

إعادة النظر في التاريخ الكردي في رواية "عندما تبكي الجبال" لغربي مصطفى"

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“Revisiting Kurdish History in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*”

“Revisiting Kurdish History in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*”

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المُلخَص

تتناول هذه الدراسة الكيفية التي يُعيد بها غربي مصطفى في روايته "عندما تبكي الجبال" نُشر في عام (٢٠١٣) قراءة التاريخ الكردي وتأويله ضمن إطار النقد التاريخي الجديد. من خلال وضع الرواية في سياقها الاجتماعي-السياسي في عراق الحقبة البعثية، تستكشف الدراسة العلاقة الديناميكية بين السرد الأدبي والخطاب التاريخي. وبالاعتماد على تحليل الأسلوب السيرة ذاتية والرمزية واستراتيجيات السرد لدى مصطفى، تبيّن الدراسة كيف يعمل النص بوصفه أرسيفاً ثقافياً وسرديةً مضادةً للتواريخ الرسمية التي همّشت الصوت الكردي. كما تدمج الرواية بين الذاكرة الفردية والجمعية للكشف عن آليات السلطة والقمع الثقافي والمقاومة، ولا سيّما من خلال تجارب التعريب وحملة الأنفال وانتفاضة عام 1991. باستخدام التحليل النصي النوعي، تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن رواية "عندما تبكي الجبال" لا تؤثّق فحسب صدمة الشعب الكردي، بل تسهم

أيضاً في إعادة بناء الوعي التاريخي للکرد على نحو فاعل، متحديةً السرديات التاريخية المهيمنة ومؤكدةً دور الأدب في استعادة الهويات المُمهّشة والمقموعة. يمثل الشعب الكردي أكبر جماعة عرقية في العالم بلا دولة، إذ لا يزال يواجه اضطهاداً واسع النطاق، وانتهاكات ثقافية، وتهميشاً سياسياً منذ قرون. على مر التاريخ، ناضل الشعب الكردي بلا هوادة من أجل الاستقلال، محافظاً على هويته، ومطالباً بقبول جيرانه الذين يواصلون عسكرة حريته وقمعها. ويتجلى هذا الصراع المحتدم في الكتابات المتنوعة للأدب الكردي، الذي يضطلع بدور محوري في صون التاريخ الكردي والتعبير عن نضالات الشعب، لأنه ينبع من ذكرياتهم المشتركة عن التهجير ومقاومة الظلم.

Abstract

This study examines how Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep* (2013) revisits and reinterprets Kurdish history through a New Historicism framework. Situating the novel within the socio-political context of Ba’athist Iraq, the study explores the dynamic relationship between the literary narrative and historical discourse. By analyzing Mustafa’s autobiographical mode, symbolism, and narrative strategies, the study shows how the text functions as both a cultural archive and a counter-narrative to the state-sponsored histories which marginalize Kurdish voices. The novel integrates personal and collective memory to reveal mechanisms of power, cultural suppression, and resistance, especially through the experiences of Arabization, the Anfal campaign, and the uprising of 1991. Employing qualitative textual analysis, this study argues that *When Mountains Weep* not only documents the trauma of Kurdish people but also engages in the active reconstruction of the historical consciousness of the Kurds, challenging dominant historiography and asserting literature’s role in reclaiming suppressed identities. The Kurdish people represent the world’s biggest ethnic community without a state as they continue to face extensive persecutions, cultural abuses, and political marginalizations for centuries. Throughout history Kurdish people have fought relentlessly to claim independence through maintaining their identity and securing acceptance from their neighbors who consistently militarize and repress Kurdish freedom. This intense conflict appears through the diverse writings in Kurdish literature. This literature maintains a key role in safeguarding



Kurdish history and expressing the struggles of a people because it stems from their shared memories about being displaced as well as disputing oppression. According to

1.1 Background of the Study

The Kurdish people represent the world’s biggest ethnic community without a state as they continue to face extensive persecutions, cultural abuses, and political marginalizations for centuries. Throughout history Kurdish people have fought relentlessly to claim independence through maintaining their identity and securing acceptance from their neighbors who consistently militarize and repress Kurdish freedom. This intense conflict appears through the diverse writings in Kurdish literature. This literature maintains a key role in safeguarding Kurdish history and expressing the struggles of a people because it stems from their shared memories about being displaced as well as disputing oppression. According to (Chaliand, 1980, p. 11), the Kurdish people hold the sad record of being one of the largest groups above 15 million who lack national statehood after enduring centuries of struggles.

After the demise of the Ottoman Empire in the first half of 20th century, the Kurdish people encountered sustained oppression because modern powers partitioned their homeland region known as Kurdistan and divided it across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Through the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) the Kurds lost their chance for statehood while surviving subjugation that included forced cultural erasure and assimilation policies along with physical violence. The fate seems to indicate that Kurds will remain a ‘race’ rather than achieving a national status (O’Ballance, 1973, p. 11).

Kurdish communities across the 20th and 21st centuries had to endure many atrocities that include the Anfal genocide in Iraq and Turkish cruelty toward Kurdish language and culture while Iran and Syria continue marginalizing Kurdish people. Human Rights Watch has reported that between February and September 1988, the Anfal campaigns caused the deaths of about 50,000 to 100,000 people, including numerous women and children in this mortality statistic (Human Rights Watch/ Middle East, 1995). In 1991, after a long-standing prohibition on Kurdish language in Turkey, a new law was passed allowing the use of Kurdish in public and publications (Izady, 1992, p. 71). Also, these nation-states have tried to prevent the Kurdish people from growing as a different national group and have often attempted to eliminate them entirely (Izady, 1992, p. xiii). Multiple injustices from the



past created both an identity base for the Kurdish people and an essential foundation for their literary practices.

Kurdish literature functions as resistance literature through which the body of historical narratives gets documented and contested. Literary writers employ their literary power to reestablish Kurdish identity while opposing mainstream historical understandings and safeguarding their cultural and historical heritage. Christine Allison (1996, p. 30) argues that any thorough study of Kurdish culture must consider the oral traditions as most of the Kurds’ understanding of their identity, history, and daily lives has been passed down through spoken words. The oral traditions like *dengbêjî* (bardic tradition), have had a great role in the spread of literature and history before modern written texts became a medium for documenting Kurdish culture and politics. Kurdish literature exists in a unique condition because it developed through the socio-political and cultural difficulties experienced by Kurdish people. In his article *In Search of a Kurdish Novel that Tells Us Who the Kurds Are* (2007), Hashem Ahmadzadeh declares that the main theme in Kurdish novel is related to the question of their national identity, and points out that it is widely believed that a novel projects its time and space contexts.

