respect to him and respect from his extended family, and the community. Again, the text points back to Surah 33:72, the same verse as did Barakat's title *Sages of Darkness*—the word *Amanah*: "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."²

As far as Barakat's technique is concerned. It is extremely difficult to write conversation between a protagonist and his alter ego. Barakat does that and writes lengthy such passages successfully. Moreover, when the young boy Kirzo who absolutely identifies with his father takes on Mullah Benav's alter ego as his own, we are witnessing a technique and piece of writing that is original and to my knowledge never done by anybody before and most likely will be too difficult for any other writer, other than Salim Barakat, to attempt in the future.

² Translated by Walid Ahmad Saleh, "Death and Dying in the Qur'an" (2021): 352.

From the Kurdish ballade to Barakat's Kurdish novel: a new novelistic structure

Chapter Two of *Sages of Darkness* has two ongoing stories: (1) the son of Avdei Sarei murders a rival who slanders Avdei and hurts his business as a consequence. This story supplies a colorful glimpse of Kurdish tribal history; (2) and the story of the conception of Bekas in Brina's womb, ongoing and related as a fantastical and highly scientific event. It is the latter unique and original presentation that is of interest, since it has the structure, unity, and continuity of the traditional Kurdish ballade.³ Whereas there is no actual refrain, there is the suggestion of a refrain by the identifying and repetitive description of Barakat's "creature" with the words: "the creature swimming in the sticky albumen." The importance of the "creature" is that it is a vehicle for the perpetuation of Kurdish existence: "They call me a creature, even though I'm their memory." The chapter ends with the conclusion of the ballade:

The creature stopped at the end of the tunnel, with a bump. A soft mass caught and enveloped it, as it sank into luxurious unawareness. The sperm that came from Mullah Benav's extension at last reached Brina's egg, and the embryo that followed would weave, with its red mechanisms, a person called Bekas.

To go back to the tale about Avdei Sarei, father of Brina, Mullah Benav's young wife. His son settled a grievance in context of Kurdish tribal interactions and Kurdish interactions with the State. Martin van Bruinessen briefly describes the background to why at that point in time the young man in Barakat's story could commit a murder and then seek refuge in becoming a smuggler involved in his father's side ventures:

To my surprise I found that the tribes had been shaped deeply by their interactions with the state and almost appeared as products of policies of the states that had been in control of the region. . . . The drawing of new borders separating Turkey, Iraq, and Syria in the

³ See Aviva Butt (2021). *Salim Barakat, Mahmud Darwish, and the Kurdish and Palestinian Similitude: Qamishli Extended*. UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

1920s, for instance, forced nomadic tribes to partially settle and change their migration routes but also offered new economic opportunities in the form of smuggling.⁴

Van Bruinessen quotes a remark made to him that spurred him on to research Kurdish interactions with the State. The remark is intended to contrast the tribal chieftain of those days with today's chieftain: "in the past, the major requirement for a tribal chieftain was that he must be courageous and generous. . . but nowadays only the man who knows how to negotiate with the state can become a chieftain." Van Bruinessen points out that the matter is far more complicated. In context of Barakat's story in times of the inception of modernisation, this could be better put as 'to *remain* a chieftain might involve skill in negotiating with the authorities, both then and now.'

Barakat's meaningful descriptions of landscape with his own "unimaginative" symbols:

Another technique that Barakat introduces to the secular novel is description of "meaningful" landscape. The first pointed example is when the Ministry of Education sends a teacher to help the village Mullah set up a notebook for keeping records of the village produce and so on:

[The teacher] used horizontal lines to underline names and places, and vertical columns for numbers, arranged like bricks on a wall. The father of Mullah Benav, between one thing and another, saw the white spaces as plateau with mountains on the far side of the village river. And he saw the protests in Lausanne, and the crowds in what looked like the heart of the Kurdish villages.

That is, Mullah Benav's father Hassan Bin Kojarei envisages his daily existence in terms of a very specific landscape. Namely, the vast open spaces leading to the magnificent view provided by two plateaus and a river and mountain range. An important section figuring Kirzo, Mullah Benav's 10-year-old son could be said to be an "Ode to Syria" or "Kirzo's Spiritual Journey through the Desert," a common Middle Eastern symbolism. It is a spiritual journey in an actual

⁴ Martin van Bruinessen (2022): "Foreword: the various manifestations of the Kurdish tribe." English original of a text published as 'ÖNSÖZ: Kürt Aşiretlerinin Muhtelif Tezahürleri', *Tuncay Şur & Yalçın Çakmak*, eds, *Aktör, Müttefik, Şaki: Kürt Aşiretleri*, Istanbul: İletişim.

landscape, a “wilderness.” For Kirzo, who one might imagine would be the next “Mullah,” the landscape offers him that sort of wilderness. When the boy set out on a mission for his distraught father, Kirzo wallowed in independence and took the opportunity to wander and reflect:

At first, Kirzo jogged, heading straight past the house of Avdei Sarei—actually not his grandfather but called “grandfather” out of respect for his stepmother’s father. Then he slowed down and cut through white open spaces on the north side of the western district. He had to walk in a curve to enter alleys where the houses were lined up adjacent to the vast open border. In the distance the houses cut off to the north and scattered, surrounded by the fields of Aleppo up to the Syrian-Turkish border wire.⁵

When Kirzo had gone half the way, his father’s request to hurry no longer weighed on him. “He let his thoughts wander, in that snowy wilderness. . .” And the intensity of his emotions built up.

Conclusion

Salim Barakat’s first novel transitions from his remarkable and modern Kurdish poetry. He writes a remarkable and modern novel. He has done the impossible. Barakat always starts from logic. Thus, from Noah in the Qur’an and Hebrew Bible and others in ancient antiquity who lived for nearly 1,000 years to a theoretically possible further shrinkage to our own approximate one-hundred-year life cycle and then to a life cycle of one day, seems plausible. And, the author accordingly created Mullah Benav’s newborn son Bekas. In any case, Bekas has a profound role to play, as the Mullah’s companion, the Mullah’s alter ego. Not only in the light of the close relationship between father and son is it obvious that Bekas has to be Kirzo’s alter ego, as well but because Kirzo will become the next “mullah.” Bekas carries the baggage of thousands of years of tradition, and the Mullah needs him not only to solve the problem of the Mullah’s lonely situation in life, but also to give Barakat’s protagonist, the bearer of memory—the creature with the dome-shaped head—a chance to produce likenesses, new generations, *ad infinitum*.

⁵ The fields of Aleppo: The area is one of the most fertile in Syria, with wheat fields and orchards covering the plain south of the city. Aleppo is situated on a plateau.

With his first novel, Salim Barakat achieved the impossible. He wrote not just a modern mainstream novel, but also a novel with innovative techniques that have stood him in good stead for his many subsequent novels.

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