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## LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# English letters, Kurdish words: Debunking Orientalist Tropes in Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd*

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**Abstract:** This study discusses the affirmation and negation of Orientalist tropes in Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd*. As novel by a London-based Iraqi Kurdish novelist, *Letters from a Kurd* exemplifies many of the issues which inform literary production in transnational and diasporic contexts. While references to recent studies of world literature by David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Pheng Cheah, and Rebecca Walkowitz provide a framework for discussing and understanding the conditions of the novel's production and circulation, Edward Said's critique of Orientalism provides us with a critical standpoint for discussing the novelist's representation of the Kurdish society. The findings of the study suggest that, despite the demands of the global market and the Orientalist history of the English language, the novel provides a nuanced representation of the Kurdish society by debunking Orientalist fixities stereotypically attributed to Middle Eastern communities.

**Subjects:** Literature; Middle Eastern 21st Century Literature; Literature & Culture; Literature & Language; Literary/Critical Theory; Novel

**Keywords:** Kae Bahar; Kurdish novel; born-translated novel; Orientalism; world literature

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The acceleration of economic and cultural globalization in today's increasingly cosmopolitan world has brought about a renewed interest in world literature and affected the way it is defined and appraised. This is particularly significant with regard to the Middle East which has produced, in the past few decades, a growing number of authors who have tried their hands, more than any time before, in writing works addressed to a global audience. Kae Bahar is one of these authors. The present study investigates his debut novel *Letters from a Kurd* (2014) via the theoretical framework developed by contemporary critics of world literature including David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Pheng Cheah, and Rebecca Walkowitz. It discusses the dynamics that affect the production of literary works addressed to a global readership and the extent to which Bahar's novel fulfills and/or problematizes these determinants.

I have in me Shiite blood, Sunni blood, Christians, Turkman, even Jew, Armenian and some Persian. If I go back further, no doubt I'm part Babylonian too.

(Bahar, 2014, p. 242)

## 1. Introduction

*Letters from a Kurd*, one of the first Kurdish novels in English and Bahar's debut novel, deals with war and political turmoil at a critical time in Iraqi Kurdistan's political history. It narrates the story of the Kurdish people's difficult times under Saddam Hussein from the viewpoint of Marywan Rashaba (Mary), a Kurdish teenage boy growing up in Kurdistan. The novel records the traumatic experiences of Marywan and a host of other characters when Saddam's anti-Kurdish policies were being implemented through unimaginably atrocious means. To survive the harsh realities of his surroundings, Mary escapes to the dream world of cinema, particularly the Hollywood, and dreams of escaping Iraq and becoming a filmmaker. Meanwhile, he keeps writing letters to his favorite American actor, Clint Eastwood, his Gringo, wherein he recounts his personal tragedies and traumas and asks for help. He asks Gringo to take him to America and save him from the agonies of life in Iraq.

In the following sections of this article, an attempt has been made to provide a critical reading of Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd* as a novel produced in a transnational context and informed by the conditions of literary globalization.

## 2. Methodology

The present study is a descriptive and qualitative piece of research. Accordingly, no quantitative findings would be offered at the end. The objective of the present paper is to study Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd* as one of the Middle Eastern diasporic novels published at a time when writing in English is being increasingly welcomed by Middle Eastern writers who aspire for global readership. The subject is analyzed based on the theoretical framework developed by contemporary critics of world literature including Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova, Cheah, and Walkowitz. To discuss the dynamics of the text, it is also necessary to refer to Edward Said's critical tenets on Orientalism.

### 2.1. *Letters from a Kurd* as a born-translated novel

*Letters from a Kurd* is an example of what Walkowitz calls born-translated novel: a term for those novels that approach translation as "a condition of their production" (Walkowitz, 2015, p. 4). A born-translated novel is written both for translation and as translation from the outset, in the sense that it aspires to be translated in multiple languages and simultaneously pretends to happen in a language other than the one in which it is composed (p. 4). It also pretends to be written "from translation" (p. 4), and accordingly, self-translated (p. 22). Furthermore, by decoupling the relationship between language and geography, a born-translated novel caters for multiple audiences at the same time. In this way, it challenges the traditional tenets about literary history, "native" readers, and "the novel's traditional role as an instrument of monolingual collectivity" (p. 46). Thus, it problematizes the binaries of native/foreign, original/translation, monolingual/multilingual, and nation/world (p. 45).

