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## The representation of post-conflict gender violence in Iraqi Kurdish novelistic discourse in Bahdinan<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores the processes of finding a voice, learning to speak, and breaking silence around gender violence for a Kurdish woman endeavouring to resist oppression and destroy forced negative images and identities. It examines the ways in which she struggles to break imposed silences through resisting gender discrimination and telling stories of violence and exploitation, as represented in the Kurdish novelistic discourse in Bahdinan. Studying Sabri Silevani's *Mariama: Kîçe-Jînek Ji Zemanek Dî* (*Mariama: A Woman from Another Time*, 2007), the article examines the various forms and layers of violence imposed on Kurdish women by the tribal and patriarchal norms and the social and political structures within the post-conflict Kurdish society in Iraqi Kurdistan. The three-fold typological model of violence developed by the political scientist Johan Galtung is adopted in the article to explore the ways in which the personal characteristics of individuals and the political, economic, and cultural structures of society are viewed as factors affecting the generation of gendered aggression. Most importantly, for the purpose of this article, is the significant utilisation of the association of Galtung's typology with feminist studies of violence in the exploration of Kurdish women's attempt to resist marginalisation and their struggle for recognition. Moreover, Rita Felski's description and study of modern writing by women as a medium through which female political identities and collective consciousness are constructed and represented are adopted to discuss the structural and thematic properties of the text.

**Keywords:** Kurdish women; post-conflict gender violence; Kurdish novelistic discourse; Bahdinan.

### ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

#### Temsîla şîdeta cînsî ya piştî şerî di gotara edebî ya kurdên Iraqê de li herêma Behdînan

Ev meqale berê xwe dide merheleyên peydakirina dengî, fêrbûna axiftinê û daşikandina bêdengîya li dor şîdeta cînsî li cem jînekê kurd a hewl dide li hember zextan ber xwe bide û wêne û huwiyetên menfî yê dasepandî jî nav bibe. Meqale lê hûr dibe ka çawa jin têdikoşe ku bi rêya berxwedana li hember cudakariya cînsî û bi gotina hikayêtên şîdet û bikaranînê, wek ku di gotara romana kurdî ya li Behdînan tê temsîlkirin, bêdengiyên dasepandî bişikîne. Ev meqale li ser romana Sebrî Silêvanî ya bi navê Meryema: Kîçe Jînek Ji Zemanek Dî (2007) hûr dibe û dikeve dû destnîşankirina wan awa û tebeqeyên cihêreng ên şîdeta li ser jîna kurd yê bi destê dab û nerîtên eşîrî û babsalarî û herwiha bi destê dezgehên civakî û siyasî yê di nav civaka kurd a li Kurdistana Iraqê ya piştî şerî tene dasepandin. Di meqelayê de modêla tîpolojîk û sê-tebeqeyî ya şîdetê, ku Johan Galtungê zanyarê siyasetê dahîneye, hatiye bikaranîn jî bo veçîrandina awayên ku taybetiyên şexsî yê ferdan û binyadên civakê yê siyasî, aborî û çandî wek fakterên kartêker ên peyda bûna

<sup>1</sup> Bahdinan, also known as Badinan, was first used to refer to the powerful Bahdinan principality founded by Prince Baha'a-al-Din between the thirteen and fourteenth centuries. Today, it refers to the present-day Duhok province in Iraqi Kurdistan and all the surrounding towns and cities. The term also refers to the dialect of the Kurmanji Kurdish language spoken by the inhabitants of these areas.

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êrîşkariya cinsî têne dîtin. Ji bo armancên vê gotarê, ev tîpolojîya Galtung ligel xebatên fêminîst ên li ser şidetê têne bikaranîn da ku hewla jinên kurd a berxwedana li hember perawêzixistinê û venasîne berçavtir bibe. Herwiha, pênasê û lêkolîna Rita Felski ya li ser nivîsînên hevçerx ên jinan wek amrazek ji bo avakirin û temsilkirina huwiyetên siyasî û şûra cemawerî hatine bikaranîn ji bo vedîtina xasyetên metnê yê binyadî û têtmayî.

### **ABSTRACT IN SORANI**

#### **Wênekirdinî tundûtîjîyê cenderî le gutarî novêlistîkî kurdîyê 'Êraq le Badînan**

Em meqaleye degerrêt be dway ew prosaney dozînewey deng, fêrbûnî peyivîn û şkandinî ew bêdengîye ke ballî be ser tundûtîjî cenderî da kêşawe, le xebatî ew jine kurde da ke deyewêt rûberrûwî stemkarî bibêtewe û wêne û şunase nerêniye be zor dasepênrawekan têt bişkênêt. Ew rêgayane be taqî dekatewe ke ew jine le xebatî da be kariyan dehênêt bo şkandinî bêdengîye be zor beserî da sepêndrawe le rêgay rûberrûbûnewey ciyakarî cenderî û gêrranewey dastangelî tundûtîjî û pawankirdin, herweku le gutarî novêlistîkî da be kar hênrawin le nawçey Badînan. Le rêgay xwêndinewey "Meryeme Kîçeyinek Ji Zemanek Dî" nûsraw le layen Sebrî Slêvaniyewe, em meqaleye ew şêwaz û rehendaney tundûtîjî be taqî dekatewe ke le rêga bawe hozgerayî û bawsalarîyekan û bunyade siyasiyekanî komellgay kurdî dway şerr le Kurdistani 'Êraq da xirawnete ser jinani kurdewe. Lem meqaleye da modêlî sê çîni taypolojîyê tundûtîjî bekarhênrawe ke le layen zanay siyasî Johan Galtungewe dirust kirawe, be mebestî dozînewey ew rêgayaney ke pêyan karakterîstîke kesiyekanî takekan û bunyade siyasî û abûrî kelepurîyekanî komellga weku fakterî karîger nişan drawin be ser qehrî cenderîyewe. Giringtirîn layenî mebestî em meqaleye nişandani ew sudbexşîye giringeye ke peywendidarkrdinî taypolojî Galtung legell lêkollînewey fêminîstî le gerran da be dway hewllî jinani kurd bo rûberrûbenewe le hember perawêzixistin û xebatyan bo ewey ke danyan pêda binirêt. Herweha wesf û lêkollînewey Rita Felski le nusîni hawçerxî jinan weku geyenerêk ke le rêgayîyewe şunasegêlî siyasî û agayîyê giştîyê mê bunyad denirêt û nişan dedirêt, be mebestî giftûgokirdin le ser layene binyadî û tewerîyekanî deq, be kar hênrawe.

### **Introduction: The representation of Kurdish women's experience of violence**

Kurdish women in Iraqi Kurdistan have been affected by decades of systematic marginalisation imposed by the Iraqi governments as well as by Kurdish political powers during times of war and post-war periods. However, the influence of the war's aftermath has remained understudied in the growing Kurdish literature on war and armed conflict. Criticising the notable absence of a gender dimension in the studies of war in Iraqi Kurdistan and the way many Kurdish political organisations and even feminist groups have treated armed conflict in Kurdistan, Shahrzad Mojab asserts that they have "focussed only on two aspects of women and war... 'Women as Direct Casualties' and 'Women as War Refugees'" (Mojab, 1998: 90). Although these two categories reflect the brutal victimisation of Kurdish women, Mojab believes that there are many other ways in which women are affected by these on-going wars. For example, she refers to such forms of gender aggression as sexual and domestic war-related violence, loss of family, community and social stability, as well as war-related environmental and economic destruction that have taken place in the course of these wars.

