The Linguistic Construction of Political Crimes in Sherko Bekas' Selected poems

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Abstract

This work centers on the topic of victims of crime and crosses cultural borders into Iraqi Kurdistan with an exploration of Iraqi Kurdish poet Sherko Bekas and his collection of poems known under the title 'The Small Mirrors'. The selected passage under scrutiny has at its core the (Kurdish) victims of genocide but does not name explicitly those responsible for the atrocities. Genocide and other 'political' crimes are often given scant treatment, or they are even neglected, in classic works on crime fiction. By addressing this issue we draw attention to the socio-political situation worldwide and see this genocide in a row with fascism, the Balkan wars, the Rwandan genocide and others. However, the Kurdish victims face much more difficulty in receiving a global recognition of their fate and consequently the Iraq-Kurdish conflict is a very complex one with no clearly clear good/bad dichotomy.

In the passage under scrutiny it is noticeable that the linguistic construction of the victims automatically brings about the construction of the respective offenders even though they are not talked about. The author employs the framework of Critical Stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) that is particularly suited to detect ideological meaning in texts and lists ten textual-conceptual functions of texts which, on the level of ideation as world creation in texts, unravel the world projected by the text and the values attached to this world, that is the ideological meaning. In this paper, the focus is on naming choices, transitivity patterns, negation and implied meaning. The analysis shows interconnections between some textual conceptual functions in the poem. Thus, I discuss some textual conceptual functions together to avoid repetition. Bekas' political statement and his tireless work to give a voice to the Kurdish people in their ongoing struggle against oppression emphasises the fact that victims of genocide might be numerous and anonymous but their suffering is as tragic as that of an individual victim of crime.

Keywords: Critical Stylistics, Sherko Bekas, Iraq, The Small Mirrors, Genocide

1. Introduction

In this work, we introduce a critical linguistic analysis of some selected extracts from Sherko Bekas' collection of poems, known as 'The Small Mirrors'. First, we present a short introduction to Sherko Bekas and his work before we discuss Critical Stylistics (Jeffries, 2010) and present a brief analysis of an extract from the poems. While this paper offers only a glimpse of our analysis, we invite the reader to follow up our chapter 'The Linguistic Construction of Political Crimes in Kurdish-Iraqi Sherko Bekas' Poem *The Small Mirrors*' in the edited collection 'The Linguistics of Crime'(Douthwaite & Tabbert, forthcoming 2022). In addition, for

readers interested in a more comprehensive analysis of Bekas' work, the author's PhD thesis (M. Ibrahim, 2018) is available for download.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Bekas was born in 1940. He is a contemporary Kurdish poet and was a son of Faiq Bekas (1905-1948), himself a well-known Kurdish poet.

Since 1970s, Kurds were seen as second class citizens and as a result there were attempts to erase them. For example, in Halabja, 5,000 Iraqi Kurds were killed and this mass killing is a prevalent topic in Bekas' work. The injustice encouraged Bekas to write about it and becomes recurrent in his poetry as the analysis will show.

Bekas's political activities started when he joined the Peshmerga who were fighting against the regime in 1964 while Bekas was still young. Furthermore, he joined the Kurdish Liberation Movement in 1965 and also the second Kurdish Liberation movement in 1974. Following the failure of the movement, he was exiled for three years. In 1986, he was again exiled to Sweden where he published 'The Small Mirrors' in 1987 in which he mourns the victims of Kurdistan. On 8th August 1987 in a speech at Folkore Hois (The Whole Sky of my Borders, 8th August 1987)[i] he stated that he considered himself the poet 'of all Kurdish nation, of revolution and of Peshmergas' and said, 'I consider myself the mother poet of Kurdistan'.
After the uprisings in Kurdistan in March 1991, Bekas returned to Iraqi Kurdistan and became minister of culture but he resigned and returned to Sweden where he died on 4th August 2013(Douthwaite & Tabbert, forthcoming 2022).
Bekas sought an international reputation through exceptional aesthetic values of his works, thus he turned to internationally known texts. For instance, he read the Arabic translation of the 'The Waste Land', borrowed its technique and implemented it into Kurdish poetry.