While it deals with Kurdish (local) setting and characters, *Letters from a Kurd* is composed in a global language. As a born-translated novel, it is composed in English, although there are at times non-English references, words, and expressions that remind the reader of the fact that the novel is an intentional self-translation from the outset. It is probable that Bahar has preferred English over both Kurdish and Arabic (as the language of his novel) in the hope of a wider readership, or in an attempt to present himself as an international author. He prefers, in other words, an international language over what Casanova calls a "small language" (2005b, p. 135) from the peripheral literary spaces. Bahar writes, nevertheless, in a glocalised mode.<sup>1</sup> He selects material from his homeland and presents it in an international language. By so doing, his novel decouples the relationship between language and geography and deconstructs the dichotomies of original/translation, center/periphery, and native/foreign.

While *Letters from a Kurd* has the general characteristics of a born-translated novel, its addressing and challenging of Orientalist representations of gender and sexuality add a critical significance to this novel and an additional layer of complexity to it. As a born-translated novel about the contemporary Middle East, *Letters* faces the unique burden of both fulfilling and challenging Orientalist stereotypes of gender. In order to work out this argument, the article addresses the representations of gender in the novel to show how the apparent affirmation of stereotypical gender roles, together with Orientalist notions about the Middle Eastern subject, is silently, but critically, deconstructed to provide a more nuanced representation of Middle Eastern subjectivity.

## 2.2. The global market and the lure of exoticism

Borrowing Immanuel Wallerstein's model of the world-system's theory, both Casanova and Moretti conceive of the world literary system as an unequal hierarchical system marked by tension and struggle for domination and literary legitimacy (Casanova, 2005b, pp. 4, 12, 42–43; Moretti, 2013, pp. 22–32). In this unbalanced struggle, one of the ways for the writers of the periphery to achieve literary authenticity and recognition and “to struggle against [...] invisibility” and negligence (Casanova, 2005b, p. 177) is to write in the language(s) of the dominant literary centers. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova lists two possible alternatives available to authors from the so-called small<sup>2</sup> countries of the literary peripheries: *assimilation* on the one hand, and *differentiation* on the other (p. 179). The first one has to do with cosmopolitan tendencies, whereas the second one champions nativist tendencies. Authors from the peripheries

have to make an unavoidably painful choice: either to affirm their difference and so condemn themselves to the difficult and uncertain fate of national writers (whether their appeal is regional, popular, or other) writing in “small” literary languages that are hardly, or not at all, recognized in the international literary world; or to betray their heritage and, denying their difference, assimilate the values of one of the great literary centers. (Casanova, 2005b, p. 180)

Bahar does not confine himself to one of these mutually exclusive choices, but employs a mixture of both. While his novel reverberates with details of the homeland's culture and tradition—details that might, for the most part, seem unfamiliar to the English-speaking reader—it also makes frequent references to American cinema. Reference to American cinema as a compendium of American popular culture, which is known to most of the world through the global reputation of the Hollywood, strikes a balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar. However, the point to be made here is that, due to Bahar's peculiar choice of the Hollywood material, many of these references may go lost on readers (especially younger ones, even among the Americans) who are not familiar with them.

Moreover, although Bahar's references to American cinema acknowledge the influence of Hollywood on a Kurdish boy's personal life and, thus, seems to praise Hollywood as a redeeming force, it turns out as a structural irony at the end of the story: ironically, as Mary becomes disillusioned with his Gringo and renounces his idealization of America, the story of his life becomes like an Eastwood film in which, as a lonesome hero, he is determined to save his loved ones and destroy the sources of evil.

One can argue that the account of the political, cultural, and social circumstances of a nation by an insider satiates the foreign readers' thirst for authentic “exotic” stories of distant lands. These exotic stories spiced with tints of adventure are validated due to the simple fact that they are instances of what Fatemeh Keshavarz (2007), calls “eye-witness literature” (p. 2); what Saba Mahmood (2008) terms “native testimonials” (p. 83).<sup>3</sup> In such novels, the writer, as Gillian Whitlock (2008) states,<sup>4</sup> has the privileged status of a mediator between the two cultures. She is an insider and an outsider too. She is “just ‘Other’ enough to represent her subject authoritatively, and at the same time familiar enough not to alienate her audience” (p. 14). These writers are in a liminal position, so to speak. They are not complete insiders or outsiders to either the home or the host cultures.

*Letters* focuses on the lives and circumstances of a group of characters residing in Kirkuk, a province in Iraq (whose status as belonging within or beyond Kurdistan is hotly contested) with Marywan Rashaba, a teen from a lower-middle class family, as the focal character. It follows the line of his progress from naiveté<sup>5</sup> to growth toward political, ethical, and social maturity. To meet the expectations his (Western) readers bring with them in their reading of tales on the Middle East, Bahar foregrounds those elements from his homeland about which the readers have heard elsewhere, in other narratives, as well as in the news, and of which they are curious to hear more yet. Most of these expectations have to do with images and tropes with which the Middle Eastern geography is indiscriminately associated.