In this regard, Gharbi Mustafa, a Kurdish novelist and assistant professor of English at the University of Duhok works in the field and writes mostly in English about Kurds. His writing emerges with significant importance because it conducts an in-depth exploration of Kurdish historical and cultural background. Through his works, Mustafa has proven to be one of the influential Kurdish writers who creates innovative literary portrayals of Kurdish history and culture. His novel, *When Mountains Weep* (2013), is evidence that Kurdish people’s determination is still ongoing and unbroken.

When Mountains Weep is an autobiographical novel narrated by a Kurdish boy named Hamko who strives for survival among cultural challenges and political unease. Through his storytelling techniques Mustafa interweaves specific characters’ stories with historical events which provide deeper comprehension of Kurdish resistance during times of survival and dignity preservation. Through its main character Hamko, the book provides readers with knowledge about identity development as it examines connected themes of identity together with challenges arising from institutionalized oppression along with generational trauma resulting from oppressions. It covers both individual and collective history of Kurdish resistance through their struggle and their emotional journey under suppression.





The analysis of *When Mountains Weep* enables this study to examine how literature acts as both historical documentation and resistance performance when revisiting Kurdish history. The novel serves purposes beyond expressing personal accounts when viewed in this light. Through these literary works, Kurdish writers work to retrieve their culture while contesting major historical accounts that undervalue their perspectives. Through Mustafa’s works, he reflects and restructures readers’ understanding about Kurdish historical events. The study explores Mustafa’s text for its role in revisiting Kurdish history through the New Historicism’s lens. Through this approach, literature demonstrates its ability to transform marginal histories by redeveloping their records. The world’s growing globalization requires Kurdish people to assert their voices worldwide according to Ahmadzadeh (2007, p. 592).

2.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The central objectives of this study revolve around a profound exploration of how Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep* (2013) revisits and reinterprets Kurdish history, focusing on the way this work engages with the themes of cultural resistance, foreign influence, and historical oppression. Through examining the representation of Kurdish history in the novel, this study will analyze the portrayal of power dynamics and foreign influence by exploring how external forces such as the Ba’athist regime shape Kurdish identity and history. Furthermore, this study aims at providing a New Historicist analysis of how this novel contributes to the reclamation of Kurdish history and critique the marginalization of Kurdish voices in mainstream historical narratives. Collectively, the study would attempt to answer the following questions:

- How are historical and cultural dynamics portrayed in the selected novel?
- What role do symbolism and narrative techniques play in subverting dominant narratives?
- How does Mustafa integrate personal and collective memory?
- How does the genre of non-fiction and historical context shape the portrayal of Kurdish identity in the work?

3.1 Problem of the Study

Historical literary works about Kurds have more widely been written in Kurdish, resulting in a more local reader, conversely, Gharbi Mustafa has focused more on writing literature in English about Kurds addressing to a greater extent to the external (non-local) audience to become familiar with the Kurdish case. Mustafa in his novel *When Mountains Weep* (2013) provides an opportunity to revisit this history from a Kurdish viewpoint. This study will fill a large gap by employing New Historicism



principles to analyze the interaction between Kurdish historical events and literary narrative in the novel.

4.1 Research Methodology

The investigation of this study uses an analytical qualitative approach grounded in New Historicism to embark on a journey to explore how Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep* (2013) acts as a narrative that resonates the history of Kurds. As historical narratives have become integral components of literary discourse in the recent decades, this study will focus on the representation of Kurdish history in the selected novel. Through a close textual analysis and historical textualization, this study will illuminate the role of literature in expressing marginalized and devoiced histories. Generally, this study draws from a spectrum of literary, cultural, and historical resources to embark on a New Historicist exploration of the selected novel in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the history of Kurds who have suffered from suppression for decades and have strived hopefully for independence.

5.1 New Historicism

New Historicism emerged as a critical framework in the 1980s, reshaping the relationship between literature, history, and culture. Although Stephen Greenblatt, the most prominent pioneer, admitted he did not approve of ‘New Historicism’ as a term and would prefer ‘Cultural Poetics’, he unintentionally coined ‘New Historicism’, which continues to be used and holds a unique place as a critical tool for interpreting literary texts (Sethiya, 2017, p. 50). Greenblatt in his essay, *Towards a Poetics of Culture* (1989), preferred to refer to it as a ‘practice’ rather than a ‘doctrine’ (p. 1). It challenges traditional historicism, which tends to generalize entire historical periods under fixed characteristics, and it also opposes the New Critical approach, which detaches literary texts from their historical and political contexts in analysis. Instead, New Historicists argue that literature must be analyzed within the broader cultural and historical forces that shape it. According to Neema Parvini (2018), in its initial form, new historicism focused on analyzing power structures, drawing heavily from Clifford Geertz’s anthropological studies (1973), Michel Foucault’s descriptions of torture and punishment (1977), and Louis Althusser’s methods of ideological control (1971) (p. 348).

This method opposes the notion of history as a linear and objective progression and focuses on the complexities, contradictions, and power dynamics that influence historical narratives. The way New Historicism refuses grand historical narratives gives opportunity to analyze marginalized histories, since it offers the ground for recovering and





reinterpreting suppressed voices. For Peter Barry (2017), New Historicism treats literary and non-literary texts from the same historical period equally without preferences and considers them both similarly important types of material which differs it from old historicism method (pp. 146-147).

At the core of New Historicism is the idea that history and literature are mutually influential, continuously shaping and reshaping each other. Louis Montrose encapsulates this idea through his concept of ‘the textuality of history and the historicity of texts’, which suggests that history itself is a form of narrative and that literary texts are shaped by historical forces. This perspective destabilizes the boundary between history and fiction, emphasizing that historical accounts are not objective representations of reality but are constructed through language, ideology, and discourse. Hayden White’s work further supports this view by showing how historical narratives are shaped by literary and rhetorical techniques, blurring the line between fact and fiction.

One of the foundational influences on New Historicism is Michel Foucault, whose theories on power, discourse, and knowledge have significantly shaped the movement. The distribution of power appears to Foucault primarily through both discourse and institutions instead of being focused inside specific authorities. Foucault’s archival focus on history, particularly how truth and power interrelate at the foundational level of knowledge, enabled him to interpret historical texts in terms of their connections to the governing principles and structures that shaped their creation (Faysal and Rahman, 2021, p. 12). This concept matches with New Historicism’s stress on the ways in which historical narratives function as power mechanisms. To New Historicists, history exists as a product created by those in power that shapes collective memory and social norms rather than a mere record. Through power relations literary and historical analysis obtains its core focus because these relations decide upon the heard and the marginalized voices.