As will be explained in further detail below, traditionally, violence against Kurdish women has remained absent from the Kurdish political, cultural and literary discourses in Iraq. In reaction to these processes of marginalisation, the case of Kurdish novelistic discourse in Bahdînan offers new grounds for the

depiction of Kurdish women's lives and experiences. In examining Sabri Silevani's<sup>2</sup> novel *Mariama: A Woman from Another Time*, which demonstrates a profound interest in feminist questions and adopts feminist perspectives through the depiction of female characters and female themes, I identify the manners and mechanisms by which Kurdish women are represented in relation to the changing socio-political situation of Iraqi Kurdistan. A feminist approach that intersects with a variety of fields including sociology, psychoanalysis, and economics considers literature, particularly the novel, as an influential medium for the study of gender inequality and women's socio-political roles and interests. Adopting this analytical model, the article explores the representation of violence against Kurdish women as depicted in Silevani's novel. This interdisciplinary intersection is evident in the feminist literary arguments that provide much of the theoretical framework of this article including Johan Galtung's (1990) typology of violence which utilises political theory to investigate the various forms and layers of violence against women. Additionally, Rita Felski's (1989) feminist criticism, which intersects with cultural studies, is used to examine the structural and thematic properties of feminist texts.

Adopting these two theoretical arguments and employing textual and contextual approaches, in other words, studying the social, political, economic, religious, and aesthetic conditions combined with an analysis of the formal features of the text, the article explores the representation of the various forms and layers of violence against women in post-war Iraqi Kurdistan. In Silevani's novel, the Kurdish woman is depicted as suffering from growing levels of violence related to traditional gender norms and attitudes, patriarchal and tribal structures and post-conflict gender violence. Moreover, the article investigates the ways in which oppressed Kurdish women resist violence, attempt to bring about change, and endeavour to transform themselves from voiceless victims to influential social and political activists.

It is important that in the scarcity of a Kurdish feminist literary tradition, Kurdish male authors, writing with a sense of responsibility to their community and nation, have started to focus on and experiment with feminist issues and themes in their works. A significant illustration in Bahdinan is Tahsin Navishki's work which depicts feminist themes as central to the understanding of Kurdish women's personal and political motivations to break silence and resist violence. In almost all of his novels including *Janên Sinabîyê* (Agonies of Insights, 2005), *Çavê Sîtafê* (The Eye of Shadow, 2007), and *Bebeşta Agrî* (Hellish Heaven, 2011), Navishki displays a profound preoccupation with the

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<sup>2</sup> Born in 1972 in Zakho, Silevani's literary career began in 1987 with the publication of various journal articles in Duhok. Due to political persecution as well as ideological conflicts within his political group, Silevani chose the path of exile and left Kurdistan in 1993 to settle in the Netherlands, where he stayed for more than a decade and returned back to settle in Kurdistan in 2006. After publishing a number of poems, Silevani wrote his first novel *Ana Mazîn* (The Great Water) in 2004 followed by *Bist Sal û Êrerek* (Twenty Years and a Night, 2005), *Mariama: Kîç-Jinek ji Zemanek Dî* (Mariama: A Woman from Another Time, 2007) and *Sifra Silevi* (Silevi's Feast, 2009).

representation of female characters and feminist themes. Similarly, in his depiction of the feelings, pains and experiences of a physically and psychologically abused woman, Sabri Silevani shows a profound interest in women as individuals and in their communal, national and universal rights and in the necessity of resisting and eradicating violence. By concentrating on the inner life of Mariama, both a narrator and protagonist, the writer is concerned with the evolving image of the Kurdish woman, her subjectivity, and her search for identity in the tribally codified Kurdish society.

Because violence against women in Kurdish society is related to the prevalence of tribal and traditional socio-cultural structures as well as to individuals' understanding of gender roles, it is essential to consider the ways these contribute to the legalisation and continuation of violence. Accordingly, Galtung's three-fold typology of violence is employed in this article to explore the various forms of violence imposed on Kurdish women in Iraq. In his article "Cultural Violence," published in 1990, Galtung identifies three interrelated forms of violence: 1) direct violence which includes acts of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, 2) structural violence which includes institutionalised and state-related acts of exploitation and oppression, and 3) cultural violence which Galtung defines as "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural forms" (Galtung, 1990: 891). Confirming that violence studies are not only about the use of violence, but also the generation and legitimisation of that use, Galtung states that permanent cultural aspects such as religion, ideology, and language contribute to the spread and continuity of direct and structural forms of violence.

In the exploration of the factors that contribute to the persistence of violence, the article draws on the congruity between Galtung's typology and the feminist perspective on violence in which the significance of the male-dominated social structure and socialisation practices associated with gender roles, power, and patriarchy is asserted. This is illustrated by Catia Confortini whereby she presents a theorisation of violence based on the interrelations between gender and power. Confortini confirms that while feminists have prolifically theorised about war and violence and the causes and consequences of that violence, they need to employ a theory of violence that takes into account the different forms of violence and the associations between them. Also important for the examination of violence against women in post-conflict Kurdish society, as represented in Silevani's text, is Confortini's focus on gender as a patriarchal social construct and its association with power and domination: "Issues of power and gender are essential to an undertaking of violence as a complicated process through which social relations of power are built, legitimised, reproduced, and naturalised" (Confortini, 2006: 56).

Adopting Galtung's typology and the feminist emphasis on gender and power, I define Silevani's representation of direct acts of emotional, physical, and sexual aggression as an indistinguishable part of a larger contextual framework of socio-cultural structures and state-related practices. In other

words, Mariama's exposure to direct acts of violence is connected to larger contexts such as familial structures, religious fundamentalism, political orientations and ideologies of nationalism. However, before moving on to discuss Mariama's exposure to these acts of violence, it is important to mention that during armed conflicts in Iraqi Kurdistan, including such conflicts as the First Gulf War (1990), the Kurdish 1991 Uprising, as well as the Kurdish Civil War (1994-1998) between the two dominant Kurdish political parties, the majority of the casualties have always been civilians. Following these successive and closely interrelated conflicts and ordeals, a tribal ideology has come to dominate Kurdish society in Iraq as Kurdish people endeavoured to find new ways to prevent further destruction and protect themselves against outside forces. As a result, Kurdish women in Iraq were forced into marginal positions and lost their voice and identity.<sup>3</sup>

In their exploration of the way voice and identity are reclaimed in the Kurdish context, Kurdish writers endeavour to challenge acts of silencing and marginalisation imposed on the Kurdish people by the hegemonic Iraqi state. In their project of reclaiming an identity that has not been recorded, they are forced to go back in time to a past where they can search for traces that link their characters to the possibility of future agency. In so doing, they represent the characters' quest for identity and their urgent need to reclaim their past in order to live in the present. Arguing that Kurdish writers "bear witness" to acts of historical silencing and marginalisation of their people, this article partly draws from the famous question of the Indian literary and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1988: 271-313).<sup>4</sup>

Although Spivak paradoxically claims that the voice of the subaltern cannot be unproblematically retrieved, contemporary Kurdish novelists in Bahdinan attempt to capture the contributions of ordinary men and women to the Kurdish struggle for liberation as well as their efforts in nation-building and peace-preservation in the post-conflict Kurdish society. Moreover, these writers highlight the fact that Kurds, as a marginalised category, were never allowed to represent their voices and participate in documenting their own history. In a similar manner to the narratives of exile examined by Cihan Ahmetbeyzade, their novels act as "individual accounts of the past formulated by the narrators as events belonging to a collective past; commentators contribute to the unfolding of the narration in creating a collective belonging to a past as recounted by the narrator" (Ahmetbeyzade, 2004: 8). Unlike the conventional forms of writing produced by the dominant public spheres, which systematically promote ideologies of subjectivity and subalternity, literature may

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<sup>3</sup> This statement has been asserted by a number of writers and activists such as Kathryn Olson and Nadjé Al-Ali who attribute the prevalence of patriarchal codes in post-conflict Kurdish society to the tribal attitudes of the Kurds.

<sup>4</sup> "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is an essay first delivered in 1983 by Spivak, establishing her position among the ranks of feminists who consider history, geography, and class in thinking about women.

be produced by subaltern groups in reaction to such policies of marginalisation. Such writing also aims at reconceptualising historiography in a way that guarantees the existence and value of the subalterns.