Throughout the novel, one can discern numerous instances of such images. Before enumerating some of these images, it must be explained at this point that as a Kurd from Kirkuk who personally experienced similar hardships under Saddam's regime, Bahar has a great sympathy for the people to whose communal trauma he gives voice. However, being written in English, a language heavily burdened with Orientalist tropes, shaped by the discursive boundaries of the novel as a mainly *Western* genre, the demands of the literary market, and the tradition established by other diasporic novels from the Middle East, cause the narrative to be inadvertently informed by a number of familiar Orientalist tropes; an entrapment that happens somewhat *unconsciously* in spite of the author and which is compensated for in the "moments of truth"<sup>6</sup> in which the narrative constructs its own counter-narrative. (This argument will be elaborated below.)

Some of these Orientalist tropes are reproduced through the setting of the novel. Iraqi Kurdistan, the geography in which almost all the narrative is set, is depicted as the land of oriental pedophilia—which threatens Mary throughout his childhood—, oriental despotism, political corruption, the oriental Harem, violence against women, oriental superstition, cultural and social stagnancy, and oriental philistinism.

There are references to the practice of female circumcision—a local practice that causes the death of one of Mary's intimate childhood friends, Shadi, "Happiness" (Bahar, 2014, pp. 25–26). The image of female circumcision, it must be mentioned, is so popularly associated with the Middle East, particularly with Muslim communities, that it has been reproduced and referred to in numerous other narratives on the Middle East, an instance of which is Ava Homa's short story "I'm Not One of Them" (Homa, 2010, pp. 49–60). There is also reference to honor killing, a practice "which usually applied to women" but was also used at times "against young boys identified as Hiz.<sup>7</sup> Or, even worse, who were merely suspected of being Hiz" (Bahar, 2014, p. 54).

Even the front cover illustrates a remote, rural area with the main character in his local costumes playing a traditional local game named "Haluken." The cover promises the Western readers that they are about to read an exotic tale about a forsaken land. This paratextual element discloses the Western readers' *shaped* tendency to associate the Middle East with preindustrial, medieval settings untouched by civilization and modernity. This pre-modern setting, however, does not render the geography an idyllic paradise. Far from it, it reproduces the Middle Eastern geography as a stagnant entity devoid of social dynamism and change.

Another example of such Orientalist tropes is "a British gentleman's" estimation of the Kurds in one of his history books as "hardworking, avaricious savages" (Bahar, 2014, p. 281). This same gentleman contends that, "The Kurd has a curious habit of disparaging himself and his brethren" (pp. 280–281). It seems that Mary, the protagonist, has internalized some of those fixities of the Orientalist discourse which expose themselves in his descriptions of his people. "It was not without reason," he recalls, that "some stranger noted that the Kurds had the curious habit of loathing their own people and enslaving themselves to strangers" (p. 338).

An important factor that must be considered in the appraisal of novels like *Letters* as "global" literary products is the extent to which they promote literary tourism or tourism at home. This

notion is borrowed from Pheng Cheah's insightful analysis of tourism, and particularly ecotourism, in his *What is a World?* (2016, pp. 216–245). Literary tourism which is made possible through reading narratives that unfold the lives of people in distant lands—distant from the perspective of the Western reader—provides the opportunity for the Western reader to pay a visit to the unknown worlds of the novel at a very low cost. This literary journey, through which time and space get compressed, eliminates the risk factor—risks involved in trips to unknown, war-stricken, dangerous places like the Middle East wherein linguistic and cultural barriers duplicate the problems of communication. This virtual travel, it must be noted, doubly troubles the already troubled hierarchical relationship between the Easterner and the Westerner. It posits the Westerner at the superior position of power. S/he becomes the active voyeur, the gazing subject, and the Easterner the voyeured, the seen, the passive object of gaze (Oliver, 2001, p. 149); a dichotomy in which one reclaims her/his superiority, authority, and control while the other is pushed to the background, becomes subjugated and controlled. Hence, it might be argued that in such novels, the non-Western culture is commodified as a mass market product to be sold out to the centers of the world to satisfy the whims and pleasures of its readers. True as it is, it is only part of the story, however, as it will be elaborated in the followings sections.

The portrayal of the daily lives of Middle Eastern women is one of the key concerns of the novel. It seems to gratify the Western readers' longing for a peep under the veil and reiterate their presuppositions about what lays there. The way Mary describes his mother's relationship with his father and the role she plays in her family in particular and in the society at large gives the reader the impression that she is a subjugated woman whose life is confiscated by her husband. It seems that there is no bond of love between the couple: "Father did not greet her. No 'good morning' or 'good night' or 'have a nice day' like the husbands and wives do in American films. I had never seen him give Mother a hug or a kiss" (Bahar, 2014, p. 20).