‘Subversion’ and ‘containment’ stand as central concepts in New Historicism as they demonstrate the ways power operates within cultural and historical narratives. Marginalized groups use subversion to resist dominant power structures whereas containment represents the methods used by these structures to maintain control or absorb resistant practices. The goal of New Historicists involves highlighting resistance activities carried out by suppressed populations like women, the bourgeoisie, and non-European ethnic communities since they share a Marxist view through exploring the conflict between the dominant and the suppressed (Sharma, 2014, p. 9). Power tends to eliminate or incorporate subversive



movements according to New Historicists and this dual dynamic showcases their skepticism toward the strength of resistance efforts. According to this view, literature displays dual functions because texts can both undermine existing power structures and uphold dominant ideologies.

According to New Historicist principles, to understand texts properly, they must be studied within the cultural, political, and ideological frameworks where they originated. Thus, two essential factors which include the historical moment of the text production and the conditions under which it is analyzed must be taken into account. The interpretive process depends heavily on the background of the author and the critic for they may create distinctive readings that show no text can be read from a purely neutral or objective perspective. New Historicism enables readers to understand cultural and ideological assumptions in texts because it examines literary elements with surrounding discourse patterns.

Through its disagreement with the notion of objective historical narratives, New Historicism shows that all historical accounts exist as constructed and subjective. The approach criticizes traditional historical methods dependent on empirical and allegedly objective data for every historical analysis reflects the personal, cultural, and ideological biases of the historian.

As New Historicism focuses heavily on marginalized voices, it becomes relevantly applicable to studies on the history of the suppressed people. Traditional historical accounts frequently exclude or misrepresent the experiences of ethnic minorities and marginalized communities, but New Historicism established the methodology to study these cases of omissions. New Historicists become familiar with the forces and mechanisms that construct and supervise history when they analyze the overlooked texts. Mehmet Akif Balkaya (2014) declares that the goal of New Historicism is to critically engage with the past and reassess societal values instead of disregarding the past (p. 7068).

The methodology of New Historicism stands as a powerful evaluation instrument for studying Gharbi Mustafa’s novel *When Mountains Weep*. The novel investigates Kurdish historical events despite dominant historical sources which have often ignored or deliberately distorted those narratives. This study utilizes the New Historicist approach to explore the ways in which Mustafa’s novel works as a literary text and historical intervention that challenges the conventional views about Kurdish resistance and identity. The novel creates literary spaces in which the Kurdish history is reimagined, revisited, and challenged as power, narrative, and discursive elements interact. New Historicism helps





understand the novel better while demonstrating how literature displays historical perspectives and plays a role in making historical awareness.

6.1 Literature Review:

The Kurdish people have suffered throughout history from extensive persecutions like cultural suppression, political repression, ethnic cleansing and violence, displacement, and human rights violations especially under the rule of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Kurdish literature through various influential forms and genres such as novels has been a medium to document and critique these historical injustices. Gharbi Mustafa is a famous figure among the prominent Kurdish writers for his compelling narratives that tackle the social, political, and psychological struggles of the Kurdish people. In his novel, *When Mountains Weep*, he explores themes about Kurdish history, identity, and resilience. While *When Mountains Weep* has been analyzed in several scholarly articles, none of them used a New Historicist lens.

Mehmet Recep Taş in his article entitled ‘The Sense of Belonging and Unhomeliness in *When Mountains Weep*: Coming of Age in Kurdistan’ (2016) focuses on the concept of ‘unhomeliness’ as articulated by Homi Bhabha, arguing that the protagonist Hamko’s lack of a sense of belonging stems from the statelessness of the Kurdish people. Taş situates the novel within the historical context of Kurdish displacement and the Anfal campaigns, emphasizing the psychological impact of statelessness on Kurdish identity (Taş, 2016). The work produced by Taş offers a great historical and psychological breakdown, however, the analysis stays generally focused on Bhabha’s concept of unhomeliness which limits investigation of other vital Kurdish historical and identity aspects.

Chiad Abdulkarim and Ismael Saeed in their study ‘The Burden of Colonialism and Alienation in the Modern Kurdish Novel’ (2019) explore the impact of colonialism and alienation in modern Kurdish novel, focusing on four key novels: *When Mountains Weep: Coming of Age in Kurdistan* and *What Comes with the Dust Goes with the Wind* by Gharbi Mustafa, *Dawiya Şervanekî* (The End of a Warrior) by Ismet Badal, and *Hüyükteki Nar Ağacı* (The Pomegranate on the Knoll) by Yashar Kemal. The authors argue that colonialism has a fourfold effect on Kurdish society, as reflected in these novels: internal displacement, psychological conflict, a thirst for tradition, and a response to dominant narratives (Abdulkarim and Saeed, 2019). According to Abdulkarim and Saeed (2019), through Hamko’s experiences, the protagonist in *When Mountains Weep*, we observe the broader instability and alienation which Kurdish people endured. The authors present wide perspectives about Kurdish literature, yet they do not analyze the broader historical context



of Kurdish experience within *When Mountains Weep*. The study misses an opportunity to use New Historicism to deepen its understanding of Mustafa’s literary work by exploring complex relationships between history and literature.

Saman Hussein Omar and Dana Hameed Mahmood, in their article ‘Causes and Effects of Ethnic Conflict in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*’, published in 2020, explore the novel in light of ethnic conflict and systematic demographic change. In this context they note that the displacement of the Kurdish characters is both a cause and a result of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing, in particular ‘Arabization’ policies employed by the Iraqi Ba’athist regime to disassemble the socio-economic structures of the Kurds (Omar and Mahmood, 2020, pp. 234, 237). Omar and Mahmood describe in detail how denial of cultural rights such as language and traditional dress seem to be a catalyst for ethnic tension between Kurds and Arabs (2020, pp. 239-240). While their work provides a concrete analysis of the political processes of displacement and cultural annihilation, it focuses mostly on the sociological and political effects of ethnic conflict. Like previous studies, it does not utilize a New Historicist framework to examine how the novel serves as a cultural artifact negotiating and reconstructing the particular archival history of the Kurds.

Araz Ahmed Mohammed in his study ‘Trauma and Recovery: A Psychoanalytic Study of Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*’ (2022) uses Judith Herman’s trauma theory to dissect the psychological consequences war events pose to Hamko, the protagonist. The article explores how Hamko’s traumatic experiences serve in shaping his identity and his journey toward recovery (Mohammed, 2022). Though Mohammed’s psychoanalytic approach helps illustrate psychological aspects of the novel, his study does not investigate the novel’s historical context. The focus of the study is on individual trauma rather than the collective historical trauma of the Kurdish people, leaving room for a thorough historical analysis.