He was inspired by these texts. In 1970, together with other poets and writers of his generation, he brought a radical change to traditional Kurdish poetry through founding the Rwanga movement (Fahmi & Dizayi). As its meaning suggest, Rwanga is the immediate observation of the situation. Thus, its poetry was a reaction to the socio-political situation and is 'one of the fruitful consequences of the socio-political developments' (Fahmi & Dizayi, p. 72). Rwanga poets attempted to adjust poetry to real life (Naderi, 2011 32), thus, it does not follow the traditional rules of rhyme and rhythm for the expressions of different beautiful fantasies. This movement allows poets to express their vision precisely and to overcome the boundaries of language. In this movement, Bekas identified 'new elements in the world literature' and used them in his own poetry (Fahmi & Dizayi) and stated that in this movement, the poets wants to be 'free to discover what has not yet been discovered, to mix local and global languages in new and creative writings, and to support freedom all over the world' (Dhiab, 2007 132).

The poets of Rawanga proclaimed in 1970 (Naderi, 2011 12):

> '-Our writing is full of suffering .... Thus we are fighting against suffering.
> - Beauty is the center of our writing .... Therefore, it is against ugliness.
> -It is free and independent .... Hence it breaks boundaries.
> -It is revolutionist ....'

Bekas' work has been translated into many languages, such as English, Italian, Arabic, French, Swedish and German. This means that his work is well known throughout the world. In this paper, I use a Critical Stylistics approach to show why Bekas' work has acquired such a wide reputation.

2. A Critical Stylistic Approach to 'The Small Mirrors'

'The Small Mirrors'/Awena buchkalakan is a collection of poems written in Kurdish by Bekas over a periode of two years (1987-1988) and is included in his second Diwan in 2006, namely in the second volume of Bekas' Diwan (2006/8). It was published in Kurdish and European magazines. This collection is characterised by 'exceptional aesthetic value, unparalleled facility with words, a poetry that is emotionally, historically, cognitively, and existentially accessible to the public through its rich yet simple everyday language' (Sharifi & Ashouri 2013). In this collection, Bekas describes the war and its victims.

Van Wijk (2013) states that victims of war (if the victims described in the poems are not even considered as victims of genocide) can lawfully claim victimhood status despite the fact that here the victims are seen against the background of the Kurdish longing for an autonomous state. Thus, the sympathy margin (Kenney, 2002, p. 214) is not very powerful because the opposing parties see an independent Kurdish state as a threat to national unity.
Beka's ideological perspectives on these wars and on the victims of Halabja and the respective offenders can be found in his description of the wars and their victims. These ideologies could also be considered to be the Kurds' viewpoints.
I use a critical stylistic analysis to uncover these ideologies in a passage from 'The Small Mirrors' (1987-1988) from which I select some lines. Next, I present the longer passage with its translation into English, translated by myself as a Kurdish native speaker for more contextual information.

xanûyek juriyêkî liyê mird

le prseda çawî giyêrrra

bo jûrekanî drawsiyê

eweyi neydî

eweyi nehat

lenaw dlêyi pencereyda bû bergriyê!

gerrrekî malêyêk kujra

le prseda çawî giyêrrra

bo rriyê û ban û ,

bo gerrrekî em law ula

eweyi neydî

eweyi nehat

le naw dlêyi ber heywan û serkolaên û

gorrrepaniya bû be griyê!

axir xo min kurdistanm

leyek tirûkeyi çawa bû

piyênc hezar kanîyi liyê kujra

piyênc hezar rezî liyê xinika

piyênc hezar şî'rî liyê kujra

piyênc, piyênc, piyênc, piyênc,..

wa şeş mange le prsedaye mewlewîm

dar be darm guyê helêexa

berd be berdm sorax ekaw

şax be şaxm çaw egiyêrrriyê

eweyi dûkelêyi cergmî nasî û nehat

eweyi nemdî

çon leber çawî em miyêjuwe sk sutawem

rreş, rreş, rreş, rreş

danagerrriyê !

kotelê

A room of a house died

in the consolation it looked

for the neighboring rooms

those whom it did not see

those who did not come

became, in the heart of window, a knot!