As Cyrus Amiri has argued, in many recent Anglophone novels by diasporic Middle Eastern authors such instances of cold marital relationships are explained in cultural and religious terms—as part of an allegedly loveless culture which has no understanding of love and has no place for man–woman relationship beyond the so-called "arranged marriage" which has always been a favorite Orientalist trope (Amiri, 2013, p. 55). Although Bahar evokes these tropes, he does not succumb to the Orientalist explanation. Sharply contrasted to Mary's mother are a number of other female characters, including Papula, Sunshine, and Aida, who speak out against harassment and discrimination, seek love, or defy social norms in other ways.

Unlike Mary's mother, Papula is an outspoken, modern woman to whom Mary was attracted "because she spoke English and loved films" (Bahar, 2014, p. 116). She is portrayed as a strong woman, "a real extrovert and straight-to-the-point" (Bahar, 2014, p. 116) whose complaint that "I was not born to be a housewife," (p. 116) disclosed her objection to the strictly defined gender roles.

In spite of her difference from the typical housewives of her country, she had been forced to marry Mary's uncle, Arsalan, nicknamed Flathead, in an "arranged marriage" (p. 117). Noticing Papula's obstinacy, Flathead, being a possessive, authoritarian, and controlling husband,—the typical way a Middle Eastern man, father, husband, or son is portrayed in most of the Middle Eastern novels and memoirs—stops her from continuing her education at secondary school (p. 116) and starts making restrictive rules to confine her even more in the claustrophobic culture depicted by Mary. Despite her individuality and difference, however, she is subject to the same omnipresent discrimination that Mary's mother and the rest of the women face; a discrimination that results in her suicide. Yet, Papula's revolutionary spirit cannot be tamed. Even her suicide can be read as the final expression of her subversiveness and her revolt against her husband's control.

Two other female figures painstakingly depicted in the novel are Aida, Mary's first love, and Khorataw, or Sunshine, his second love and wife. Like Papula, Aida and Sunshine are in sharp contrast with Mary's mother. Aida, a Christian Iraqi girl who works in one of Kirkuk's modern

shopping malls, is an outgoing confident woman who dares to challenge the sexually biased norms of her country—a risky enterprise for which she pays with her life. She is raped and killed instantaneously by Abu Ali, a member of Mukhabarat, the Iraqi intelligence service. (It must be remembered, of course, that she was raped and killed by Abu Ali partly due to his personal animosity with Mary.)

Sunshine is Mary's English teacher's daughter and his intimate friend's sister, who, like Mary, develops an interest in film and photography and gradually gets into a romantic relationship with him. Being brought up in an enlightened family, like Aida's, she finds the guts to move and act against the grain and to challenge her society's sexual politics by refraining from the traditional code of behavior attributed to her sex. Sunshine's final political activism also problematizes the stereotypical associations of Middle Eastern women with passivity and negligence.

The attempt for moving toward a more nuanced picture of the geography and its people reveals itself, moreover, in the seemingly Orientalist description of Middle Eastern masculinity. Men in Bahar's novel are of two types: the first group includes prejudiced, narrow-minded men like Darwesh Rashaba, Mary's father, and his uncle Arsalan, Papula's husband, who enslave and silence their wives and children and deprive them of their human rights. This group fulfills the Western readers' expectations about Middle Eastern masculinity. This kind of expectation is not formed out of a vacuum, of course. It is, by and large, the result of the stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern men propagated in Western media, political discourse, and the frequent Orientalized portrayals of Middle Eastern/Muslim men in popular narratives, filmic or otherwise, the antecedents of which are the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western travelogues.

There are a second group of men, however, who contradict the stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern masculinity. The first example is Mary's maternal grandfather who "loved his wife" and called her "Gulbahar, Spring Rose" (Bahar, 2014, p. 21). His love of her deceased wife was to the extent that "'every year when the roses blossomed,' Mother said, 'your grandfather would cut a bunch and place it on your grandmother's grave'" (p. 21). Other examples include Shamal, Mary's English teacher, an enlightened man whose relationship with his wife and daughter is based on reciprocal respect and love. He also is represented as a lover of music, film, and art—a feature which puts him in a sharper contrast with Mary's father who associated music and arts with the Devil. The next character is Mary's close friend, Jam, who is also an admirer of art and high culture. Yet another example is Samir, nicknamed Norman, who is likewise an appreciator of fine arts. Although most of these characters are different from the first group as a result of their constant touch with the Western culture, through English language, art, and film, there are others who, like Mary's grandfather, have no touch, whatsoever, with the Western culture, and still are the kind of respectful men who contradict the stereotypical image of the Middle Eastern father and husband. Meanwhile, as the narrative progresses, the reader learns about the social and political events which made Rashaba, among others, the kind of sullen person he was. Recounting his mother's words, Mary says "she often told us that my father was the sweetest man on earth until my grandfather's death" (Bahar, 2014, p. 22). At the age of 16, Rashaba becomes a "Peshmerga" to fight for the rights of his people, but he is disillusioned when the Ba'ath political party takes power in Iraq and destroys many Kurdish villages and massacres Rashaba's entire family (Bahar, 2014, p. 16). He is disappointed all the more and lays "down his gun in protest" when "the Kurdish leaders could no longer share power, and the Kurds also split into opposing factions" (p. 16). All these, along with the burdensome financial insecurity the family faces, as well as the traumatic life under Saddam's regime, make Rashaba an intemperate conservative man insensitive to the beauties of life.