As a subaltern group, Kurdish women in Iraq (as well as in Turkey, Iran and Syria), who have been struggling to record their voices and reclaim their identities, have been fighting on more than one front as a result of continuous marginalisation and persistent tribal traditions and armed conflict. In her discussion of this interlocking system of oppression imposed on Kurdish women, Dilar Dirik indicates that:

While the four different states over which Kurdistan is divided display strong patriarchal characteristics, which oppress all women in their respective populations, Kurdish women are further ethnically discriminated against as Kurds and are usually members of the lowest socioeconomic class. And of course, the feudal-patriarchal structures of Kurdistan's internal society restrict women from living free and independent lives as well (Dirik, 2015: 1).

Although Kurdish women's status and roles are heavily determined by the tribal politics of the Kurdish society and political system, Kurdish historians, activists and authors have been concerned with questions of Kurdish national liberation and independence rather than with cultural and social issues of particular importance to Kurdish women, even before the rise of nationalism early in the twentieth century (Mojab, 1997: 68). The overt emphasis on the Kurdish national struggle in various forms of political, cultural and artistic representations has created a notable scarcity of a gender component and a feminist tradition in the different spheres of Kurdish society. In her discussion of this phenomenon, Mojab challenges the concept of a feminist nationalism, asserting that such theorisation overlooks the influence of the social and economic formations and political limitations on feminism in such cases as the complex Kurdish case. She explains:

The nationalists of Iraqi Kurdistan failed to challenge the lingering pre-capitalist gender and class structures. Instead of democratising religion and secularising politics...they sanctioned oppressive gender relations, supported fundamentalist politics, and suppressed radical political activism (Mojab, 2001: 147).

The nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan employ patriarchal standards which promote oppression and sexual segregation. Mojab returns to this subject in "Vengeance and Violence" (1998), indicating that the Kurdish case is an example of a gendered, as in male-dominated, nationalism in which women emerge as symbols rather than political agents:

Nationalists depict women as heroes of the nation, reproducers of the nation, protectors of its “motherland,” the “honour” of the nation, and the guardians of Kurdish culture, heritage, and language. In these depictions of women, or in the relegation of equal rights to the future, the Kurdish case is by no means different from other nationalist movements (Mojab, 1998: 89).

In a similar manner to Mojab, Susan McDonald explains that although the objectives of the Kurdish national organisations are “laudable”: “the restructuring of power, the creation of a society based on equality and non-exploitation, the freedom of speech, religion, and association,” (McDonald, 2001: 150), they ignore feminist objectives of gender equality, women’s rights of leadership and independent organisation. Thus, while Kurdish nationalists endeavour to guarantee women’s autonomy, they insist on determining the content of this autonomy. An important manifestation of this is *The Kurdistan Women Union* (KWU), the Kurdistan Democratic Party’s (KDP) women’s division formed in 1952. Ever since its formation, the organisation has been fighting on two fronts in a struggle both against national/ethnic oppression and gender discrimination, in other words, participating in the Kurdish national struggle for the determination of democratic rights for the Kurdish people. Despite its fervent attention to Kurdish women’s socio-economic needs and political aspirations, the organisation, which is still active in Iraqi Kurdistan today, remains strictly linked to the KDP’s political aspirations and their struggle for geo-political influence and domination. A similar position is shared by the Kurdish feminist scholar and activist Choman Hardi who confirms that despite the efforts of Iraqi Kurdish women’s organisations to consolidate their efforts and exert greater pressure for change, “the legal reforms that promised protection and equality to women have not been implemented and the majority of women who reach decision-making positions are chosen because they do not pose a threat to the system” (Hardi, 2013: 61).

Although women have always been a significant part of Kurdish history and society, most scholars, whether Kurdish or non-Kurdish, have tended to overlook gender dimensions in their studies of Kurdish historical, cultural, artistic and literary discourses. An important manifestation of this is the book by the Danish anthropologist Henny Hansen, *Kurdish Women’s Life: Research Field in a Muslim Society, Iraq* (1961), which was translated from English into Kurdish (Sorani dialect) by Aziz Gerdi and published in Baghdad in 1983. As confirmed by Mojab, although the book is considered “a landmark in the study of Kurdish women, [it] is not informed by a gendered theoretical position” (Mojab, 2001: 119). Accordingly, Kurdish women in Bahdinan never found their way into the traditionally male-dominated literary discourses until quite late in the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century when a number of texts, including Sidqi Hirori’s 1998 *Evin û Şewat* (Love and Fire), Hassan Silevani’s 2000 *Gulistan û Şev* (Gulistan and Night), Hassan Ibrahim’s 2004 *Dozexa Spî* (The White Hell) and others, started to investigate feminist issues and themes.

Additionally, exploration of the thematic elements of the Kurdish novel in Bahdinin demonstrates that it is more concerned with the macro-picture of the Kurdish national cause, and the mechanisms through which complex socio-political concerns function, at the cost of such micro-aspects as the predicaments of the Kurdish individual and the Kurdish family, men/women interrelations and the socio-political rights, obligations and participation of women in Kurdish society. This is evident in almost all novels written before 2003 which are clearly influenced by the reality of Kurdish division among four different nation-states and are highly connected with such concepts as belonging, community and Kurdish national and socio-political identity. In her discussion of Kurdish novels published in Turkish Kurdistan and its diaspora between 1984 and 2010, Ozlem Galip demonstrates that “what is apparent within the Kurdish novelistic discourse is the dominance of the real or imagined socio-political context of Kurdistan, which undoubtedly affects the way ‘home-land’ is perceived and narrated” (Galip, 2015: 6). It is important to note that *Mariama: A Woman from Another Time* is written from a feminist perspective in its detailed portrayal of Kurdish women’s experiences and outlooks.

### **Gender aggression, power imbalance and direct acts of violence against Mariama**

Silevani’s text is characterised by a simple structure, a plain form of narration and the employment of a rather traditional stylistic and formal technique. The novel is written in the Bahdini dialect and published in Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR)<sup>5</sup>. It is comprised of thirteen titled chapters and depicts Kurdish women’s resistance to imposed marginalisation as well as their attempts to create spaces both to subvert oppressive socio-political structures and achieve subjectivity and self-esteem. It follows Mariama’s tireless search for subjectivity and dignity in a society that victimises and silences her. Mariama is raped at a very young age by an old man and spends the rest of her life paying for the aggression imposed on her. Though she has never reported the sexual assault to anyone, Mariama decides on her thirty-sixth birthday to break silence and tell her story to her new friend Nareen, who has spent all her life in Europe and has recently settled in Duhok. This revelation, as will be explained later in the article, provides Mariama with a form of cathartic empowerment and liberation despite the shame and humiliation embedded within her story. In representing Mariama’s encounters with different men, each with a different background and ideological outlook, the novel situates Kurdish men and women’s perceptions of each other, which are mostly troubled and infused with a legacy of authoritative and patriarchal attitudes, in a critical tension.

Written by a male author, the novel is considered to be one of the first fictional representations of violence against women in the Kurdish novelistic

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<sup>5</sup> Following the new Iraqi constitution, the region is officially referred to as the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), but is more commonly known as KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq).



discourse in Bahdinan (S. Silevani, personal communication, 10 November 2016). Although his text is not devoid of questions of Kurdish national struggle and identity, unlike mainstream Kurdish male authors in Bahdinan, Silevani writes from a feminist perspective by focusing on themes of particular importance to Kurdish women. This, however, is not to say that the text is an exceptional case in the contemporary Bahdini novelistic discourse. Almost all Kurdish novels contain at least a reference, at some point, to the ever present reality and threat of sexual and physical violence exerted against Kurdish women. For example, Taha Naji's 2002 *Ev Aşê Derav Lê Wergaray* (The Mill that Changed the Water's Stream), Sidqi Hirori's 2007 *Ez û Delal* (Delal and I) Hassan Ibrahim's 2010 *Evin û Anfal* (Evin and Anfal), and Tahsin Navishki's 2010 *Alê Dî Yê Pirê* (The Other Side of the Bridge) make various references to the sexual violence and economic discrimination experienced by Kurdish women. Reviewing these texts, however, one can hardly find substantial connections between the brutal reality of sexual and physical assault and the literary representations made by these writers. In these texts, violence and the effects it leaves on women and their self-perception are depicted as a trope or treated as just one of the many conflicts the characters go through.