The main focus of academic studies on *When Mountains Weep* has been mostly on postcolonial and psychological themes such as trauma, unhomeliness, and alienation. Although these analytic methods have advanced the understanding of Kurdish people’s emotional and existential hardships, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis of historical elements in the novel. Particularly, there is no study available in which the principles of New Historicism are applied to the novel, which would open a gate for a deeper analysis of the way the novel revisits and reinterprets Kurdish history. Through New Historicism, scholars study





the connection between history and literature as literary works serve as cultural artifacts which both represent and shape historical realities. Through the application of this approach, it becomes possible to uncover the way Mustafa’s novel provides archival knowledge about Kurdish history as well as actively participates in its reconstruction and reinterpretation.

2. Analysis of *When Mountains Weep*

2.1 Historical Context and Autobiographical Novel as Resistance

The autobiographical novel *When Mountains Weep: Coming of Age in Kurdistan* by Gharbi Mustafa can be considered not merely as an individual story but also as a culturally important artifact that cannot be dissociated with the disruptive historical condition of the Kurdish people in Iraq. In an autobiographical narrative structure, the novel engages in the New Historicist project of revisiting history and thus creates a powerful counter-narrative that challenges the state-sponsored monolithic history of Ba’athist Iraq. To analyze its significance requires a critical lens that can take into consideration the complex relationship between the literary text and the world from which it springs. The theoretical framework of New Historicism developed by scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose provides such a lens. This approach does not believe that literature is a timeless and self-sufficient work but claims that texts are inseparably connected to the social, political, and cultural contexts of their time (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 12).

New Historicism focuses on these two foundational principles articulated by Louis Montrose which are the ‘historicity of texts’ and the ‘textuality of history’. The term historicity of texts refers to the cultural specificity and social embedment of all writing modes which shows that any text is a product of its historical moment that is shaped by the power structures, ideologies, and cultural anxieties of its era (Mambrol, 2016). On the other hand, the textuality of history argues that history in itself is not an objective collection of facts but rather a narrative, a text constructed and shaped by powerholders (ibid.). From this standpoint, history is regarded as a discourse and historical accounts are considered to be rhetorical constructs that are subject to the same critical analysis as a work of fiction (ibid.). This framework gives way to a parallel reading of both Mustafa’s novel and the official records as well as propaganda of the Ba’athist state since both are considered ‘texts’ that participate in a struggle over meaning and representation.

The New Historicists view history not as a stable and objective background against which literature is set, but as a narrative construct, a ‘text’ shaped by complex power dynamics and ideologies (Greenblatt,



1988). History is not a simple and linear progression of facts but a dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, and political forces that is often understood through the stories a society tells about itself (White, 2014). The official history that was promoted by the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party in Iraq was such dominant and hegemonic narrative. It was based on pan-Arabist ideology and it strived to create a single and unified Arab identity for Iraq by systematic suppression, assimilation, or violent erasure of non-Arab communities, the most notable of which were the Kurds (Makiya, 1998). This state-sponsored history that is distributed through its control of education, media, and other governmental institutions is the dominant discourse against which *When Mountains Weep* is written.

The Ba’athist state’s ideology was not a distant and abstract policy but a prevalent ‘social energy’ (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 6) that was circulating through all aspects of everyday life and penetrating into the institutions, relationships, and the consciousness of individuals. The state’s project of building a monolithic Arab nation needed the violent suppression of any competing identity, such a process is meticulously documented in Mustafa’s novel. School appears as a key site where this power is negotiated, that is, a microcosm where the state’s architecture of oppression is built within the minds of children. Through juxtaposing the official ‘text’ of the Ba’athist policy with the personal ‘text’ of the protagonist Hamko’s experience, a New Historicist reading can reveal how state power operates on the most intimate levels.

The Ba’ath Party seized power in Iraq for the first time on February 9th, 1963. The second time was on July 17th, 1968, till the USA invasion on April 9th, 2003. It was founded on an ideology of pan-Arab nationalism that advocated for a single Arab socialist nation (University of North Carolina Greensboro, n.d.). This ideology was exclusivist by nature, which did not leave any legitimate space for the different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity of the Kurds. To accomplish this vision, the regime enforced a systematic policy of Arabization especially following the failure of a Kurdish autonomy accord in 1974 (Anderson, 2019, p. 306). In this policy, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were forcefully driven out of their ancestral lands mainly in the oil-rich north regions and replaced by Arab settlers brought from central and southern Iraq (Yildiz, 2004, p. 62). This was not only a demographic relocation but a historical revisionism because it aimed to eliminate the presence of the Kurdish people in the landscape and the national consciousness.

The most subtle type of this oppression is psychological. The repeated taunts of ‘the Kurd’ or ‘the brainless Kurd’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 13) that Hamko bears from his classmates are not random acts of childhood





cruelty but echoes of a state-sponsored discourse that dehumanizes its minorities. The regime’s power is shown to be deeply insecure and reliant on the continuous policing of symbols and language. The volcanic outburst of violence by the headmistress is not triggered by a physical act of resistance but by Hamko’s utterance of a single ‘dangerous word’: *Peshmarga* (ibid., p. 10). The word itself contains a counter-history that serves as a narrative of heroism and resistance which directly challenges the state’s official text of ‘outlaws’. Also, Hamko is later arrested and, without any reasonable action, brutally tortured due to wearing a red shirt, which is misinterpreted as a symbol of communism, a rival ideology. These episodes show that the Ba’athist state’s primary battle was discursive. It understood that to control the nation, it had to control the narrative, and any signifier of a competing identity, be it a word, a color, or a song, had to be violently suppressed.

A well-planned construction of an official, single history under the reign of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq was a primary tool for legitimizing its authority and consolidating power. This state-sponsored history works as a ‘metanarrative’, a grand, all-encompassing story by which, as Jean-François Lyotard believes, institutions and practices are legitimized (Lyotard, 1984, pp. xxiii-xxv). *When Mountains Weep* actively documents this process of ideological indoctrination and then systematically deconstructs it through the live experience of the protagonist Hamko. This dialectic between the state’s grand narrative and the individual’s ‘small story’ is one of the major assumptions of New Historicist analysis, which, inspired by Michel Foucault, investigates how power operates through discourse to produce and regulate ‘truth’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 133).

