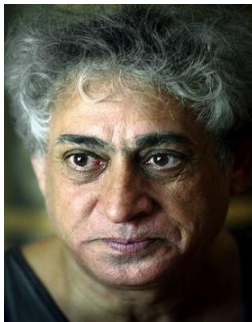


Barakāt, Salīm (1951-) برکات سلیم

SUMMARY

Salīm Barakāt is one of the most prolific modern Arab writers. He published his first poetry collection in 1973 and has since produced several more in addition to novels, essays, and autobiographical works. Despite living outside the Arab world since 1982, Barakāt's literary output is closely connected to his Kurdish roots, and the culture and traditions of his birthplace in northern Syria. Barakāt's inventive language, original narrative style and fantastical plots have placed him in the forefront of Arab literary modernism. His unconventional technique and mixture of styles and genres have at times made critics unable to describe his work in common literary terms, which in turn has given him the reputation of a renovator of the Arabic novel.



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MAIN ENTRY

The Kurdish writer Salīm Barakāt was born in Qamishli in northern Syria in 1951. His father was a religious man and Barakāt's childhood was coloured by readings of the Quran, Islamic history, and tradition. In his acclaimed autobiographical text *The Iron Grasshopper* (1980) Barakāt vividly describes his first years and the conflicts and violence which formed his childhood. Upon finishing high-school Barakāt moved to Damascus in 1970 to study literature at the university, but left after the first year and moved to Beirut instead. In Beirut he got to know *Adūnīs* and *Maḥmūd Derwīsh*, both well-known avant-garde poets at the time. They appreciated Barakāt's fresh outlook and intricate use of language, and included him in their circle of poets, writers, and critics. Barakāt soon established himself as a poet and writer, and in 1973 his first collection of poetry, *Everyone Entering will Hail Me and Everyone Exiting As Well*, was published. In 1982 Barakāt moved to Cyprus where he lived until 1999 when he moved to Sweden. During his time in Cyprus Barakāt worked as an associate editor of *al-Karmel*, a Palestinian literary magazine.

Though constantly renewing himself through language and narrative techniques Barakāt's first novel, *Sages of Darkness* (1985), set the tone for his later fiction in terms of themes, unconventional usage of time and space, magical interventions, talking animals and surreal

events. The novel is set in a small Kurdish Syrian village and tells the story of Bikras, a baby growing so fast that by the end of his first day he has reached the age of marriage. The novel won Barakāt immediate acknowledgment as a skilled novelist and two years later he published his second novel *Geometrical Spirits* (1987). This novel is set in a world between the living and the dead in a war torn country where the dead are still fighting and random events influence the plot. As in *Sages of Darkness*, *Geometrical Spirits* balances on a fine line between fiction and reality; it can be read as Barakāt's comment on the Lebanese civil war.

At a relatively young age, Barakāt had published two autobiographical works, *The Iron Grasshopper* (1980) and *Play High the Trumpet, Play It the Highest* (1982), and a collection of his diaries, *The Church of the Warrior* (1976). In addition to these accounts, much of Barakāt's fiction and poetry is informed by his personal life and the question of Kurdish identity and history, and hence has an autobiographical air. This organic way of incorporating true events, personal and general history, and contemporary events into his fiction while at the same time twisting and turning it all to appear as a fantastical fairytale has become Barakāt's trademark. His novel *The Feathers* (1990) tells the story of two twins, one living in exile in Cyprus and the other in Qamishli. Together the two brothers' fates echo Barakāt's own life and can, to a certain degree, be said to form a fictional continuation of his autobiographical works. At the same time, abrupt changes in time and perspective, talking plants, characters from mythological stories, and the living dead place the novel very far from the genre of autobiography. Barakāt's novel *Novices in Death* (2006) is set in Sweden, Barakāt's country of residence, and deals with feelings of estrangement and alienation in a new environment. However, the Sweden appearing in the novel is a country where ships travel on dry land, the sea misbehaves, and even death is different from what one expects. Since 1985 Barakāt has published over twenty novels, many translated into other languages.