An important aspect of Silevani's novel, which is also a prominent feature of the work of other Bahdini writers such as Navishki (discussed in the introductory section of this article), is the fact that the author is a man. Here a major question becomes if a man can indeed break the silence of women. Nevertheless, employing the female body as a focal point, Silevani aims to break the silence imposed on women and represents explicit references and descriptions of sexual and physical violence practiced within the post-conflict Kurdish society. His text offers new readings of the act of sexual abuse by paying attention to its horrific details and the way the abused women feel during and after the act. The writer, that is to say, not only depicts the violence practiced against Kurdish women, but also the resultant effects on their dignity and self-perception as well as their attempts to re-establish their shattered self-images. To serve this process, the writer brings various extra-textual facts and realities into the text. These extra-textual facts include contextual aspects such as history and traditional manners and social attitudes towards gender relations and women's position in Kurdish society. Such aspects not only give the text realist features, but also serve as identification of and an introduction to the forms and layers of violence prevailing in the post-conflict Kurdish society. In his review of Silevani's text, Omar Dilsoz delineates the ways in which the novel contributes to the advancement of the contemporary Kurdish novelistic discourse in terms of its representation of the sufferings and conflicts of Kurdish women. Arguing that the text depicts Mariama's resistance to the various national, political and religious ideologies that confine Kurdish women to inferior positions and enhance violence practiced against them, Dilsoz adds that:

Sabri Silevani's social critique is concerned with the female's fight for existence as well as Middle Eastern traditional expectations of women. His novel offers an alternative ideology by which women and their agency should be viewed and in which violence needs to be eliminated (Dilsoz, 2012: 1).

Exploring the power imbalance and patriarchally inscribed gender relations, Mariama delivers harangues on the physical, sexual, and emotional violence she has experienced both in childhood and as an adult. The first chapter of the novel, entitled "July the First," opens with Mariama's self-narration of her story and personal experiences. She starts by exhibiting the patriarchal attitudes of Kurdish men and the way they view women:

How do I not tire when everything I approach turns male? Every man, without building pyramids, desires to be a pharaoh and we [women] dance in his throne room while our dreams die alone in narrow frightening lanes. I am tired, tired of everything (Silevani, 2007: 13).<sup>6</sup>

The protagonist associates these feelings with the patriarchal ideology of her society in which women are increasingly confined to passive roles and viewed as sex objects. In the following three chapters of the novel, Mariama tells of her mother Halima's death when Mariama was only thirteen years old and of her father's marriage to Manjool, a widow, shortly after the funeral. The marriage, however, did not last for long as her father was killed during the First Gulf War between Iraq and Iran. We soon learn that Mariama has never been able to build and develop a healthy relationship with Manjool, especially after her father's death as Manjool started directing all her hatred, anger, and revenge towards Mariama. The shock of her father's death is so intense that Mariama falls seriously ill and is taken to hospital by her kind neighbour Mayrê and her husband Muhammad, an old man referred to as Kabra (the Guy) in the novel. To keep her away from the crowd of the funeral, Mayrê decides to take Mariama to her house and look after her.

Mariama's description of Kabra very early in the novel as "ugly, hateful and vicious, like most men in the Kurdish society" (14) not only creates a sense of foretaste and apprehension related to this man, but also reflects the way she views men in general. She describes him as a hypocritical womaniser who pretends to be the kind caring neighbour and at the same time conspires with Manjool to exploit Mariama's weakness and ingenuousness. The fifth chapter of the novel, "Another Time," depicts Mariama's rape by Kabra the same day her father has been buried. Describing the sexual assault, Mariama draws on a dream in which she sees herself wandering in a beautiful childish and colourful garden she compares to the Garden of Eden and the Hanging Gardens of

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<sup>6</sup> All further references to this work are cited within the text by page number in parentheses. The text is written in Bahdini, a sub-dialect of Kurmanji and the translations of all quotations included in the article are my own.

Babylon: “It was spring. The green landscape was furnished with colourful flowers. Everywhere the babble of the waterfalls mingled with the chirping of birds” (40). Her dream, however, stands in profound contrast to the reality of the sexual assault she is experiencing. Whether because of her illness or her inexperienced mind, the violent act is not comprehensible to Mariama until it is over when she feels “a shiver in [her] belly” (41). She wakes up to see herself: “On Mayrê’s iron bed... Neither in the Gardens of Eden nor in the Babylon Hanging Gardens... But in a dark, damp and cave-like room and Kabra tightening up his belt and leaving the room” (41). It is important that Mariama does not hold Kabra as the only person responsible for the violence exerted against her, but the whole society. She tells Nareen:

I used to think at times that if only people knew what he did to me, they would absolutely help me, but then I remembered that they would also condemn me. Nareen, Kabra killed me one time, whereas this society and those people calling themselves faithful and honourable murder me every day carelessly and disgracefully (47).

Kabra convinces his wife that Mariama is haunted by *Zarê Mazîin*, an evil spirit which needs to be exorcised by a sacred man like himself. He also claims that since *Zarê Mazîin* has completely controlled Mariama’s body, its exorcism will need more than one session. Exploiting Mariama’s weakness and Manjool’s cooperation, he uses these sessions to extend his sexual abuse of Mariama. The sixth chapter of the novel, “The Twenty First Year,” describes both the brutality of Kabra’s sexual abuse of Mariama and the pervasive consequences it inflicts on her: “Kabra not only stole my virginity, he destroyed everything beautiful in my life: dreams, ambitions, names, histories, behaviour, and my relationships with people” (46). This chapter presents the text’s most brutal and painful scenes of sexual violence and abuse. While the act of rape has only been mentioned indirectly in the first instance, it is portrayed directly in this chapter as Silevani seeks to present a comprehensive portrait of the act and its physical and psychological effects on Mariama. Mariama’s description of the sexual violence she has experienced at such a young age brings back into her mind painful memories from which she has never recovered. The horrible images of the act have kept her from forming a healthy social life in the present time as she constantly fights to outlive their traumatic memories.

Unlike the first instance of rape, when the reader needs to decipher the act of the sexual assault from the few sentences that represent it such as “I was filled with colours” and “Kabra fastening his belt” (41) Mariama starts to delineate a graphic and visually conceivable description of the violence Kabra continues to exert against her. She tells of the way Kabra commences with what she describes as “the rites of exorcism” by lighting a few candles, undressing her and asking her to lay down on the white sheet he has thrown on the floor. She goes on to say: “I was completely mortified. Fear and bashfulness mingled

in me like electrical currents... I started shivering. I hid my breasts with one hand and tried with the other to cover my genital area. He threw me on the floor under his feet and turned me around” (51). The more Mariama carries on with the description of these moments, the more ugly and unpleasant the images of the sexual abuse become: “Afterwards, he passed his hand along my back till he reached my legs. He stood behind me and extended his hand to touch my lips, my chest, and then between my legs. Then, he threw me on the floor and turned me over” (52). Along the portrayal of the outrageousness of Kabra’s aggression, Silevani makes numerous allusions to Mariama’s suffering both during and after the act:

Kabra imposed himself on me like a painful reality. All these years passed and I still feel besieged by him. Thinking of him still stifles me. I feel great anguish and lose my breath. Because it was done to me against my will, I was not only traumatised the first time, but every time he approached me (59).

As illustrated by the above passage, the representation of violence, whether actual or metaphorical, is consistently appended by a description of Mariama’s suffering which takes a significant formal dimension throughout the novel. Suffering becomes so tangible that the reader conceives of it as a character with a material presence rather than an unspeakable sentiment. Mariama’s everlasting suffering is evident both in her realisation of what she has lived through and its power to command her life in the present. Just as Silevani blurs the boundaries between the actual assault by Kabra and the metaphorical aggression of her community, he conflates the actual suffering Mariama undergoes with her metaphorical battle to combat it. Mariama, who never frees herself from Kabra and the physical and emotional traces of his assault, learns to suppress her suffering and survive through painting. Though most people do not even bother to comprehend, the symbolism she uses in her paintings becomes the only form of expression through which she both tells her story of oppression and alleviates her long-lasting suffering. In other words, her paintings become the embodiment of her suffering: “July the first, cracks, torn curtains, black snakes, and train smoke became the major symbols in my paintings. In some paintings all these symbols intertwine and move away from my sight” (92). Characteristically, the persistent symbolisation and figuration of Mariama’s suffering highlights the devastation that sexual abuse has wrought upon her. She grows up a broken secluded woman completely estranged:

How can I not be estranged when I have been deprived of many things: The fantasy of childhood, the exhilaration of adolescence, and the free talks with schoolmates? All that faded after that dream of the colourful rainbow. I am viewed as a weak foreign female by my own community (78).

