



Article

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Salim Barakat's First Novel: *Sages of Darkness*

Aviva BUTT<sup>1</sup> 

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Abstract

Aviva Butt has just finished translating in collaboration with the author, Salim Barakat's first novel *Fuqahā' al-Zalām* (*Sages of Darkness*) written in 1985. The translation was done from a later original Arabic manuscript roughly the same as the 1994 Baghdadi edition. *Sages of Darkness* is a Kurdish Sufi novel depicting Kurdish life in late Ottoman times. It is, in fact, a philosophical novel with a strong dose of psychological realism, written in a style derived from Classical Modernism. And so, it is mainstream literature, an achievement in view of the late start in novel-writing by the Kurdish far-flung writers' community. The action line, full of suspense, violence, and murder, is greatly about the tribal notable "Avdei Sarei," who does everything he can to ensure the survival of his business and the economic health of his endeavors. In this article, the translator of *Sages of Darkness* analyzes Barakat's novelistic techniques for the purpose of prompting a better understanding of the novel, and by-the-by, if possible, to solve the enigma of the meaning of the title.

**Keywords:** Salim Barakat, poet and novelist, *Sages of Darkness*, Kurdish novel, psychological realism, Kurdish Sufism, Islamic Kabbalah,

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author, Independent scholar, Tasmania, Australia: [avivabutt@winshop.com.au](mailto:avivabutt@winshop.com.au),  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4710-4475>

## Introduction

Salīm Barakāt (Kurdish: Selim Berekat) 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 of age, he left his birthplace and has never returned. From then on he wrote poetry and prose, almost all the content of which has been connected to his own Kurdish existence. For the past twenty odd years, he has lived in Sweden where there is a Kurdish writers' community. As evident from my book of 2021,<sup>2</sup> together with the as yet unpublished translation of the novel under discussion, Salīm Barakāt is the greatest of the mainstream Arabic modern poets and also most likely the greatest writer of modern mainstream literary fiction.

During 2022, I translated Salim Barakat's novel *Sages of Darkness (Fuqahā' al-Zalām)* from the Arabic original to English, in collaboration with the author. In 2022, I also wrote two articles on *Sages of Darkness*, both published in the *International Journal of Kurdish Studies (IJOKS)*. Now I would like to add a few more remarks having come to the end of translating the book.

The present translation, the first to English, is from the manuscript the author sent me, and it approximates the 1994 Arabic edition.<sup>3</sup> In taking on an increased aura of mysticism between the 1985 Cyprus publication, and the 1994 first edition, it shifts from being greatly psychological realism to become a philosophical novel with extensive description of Islamic Kabbala.<sup>4</sup> One might say that it is a Kurdish Sufi novel that illustrates the way of life of Kurdish communities in late Ottoman times. This period in Ottoman history was not only a period of transition to adapt to modernization and a global economy, but also a time of corrupt Ottoman governance and collapse. Inevitably there would be tensions, and in fact there was so much economic hardship and insecurity in general, that even the "mighty men" of those times were crazed by the extreme hardships they endured. Thus, the historical background yields a suspenseful tale, as well as the need to interpret ongoing tragedies, and then to re-invent Kurdish culture which is currently common in different parts of the world such as Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey (Babayiğit, 2020; Babayiğit, 2021 & Karacan & Babayiğit, 2017). The historian Michael Eppel makes a few

<sup>2</sup> See Aviva Butt. *Salim Barakat, Mahmud Darwish, and the Kurdish and Palestinian Similitude: Qamishli Extended*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. UK: September 2021: 270 pp. This book has an anthology of poems as Appendix and analyzes the more recent techniques of the poets discussed.

<sup>3</sup> Salīm Barakāt, (1<sup>st</sup> edition). *Fuqahā' al-Zalām / فقهاء الظلام [Sages of Darkness]*. Baghdad: Al-Mada Publishing House, 1994. Previously published in 1985 in an earlier version in Nicosia Cyprus.