Another aspect of the novel that needs a deeper analysis with regard to the Oriental-Occidental relationships is its portrayal of America. From his childhood, Mary develops a keen enthusiasm for America, its language, its culture, and particularly its cinema. In fact, the "letters" of the title of the novel refers to the letters Mary writes to his favorite American actor and filmmaker, Clint Eastwood, his Gringo. "With no one to talk to," Mary says, "I turned

to Gringo, and I secretly wrote him my first letter, crying for your help to come and take me away to America” (Bahar, 2014, p. 54). From his childhood he dreams of leaving his devastated country for America, the country of his dreams, where he can pursue his favorite career in acting and filmmaking; a career the pursuit of which seems almost impossible in his homeland due to both the political instabilities and his father’s lack of respect for arts. In order to achieve this long-awaited wish, he even contemplates stealing all his father’s savings to give to a smuggler to take him out of the country. His own country is represented as America’s uncanny other. As in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by the Iranian-American authors Azar Nafisi and *Infidel* by the Dutch-American-Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali—the two texts which rely solely on the Western canon as the sole redemptive source through which the writers come to know about “concepts of freedom, struggle, and adventure,” equality, and democracy (quoted in Blumenthal, 2012, p. 255),—Mary<sup>8</sup> views American cinema and English language as agents of intellectual awakening. American films offer an alternative space to the political, cultural, and ethnic oppressions of the lived space. They become, in other words, not only a source for Mary’s enlightenment but also the sole source for his escape from his homeland’s cultural stagnancy, as well as the horror and trauma of war. Against his war-stricken country, there is America, “the land of dreams and opportunity,” (Bahar, 2014, pp. 184 and 308) “the land of freedom,” (p. 185) the complete antithesis of his own “twisted society,” (p. 260) the prospect of which worries him “beyond reason” (p. 260).

Nevertheless, as Mary grows up, he gradually develops a more realistic understanding of the country and his own people. Learning from his uncle about Henry Kissinger, the American Secretary of State under President Gerald Ford Jr. “who betrayed the Kurds in 1975 in our war against Saddam, bringing disaster to our people,” Mary becomes “truly disappointed to learn that Kissinger was American. Until then, I believed the Americans were all great people” (Bahar, 2014, p. 61). A later disappointment is brought about when he gets to know more about American history through the film *Soldier Blue*. This disillusionment is reflected in his next letter to Gringo wherein he declares “I believe your people treated the Native Americans atrociously. They suffered terrible injustices, just as my people and I are suffering now at the hands of the occupying powers in our land” (p. 237). Another disenchantment is still to come when Mary realizes the American government’s constant support of Saddam’s tyrannical subjugation of his people:

You should know that your American money and weapons, given to your beloved monster, are used to spread terror in my country, and to take away the lives of many innocent women and children of all faiths and races: Kurds, Arabs, Turkman and Christians. (Bahar, 2014, p. 331)

Nonetheless, he does not put the whole blame on the Americans. He believes that his own people “are also the culprits in serving Saddam, but the difference is that they do it because they have no choice, whereas you do it because of greed, in order to steal our wealth, our oil” (p. 331). Although he has written this letter at a moment of extreme wrath because of receiving no response from Gringo, he, nevertheless, changes his mind about leaving the country for America when Teresa Miller, Jam’s wife, comes personally to fetch him. He decides to become a freedom fighter instead to help his own people in achieving their freedom. Mary’s refusal to go to America, his decision not to wait for Gringo’s help anymore, and his subsequent political self-consciousness can figuratively amount to Bahar’s own decision not to be overwhelmed by English language or the overpowering demands of the market. His born-translated novel, as explained before, preserves its Kurdish overtones by the help of its glocalized mode and local content, or, to borrow from David Damrosch, by its treating of “local matters for a global audience” (2009, p. 109). In other words, like the focal character who finally chooses neither to be effeminated by his idealized American hero nor by the hyper-masculine defenders of Saddam’s regime, but rather take matters into his own hands, the author resists the Orientalist overtones of the English language and the mainly Western genre of the novel.