Thus, the consequences of Kabra's sexual violence transcend her eternal suffering as it not only results in her pregnancy and miscarriage because of poor nutrition, but also in her deprivation of education and healthy social living.

### **Institutionalised and cultural violence against Kurdish women**

An effective formal aspect maintained throughout the novel is the interplay between past and present indicated by Mariama's account of her personal experiences of almost three decades. Silevani's indisputable attention to time-conflation illustrated in the title of the novel has been discussed by a number of critics and reviewers. For example, in "Sabri Silevani and the Suffering of the Kurdish Woman," Haithem Hussein elucidates that Silevani characterises different forms of "timeless" violence imposed on Kurdish women in a society holding on to oppressive traditions and mores and in which women fall victims to patriarchal attitudes and structures. He also explains that "although Silevani claims in the title that Mariama, his female protagonist, belongs to a different time, he starts the very first chapter with a specification of both time and place: first of July, Duhok City" (Hussein, 2015: 1).

After describing all the pain and suffering related to Kabra's sexual abuse, Mariama promises to tell Nareen of Kirmanj, the man who *really* wanted to "rescue" her. However, before commencing with her story with Kirmanj, Mariama asks Nareen to be patient and listen to her encounter with three other men who appear in her life before Kirmanj. She describes her alienation and resentment of the constant domination of men in the Kurdish society in which she lives and the ways in which the three men subjugate and oppress her. For Mariama, no matter what their names, personalities, and beliefs are, they are still representations of the same patriarchal system and products of the same violent war-torn past:

Clearly, every one of them had a distinct identity, they had three different existences, three sets of experiences, and three different names, but they were similar in their compositions and attitudes. I thought they were unique, but gradually, that thought faded away. Every one of them claimed to be the candle that would light up my dark life, but they ended up killing honesty in them and in me (82).

Silevani juxtaposes these three male characters to confirm that sexual violence against women is heavily layered by multi-dimensional forces of national discrimination, political antagonism, religious affinities, morality codes, gender inequality and most importantly, male domination. Most significantly, by portraying the ways in which Mariama is subordinated and abused by different men in different contexts, Silevani also confirms that gender norms and beliefs surrounding male domination and male superiority, created by gender power imbalance that accord men greater status, are the vital causal factor of Mariama's oppression, whether in her childhood or mature life.

In these representations of violence, Silevani's text indicates that direct acts of violence are heavily infused with both indirect structural violence by many state-sponsored institutions in Iraqi Kurdish society and cultural violence exercised mainly through people's adherence to the patriarchal ideology that dominates Kurdish society. Accordingly, it becomes appropriate to define and discuss these forms of violence within a feminist framework in which the inclusion of larger cultural and socio-political structures in the society that provide a platform for the actuation of various forms of violence against women is illuminated. In addition to the direct acts of violence explained above, this article identifies the contexts, the causes and the consequences of the two other layers of violence: structural and cultural violence against women. Here, it is important to return to Confortini's assertion that violence against women can be defined in terms of the kind of harm it produces. In other words, the damage that structural violence exerts upon women is both physical and emotional and includes: "bodily and psychological integrity, basic material needs such as movement and health, classical human rights such as freedom of expression, need for mobilisation, need for work, and nonmaterial needs such as solidarity and self-actualisation" (Confortini, 2006: 37).

To elaborate on Galtung's definition of structural violence, it is essential to refer to William T. Hathaway's discussion in which he confirms that structural violence exists when "some groups, classes, genders, nationalists, etc. are assumed to have, and in fact do have, more access to goods, resources, and opportunities than other groups, classes, genders, nationalists, etc." (Hathaway, 2013: 1). Hathaway asserts that this unequal distribution of benefits is rooted in the very social, political, and economic systems that govern most societies and states. Moreover, theories of structural violence explore the ways in which such systems "result in the occurrence of avoidable violence, most commonly seen as the deprivation of basic needs both material and nonmaterial" (Hathaway, 2013: 2). In an effort to eliminate direct and structural violence, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has adopted various approaches and disapproved of and modified a number of laws in the Iraqi Panel Code and justice system. For example, in 2008, the Kurdistan National Assembly reformed Article number 188 of the Iraqi Personal Status Code and approved of a new law that concerned the prohibition of child marriages and tackling the high rates of polygamy (Begikhani, 2010: 292). The KRG also re-assessed a number of laws in the Iraqi criminal justice system and began new initiatives regarding gender related crimes and the imposition of penalties on the perpetrators (ibid.). Between 2008 and 2010, a study was carried out by a number of researchers from two UK universities in collaboration with Kurdish women's organisations and Kurdish Women's Rights Watch (KWRW) and supported by the KRG, to analyse practice, activism and policy on honour-based violence in Kurdish communities with the aspiration for social change and more gender equality. The study later developed into a wider government-sponsored strategy to monitor violence against women. Begikhani explains:

“These strategies were designed to contribute to the committed democratisation and modernisation process currently underway in Iraqi Kurdistan, including the integration of gender issues into social and public policy” (Begikhani, 2010: 9).

Additionally, the KRG has taken major steps to provide greater administrative unity and important progress has been made in areas as diverse as gender roles, legal status, health and safety, education and employment and women’s social and political representation in the public spheres (ibid.). Katherine Ranharter notes that a major part of the KRG’s aim to decrease the potential of new conflict and increase development of its people is the promotion of gender and women’s inclusion in public spheres and that “it follows that the policies enacted by the government have not gone unnoticed and have had an effect on the development of the region, as well as its individuals, but with any positive effect remaining marginal” (Ranharter, 2015: 309).

It is important that Silevani’s representation of direct and structural violence against Kurdish women is embedded within yet a third layer, cultural violence, which allows and validates the other two layers namely direct and structural violence. Most prominent within the structures of cultural violence is the system of patriarchy defined as “a force embodied in cultural violence, insofar as certain patterns legitimise the domination of men over women; and indirect violence, insofar as men, rather than women, commit the vast majority of directly violent acts” (Confortini, 2006: 340). Employing Galtung’s emphasis on patriarchy as a system that provides justification and legitimacy to the use of violence and the focus on gender within feminist scholarship on violence against women, I examine the ways in which ideologies of nationalism, political and religious orientations and social traditional structures imbed the inevitability and righteousness of violence into people’s attitudes and behaviour as represented in the novel.

Silevani’s novel demonstrates many of these aspects of Kurdish culture within which direct violence such as the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of Mariama are practiced. After revealing her terribly painful and emotional experiences of pregnancy and miscarriage in the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters, we move on to the tenth chapter of the novel, “The Revolutionist,” where Mariama introduces a man she meets in the first gallery exhibition she participates in and for which she wins first prize. Described as a revolutionary by Mariama, Hazhar has spent most of his life in the mountains as a peshmerga fighting for the liberation of Kurdistan. In her description of Hazhar’s intriguing character, Mariama asserts her puzzlement at his unsettled attitudes towards life, his past and their relationship: “His experiences in the mountains have affected his behaviour and mentality negatively. Clinging to the psychology of a fighter, he is used to turning everything into a target” (86). Mariama tells Nareen of the night in which she realises Hazhar’s patriarchal way of thinking and patronising attitudes towards her:

Like an agha snobbishly fondling a loyal servant, he embraced me with one arm and unwillingly put his cheek against mine. I thought he would kiss me warmly after that long separation. His coldness frightened me. I felt like a scarecrow shaking in the wind of doubts and questions. He sat down on the sofa like a Sultan proudly seating himself in his throne and told me to sit down on the ground at his feet like a slave girl (88-89).