<sup>4</sup> See Aviva Butt, "Salim Barakat's novel, Sages of Darkness: Who is Benav's son Bekas?" *International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 8 (1), January 2022: 82-98. <https://doi.org/10.21600/ijoks.1028134>.

comments about the period of the Tanzimat Reforms in the Ottoman Empire (1839-1876) and towards the end of the nineteenth century, relevant to understanding Barakat's novel:

On the one hand, the elimination of the tribal Kurdish emirates and the weakness of the Ottoman administration allowed the tribes and tribal leadership to gain strength over the course of the nineteenth century. . . . But, even as landowners became more powerful, the elimination of the autonomous emirates that had ruled over the tribes strengthened tribal frameworks and loyalties. Insecurity, anarchy, robbery, and violence increased, against the background of impotent Ottoman rule and poverty and the constant struggle for survival in the harsh terrain and climate of Kurdistan. . .

In the vacuum that followed the elimination of the emirates, the Sufi shaykhs became more influential. . . Though modified to some extent, the tribal patterns were basically preserved, with some tribes still headed by traditional tribal notables, while others congregated around the shaykhs. The lack of significant change in the conditions of production and survival contributed to the preservation of tribal social patterns, notwithstanding the disappearance of the emirates.<sup>5</sup>

In *Sages of Darkness*, Barakat's protagonist Mullah Benav is one of those "traditional tribal notables" mentioned above by the historian Michael Eppel. The novel opens with a description of a Kurdish Mullah laying claim to moments of private contemplation. At the same time, the author establishes the methodology he will use to achieve his goal of unity and unbroken continuity for his lengthy novel:

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.

Some of the men roundabout rose from where they sat, intending to ingratiate themselves with him. But he didn't turn towards them. He spread his prayer rug and performed two Rak'as, thus prolonging the externalities of prayer with fading murmurs of thanks, and words of praise.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Eppel. *A People without a State: The Kurds From the Rise of Islam to the Dawn of Nationalism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016: pp. 65-66. DOI: 10.7560/309117.

That is, just as there are the externalities of prayer as differentiated from the Mullah's heartfelt prayer, in the forthcoming chapters there will be the tale of historical externalities of a tale interwoven with the mystical and fantastical workings of a human drama. In Chapter Two, an ongoing ballade will provide an altogether additional parallel content—miraculously, due to the skill of the author providing touch points from time to time between the ballade and the second narrative with its often mysterious and strange content.

The book, Barakat's first novel, has five chapters which are lengthy, all the more so since each one contains intertwined narratives. Chapter One begins by bringing to the fore the protagonist Mullah Benav, who is highly respected in a Kurdish community of the Hasakah Governate, where he lives in late Ottoman times in Syria. The Mullah's existence in this environment seems to hearken back to a Kurdish Golden Age—a sempiternity in which its no-time (*waqt*) will soon shift to a world of present, past, and future, a different kind of time (*waqt*)—a shift-in-meaning. The Mullah himself explains the world in which he lives:

For anyone who finds favor in Allah's eyes, his affairs would run properly of their own accord. At the neighbors, women baked bread for the family, in an oven, ample supplies for the winter from the sacks of flour. The butcher chose the best of the meat, and took it to the gate himself, even without being asked. The children were spoiled, the relatives competing to win his wife's affection, so that she would of course intimate to him, who was worthy of his excessive generosity. Even a stray olive sapling in the courtyard, not grown more than a meter in seven years, would find someone willing to loosen the earth around it.

But no more. Now Mullah Benav is witnessing “a great decline in his agricultural activities.” He is, in fact, confronted with the effects of drought, alongside new ideologies, new farming methods, and attempts by the Governate and local government to exercise tighter, unwanted, and bumbling control of Kurdish communities that were once run autonomously. The Mullah is confused and unable to cope.