### 2.3. *The emancipatory powers of storytelling*

Mary's letters to Gringo pay off for him and, of course, for Bahar in an ironically different way: it is through this practice of letter writing (and storytelling) that Bahar's semi-autobiographical<sup>9</sup> protagonist emerges as an author. The fact that the bulk of Bahar's own story is told through these letters (hence the title *Letters from a Kurd*) underlines their significance in giving voice to the protagonist/novelist. It is ironical, since Mary's emancipation is made possible not through the American actor's intervention, but through his *inaction*: if Gringo intervened and took Mary away, we did not have the letters and the novel in their present form. By leaving out Gringo, Bahar makes a powerful commentary on the relationship between the America and the Kurdish people on the one hand, and the relationship between himself and the English language, on the other: Mary's rethinking of his relationship with Gringo, turning him from a redeeming subject into a narrative device (the addressee of his stories), mirrors Bahar's own ability to adapt English language, and the expectations of English-speaking readers, to his own purposes without giving in to the Orientalist tropes.

Through depicting the fictional, at times improbable, incidents of a fictional character, Bahar re-narrates the lived history of the people who were, as an ethnic and linguistic minority, tortured and massacred under a totalitarian regime. There are references to Saddam's *Anfal* of the Kurds, chemical bombing of Halabja, and the Arabization of Kirkuk. It is, accordingly, not only the story of a teen, or a family, but the story of a people and a country at a critical time in its history.

Storytelling is of tremendous significance in this novel. It inaugurates by Mary's decision to confide the story of his life to Gringo through letters. From the outset, the Mukhabarat learns about the letters through the city's post office clerk and records them to identify potential intruders/ traitors. After years of spying on Mary's life through his letters and identifying and either captivati- ing or killing all the people around him who were deemed dangerous, it is time to annihilate Mary himself along with his story. They take possession of all the letters, but they know that he has kept a copy of each and they intend to get those copies as well because of the irreparable conse- quences that result from their publicizing: "If your story were to be published, it could be very damaging to our president, which means that I, Abu Ali, and everyone else in Kirkuk would have to pay for your shit. Your story must die with you" (Bahar, 2014, p. 335). Marywan's letters, conse- quently, have a figurative emancipatory function. They endow an oppressed and silenced people with the means to communicate their suffering to the whole world. As Teresa reminds Mary, "[more than half the world do not even know that Kurds exist, let alone who they are, where they live, and in what tragic circumstances" (Bahar, 2014, p. 406). In such a situation, Mary, through his letters; Jam, through his films; and the author himself through his book become their "people's ambassadors]" (p. 406).

Bahar's appreciation of the writer/artist as the ambassador of his people illuminates all the more his intentional decision in choosing English for composing his novel. He wants literary centers of the world to hear his narrative. Like the diasporic Kurdish writer Mehmed Uzun, Bahar "trie[s] to write those pages as a world citizen and a Kurd and thus establish a bridge between my language and the world" (Uzun, in Sievers, 2016, p. 443). By placing Goran, the influential Kurdish poet of the twentieth century, alongside Joyce, Tolstoy, Lorca, Shakespeare, and Chekhov (Bahar, 2014, p. 102), Bahar, like Uzun, intends to write "Kurdish literature into world literature" (Sievers, 2016, p. 443).<sup>10</sup> This effort to enhance the visibility of Kurdish literature hints to the fact that, as a literature of the peripheral literary spaces, it has already been overshadowed by the literature of those who are politically dominant. This reminds Casanova's claim that "to one degree or another [...] literary relations of power are forms of political relations of power"<sup>11</sup> (2005b, p. 81).

### 2.4. *Novel as a transcultural space of belonging*

Bahar's project to write Kurdish literature into world literature is accomplished neither through a purely Kurdish text nor through a purely English (or Orientalist) one, but through a hybrid novel. This transcultural move is indicated in several ways in the novel. In parts of the narrative, one can

discern instances of a cosmopolitanism which transcends local prejudices and trespasses national considerations. Angered by the horrific acts of Saddam's men, who were mostly Arabs, Mary "hated the Arabs so much that" he "wanted them wiped out" (Bahar, 2014, p. 321). After visiting his grandfather's close Arab friend, Abu Rasul, (and what a coincidence it is!), who remembers that "before Saddam put his vile spell on us, Arabs and Kurds were not such enemies" (p. 321), and who defends Mary against Abu Ali's gang, he apologizes for his blind hatred of the Arabs.