Mariama, however, is most shocked when he, while gently touching her face and body, tells an old Turkish proverb: “Money is to be spent, an enemy is to be killed, and a woman is to be fucked” (89). Hearing this, Mariama leaves him and decides never to look back since “many Mariamas were running ahead of [her]: Mariama the orphan, the artist, the heartbroken lover, and the imprisoned Kurd” (89). As a peshmerga with a long history of fighting within the Kurdish national movement, Hazhar represents the traditionally antagonised interplay between Kurdish nationalism and women’s status in society. Although Hazhar’s distorted psychology is, in a sense, one reason for his troubled and confused relationship with Mariama, it is clear that his prominent stature within the national movement as a military force has influenced his perception of gender roles and relations.

The text thus indicates that Kurdish nationalism as an ideological entity often enhances violence against women by accrediting men with power and domination over women. It also indicates that belief in men’s superiority and women’s subservience, which is prevalent within nationalist institutions, has extended to the political parties. This is exemplified in Islam, the man who appears in Mariama’s life two years after she breaks with Hazhar. Again, at an exhibition for her twenty-four paintings, Mariama meets with a man who shows a particular interest in the way she uses cold and gloomy colours and symbols in her paintings and asks her permission to write about it in the newspaper he works for. Though Mariama loses his business card, she goes to the newspaper where he works to thank him after reading his article entitled “The Train Smoke,” referring to the train smoke that appears very frequently in her paintings. Meeting her in the newspaper offices, Islam invites her to what he calls “an artistic dinner,” where he describes his alliance with radical anthropology and expresses great support and sympathy for the poor and their well-being: “I wish there was something I could do to provide them with basic needs, help improve their state on all levels and secure good jobs and a happy living for them” (103). In this first meeting, Mariama also learns that he has had a long history with a political group in Duhok and that he has read a lot, travelled widely and held many courses and meetings to promote communism, but has earned nothing in return. He tells Mariama:

Due to a long demanding political struggle, I look much older than I really am. On paper, I have done a lot but no practical gains can be mentioned. People kept succeeding and I kept promoting



principles which left me poor and unknown after sixteen years of constant work and exhaustion. I was imprisoned and tortured many times before and after the Uprising but it was never acknowledged even by my own comrades (102-103).

Their relationship intensifies in a relatively short time and Mariama, despite all the painful experiences with Kabra and Hazhar, feels “love as great as an ocean running down [her] dry body” (104). During the three months of their relationship, they meet very frequently and spend many nights talking on the phone which Mariama defines as “a way to make up for their physical thirst and fly to reach their desires and freedom” (105). In one of these nights, however, Mariama encounters the pervasive force of patriarchal belief in a society where a woman is defined through her body rather than her character. When Mariama disapproves of the idea of having sex before marriage, Islam gets very angry and hysterically insults her.

While chapters ten and eleven of the novel focus on the nationalist and political ideologies as spaces where patriarchal beliefs affect gender roles, chapter twelve, “The Molla,” extends the text’s representation of these aspects to include the religious tendencies of some groups and the impact on marriage and family structure in Kurdish society. In this chapter Silevani reinforces his argument of the structural and cultural aspects of the Kurdish society that legalise women’s inferiority by chronicling Mariama’s encounters with Shaima’ and her brother Haji Hawar. This chapter starts with Mariama reflecting on the six-year period she spends with desperation and separation from the people, the community and the places in which she used to meet with Islam. She also tells of the serious decline in her economic state and her turn to writing articles for various magazines to earn money. Realising the importance of economic prosperity as a form of empowerment and independence for a woman with few skills in the trading and marketing domains, Mariama tells of a sewing project she wishes to set up with the help of Shaima’, the daughter of a rich family in the neighbourhood who, like Mariama, believes in the importance of women’s economic independence. Despite her family’s very committed and rigid religious beliefs, Shaima’ convinces her brother, Hawar to help them with the project. Haji Hawar’s offer exceeds their expectations when he decides to fund a store for Kurdish clothes. Though Hawar agrees that they run the store, they cannot work as sellers.

Mariama goes on to tell of Haji Hawar’s serious commitment to Islamic sharia’ that has always dictated his attitude and behaviour: “Whenever he saw me, he would turn his face away and with the excuse of ablution, he never shook hands with me. His manners made me feel impure. He asked Shaima’ more than once to advise me to wear a scarf?” (115). Despite Mariama’s cautious manners and respect for his beliefs, she finds it difficult to adopt his fundamentalist viewpoints regarding life, humanity and life after death. However, what irritates Mariama most about Hawar’s attitude is the way he overpowers her and tries to “convert” her and constantly “treats [her] as a

female” (118). As their relationship develops, his attitude starts to change and Mariama is, once again, convinced that there is someone for her, someone who will love her the way she is. Once more, Mariama is confronted with the prevalent ideological notion of women’s subordinate position which she confirms is based on social and cultural assumptions rather than true Islamic doctrine. In one of her conversations with Hawar, Mariama questions him regarding what would be the greatest sin from his point of view, to which he replies: “Mariama, in my opinion, the greatest sin is adultery and forbidden sexual relations” (120). This, according to Mariama, is a clear indication of the failure of their relationship before it actually starts. Though she learns that Hawar gets seriously ill following her disappearance, Mariama renounces her partnership with Shaima’ and goes back to her previous state of solitude and despair.

It is important that in the Kurdish context, the above discussed structural aspects, nationalism, political struggles, and religious affinities, are heavily woven together with larger cultural aspects including the tribal ideology of the Kurdish people that have shaped women’s status in society. The interplay between these various institutions is an important factor in causing and enhancing the different layers and forms of violence against women. In Galtung’s discussion, as previously mentioned, it is cultural violence that legitimises direct and structural acts of violence:

One way cultural violence works is by changing the moral color of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow/acceptable... Another way is by making reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent (Galtung, 1990: 292).

Accordingly, the text indicates that while Mariama is exposed to direct acts of gender aggression, these acts are legalised and maintained by larger forces. How this happens is explained by Galtung’s discussion of the ways in which these three layers of violence function and reinforce each other. According to him, “direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant, a ‘permanence’ remaining essentially the same for long periods, given the slow transformations of basic culture” (Galtung, 1990: 294).

It is important that Galtung has established himself as a pioneer of the peace research community and his path-breaking work has been revisited and critiqued by a number of peace theorists and critics. A significant example is Dilts (2012) who indicates that although political scientists can reflect on and extend Galtung’s work to discuss the ways in which violence shapes and reshapes experiences, they should not limit themselves to an analysis of violence that solely studies the actors and structures that generate and enhance violence. Despite such criticism, Galtung’s work is not only effective in the study of violence against women and the diverse forms and layers within which it is

usually practiced, but also in the development of mechanisms to eliminate violence by providing insights into the study of peace in relation to violence. This is where Galtung's typology is most related to feminist perspectives in that it addresses the power imbalance in gender roles and relations between men and women mostly defined in relation to the system of patriarchy. Almost all cases of violence and exploitation in the novel are caused more by power imbalance as a facet of patriarchy than any other system of oppression. In other words, despite the considerable variations among the cases of violence, belief in women's vulnerability and inferiority has contributed to the initiation and persistence of violence. This is well illustrated by bell hooks' affirmation that "sexism" more than any other form of domination, "directly shapes and determines relations of power in our private lives, in familiar social spaces, in that most intimate context—home—and in that most intimate sphere of relations—family" (hooks, 1989: 21). hooks' position is reiterated in Confortini's feminist examination of Galtung's typology of violence when she confirms that "only the elimination of violence at all levels can lead to true peace" (Confortini, 2006: 335). Highlighting the various layers of violence against women, Confortini demonstrates that within the continuum of violence, "spaces can be and have been created in all situations for the subversion of the unequal social structure and the establishment of potentially transformative relationships" (ibid.).