The Mullah cannot reconcile his expectations, what he demands of himself as a good, a righteous, and a moral person—and at the same time cope with for example the immediacy of his community's pending economic disaster:

The men noticed but didn't question the Mullah's distancing himself from them. Perhaps his sorrow had caught up with him and he'd stepped aside to hide his feelings as befitting a man of his status. They thought about it and forgot about it. Meantime, the Mullah reached the gravestone, all the while not taking his eyes off that black whatever-it-was—the tip of a cloak? He walked half-way around the gravestone and found himself face to face with what was concealed. Dumbfounded, he felt as though he'd scream. A certain looseness in his joints was overcoming him. He felt a stinging sensation from under his tongue to under the skin on his face, on his eyelids and on the edges of his lips. He slowly disintegrated and collapsed in slow motion onto the snow, where he sat—exposed to a pair of eyes that looked at him in utter calm.

In the below passage, the author uses the device of personification to present two ghosts. The image that is the Mullah, an image in our familiar world—and the image the Mullah sees—in colors that include violet and bright yellow, suggestive of very bright light that is blinding to whoever beholds it—the image that is in the intermediary world of images, that is, “radiance.”

A white face with violet tufts of hair hanging at both sides. Eyes with a bright yellow hue. A greyish beard, and a shapeless head under a cloak that fell from the top of the head over the rest of the huddled body. The creature's back was resting on the gravestone. “Be-ka-as,” the Mullah muttered between clenched teeth. His face had changed a lot, but there was something about him that was unforgettable. Was it the mockery in his eyes? Or perhaps the eyebrows attached to the slope above the base of the nose? Or was it the convex nose, like the nose the Mullah displayed on his face? Altogether it was the face of the father, despite the coloring of the mask.

The Mullah's outward appearance, as described in the last chapter, Chapter Five of *Sages of Darkness*, in retrospect becomes anecdotal and emphasizes what embodies an era disconnected with our modern vision:

The Mullah, like all men of the North, had a small round pocket mirror, with a mottled copper cover, which when he shut it became an elegant box to be put into

the pocket of his loose jacket. He also had kohl, made of the bone of the hoopoe, and a small blue bag in which the kohl was kept. He wrapped it up when he finished using it and knotted a braided cord of pure silk threads over it. As for his tweezers with which he trimmed his mustache, they were made of brass, with rust-green at the corners.

There is a disconnect with what has become a global and imposed Western materialistic vision in our modern times, and his outward appearance matches the venerable Mullah's understanding of beauty and a way of life that was Good, not Evil, and in keeping with the antiquity of Kurdish traditions. Prior to Islam, dualistic concepts of Zoroastrianism were strong throughout what was then the Persian Empire and the Arabian Peninsula. In Zoroastrianism, "all physical existence became a mixture of good and evil, light and darkness."<sup>6</sup> Due to Kurdish oral traditions, especially poetry, this straightforward, unbending, and dualistic view of Good and Evil found expression in Kurdish Muslim belief in the succeeding Islamic period. The Kurdish peoples adopted Islam in its earliest manifestations during the first and second Caliphates,<sup>7</sup> the Rashidun Caliphate (632 CE), and the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE). Accordingly, assuming Barakat's book is still representative of the present majority Kurdish outlook, Muslim Kurds have clung to early Sufism (mysticism), early philosophy such as that of Plato,<sup>8</sup> and history achieving continuity with the past unto the mystery of the creation. That is, there has been no disruption in the Kurdish view of past, present, and future as happened for example between the ancient and the modern Greeks. As Kappagoda says in his dissertation *Semiosis as the Sixth Sense: Theorising the Unperceived in Ancient Greek*, "explaining the perceived in terms of what is unperceived" is a particular kind of theory-making.<sup>9</sup>

Barakat mentions Mechanical Philosophy and "mechanisms" in his novel. Here we have René Descartes' new formulation of the ancient thought of the Greek philosopher Aristotle which then could be said to have evolved over a period of time:

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Zajonc. *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind*. Oxford University Press, 1993: p. 42. Available as pdf: <https://archive.org/details/catchinglightent0000zajo> .