The novel presents the Iraqi education system under the Ba’ath Party as a major instrument for state propaganda in which history is not learned but dictated. Former dictator president Saddam Hussein (1937-2006) is deified and presented to schoolchildren as ‘the everlasting historical leader’ whose ‘wise leadership’ is the only barrier between the people and homelessness (Mustafa, 2013, p. 12). This image is reinforced through obligatory rituals like his photo featured on the first page of every textbook. The Iraqi army is placed in the role of a heroic and benevolent actor. Such a characterization is clear when Hamko’s teacher asks the class to draw a picture of ‘the brave Iraqi army attacking the enemy-Kurdish outlaws in the mountains’ (ibid., p. 10). The state’s narrative perceives its own military aggression as a noble act of national defense. Conversely, the Kurdish freedom fighters, the Peshmarga, are delegitimized systematically and categorized as ‘outlaws’ (ibid., pp. 10,



65) and ‘traitors’ (ibid., p. 48). Such rhetoric reaches its climax when five young men are publicly executed at the soccer field, among them a classmate’s brother, being labeled officially as ‘cowards’ and ‘traitors’ due to rejecting ‘to fight in our [Iraqi army’s] holy war with Iran’ (ibid., pp. 47-48). The regime’s subsequent refusal to return the body for burial and its cruel demand that the family pay for the bullets that were used in the execution are further acts of symbolic violence. The scene that the students are forced to witness is a brutal declaration of state power which is designed to terrorize any potential dissenters and reinforce the state’s definition of loyalty and treason.

The direct experiences of Hamko create a stark counter-narrative that exposes the state’s official history as a violent fiction. This unofficial history can be understood as a ‘hidden transcript’, a critique of power that flourishes offstage, beyond direct observation by the powerholders (Scott, 1990, p. 4). The reality of state power is not benevolence but rather fear, violence, and extreme humiliation. This is first experienced in the microcosm of the school where the headmistress pours ice-cold water over Hamko’s hands before beating his ‘wet fingers fiercely and repeatedly with a stick’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 11). This brutality is repeated when she beats him all over his body for another perceived offense. Instead of being protectors, the agents of the state are used as a tool of oppression. The family of Hamko lives in constant fear and insecurity as his mother warns him ‘from now on you must hold your tongue. If you don’t, you and your grandfather could get us into real trouble’ (ibid., p. 12). This fear highlights the extent to which the state authority’s power penetrates their life. The Peshmargas that are labeled as outlaws by the state, are glorified as a symbol of pride and resistance within Hamko’s family and community. His grandfather directly contradicts the teacher’s propaganda and insists that the great Peshmarga leader, Mustafa Barzani, is ‘alive and living with his men in the mountains’ (ibid., p. 10). This unofficial history that is passed through family provides Hamko with an alternative framework for understanding his identity and the world around him.

Even within this oppressive environment the novel depicts nascent forms of resistance. The episode where Hamko and his friend Abo react against the Arab boys’ racist slurs ‘brainless Kurd’ (ibid., p. 13) to come up with a counter-slur about Arab women not wearing undergarment is a critical though childish form of narrative resistance. This act represents a strategic shift from either physical retaliation, which Hamko always loses, or passive endurance. Instead of accepting the terms of the dominant discourse, the boys create their new and parallel discourse. It is





“Revisiting Kurdish History in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*”



a fabrication or a ‘text’ of their own making that is designed to attack the cultural identity of the dominant group in the same way their own identity is attacked. This move from reaction to creation is the essence of counter-discourse. It shows an intuitive understanding that power is tied to who controls the story. This microcosm of schoolyard politics reflects the broader Kurdish struggle to create and sustain a national narrative that can stand against the hegemonic discourse of the state and shows that resistance can begin in the everyday spaces of power struggle.

The Kurdish people in Ba’athist Iraq had been systematically oppressed and their experience can be symbolically embodied in historical traumas like the brutal suppression of the 1991 uprising, which triggered a catastrophic refugee exodus. This event forms the historical ‘text’ against which the final third of *When Mountains Weep* unfolds. When the Ba’athist Regime was defeated in the Gulf War and encouraged by calls from U.S. president George H.W. Bush to take matters into their own hands, Kurds in the north and Shia in the south rose up against the regime (Zenko, 2010, p. 30). For a short period of time, the uprising, known in Kurdish as *Raperin*, was significantly successful that it made possible to take control of most of the Iraqi Kurdistan (Bell, 2024). However, the euphoria did not last long. Saddam Hussein used the ceasefire terms by the coalition to fly helicopters and then he unleashed his elite Republican Guard in a ruthless counterattack (Zenko, 2010, p. 31). The regime’s brutal suppression, which killed tens of thousands, triggered one of the largest and worst refugee crises in modern history (Human Rights Watch, 1992). Over 1.5 million Kurds fled their homes and headed for the mountainous borders with Iran and Turkey (Aziz, 2025). The resulting humanitarian crisis was catastrophic. Turkey initially sealed its border and hundreds of thousands of refugees were trapped in the freezing mountains without food, water, or shelter (ibid.). Thousands, especially children and elderly, died due to exposure, starvation, and disease (ibid.). Mustafa documents this exodus with harrowing and ground-level details in a way that transforms abstract statistics into tangible human suffering. The lived experience of the author, a refugee himself, in a television interview during the exodus, directly confirms the psychological state of those who fled, confirming the novel in its expression of despair and mistrust. Speaking to a reporter about the dangerous situation, Gharbi himself said, ‘I think we will face our fate. We will die one after the other. We’ve escaped from Saddam Hussein and his death and we are facing another death here.’ When asked whether he would return back to Iraq, he expressed his deep desire for a guaranteed safe return, a feeling that sums up the political reality and collective trauma of the refugees:



‘I prefer to go my home because we do not want to live like beggars or parasite or others, but we want to live with guarantee. We want guarantee from United Nations, from Europe, and every because we do not trust Saddam Hussein’ (Xezal1991KurdishGirl, 2010).

Hamko is tasked by his father with saving the family’s seven goats which is an absurd priority in the middle of a human disaster, that shows the entire collapse of normal life. The journey is a catalogue of horrors: the sight of unburied bodies along the road; the finding of a dead baby, its corpse ‘yellow, bloodless, milky-eyed,’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 120) left under a blanket; the continuous fear of Iraqi helicopters. The novel captures the fatigue, the hunger and the physical suffering of the journey where a thorn in a torn shoe is a torturous experience. The theft of a man’s shoes in the course of prayer is not a simple crime but a desperate act of survival. The death of the orphan boy Mihvan on Hamko’s back and the consequent effort to dig out a shallow grave with their bare hands is a moment of deep pathos which gives a face to the anonymous thousands who perished. Even the name Mihvan (guest) is symbolic here, as such he died, he departed, just like a guest who had to leave them behind.