Despite all the sexual, physical, and psychological violence that Mariama experiences and the growing mechanism by which she is forced into marginal and restricting positions concerning this violence, she endeavours to break imposed silences and creates spaces from which to fight violence and achieve subjectivity and self-affirmation. Before moving on to explore the ways Mariama's revelation of her experiences of violence are communicated in the novel, it is important to contextualise the systematic acts of silence practiced against the Kurdish population in general and Kurdish women in particular. By silence, here, I mean not telling stories of violence and abuse, not reporting them to anyone or asking for help and having to (or choosing to) suffer alone. In Iraqi Kurdish society, with its multiple patriarchal structures, abused women choose to remain silent for a variety of reasons including the shame of disgrace and humiliation, fear of retaliation, and vulnerability to further violence. Breaking silence around violence requires effective intervention and prevention plans and actions on individual, societal, and community levels.

Imposing silence and invisibility on violence and violated women has historically contributed to the prevalence and continuity of violent acts. *Mariama: A Woman from Another Time* depicts two levels of silence: silence on the part of the abused woman, usually defined as imposed and silence on the part of community and state-institutions. The novel, additionally, questions abused women's awareness of their marginalisation and inferiority and the way they struggle to break silence and tell stories of violence as a mechanism of empowerment. Due to persistent socio-political and economic troubles, silence

has become a prominent feature in most artistic and literary discourses, especially when they concern women's issues which are in most cases allowed little representation. Under the Ba'ath regime, in particular, women suffered not only from racist and sexist ideologies, but also from a historical muteness that contributed to the continuity of sexual, physical and psychological violence (Al-Ali, 2008: 410). In its 2003 fact sheet, the Office of International Women's Issues argues that throughout the rule of the Ba'athists, Iraqi women were exposed to systematic acts of beheading, rape, torture, and murder. The fact sheet relates the persistence of these brutal acts to the regime's atrocious policy of imposing silence:

In 1979, immediately upon coming to power, Saddam Hussein silenced all political opposition in Iraq... Since then, his regime has systematically executed, imprisoned, raped, terrorised, and repressed the Iraqi people... [It] has silenced the voices of Iraqi women, along with Iraqi men, through violence and intimidation.<sup>7</sup>

Against hopes and expectations, the elimination of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 resulted in higher exposure to violence as women in the post-war context faced a state of lawlessness and chaos and increased rates of male aggression promoted during the conflict. Describing the post-conflict Iraqi society as "extremely violent and insecure," Nadje Al-Ali confirms that Iraqi women "are subjected to increased harassment and abductions, as well as sexual abuse and rape... [They are] silenced or marginalised from formal peace initiatives, political transitions and reconstruction efforts" (Al-Ali, 2008: 742).

Following the 1991 Kurdish Uprising as a reaction to the historical silencing and relegation of the Kurds, women's organisations and shelters sprang up in Iraqi Kurdistan. They made several significant advances regarding women's national and political participation, enabling women's voices to be heard both within KRI and the central government in Baghdad. Today, such women's organisations in Kurdistan, like the KWU, are actively promoting women's rights through efforts to reform traditional and tribal gender beliefs and norms, to eliminate political antagonism and to challenge religious fundamentalism. They are also working to increase media attention to women's sexual, physical and psychological abuse, especially the prevalent exercise of honour killing, by addressing the silence that has traditionally surrounded these forms of violence. Hardi indicates that "in the post-dictatorship era, however, the political space was opened up for suspended issues to be addressed and side-lined voices to be heard. Women rapidly mobilised in response to the wide-spread gender based discrimination, marginalisation and violence" (Hardi, 2013: 61). Iraqi Kurdish women's organisations are endeavouring to further break silence through establishing connections with Kurdish and non-Kurdish international

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<sup>7</sup> Office of International Women's Issues, Washington, DC, "Iraqi Women under Saddam's Regime: A Population Silenced," *Women in Iraq Fact Sheet* (March 2003). <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/18877.htm> (last accessed 20 March 2016).

women's organisations in the diaspora and creating significant platforms for the advancement of Kurdish women's rights both inside and outside Kurdistan. For example, in Britain, the KWRW and the *Middle East Centre for Women's Rights* focus, among other issues, on "exploring how constructions of female sexuality and its associations with masculinity and honour determine the subordinate positions of women in Kurdish communities" (Gill, 2012: 82).

Given that the novel depicts Mariama's search for subjectivity through a separation from and response to the Iraqi Kurdish patriarchal society, it is appropriate to study it in relation to Felski's category of "novel of awakening" in which the conceptualisation of female self-definition and identity is "initiated through an abrupt revulsion of female protagonists' interior feelings and personal experiences" (Felski, 1989: 142). Felski's argument of the "novel of awakening" is employed here to describe the formal properties of Silevani's text and investigate the narrative tools through which he makes a feminist sense of representation to depict violence against women in the Kurdish society. According to Felski, "the novel of awakening is grounded in a moral or aesthetic revulsion against the very nature of contemporary social reality, which is perceived of as alienating and debased" (ibid.).

Because of the painful nature of gender violence, the protagonist represses her memories in an attempt to forget a horrific history and efface its deep scars. This repression causes a dissociation from society and a fragmentation of identity. The most dangerous effect of violence is, however, its negative impact on the character's sense of self, and the novel contains multiple examples of self-alienation and detachment from society. In conformation with Felski's definition, Mariama displays an extreme sense of estrangement and disconnection from environments and chooses to abandon her previous life. Mariama, for example, is so alienated that she no longer understands herself or her surroundings:

How can I understand my "self" if I don't even know that self?  
How can I identify my hopes and dreams? How can I know other  
people when each person calls me a different name, deals with me  
in a different manner, and condemns me for the same crime? (74-  
75)

Throughout the text, Mariama displays a shattered and damaged self-image as a result of repeated sexual, physical and emotional violations. Describing her distorted relations to society and the confused perceptions of identity she experiences, she declares that "the stronger sex has killed in me my sense of belonging" (12). She also indicates the negative image by which she has been perceived by the men in her life: "Sadly, the Peshmerga with the rifle [Hazar] did not see the nationalist woman in me, the drunken Infidel [Islam] did not see the atheist woman in me, and the Mullah with the rosary [Hawar] did not see the pious woman in me" (75).

Although the break between self and society is depicted as absolute, Mariama starts searching for her subjectivity in new contexts by breaking silence and telling stories of violence. The first step in her breaking of the silence is reflecting on her inner feelings and experiences. The novel of awakening presents the journey undertaken by the protagonist as an “individual and interior one which puts her in touch with a lost sense of self” (Felski, 1989: 142). In her interaction with the outside world, Mariama encounters horrific male violence which only results in her alienation. Consequently, the novel describes her journey into interior experiences of violence in an attempt to revive a repressed sense of self and subvert the negative image of submission and passivity that has been attributed to Kurdish women. To do so, she needs to revive memories and experiences she has worked hard to repress for a long time.

In the novel, breaking silence and acknowledging a repressed female identity is undertaken by the protagonist who exposes layers of silence that have historically threatened and suppressed Kurdish women’s voices. Mariama’s “speaking” is indicated indirectly through artistic expressions, her paintings, and directly through speaking of the violence imposed on her. This self-conscious creation of spaces conforms to Confortini’s argument that “when women create spaces within a potentially or actually exploitative system, they carve out opportunities and come to see their work as empowerment and emancipation” (Confortini, 2006: 349). In this sense, speaking for Mariama becomes a political act and a precondition for a process of resistance, struggle and affirmation. Related to this is Cora Kaplan’s argument of speaking as a significant context to create a “position within culture where women could, without impediment, exist as speaking subjects” (Kaplan, 1997: 42). Kaplan views speaking and writing as necessary for women’s autonomy and subjectivity and effective methods to fight the historical silence that surrounds women’s inferiority.

Mariama’s paintings, in this sense, are representations of the sexual and emotional violence she experiences of which she can never speak without being exposed to further exploitation and punishment. She associates her need for painting to her community’s indifference towards violence against women: “No one answered me when, in loneliness, my paintings were dressed in white like dead corpses and my chest entombed pains and sorrows? It is at such times that my silence and imperfections become a language” (65). She also adds: “People, snakes, threads, headstones of the dead, train smoke, all become alive... Each [painting] turned into a friend; they talked to me and I talked to them one by one” (111).