<sup>7</sup> Eppel. *A People without a State*, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Not the philosophy of Ibn Sina' which entered the three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam at a much later date as religious philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> See Astika K. Kappagoda. *Semiosis as the Sixth Sense: Theorising the Unperceived in Ancient Greek*. Dissertation in Discourse Analysis, Dept of Linguistics, MacQuarie University, Australia, 2004: p. 9.

What are the building blocks of the universe? If the world is a book, what are the letters? Aristotle had given an answer in terms of the four elements, the four qualities, and something called 'prime matter.' René Descartes believed he had a completely different answer, and many of his contemporaries agreed. Descartes was a French-born philosopher who developed what came to be known as 'the mechanical philosophy,' according to which the natural world consists in nothing but matter in motion. Descartes' universe was a stripped-down version of Aristotle's: Descartes' had one element rather than four, and the only qualities he recognised were shape, size, and speed. The mechanical philosophy, so-called because it depicted the world as a machine, was extremely popular in the seventeenth century, not just among philosophers but among a wider public. The philosophy certainly had its critics, some of them vociferous, but many critics ended up modifying the philosophy rather than rejecting it altogether.<sup>10</sup>

Although the actors in Barakat's Kurdish drama for sure never heard of Descartes or his Mechanical Philosophy, Barakat finds mentioning this modern version of ancient philosophy a convenient way to explain Kurdish thought and traditions. And in so doing, he puts forth his own view of the created world as being all of it 'matter,' that is, 'physical' with specific geometric forms and shapes—and confirms, in accord with the ancients, cyclic.

#### CONTINUITY THROUGHOUT THE NOVEL

The author achieves continuity throughout the novel. Each long chapter describes the story of the externalities in the life of Kurdish enclaves in the region, in the main hardships, as well as the philosophical aspects of Kurdish existence.

In the case of Chapter Two, Barakat deals with shape and form, perceptual and perceptive forms, animalistic abstractions, and other philosophical concepts to do with creation and creativity; these are also common in Kurdish divans in terms of mythological legendary and religious heroes (Tanrikulu & Babayiğit, 2021a ;Tanrikulu & Babayiğit, 2021b). The chapter opens with the beginning of what will be a continuous free form ballade, interrupted at intervals by a parallel tale of murder and the needed heroism for economic survival among the Syrian

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<sup>10</sup> John Henry. *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science*. Chapter 5 (The Mechanical Philosophy), London: Red Globe Press, 1997.

Kurdish enclaves. The narrator describes incidents revealing the corruption and the relationship between the local government, and the provincial government, and the resultant chaotic scene for the “governed.”

Chapter Two starts out with a free form ballade that tells the tale of a “creature,” in fact a sperm, whose passageway to “completion” also serves as an imaginative account of happenings in the waters of creativity. This poem, identifiable by the repetitive hint of a refrain, “the creature swimming in the sticky albumen” or a variation thereof runs the length of the chapter:

A creature crawls in the darkness. Rather, it swims in the darkness, effortless but floundering in sticky albumen.

Thousands of white creatures, resembling it with their round heads, and spindly threadlike tails proceed onwards acting in the same way, swaying left and right, in a mysterious race through the sticky albumen over the darkness of the tunnel floor. One of them will arrive, the creature knows, and driven instinctively will come out into the light. . . . Engorged by its speed, it says: “They call me a creature, even though I’m their memory.”

Barakat uses the tale of his “creature,” a sperm “engaged in a mysterious race,” as a miniscule of the events in the waters of creativity. Moreover, as the poet says, the sperm’s importance is that it is the memory of generation after generation, the memory of both shape and form, passed on through the organ that the poet refers to as the male “extension.” Details of such events are not described in scripture, which leaves a gap for the poet to use his imagination:

“Self-importance,” [the creature] repeats these words to itself. “The question is whether or not to pre-occupy myself with what will grant me form, more than with this big blind entourage, merely attracted to smell—how boring.” And it goes on, exuberant: “Completion is awaiting me!”

