

Özlem Galip, *Imagining Kurdistan: Identity, Culture and Society*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015, 311 pp., (ISBN: 978 1 78453 016 7).

Özlem Galip's book is of high relevance to all those interested in Kurdish literature and culture. Given the scarcity and the difficulties of Kurdish literary scholarship in Western languages (see Ghaderi, 2015), Galip's accomplishment represents a valuable contribution, especially for the breadth of the corpus examined (for other comprehensive works on the subject see Ahmadzadeh, 2003; Bocheńska, 2011; Scalbert-Yücel, 2014).

In *Imagining Kurdistan* Galip discusses one-hundred novels, written in, according to the geographical terminology used by the author, Turkish Kurdistan and in diaspora between 1984 and 2010. Her study has three main delimitations: it tackles only one literary genre: the novel; it is limited to the production of authors based in or hailing from Turkish Kurdistan and writing in Kurmanji, thus excluding Kurdish writers writing in Turkish; it has a temporal limitation that goes from the rise of the PKK insurgency to 2010. Notwithstanding such limitations, the corpus taken into account by Galip is remarkable. Although this work does not offer an in-depth discussion of each and every novel, it focuses on the overarching novelistic discourse concerning Kurdistan as it surfaces from such a vast number of works. The number of passages from novels originally translated by the author from Kurmanji into English contributes to making this book an important source for the international audience who seeks a more accessible path to Kurdish literature.

The study is informed by a recent and fecund stream of literary criticism focusing on notions of space and place (for an overview see Tally, 2013). Central concepts of space, place, homeland, territory, and identity in fact prove to be extremely useful in addressing the literature of a people whose geography is fragmented, continuously questioned, and even denied. As the title clearly confesses, Benedict Anderson's notions of "imagined community" and of literacy as a key tool of the imaginative nationalising process are crucial to Galip's understanding of her corpus.

The book starts with a preliminary discussion of the concept of "homeland" in the Kurdish context. It overviews the foundational myths and historical developments of the Kurdish sense of ethno-national community in relation to the geographical territory. In a rapid-yet-exhaustive overview, it goes from the Medes to the rise of a "modern" nationalist movement in opposition to the assimilative policies of the Turkish state. In Chapter Two, the author conducts an "Overview of Kurdish Politics" informed by a vast scholarship. It focuses on Kurdish revolts in the late Ottoman Empire, early Turkish Republic, and

in the last section on “the emergence of a Kurdish Socialist Movement in the 1960s, and the Hegemony of the PKK” (p. 58). This chapter condenses dates and events well known to scholars working in Kurdish studies, but that function as necessary buttresses for readers coming from other research fields.

With Chapter Three we get to the heart of the matter, as Galip discusses the development of “Kurdish literary production” (p. 67), retracing the significant evolutions of literary creation and consumption in Turkish Kurdistan: “from oral literature to digital media”. While giving some basic information on the history of Kurdish “traditional” literary practices, the chapter focuses more strictly on the “emergence of the Kurdish novel” (p. 71), especially after the easing of restrictions on the use of Kurdish language in Turkey in the early 1990s. A section is dedicated to the role of media such as magazines, newspapers, and TV-channels (from *Hawar* to *Med Nûçe tv*) in constructing the Kurdish imagined community and in opening up a distinct Kurdish literary field in Turkey and in the Kurdish diaspora. Perhaps a deeper discussion of the genre limitation given to the book would have been appropriate here. In fact, little is said on the reasons why the novel represents a better analytical instrument to study Kurdish geographical imagination, as compared for example to poetry or short stories.

The following two chapters serve as the proper analytical chapters on literature. In Chapter Four, Galip addresses the Kurdish novelistic discourse produced in diaspora and how it articulates concepts of “homeland” and “identity”. As Galip notes, novelists of the Kurdish diaspora (Firat Cewerî, Bûbê Eser, Hesenê Metê, Mehmed Uzun, Mezher Bozan and Lokman Polat, among many others) are often pushed towards literary expression by the personal traumatic memory of their experiences under the oppressive rule of the Turkish state. For Galip, sharing individual experiences through the medium of the novel allows for the creation of a collective memory in which the visualisation of the homeland and the perception of a shared identity are mainly structured in response to social traumas.