In a regime that tries to eliminate the history and identity of a group of its population, writing an autobiographical novel becomes a highly political act. Mustafa’s choice of the autobiographical form transforms *When Mountains Weep* into a *testimonio*, or testimony. According to one of the main theorists of the genre, John Beverley, *testimonio* is a first-person narrative by a protagonist or witness whose situation is representative of a social class or group and whose purpose is to communicate a collective situation and urgency (Beverley, 2004, pp. 32-34). This form directly corresponds to the New Historicist project of recovering ‘small stories’ in order to deconstruct the grand and monolithic accounts of history circulated by those in power. The novel serves as a *testimonio* that records not only one boy’s suffering, but the collective trauma of the Kurdish people. It is an act of asserting a story and an identity against a state that denies their validity. The aim of the narrative is stated in the opening poem, which frames the whole book as the expression of ‘untold stories’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 1) and a reclamation of a ‘stolen childhood’ (ibid., p. 2). The catalogue of injustices in the poem from the ‘first humiliation, for the sake of nationhood’ to the ‘first awakening, when they shouted at me, ‘Hey, brainless Kurd!’” (ibid.) makes the work a chronicle of systematic oppression.

In addition to being a political counter-narrative, *When Mountains Weep* is an important cultural archive. It carefully documents and preserves the cultural practices and historical traumas of the Kurdish people which



were the very elements that the Ba’athist regime tried to destroy. Mustafa’s novel thus becomes a primary historical document. The novel is rich with descriptions of the traditional Kurdish village life. It keeps the memory of the children’s games like *Chingany* (hide and seek), *Tablany* (marbles), *Pinjokany* (the five stones) and *Chollany* (hopscotch) (ibid., p. 26). It also outlines important cultural customs, such as the communal celebration of the circumcision of a boy and the specific procedures of courtship and mixed-gender dancing at weddings. These details form a body of a living and breathing culture. The text powerfully archives the trauma of ethnic cleansing under the Arabization policy. The most touching example is the visit of Hamko with his grandfather to their ancestral village of Atrush. His grandfather points to the house which he helped to build as a boy and the orchard which he planted with his own hands both now occupied by Arab families relocated from the south. The heartbreaking scene of Arab boys offering to sell the grandfather fruit of his own orchard shows how deep the loss and the injustice of this policy are.

The production and publication of *When Mountains Weep* signifies the culmination of the resistance documented within its pages. The very act of writing itself becomes the final and possibly most enduring form of defiance against a regime built on silence and erasure. Autobiography has a long history as a genre of political resistance, as a space where individuals can challenge systemic oppression by making their own discourse circulate to confront official narratives (González Díaz, 2009, pp. 90-91). Works such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (1845) or Angela Davis’s *An Autobiography* (1974) are not just autobiographies, they are clear political and social critiques and moral suasion that aim to reveal injustice and mobilize change (Bosnicova, 2006). These narratives show how individual experience can be deployed to critique hegemonic power structures and allow the autobiographical subject to become an agent of change. Mustafa’s novel fits within this tradition. It is a work of resistance literature which uses the author’s own life; his struggles, traumas, and moments of resistance, to bear witness to the collective suffering of his people and to hold the perpetrators responsible in the court of global memory.

The personal storytelling is a significant political intervention to marginalized people like Kurds whose history has been denied systematically. It is a method of ‘writing themselves into history’ and challenging the state’s monopoly on the past and giving voice to experiences that have been intentionally silenced. The opening lines of the novel fulfill this purpose directly: ‘But behind the laughs, I hid the



pain of my untold stories’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 1). The narrative’s clear purpose is to uncover these ‘long-buried memories’ (ibid.) and express a history of pain which official discourse rendered invisible.

The archive of Kurdish identity is not stored in official buildings but in unofficial, often intangible, ‘texts’ of family memory, oral history, cultural practice, and the landscape itself. It is in this counter-archive that Hamko, and by extension the reader, learns to resist the campaign of sanctioned amnesia by the state. New Historicism invites a reading of these non-literary elements as parallel texts that participate in a dialogue with the dominant discourse and maintain a sense of selfhood against crushing pressure (Greenblatt, 1988). The main archivist of this counter-history is Hamko’s grandfather. He embodies a vital connection to a past that the Ba’athist regime is attempting to erase. His melancholic Kurdish folk songs, his bedtime stories of the mountains, his admiration for the old Czech rifle are all cultural texts that convey a system of values and a historical consciousness entirely separate from that of the regime. The rifle, his ‘best companion for thirty-five-year’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 9) is a symbol of a history of tribal conflict and self-reliance in the mountains which predates and resists the authority of the centralized Iraqi government under Ba’ath administration. The wisdom of the grandfather, however, is not a mere simple and violent opposition. His ultimate advice to Hamko to ‘go to school tomorrow and learn how to read and write, even if it’s in the language of your enemies’ (ibid.) is a sophisticated strategy of resistance. It recognizes that survival under the new power structure requires a complex negotiation, an ability to operate within the oppressor’s system without surrendering one’s own identity. This subtle position reflects the complex ways individuals and communities navigate power which is a central concern of New Historicist analysis.

The novel presents a world of moral and political complexity which resists a simple binary of good versus evil or Kurd versus Arab. This reflects Greenblatt’s (1988) critique of monolithic historical interpretations that fail to capture the contradictions of a given moment. As an example, when Hamko and his father are escaping from the police, they are given sanctuary not by a fellow Kurd but by a poor Arab man who, according to a traditional code of honor, risks his own safety to protect them. This act of great human decency transcends the state-fueled ethnic conflict and shows a more complex social reality. Similarly, Hamko’s own journey contains contradictions. He is conscripted into the Iraqi army and deployed to fight against the *Peshmarga*, his childhood heroes. He becomes, for a time, a reluctant part in the machinery of his own people’s oppression. This experience, however, is not one of simple





victimhood or betrayal. In this repressive structure, he finds companionship with another rebellious soldier, Nasso, and together they subvert the military’s authority. These moments show that power is not a simple top-down force. Individuals are continuously ‘negotiating’ with it, obeying in one moment and resisting in the next, in many cases doing both at the same time as a survival mechanism.

2.2 Subversion and Containment

The theoretical framework of New Historicism, especially the central dialectic of subversion and containment, offers a powerful frame through which to analyze the autobiographical novel of Gharbi Mustafa (2013) *When Mountains Weep*. New Historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt (1988, pp. 6-11) have argued that power is not a monolithic, top-down force, but a complex circulation of social and cultural energy. Power structures, in this view, do not merely repress the dissent, but actively produce and manage it. Seemingly subversive acts which seem to challenge authority, are often anticipated, even allowed, by the dominant order as a way to ultimately consolidate its own control, a process Greenblatt calls ‘containment’ (ibid., pp. 39-41).