Later on in the ballade, the poet puts into the mouthless head of his creature the following memories of past events in Kurdish history:

As the creature races along in a feverish journey, it unceasingly exerts its memory to call up images from the past: “This lying-in-wait in a thicket is not the



first time,” it says to itself. “The stalker is pitifully disoriented. . . . The creature remembers the intrigues and the call of the tanbur to Kurdish fighters:

Despite the feverish journey, the creature unceasingly exerts its memory, groping about in the thin network, icy cold. “This lying-in-wait in a thicket is not the first time,” it says to itself. “The stalker is pitifully disoriented.” Well, there is another installment to that physical loftiness, achieved by sound coincidence. “Open up, open up!” The creature speaks mind-to-mind to the feverish contestants and its own feverish alarm due to its wanting but not finding sempiternity. How preposterous!

In the above passage, when the narrator says that “there is another installment to that physical loftiness, achieved by sound coincidence,” the poetic device of sound symbolism, *jalāl* (loftiness) resembling *jabāl* (mountains) hints at the landscape, and is therefore a reminder that the ambush is on a high mountain. Barakat wrote an epic in 1985 with twenty-one episodes and with no title other than perhaps the word “Turns,” the first word of a short introductory verse of four lines: “Turns. A midday of feathers. Diligence describing the night. / Unearthly dust, // And a tomorrow as if an enemy stalking strange alleys.”<sup>11</sup> *Sages of Darkness* uses a vocabulary similar to that poem both here and elsewhere.

## BEFRIENDING EVIL

Dovetailing with the Ballade of the second chapter of *Sages of Darkness*, is the story of Mullah Benav's father-in-law, and tribal notable, “Avdei Sarei”—to be specific, his struggle for economic survival. He is unsuccessful in protecting Kurdish farmland against the Bedouin who live in tents and rove and steal without regard for the rights of settlements—and are supported by the foreign imperialist governance. Carrying on with his usual but depleted trading, Avdei's smuggling business over the Syrian-Turkish border supplements the community's income. He finds it unbearably hard to come to terms with the loss of his heroic son Majido, whom he sacrifices for the sake of the survival of his family, the community, and Kurdish notions.

Unlike Mullah Benav, Avdei Sarei is prepared to compromise and to befriend “Evil.” In a long poem, an epic that Barakat published in 2004 entitled *al-Mu'jam* (The Obscure), the poet

<sup>11</sup> For the Arabic of the entire epic, see Salīm Barakāt. *Al-A'māl al-Shi'riyyah—Salīm Barakāt* [The Poetry Works—Salīm Barakāt]. Beirut: al-Mu'assash al-'Arabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 2007: pp. 351-371.

explains the Kurdish outlook on Good and Evil, and also the reasoning behind Avdei Sarei's need to ask help not from Good but rather from Iblis, that is, from Evil. To briefly quote from that thirty-page epic:

*Call to him, O Evil;*

*Call Good away from an end that is without prior succession; without future succession.*

*[Laws of ] purity as argument the bones will defile the earth without further ado.*

*Your dung produces the reason for verdure in a verdant field of ash.*

*By reason you are also luxuriantly green an offering of ironclad enticement; by reason*

*Of the certainty. . your young lad is impervious to what is righteous, what is immoral. .*<sup>12</sup>

In the above lines of Barakat's poem, the subject of insurgence against Heaven is introduced. The "young lad" is enticed and unwittingly answers the call to insurgence. The word *hayr*, previously translated as "good" now has another dimension, a shift-in-meaning to "righteous," in a bad sense, near to being the opposite to good.