Another manifestation of the writer's glorification of trans-lingual and trans-ethnic human bonds and the proximity and kinship of all human ethnicities is the character of Norman. Samir or Norman is half-Kurd, half-Arab. In his first encounter with Mary, he introduces himself as follows: "I have in me Shiite blood, Sunni blood, Christians, Turkman, even Jew, Armenian and some Persian. If I go back further, no doubt I'm part Babylonian too" (Bahar, 2014, p. 242). Norman is a citizen of the world. He is not subject to the local prejudices of ordinary people who define themselves in terms of a single monolithic culture.

Another indication of Bahar's cosmopolitan tendencies is his choice of the setting of the novel. Kirkuk is portrayed as a multicultural city wherein Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Yezidis, and Muslims live together. Although dominantly Kurdish, the city is an intersection of different cultures, religions, and languages. Kirkuk also abounds in oil resources, and its big oil industry has made the city all the more cosmopolitan. Oil experts from different international companies who visit the place add to the racial, cultural, and linguistic variety of the city. Recent political disputes over the political and ethnic allegiances of the city of Kirkuk show not only the city's geopolitical significance but also its multicultural identity.

Employing such cosmopolitanism, the novel itself becomes a transcultural space of belonging, a space which appreciates hybridity, plurality, and tolerance of difference and by so doing treads in the way of what Goethe defined as the aim of world literature proper. The ethical end of world literature is to reveal, according to Goethe, the universal humanity that exists above all particular cultural, linguistic, and national differences; the universal humanity that connects all the human race together in spite of their differences and produces an equanimity and tranquility among human beings through mutual understanding and tolerance, even celebration, of difference. "The idea" of world literature, he asserts, "is not that nations shall think alike, but that they shall learn how to understand each other [...], and, if they do not care to love one another, at least that they will learn to tolerate one another" (Goethe, quoted in Cheah, 2016). "Reading world literature," Damrosch argues, "gives us the opportunity to expand our literary and cultural horizons far beyond the boundaries of our own culture" (2009, p. 46). It provides us with the opportunity to transcend the human-made boundaries of the nation-states to discover the shared human concerns at the core of each and every literary piece.

### **2.5. Political activism as subjectivity**

Bahar's treatment of the relationship between gender identity and political activism is equally interesting. Mary acts on his political conscience only after he has resolved his confusion over his gender identity and identifies himself as "male." Meanwhile, he also starts to question the tenets of his religion. It seems that, for Bahar, gender/sexual identity and religious identity affect political activism. Religious and political "consciousness," in particular, seem to exclude each other in an almost stereotypical (hence, perhaps, Orientalist) manner. Almost all of the peshmargas are portrayed as irreligious, while almost all men of religion are portrayed as politically passive, or worse, as the enemies of their own people. While this might be read as an outright rejection of Islamic faith, it is subject to irony in at least one significant way: this doubt over religion happens at a time when Saddam was abusing Islamic teachings to justify his criminal acts against the Kurds (for example the famous Anfal verse from the *Quran*) and oppressed all differences in the name of the unity of the Islamic People. Three decades before the publication of Bahar's novel, the famous Kurdish poet Sherko Bekas expressed this sentiment in "A Complain to God," his famous elegy for the victims of Halabja chemical attack. God's third-rate secretary, an Arab named Obaid,

returns Sherko's complain letter with a note: "Arabic only! No one speaks Kurdish in God's palace. You know not this idiot?"<sup>12</sup> (Bekas, 2016, p. 77) Kurdish readers of both Sherko and Bahar interpret these ideas not as outright rejection of Islam, the main religion in Kurdistan, but as criticism of the ideological abuse of Islam for the Arabization of the region. Throughout history, Arabic administrations of the region have used the prestige of Arabic language (as the language of *Quran* and *hadith*) as justification for racial discrimination against non-Arabs, including Kurds.

While the first half of the novel explores the advantages and disadvantages of Mary's fluid gender identity in a male-dominated society, the second half explores his political activism after he finds out he is not a neuter but a man. Like Virginia Wolf's *Orlando*, in a novel by the same title, whose fluid gender identity lets her/him experience life from the perspective of both a male and a female, Mary's supposed neutrality, as well as his physical feminine traits like his long hair, his mother's treatment of him as a girl, and his own curiosity about the world of women, provide him with the opportunity to enter the world of women. (Even his obviously male Kurdish name "Marywan" becomes the obviously female English name "Mary.") His supposed gender neutrality even justifies his uncle's decision to send him to his house to sleep in Papula's room when he himself is away from home. This provides him, and the readers of Bahar's novel, with the opportunity to see the world of women from a more intimate vista and feel the injustices and hardships they encounter in a male-dominated society. On the other hand, the realization of his male identity in the following years of his life allows him to inaugurate a more socially and politically active life; a life which is most probably denied to the majority of women in his society.