Mustafa’s narrative of a Kurdish childhood under the rule of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq serves as a raw, detailed text of this constant negotiation. The autobiographical novel is a chronicle of a life lived wholly within what Michel Foucault (1978, p. 95), a foundational influence on New Historicism, called a network of power relations. This power is not just in the state capital, but is diffused via every institution: the school, the military, the family, and even the text of the street. The novel shows the tragic limits of subversion when confronted with a state that, when it feels that its control is truly threatened, abandons the theatre of containment and resorts to overwhelming, totalizing violence, resulting in the 1991 exodus.

The earliest and the most persistent place of this struggle is the school, which the regime configures as an Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2014, pp. 243-246) for a specific purpose: to erase the Kurdish identity and produce compliant, Arabized citizens. The young protagonist, Hamko, engages in one of the greatest acts of symbolic and linguistic subversion when his teacher asks the class to draw anti-Kurdish propaganda. The ‘power/knowledge’ (Foucault, 1980) of the regime has dictated the official narrative: the Kurdish fighters are ‘outlaws’ (Mustafa, 2013, pp. 10, 65). Hamko’s refusal is not just childish defiance but is a direct political challenge to the regime’s monopoly on ‘truth’. He counters the regime’s lexicon with the subversive lexicon of his people: ‘I will not draw what you ask, Teacher, because those men are



Peshmargas... and not outlaws’ (ibid., p. 10). By asserting the ‘dangerous word’ *Peshmargas*, ‘those who march to death’ (ibid.), he rejects the interpellation by the regime and shows a counter-narrative of heroism and national identity.

This symbolic resistance matures as the characters grow. One of the most striking examples of the ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1990) made public, occurs during a forced political march. The Ba’athist authorities, in a typical display of totalitarian theatre, force the populace into the street to ‘protest against the American enemy and its evil allies!’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 104). The participants are forced to perform the form of obedience: they must march and shout. However, they subvert the content entirely. Recognizing that their guards do not speak Kurdish, they start shouting the lines of a folk song:

Who died?

A Kurdish old woman.

What was her name?

Totti Khan.

Where did she die?

On the mountain heights.

What happened?

She was eaten by a hungry wolf. (ibid., p. 106)

This action is a masterful subversion. The ‘hungry wolf’ is an obvious, yet deniable, metaphor for the predatory Ba’athist regime. The Ba’ath officials, hearing the noise, are satisfied; their ‘escorts were excited by our shouting’ (ibid.), believing they were ‘chanting slogans against the Americans’ (ibid.). This scene perfectly illustrates the New Historicist concept of power’s ‘anxiety’ (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 135-137). The regime needs to believe in its own legitimacy, making it vulnerable to such parasitic acts of mockery. The Kurds, for their part, have managed to transform a ritual of containment into an expression of collective dissent, all while maintaining a mask of compliance.

Beyond the symbolic, the novel describes physical acts of defiance which directly challenge the Ba’athist state’s apparatus of discipline. When Hamko is conscripted into the Iraqi army, a machine designed to reform him into a tool of the regime, he is assigned as a sentry. Overwhelmed by ‘anger and frustration’ at being forced to fight his ‘own people’, he commits an act of pure, anarchic subversion: he cocks his rifle, ‘aimed it at the sky, and pulled the trigger until the very last bullets had been expended’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 71). This is not a strategic military act but is a primal scream, a violent rejection of the discipline and purpose the army represents. He appropriates the regime’s own instrument of violence





“Revisiting Kurdish History in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*”



and expends it uselessly, an act of prodigality that defies the military’s logic of efficiency and control.

For every act of subversion, the autobiographical novel presents a corresponding, and often overwhelming, mechanism of containment. Power, in Foucault’s (1977) analysis, is not only repressive but productive as well, it produces docile bodies, disciplined subjects, and ‘truths’ that serve its interests. *When Mountains Weep* is a catalogue of these strategies of containment, from the disciplinary power of the school to the spectacle of public violence.

The novel’s earliest examples of containment are, fittingly, in the school. The headmistress, being the local agent of regime power, reacts to Hamko’s linguistic subversion with ritualized violence. Her goal is to inscribe the regime authority onto the disobedient body. When Hamko is first brought to her she pours ‘ice-cold water over my hands and hit my wet fingers fiercely and repeatedly with a stick’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 11). The cold water is a calculated addition, meant to increase the pain and humiliation. Later, when Hamko and his friend Abo are caught in the girls’ bathroom, the headmistress’s response explicitly links their ‘shameless’ behavior to their Kurdish identity: ‘How can they [Kurdish mothers] have time to teach them anything when all they do is keep the rice cooking and the babies coming?... They think it’s their national duty so Kurds will become a majority in this country’ (ibid., p. 15). This is a crucial moment of bio-power (Foucault, 1978, p. 140), where the agent of the regime expresses anxiety and contempt for Kurdish life itself, their reproductive capacity. The subsequent beating is a direct, physical attempt to contain this perceived demographic and cultural threat.

As Hamko grows older, he graduates from the disciplinary power of the school to the raw and sovereign power of the secret police. His arrest for wearing a red shirt is a terrifying illustration of the arbitrariness of total power. The regime’s power is so complete that it requires no logical pretext, the simple act of being a Kurd in a red shirt is enough to trigger containment. The torture that follows is a Foucauldian ritual designed to ‘produce truth’ (ibid., p. 58). The interrogator’s demand for names and a confession of communism is not a search for information, but is a demand for submission. The regime requires the subject to take part in their own condemnation, to write a confession in the regime’s own language. The torture chamber itself, with its ‘disgusting odor of blood and human waste’ and ‘bloody handprints’ on the walls (Mustafa, 2013, p. 51), is a text that communicates the futility of resistance to all who enter.



The regime’s most public form of containment is what Foucault (1977) termed the ‘spectacle of the scaffold’ in a special chapter. By forcing the public to bear witness to an execution, the regime performs a ‘ceremony of power’ (ibid., p. 184), showing the public that it has the absolute right to take life. Mustafa gives a chilling example when his school is taken not to a football match, but to a public execution of five young men. The event is pure theatre: the official announces their ‘crime’ ‘refused to fight’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 47), the firing squad delivers the climax, and the officer’s coup de grâce, pumping ‘a final bullet into their heads’ (ibid., p. 48), is the bloody finale. The regime is not satisfied with killing; it requires the participation of the audience in their own containment by forcing them to ‘stand and applaud the heroic deed’ (ibid.). It is the ultimate perversion of power, forcing the subjugated to celebrate their own subjugation.