Avdei Sarei and his network engage not only in legitimate but also illegal trading, which leads to smuggling from over the Turkish border when the opportunity arises. The sheer brutality and on-the-spot justice of the smuggling trade contrasts with the strict code of honor of the participants and at times their heroism—the incredible courage needed to succeed on a well-policed border. Majido, the heroic son of Avdei Sarei, father of Mullah Benav's young and beautiful wife Brina, dies upholding his and his father's Kurdish code of honor. This tale is full of suspense and also has an undertone of tragedy. In the case of Majido, Avdei Sarei's son, obedient to his father, he enters the story when he settles a grievance in context of Kurdish tribal interactions and Kurdish interactions with the State. He murders Bavei Joanei, who committed the wrongdoing of slander and badly injured his father's reputation and livelihood.

The scholar 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 1920s, for instance, forced nomadic tribes to partially settle and

<sup>12</sup> *Al-A'māl al-Shi'riyyah—Salīm Barakāt*, 2007.

change their migration routes but also offered new economic opportunities in the form of smuggling.”<sup>13</sup>

#### THE TALE OF THE INTERNALITIES: KABBALA AND LOVE FOR A WOMAN

Whereas the tale of Avdei Sarei's son, Majido, largely deals with externalities, we find that Kirzo, the Mullah's young son by his first wife, like his father is immersed in mysticism.<sup>14</sup> He is entrenched in Kabbalah, the Islamic mystical philosophy first discussed in written form by the Andalusian Şūfī, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (1164–1240) in one of this greatest of philosopher's most prolific works entitled *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*.<sup>15</sup> The author of *Sages of Darkness*, true to form, searches for origins, this time regarding the esoteric tradition, the received tradition, that is, Kabbalah. His novel *Sages of Darkness* illustrates a Kurdish way of life in which the actors live out the notions of Islamic Kabbalah. From speaking with the author Salim Barakat, I understand that he like for example Avishai Bar-Asher of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem finds a commonality with the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah in the origins of both. What is especially relevant to an understanding of Barakat's poetry is the notion of divisions of the celestial heavens into seven (sometimes eight) levels, and as vivified by Barakat in *Sages of Darkness*, the division of our world of images into two, both known as *barzakh*. In his article “The Ontology, Arrangement, and Appearance of Paradise in Castilian Kabbalah in Light of Contemporary Islamic Traditions from al-Andalus,”<sup>16</sup> Bar-Asher writes on the heavenly divisions:

This study is a comparative analysis of the appearances of the lower and upper Paradise, their divisions, and the journeys to and within them, which appear in mystical Jewish and Islamic sources in medieval Iberia. Ibn al-‘Arabī's vast output on the Gardens of divine reward and their divisions generated a number of instructive comparisons to the eschatological and theosophical writing about the same subject in early Spanish Kabbalah. Although there is no direct historical evidence that kabbalists knew of such Arabic works from Catalonia or Andalusia,

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Kirzo is ten years old when the story opens. With the disappearance of the Mullah, Kirzo's stepmother returns along with the Mullah's children to her father Avdei Sarei's house. There, Kirzo grows up to be thirteen years old.

<sup>15</sup> Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabī, 1946.

<sup>16</sup> In: *Religions* 2020, 11, 553; doi:10.3390/rel11110553

there are commonalities in fundamental imagery and in ontological and exegetical assumptions that resulted from an internalization of similar patterns of thought. It is quite reasonable to assume that these literary corpora, both products of the thirteenth century, were shaped by common sources from earlier visionary literature. The prevalence of translations of religious writing about ascents on high, produced in Castile in the later thirteenth century, can help explain the sudden appearance of visionary literature on Paradise and its divisions in the writings of Jewish esotericists of the same region.