Barakāt was among the first Syrian writers to give a voice to the Kurdish population in fictional form. The characters in Barakāt's novels are often Kurdish and the magical and fantastical aspects draw on traditional Kurdish epics and myths. Though lending themselves to be read as comments on Kurdish history and the situation of the Kurds during the twentieth century, Barakāt's novels are free from overt political references. The reoccurring themes of identity formation, migration, and the struggle of the marginalised make Barakāt's novels universal. Despite centering his fiction on Kurdish milieus and events, Barakāt writes exclusively in Arabic. His inventive use of the Arabic language has rendered him a reputation as a difficult writer both to read and to translate.

As his fiction, Barakāt's poetry is filled with references to Kurdish mythological and historical figures. *The Cranes* (1981) includes a long poem which is re-works the love story told in the Kurdish epic *Mem û Zîn*. And just like in Barakāt's novels, the reader of his poetry is struck by the brave usage of language, the twisted metaphors, and the sometimes ambiguous usage of a word or phrase. The titles of some of the collections, for example *For the Dust, for Shamdin, for the Cycles of Prey and the Cycles of Kingdoms* (1977) and *North of the Hearts or*

their West (2014) give an idea of Barakāt's poetical world: a world of uncontrollable chaos portrayed in abstract imagery. This world is cleverly evoked in *The Haughtiness of the Hegemonic* (2012) where dreaming is the central theme and layers of reality, history, and poetical heritage are merged together.

In 2000 Barakāt was awarded the Swedish *Tucholsky Prize* as an exiled author; in 2006 he received the *Literary Prize of Karin Boye* for his poetry.

Selected list of works

Collections

al-diwān الديوان (The Collection) 1992

al-aqrābādhīn: maqālāt fī 'ulūm al-nazr الأقراباذين: مقالات في علوم النزر (Pharmacopoeia: Articles in the Science of Triviality) 1999

al- a'māl al-shi'riyya الأعمال الشعرية (Poetical Works) 2007

Autobiographical Works

kanīsat al-muḥārib كنيسة المحارب (The Church of the Warrior) 1976

al-jundub al-ḥadīd الجندوب الحديدي (The Iron Grasshopper) 1980

hatho 'āliyan hat al-nafīr 'ala ākhirihi هاته عاليها هات النفير على آخره (Play High the Trumpet, Play It the Highest) 1982

Novels

Fuqahā' al-ḡalām فقهاء الظلام (Sages of Darkness) 1985

arwāḥ handasiya أرواح هندسية (Geometrical Spirits) 1987

al-rīsh الريش (The Feathers) 1990

Dilshād دلشاد (Delshad) 2003

mawtā mubtadi'ūn موتى مبتدئون (Novices in Death) 2006

al-slālim al-ramaliyya السلالم الرملية (The Sand Ladders) 2007

ḥūriyyat al-ma' wa banātuha حورية الماء وبناتها (The Mermaid and Her Daughters) 2013

Poetry Collections

kull dākhil sayahṭif li-ajlī wa kull khārij aydan كل داخل سيهتف لأجلي وكل خارج أيضا (Everyone Entering will Hail Me and Everyone Exiting As Well) 1973

li-l-ghubār, li-Shamdīn, li-adwār al-farīsa wa adwar al-mamālik للغبار لشمدين لأدوار الفارسة وأدوار (For the Dust, for Shamdin, for the Cycles of Prey and the Cycles of Kingdoms) 1977

al-karākī الكراكي (The Cranes) 1981

ṭaysh al-yaqūt طيش الياقوت (The Recklessness of the Ruby) 1996

al-mu'jam المعجم (The Lexicon) 2005

āliha آلهة (Gods) 2012

‘ajrafat al-mutajānis عجرفة المتجانس (The Haughtiness of the Hegemonic) 2012

shimāl al-qulūb aw gharbuha شمال القلوب وغربها (North of the Hearts or their West) 2014

Sūriyā سوريا 2015

Further Reading

Jayyusi, S. K. (ed.) (2005) *Modern Arabic Fiction: an Anthology*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Meyer, S. (2001) *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Rooke, T. (2006) 'Feathers from Heaven: or What the Paprika Plant Said to the Hero', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 9 (2): 179-188.

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