Although this treatment of the relationship between male identity and political activism in Kurdistan may seem to uphold the trope of the silenced and helpless oriental woman, it can be modified in at least two ways. First, in Bahar's novel we catch glimpses of powerful women—some of whom even end up as freedom fighters—and it is erroneous to understand political activism as an exclusively male sphere, although it is also true that women have to pay higher prices for acts of nonconformity. Second, the fact that Mary's realization of his male identity coincides with his questioning of the values of his society and religion seems to challenge the stereotypical image of the Middle Eastern man as the privileged defender of a male-dominated culture that systematically suffocates women. Indeed, Mary and his friends exemplify an appropriate model of masculinity against the one exemplified by Saddam's men who use sexual violence as an integral part of their control machine.

### 3. Conclusion

This article investigated Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd* (2014) via the theoretical framework developed by contemporary critics of world literature like Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova, Cheah, and Walkowitz. The acceleration of economic and cultural globalization in the contemporary world has affected, to a great extent, the practice of Middle Eastern authors who have turned, more than any time before, to writing globally appealing narratives which aspire for universal visibility and appreciation. It is under the effect of such forces that a considerable number of them have turned to English, along with other global languages, for the composition of their works; a decision in the hope of a greater and more global readership; a shift which may protect them from literary invisibility. Kae Bahar is an example of this new generation of authors. He chooses English for the penning of his debut novel. As it was noticed, the dynamics of the global literary market and the demands of publishers and the reader-consumers have been considerably significant in such an artistic decision as well as in the very choice of the subject matter and its portrayal.

A detailed reading of the novel suggested that through practicing self-translation, *Letters* constructed a culturally and linguistically translatable narrative. By so doing, it addressed itself to a global audience. Furthermore, the novel exemplified many of the issues which inform literary production in transnational and diasporic contexts: factors like the demands of the global marketplace, geopolitical equations, and the limitations as well as the opportunities the genre of the novel offer. *Letters*, notwithstanding, preserves a degree of originality and authenticity and

succeeds in portraying a nuanced picture of the Kurdish society. Instead of succumbing to a predictable narrative the ups and downs of which are predetermined by the earlier tradition of diasporic Middle Eastern fiction, *Letters* recounts a nuanced story which questions the expectations of the global, particularly Western, reader, challenges the presuppositions of the Orientalist discourse, and problematizes the stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern masculinity and femininity established by other diasporic novels on/from the Middle East. The novel discusses multiple issues, such as gender relations, ethnic relations, and the political and cultural significance of America and the Anglophone world in Kurdistan, among others. It must not be forgotten, nevertheless, that those problems are sites of contest, and that there are voices in Kurdish society that do not appear in the novel (religious intellectuals, for instance). Surely, however, the author describes and gives voice to aspects of the Kurdish, as well as his own (as a Kurd who spent a critical period of his life in Kurdistan) experience that have no voice on a global stage, and this is his most significant contribution as a novelist.

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#### Notes

1. In *How to Read World Literature?* Damrosch names two different trajectories for world literature, one being "delocalization," that is to write in a mode free of any discernable references to the home country's people, places, customs, or incidents, and the other to write globally. Writers can push globalism in literature, according to Damrosch, in two discernable directions: treating "local matters for a global audience" and "presenting their locality as a microcosm of global exchange" (2009, p. 109).
2. Casanova uses small to mean the "literarily deprived" (2005b, p. 181).
3. Terms they separately and originally apply to contemporary memoirs by diasporic Muslim female authors.
4. These ideas of hers are originally used in her study of diasporic literature written by female Iranian authors.
5. Although the way Marywan criticizes and questions things that seem irrational or absurd to him from the very beginning makes it hard to believe that those are the words of a child barely over 10.
6. A term borrowed from Fredric Jameson.
7. Hiz: insulting Kurdish word for "passive sodomite."
8. He must be distinguished from his author.

9. Like Mary, Bahar grew up in Kurdistan under Saddam and grew an interest in cinema and filmmaking. He is currently an actor and director.

10. Mehmed Uzun strove to do this, however, by resurrecting Kurmanji Kurdish as a literary language, i. e. by writing his works in his "small language," rather than composing or "self-translating" them in Turkish or Swedish from the outset. He is, in fact, one of the pioneers of modern Kurdish literature in Kurmanji dialect. In this regard, he is a counterpoint example with regard to the linguistic/marketing choice Bahar makes.

11. Although on other occasions she contradicts herself by arguing for an autonomous literature that surpasses political determinants: literature as a world is "a parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political domain, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature. Here, struggles of all sorts [...] come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms" (Casanova, 2005a, p. 72).

12. Our translation.

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