It seems as though Kirzo is destined to be the next Mullah. The incredible landscape reaching out to him from the threshold of his father's house beckons. Its mountain ranges, two plateaus, and vast spaces below are for Kirzo a place to wander and meet with visions of the intermediary world of ghosts and apparitions. Barakat writes:

He looked up into the vast expanse where unhurried, starlings crossed the hermetic field of his despair. "Kirzo, Kirzo." A voice came from somewhere. The boy listened intensely to pinpoint the source of the sound. He thought that he could have heard his own scream echoed in the cold white kingdom as far as he could see. But then steps away, his name was repeated. He started, then stood up: On a mound of snow flaking away, there was a ghostly being propped up on its knees in prayer, the lower leg covered under the layers of snow. The boy stepped back to better note the features of the figure he was viewing, but his panic-stricken eyes were veiled by a translucent curtain of grey vapor.

At first, only the eyes and nose were distinguishable in the ghostly face, but then the snow mask started to crumble bit by bit due to the movement of the jaws, and also the lips when he spoke the name of "Kirzo." He again murmured: "Kirzo!"

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

With the death of Kirzo's father and disappearance into the intermediary world, Kirzo and his siblings, along with their beautiful young stepmother Brina moved from the Mullah's house to the house of Avdei Sarei, Brina's father. And in the next three years, Kirzo grew into an amazing

thirteen-year-old with an elegant single curl on his shaven head, as was the custom. Avdei Sarei built a new house, and his band of smugglers followed him and settled down with their families in an alley. Avdei Sarei entered into seclusion, and the two “mighty men,” Hishmo and Jahwer attempted to replace him. They blocked the alley and controlled the comings and goings of the inhabitants. Kirzo taunted them and tried to arouse in them a realization of their dead-end situation. He nevertheless found a much sought-after freedom and independence on the rooftops:

The houses were joined one against the other, on both sides, as was the case with the houses of the Western Quarter in general, so that a person, or animal, could cross the whole distance moving from roof to roof. There were some breaks, inconspicuous as they were, they could be crossed by a boy leaping, which is exactly what Kirzo did. He'd lift his robe to above his knees, and then leapt. In that way, Kirzo was able to observe the alley that Jahwer and Hishmo had blocked, and on the other hand, with a few quick steps to witness passageways to the west or east, parallel to the blocked alley. The whole scenario, from his “observatory,” tickled Kirzo's sense of humor, so much so that no sooner had he left the rooftops than he returned to them, casting his shadow here and there, according to the direction of the sun. Moreover, Kirzo was captivated by the casting of his shadow.

However, eventually Kirzo being isolated, became angry and bitter:

Kirzo prevented Hishmo's children from climbing the stairs to the rooftops, so they had to content themselves with standing by the gate and watching from there. Kirzo himself claimed a monopoly of the view over the alley, passageways, and everything in sight. Taking possession of the rooftops, without allowing even the hens to join him, he isolated himself, becoming angry and bitter. His eyes were deeply sunken, the sockets seeming to contain the whole neighborhood as if it had shrunk.

Blocked from a normal existence and in a situation he could never hope to solve, he turned to his stepmother Brina, his one and only confident. Barakat writes:

Kirzo didn't reply, except to lift his head and look at her sorrowfully. In fact, they were friends, and they were used to discussing trivial matters, in general, together, since Mullah Benav disappeared. Brina consoled him, and Kirzo consoled her, accomplices, without design, to compensate for what they had missed due to their predestinations, the clear and unerring part it played. She was his mother, and he was her husband. Maybe things had gotten mixed up. And Brina let him down for neglecting him as a boy, in one way or another. He nevertheless responded, come what may, to the rule of her restricted femininity, accomplishing what she asked of him, in silence.

Femininity is like the whisper of the wind among broad corn leaves. It whispered between the boy and the woman, as imperious and resonant as is a whisper: "We want to be. . . and the boy completed with his eyes what he couldn't complete with his tongue.

So the woman again asks him to explain: "What do we want to be, Kirzo?"

The boy closed his eyes nervously, then slapped his hands on his forehead, indicating a sudden emotion added to a strong emotion: "Hasn't anyone seen for Heaven's sake?" And when he saw that his father's wife was perplexed about what he'd left unsaid, he grabbed her hand and almost dragged her up the stairs to the rooftops: "Come. Come on."