However, for Galip, the response to traumatic legacy differentiates along the lines of political convictions and affiliations. She employs the pro-PKK or anti-PKK stance of the writers as a fundamental line of demarcation. The use of geographical markers, such as the names of the Kurdish regions in accordance to the recognised national borders or according to the imagined geography of Greater Kurdistan, stems from and accounts for the writer’s political inclination. In general, Galip notes that “most – diasporic – authors do not challenge Turkish national borders or the sovereignty of the nation states of the countries located in other Kurdish regions” (p. 107). Furthermore, “as the

majority of the diaspora novels follow the line of the anti-PKK fraction, they do not accept the notion of ‘Greater Kurdistan’ (p. 111). Diasporic authors condemn through their works the lack of national awareness among Kurds and see submissiveness to language assimilation as forgoing a fundamental national duty. According to the author, writers from diaspora tend to have a critical approach towards their homeland, which is generally not “romanticized or idealized” (p. 121). Yet, the diasporic distance brings about a sort of crystallisation of the image of the homeland; as Galip puts it: “it is also true that the illusory plays a prominent part in the diasporic construction of homeland because, as time passes, the place of origin remains stagnant in the memory of the migrant while in reality it has evolved” (p. 134).

Chapter Five conducts the same analytical operation for the novelistic discourse produced in Turkish Kurdistan up to 2010. Analysing thirty-six novels, Galip detects temporal and geographical structures that sustain the imaginary construction of the Kurdish “homeland”. On the temporal line, we have an “idealized-idyllic” past constructed through a “patriotic attitude”, a present in which the homeland is “torn to pieces by the impact of Turkey’s provocative interventions” and a future that is the realm of “optimistic imaginary conceptions” (p. 136).

On the geographical level, Galip studies how the novelistic discourse helps in mapping and delimiting, in a word imagining, Kurdistan’s territoriality in the effort “to create the organic link between Kurds as nation and Kurdistan as their homeland” (p. 138). At the intersection of the temporal and the territorial narratives, Kurdistan emerges as “emotional space”. At times depicted as a beloved-woman, at times a “place for longing and yearning” (p. 173), the Kurdish homeland as reflected by Kurdish novels that Galip considers (by Şener Özmen, İbrahim Seydo Aydoğan, Ramezan Alan, Yaqob Tilermenî, among many others), seems to find its primary location in the realm of the imagination. In this respect, the dispossession of the lived environment, caused by Turkey’s social, spatial and military policies, equates the diasporic and the local writer inasmuch as they perceive the homeland as something to be dreamed of, or, in other words, something that needs to be constructed through imagination. Nonetheless, the attitude of the writers from Turkish Kurdistan as analysed by Galip is generally less critical when compared to diasporic writers and far more optimistic on the future possibilities of achieving the imagined correspondence between space and identity.

A critical study of a vast literary corpus does not allow for nuanced accounts of each work or each writer. The author necessitates a certain degree of generalisation in order to highlight recurring narrative patterns that contribute to a broader, yet debated, idea of Kurdistan. The clear-cut distinction between

pro-PKK or anti-PKK political leaning used by Galip, although highly relevant and worth being explored, does not consider more nuanced positions or account for potential developments internal to the literary career of a particular writer. Repetitions of arguments and at times a lack of clarity in the exposition weaken the book to a certain extent. Nonetheless, *Imagining Kurdistan: Identity, Culture and Society*, (the words “literature” and “novel” could have featured in the title), is a relevant book for scholars and general readers alike who want to deepen their knowledge of the Kurdish contemporary literary field in Kurmanji. The positive recent developments, one might call it a little “renaissance” or a spring (Erbay, 2012), of the Kurdish letters clearly deserve such kind of contextualised analytical explorations. Galip’s accomplishment helps the reader manage a burgeoning production, inspect its fundamental themes, and establish correlations with the social and political environments in which this literature was produced. *Imagining Kurdistan* is a must-read for scholars working on Kurdish literature and a positive contribution from a literary perspective for scholars working on various disciplines of Kurdish studies.

Francesco Marilungo | ORCID: 0000-0002-1601-9166
 University of Exeter, UK
 fm289@exeter.ac.uk

References

- Ahmadzadeh, H. (2003). *Nation and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.
- Bocheńska, J. (2011). *Między Ciemnością i Światłem: o Kurdyjskiej Tożsamości i Literaturze*. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka.
- Erbay, V. (ed.) (2012). *Inatçı bir Bahar: Kürtçe ve Kürtçe Edebiyat*. Istanbul: Ayrıntı Yay.
- Ghaderi, F. (2015). *The Challenges of Writing Kurdish Literary History: Representation, Classification, Periodisation*. *Kurdish Studies*, 3(1), 3–25.
- Scalbert-Yücel, C. (2014). *Engagement, Langue et Littérature: Le Champ Littéraire Kurde en Turquie (1980–2000)*. Paris: Éd. Pétra.
- Tally, R. T. (2013). *Spatiality*. London and New York: Routledge.