This logic of spectacular, public containment is not limited to the regime. New Historicism has been reminding us that power circulates through all social structures, including the patriarchy. The honor killing that Hamko witnesses is a brutal mechanism of social containment, meant to regulate female sexuality and enforce tribal law. The girl’s body becomes the text upon which the male ‘honor’ is violently reinscribed. The spectacle is made public when one of the men ‘put a bloody handprint on the upper part of the metal house gate as a badge of honor’ (ibid., p. 55). This act, like the officer’s final bullet, is a public signifier. The complicity of the regime, its willingness to ‘turn a blind eye’ and give minimal sentences, shows an important alliance. The Ba’athist regime and the Kurdish patriarchy, even though in conflict elsewhere, are united in their negotiation to contain the subversive potential of female autonomy.

The dialectic of subversion and containment reaches its narrative and historical climax in the Kurdish uprising of 1991 and the mass exodus that followed. This sequence shows both the ultimate failure of the regime’s mechanism of containment and the terrifying, absolute power that it holds in reserve.

The regime’s power, fatally weakened by its ‘victory’ in the Gulf War and President Bush’s call for an uprising, starts to dissolve. This is the moment the ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1990, p. 4) explodes into the open. The novel captures the anarchy as regime control evaporates: ‘Ba’ath Party members and secret police started to disappear from the streets’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 107). The power vacuum is immediately filled by the very forces of subversion the regime had spent decades trying to suppress. The uprising is the highest manifestation of the popular will, a moment in which the circulation of energy is reversed, and the people





“Revisiting Kurdish History in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*”



seize the power once held by the regime. The symbolic and strategic targeting of the ‘fortified secret police compound’ (ibid., p. 108), the very center of regime torture and containment, is the revolution made visible. For a brief, intoxicating moment, subversion triumphs.

However, this victory does not last long. The regime’s response shows the limits of popular subversion against modern, mechanized military power. Saddam Hussein, having ‘crushed the Shiite uprising’ in the south, ‘sent his troops toward the Kurdish region to recapture the territory’ (ibid., p. 113). The containment that follows is not the symbolic, ritualized violence of the school or the torture cell, it is total, indiscriminating, and genocidal in its intent. The regime abandons the theatre of power and unleashes its ‘war machine’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 421).

The result is the mass exodus, the novel’s ultimate image of containment. The Ba’athist state, unable to contain the Kurds as subjects within its borders, solves the problem by ejecting them from the body politic entirely. The nearly two million refugees are forced into what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, p. 166) calls it a ‘state of exception’. They are no longer citizens, but ‘bare life’, stripped of all political rights and reduced to their biological existence (ibid., pp. 126-131).

This ultimate containment is perfectly and tragically symbolized by the arrival of the refugees at the Turkish border. They are ‘trapped’ (Mustafa, 2013, p. 135). Behind them, the Iraqi army shells their cities, pushing them forward. In front of them, the Turkish soldiers ‘opened fire’ (ibid., p. 134), forcing them back. The border, a line on a map, becomes an absolute physical barrier, a ‘non-place’ where they are caught ‘between the two mightiest armies of the Middle East’ (ibid., p. 135). This is the final, horrific checkmate in the game of subversion and containment. The Kurdish people, having subverted the Iraqi Ba’ath regime, find themselves contained not just by one regime, but by the very logic of the nation-state system itself, which has no place for them.

The resolution of the novel, a ‘safe haven’ (ibid., p. 164) and a ‘transition tent camp’ (ibid., p. 165), is very ambiguous. The safe haven is, in itself, another form of containment, a reservation managed by foreign powers. Hamko returns to a looted home and a broken life, his love, Pari, is gone forever. The novel’s final words in the epilogue, expressing a hope that he will ‘someday have an opportunity to say what my father never got to say: ‘This is the day when all of this ends’ (Mustafa, 2013), confirms that the cycle is not over. The ‘text’ of history is not closed. As such, the autobiographical novel itself becomes a final act of subversion. It is a



counter-memory which refuses to be contained, a testament that ensures the Kurdish ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1990, p. 4) continues to circulate, challenging the official histories that would erase it.

Conclusion

This study has discussed Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep* through the critical lens of New Historicism to show how literature serves as both a historical archive and a form of cultural resistance. Instead of viewing the novel as only a personal autobiography, the analysis has placed the novel as a politically charged text that intervenes in the dominant historical discourses about the Kurdish people. Through the foregrounding of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, it has been demonstrated in this study that the narrative of Mustafa does not merely reflect history, but actively reconstructs and challenges it.

Through close textual analysis, the study has demonstrated how the hegemonic narrative by the Ba’athist regime attempted to erase Kurdish identity via institutions like education, military service, language, and cultural representation. In response to that, *When Mountains Weep* is a counter-archive that preserves suppressed Kurdish experiences. Hamko’s personal story becomes inseparably a part of the collective memory of a people that has undergone the Arabization policies, the Anfal campaign, forced displacement, and the 1991 uprising. That way, Mustafa turns individual trauma into historical testimony, giving marginalized voices the opportunity to challenge state-sponsored versions of truth.

The study has also shown that the novel embodies the New Historicist dynamics of subversion and containment. The acts of resistance in the text, whether linguistic, symbolic, cultural, or physical, demonstrate the way power circulates through everyday life and the way Kurdish characters negotiate domination rather than simply submit to it. Mustafa’s narrative captures resistance not only in heroic struggle, but also in ordinary gestures, family memory, oral tradition, and cultural survival. These micro-histories interrupt the Ba’athist grand narrative and reveal its reliance on fear, propaganda, as well as discursive control.

Furthermore, *When Mountains Weep* can be seen as a cultural archive that records the Kurdish social practices, landscapes, values, and historical trauma. The conservation of village life, childhood games, exile experiences, and sufferings of refugees transforms the novel to a living historical record. The writing itself becomes a political act, as it allows Kurds to write themselves into history, so as not to be systematically erased. The autobiographical form of Mustafa is thus a testimony and resistance, aligning the novel with the global tradition of political life writing that struggles to confront oppressive power structures.





Ultimately, this study confirms that Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep* is not just a literary work but also a historical intervention. Through the framework of New Historicism, the novel is exposed as the site of intersection between memory, power, and identity. It revisits Kurdish history by turning silenced experiences into narrative presence and by exposing the way history itself is constructed through ideology and discourse. The work thus adds to the existing body of Kurdish literary studies by emphasizing the role of literary works in the process of recovering marginalized histories and reimagining national identity. Future studies may extend this approach to other Kurdish narratives to further explore how literature continues to negotiate history, resistance, and cultural survival in contexts of political repression.

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“Revisiting Kurdish History in Gharbi Mustafa’s *When Mountains Weep*”

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