It was natural that Kirzo's eyes would be sunken, but should one have felt derisive or sad about that. Brina, for a fleeting moment, felt that her own eyes were straying from a visible exterior to the hidden depths of herself. No imagination could ever offer such a defined distinction articulated in unswerving detail. It was the difference between the blocked alley and the passageway, and what went beyond it to the west, which she couldn't visualize. Kirzo, watching the woman's face, and, of course, not seeing what she saw, nevertheless started to smile, gradually, according to the reversals in the woman's face. Brina, almost beseeching, began to rock from one side to the other, as if comparing one scenario to its counterpart, hoping, with the movements of her pleading hands, to stop the delirium of the floundering reality. But it was the visible that was flickering, like a

stream, beneath the overhead observatory where the woman and the boy, and the sky stood together, pursuing its dominion over forms.<sup>17</sup>

Barakat writes a unique love scene, filled with compassion for two people caught in an unnatural situation. He leaves judgement to Heaven, and his readers with something to think about after the final curtain call.

In any case, Brina decides to return to the Mullah's house, standing empty and untouched under the watch of the stunted olive sapling in the middle of the courtyard, mulling over events from the viewpoint of its existence as a plant. The little sapling welcomes Brina's return along with Kirzo and his siblings, even though the touch of the Mullah's hand turning over its leaves is missing. Brina brings the pregnant "Sinem" with them. "And the sum total of the whole farce was that Sinem had given birth to a male son in the guise of his father, in his cycles." With this sentence, the author clarifies that Bekas the son of Bekas is Bekas in another cycle of his existence. And actually Sinem exists in another cycle of her existence. The pair, Sinem and Bekas illustrate the physical existence of the Kurdish people along with their culture; Sinem and Bekas marry for one night.

In the last chapter, Chapter Five, the author clarifies some points that might have been puzzling his readers. For example, the returning "ghosts" have a philosophical discussion:

Still standing, Bekas II replied: "Did you see my twelve twins entering with me?"

And the ghost muttered: "No," while quietly looking around him.

And Bekas II, near to exploding, stamped on the carpet: "You're as limited as are your mechanisms."

Then the ghost likewise arose in order to face the other, and he started to shout: "You'll back off when I tell you some of what my mechanisms do to you."

Then Bekas II, replied: "You'll back off, and your mechanisms will explode when I recite to you the list of my [death] agonies."

In the above dialogue, Barakat puts into the mouth of "ghosts" a discussion that hints at Mechanical Philosophy, the doctrine that all natural phenomena, including life and thought, can

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<sup>17</sup> "Overhead observatory" first meaning the high up view the two had from the rooftops, then enjoying a shift-in-meaning to Heaven's view of the created forms that are below the skies.

be explained with reference to mechanical or chemical processes. Early mechanical philosophy saw life going around in terms of cycles or circles. These theories were hinted at elsewhere in the novel.

There is one mystery that Barakat does not solve for us, namely, the meaning of the title of the book, "Sages of Darkness." The first and obvious explanation is to say that the novel is about dark and troublesome times. Or that some sages still existed. Or that a generation preferred to pass from the light of day into the world of shadows and darkness, rather than face our modern times. Or that people, even their sages, were and are ignorant fools, in which case the motto that I placed at the start of the book resounds throughout this saga of an extended Kurdish family: *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* (Surah 32, Al-Ahzāb:72).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّهُ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا

The translation is by Walid Ahmad Saleh in "Death and Dying in the Qur'an," *Troubling Topics, Sacred Texts: Readings in Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an*, ed. by Roberta Sterman Sabbath. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110650617-020>.



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### Miscellaneous Resources

- Almaany English Arabic Dictionary: <https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/>
- Lexilogos Arabic Transcription. [https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/arabic\\_latin.htm](https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/arabic_latin.htm) .
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