After more than two decades of imposed reticence, Mariama expresses her need to “unfold” her story and “lay all her cards on the table” (12). While Mariama’s “telling” is important because of its awakening quality, it is also worthwhile to note the impact of Nareen’s cultural background on Mariama because of the long time she has spent in Europe. Nareen, who only makes a

few comments and participations through the whole text, shows a great sympathy and identification with Mariama and even acclaims her determination to survive her oppressive circumstances with which she awakens parts in Mariama previously suppressed by male-violence: “Pardon me Nareen. I need your patience for I have no one else. Life is cold and dark and I have too many pages to burn. I don’t want to show them to anyone except you” (73). Speaking is a cathartic act of self-expression and spiritual validation for Mariama who is muted by the patriarchal ideology of her society. The scene which solidifies Mariama’s new awakening most powerfully is when she says: “The world wars, the Cold War, the Gulf Wars and the Anfal campaigns all ended, but I am still fighting the rigid traditional cultural codes of my community. I will prove to Manjool, Kabra and the three knights that they have chosen death and I have chosen life” (124).

It is important that, as the clearest indication of Mariama’s awakening and self-validation, this scene coincides with her determination to improve her economic status. In other words, Mariama’s spiritual and economic awakenings are tied to one another. She realises the importance of economic independence as a crucial component of women’s empowerment. She endeavours to create a space through which both to challenge the passive roles attributed to her as a female and recognise the potentialities long forbidden by patriarchal codes.

As an alternative to her suppressed creativity, Mariama resorts to the traditionally female craft of designing and sewing clothes. Aware of her situation, the raped, violated, abused but never defeated Mariama tries to stand up for herself and resist her fate as a powerless woman in a male-dominated world. She realises the importance of working and earning money: “The best way for a woman to get freedom is having an independent business because when a woman gets economic independence, she can change many things in her life” (114). Thus, the novel uses painting and trading to focus on the reconstruction of the female self and give Mariama an opportunity for existence and subjectivity. The notion of women’s economic independence is re-imagined and re-examined throughout the novel. Mariama’s awareness of her weak and vulnerable status as a resource-less woman is an important step in her movement towards a greater awareness of her self-definition. This awareness reinforces her journey towards becoming a woman who finally masters the courage to stand up to abusive men and the excessive patriarchal norms and judgments in Kurdish society. Accordingly, the text emphasises economic discrimination alongside gender discrimination as forces enhancing violence against Kurdish women and depicts the importance of resisting both forces in order to reach self-definition.

When Nareen asks her, looking back, how she will describe her life, Mariama answers that at the end, “I reached a state of freedom... I was able to reconstruct Mariama the human. I am still proud of my wounds even though they will never heal” (133). *Mariama: A Woman from Another Time* is left unresolved, as Mariama, despite her struggle for affirmation and subjectivity,

fails to find the man she has been looking for throughout the book. Yet, in the final chapter of the novel, “Mohammad Mahdi,”<sup>8</sup> Mariama has one final episode to relate to Nareen. In this chapter, Mariama tells of her encounter with Kirmanj, a photographer she gets to know when she decides to apply for a passport in order to travel to Europe. She starts the chapter by reflecting on her horrific encounters with men in her life and all the violence they imposed on her and the way she decided to escape confirming that: “There is no place for me in this country. I feel like a foreigner and people, especially men, treat me like a foreigner. It is better for me to be a foreigner in a foreign country and spend what is left of my life alone far from here” (126). Mariama tells of her visits to Kirmanj’s photographic studio and his inspiring descriptions of the years he has spent in Sweden. Though Kirmanj obtained asylum a few months after arriving in Sweden and tried to learn Swedish and even attended a few courses to improve his skills in photography, he decided in the end to return to Kurdistan because of his never-ending feelings of alienation. What attracts Mariama most are Kirmanj’s compassionate and sensitive personality and his identification and sympathy with the Kurdish woman and the oppression that has historically threatened her existence in Kurdistan. Their growing relationship makes Mariama change her mind about traveling abroad and feel love again despite all the bitterness and frustration in her life. Starting with “Mariama, I love you but...” however, Mariama notices in one of their meetings that it is a day of revelations and she feels frightened that he might have heard about her past:

It was the time of frankness; time of revelations and admissions. It was time to ask for forgiveness from the past and the future. I never felt that frightened because I never knew the real value of love and life before. I was afraid that despite being very different, Kirmanj is like Kabra, Hazhar, Islam and Hawar, a Middle Eastern man and similarly restricted by Kurdish social patriarchal attitudes (134).

Contrary to Mariama’s expectations, Kirmanj is nothing like the other men she has known. He tells Mariama that: “I love you with all my life and pains. I know your whole story. I know about your parents’ death, your step mother’s conspiracy with Mohammadê Mayrê and about the three Mujahedeen who returned from their invasions empty-handed” (135). He adds that he has forgiven her for everything and is happy to marry her and spend the rest of his life with her but “[he] cannot get married because he has been wounded during the Kurdish civil war in the genital area and is no longer a ‘proper’ man” (135). The novel closes with Nareen asking Mariama about what happened later, to which Mariama only replies by repeating her question, “and then what

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<sup>8</sup> Mariama compares Kirmanj, whom she considers her saviour from all the miseries she experienced to Mohammad Al-Mahdi who is believed to be the ultimate saviour of humankind and who will emerge with Isa (Jesus Christ) in order to fulfil their mission of bringing peace and justice to the world.



Nareen?" indicating her uncertainty and the text's openness to many different resolutions.

### **Concluding remarks**

Mariama's revelations of her interior experiences and feelings conform to Felski's definition of the novel of awakening as a sub-division of self-discovery texts in which the protagonist seeks to achieve the dual goal of self-affirmation and social integration. Felski explains that her discussion of such texts confirms their two-fold function:

On the one hand, a desire for integration and participation within a larger social and public community as a means of overcoming a condition of marginalisation and powerlessness, on the other, an insistence upon a qualitative difference of cultural perspective as a means of articulating a radical challenge to dominant values and institutions (Felski, 1989: 150).

Despite its remarkable congruity to Felski's argument, the text's conclusion slightly deviates from the definition of the self-discovery novels in that the novel is left open and unresolved. While by the end of the novel Mariama does not seem to have achieved much, represented by her failure to find settlement with the man she has been searching for, as a novel of self-discovery, the text retains a generally optimistic belief in the possibility of female development. Against all the social and cultural restrictions and patriarchal gender norms, Mariama, disregarding any final resolution, is portrayed as a woman in a continuous fight for survival and resilience. She actively responds to traditional forces, demands justice, breaks silence and speaks up, and endeavours to reconstruct the passive shattered images and self-perceptions caused by violence and abuse.

In accordance with Galtung's typology, the article has explained that the personal characteristics of individuals and the political, economic, and cultural structures of society are viewed as factors affecting the generation of gendered aggression. The adoption of Galtung's discussion of the various interrelated layers of violence—direct, structural and cultural violence—and the congruity between his typological model and the feminist perspective on violence have asserted the significance of the male-dominated social structure and socialisation practices associated with gender roles, power, and patriarchy as contributing to the persistence of violence in Kurdish society as represented in Silevani's novel.

The article has also demonstrated that recent representations of women in Bahdini novels reveal how violence against Kurdish women in Iraqi Kurdistan takes diverse forms and layers depending on the context within which it is practiced. Notwithstanding the end of military actions, Kurdish women still suffer from increasing levels of violence resulting from the persisting culture of patriarchy and tribalism that relegates women to inferior positions in society. An important aspect in the depiction of these practices is the focus on the

multiplicity of the actors and structures contributing to their perpetuation and enhancement. The article has also shown the ways in which these aspects are being discussed and becoming a theme in Kurdish novelistic discourse through giving Kurdish women a voice. Moreover, it is indicated that with the persistent absence of Bahdini female writers, male Kurdish novelists in Bahdinan have foregrounded the portrayal of women and gender roles in Kurdish society, women's roles in various social institutions, and relationships between men and women.

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