A house of a neighborhood is killed

in the consolation

It looked for the roads

for this and that neighbourhod

those whom it did not see

those who did not come

in the heart of the courtyard and district!

became a knot

At the end I am Kurdistan

It was in a blink of an eye

Five thousand springs of it are killed

Five thousand fruits of it are suffocated

Five thousand poems of it are killed

Five five five five,…

It has been six months since my Malawe is in consolation

Tree eavesdrop for tree*

Stone search for stone*

Mountain look for mountain*

Those who recognize the smoke of my offspring and did not

come, those I did not see

How for the sake of my abdomen-burnt history do not turn

black, black, black, black!

Sculpture

A passage from 'The Small Mirrors' (Bekas, 2006 p. 651-652)

Previous studies examine Bekas' works from the perspective of literary criticism (Darwish & Salih 2019; Dhiab 2007a; Essa 2009; Lateef Abdulqadir 2019; Mala 2012; Mohammad & Mira 2018; Tabai et al. 2015). Ibrahim (2018) is the first to use a critical stylistic analysis (Jeffries, 2010) to mainly uncover ideologies in Bekas' texts and thus in Kurdish poetry.

Critical Stylistics is 'defined by the use of a linguistic methodology so as to critically engage with the style of literary as well as non-literary texts' (Gregoriou et al. 2021) and was developed because there is no comprehensive and structured toolkit when doing a Critical Discourse Analysis.

1. Naming and Describing: The choice of nouns to signify a referent; nominalisation; the construction of noun phrases with pre-/ post modification to identify a referent,)
2. Representing Actions/Events/States: Transitivity and verb voice,
3. Equating and Contrasting: Equivalence (parallel structure), antonymy and opposition (Jeffries, 2010b),
4. Exemplifying and Enumerating: Three-part lists to imply completeness, without being comprehensive (Jeffries 2010a: 73) and four-part lists (indicating hyponymous and meronymous sense relation), apposition,
5. Prioritizing: Transforming grammatical constructions: clefting, passive and active voice, subordination and syntactic structure,
6. Implying and Assuming: Presupposition and implicature,
7. Negation: The construction of negated meaning (Nahajec, 2009),
8. Hypothesising: Modality,
9. Presenting the Speech and Thoughts of other Participants: Speech and thought presentation, and
10. Representing Time, Space and Society: Choice of (verb)tense, adverb of time, deixis.

This list gives the ten textual-conceptual functions based on Jeffries (2010) and their formal realizations (2015, p. 45f).

Critical Stylistics is a linguistic analysis of a stylistic method. It shows how language conveys social meanings. 'Critical Stylistics' was developed by Jeffries in 2007 at the University of Huddersfield when she explored (a) the textual construction of the female body and (b) if feminist ideological perspectives have successfully been included in these constructions. Critical Stylistics brings together the main general functions that a text has in representing reality where 'there is a level at which texts arrange the world around us which can be presented in the words and structures of the texts' (Jeffries, 2010). Jeffries (2010) argues that 'language is essentially a finely balanced combination of rules and broken rules, where the fact that there is no one-to-one form-function relationship is the key to many of the most useful and life-enhancing aspects of language, such as the writing of poetry and the use of metaphor in daily life, as well as of the more negative aspects, such as lying and manipulation'. Critical Stylistics bridges the gap between CDA and Stylistics through the development of a Critical Linguistics approach to analysing a text. It provides a more comprehensive and systematic set of analytical tools. Thus, it is a more developed and rigorous approach to CDA which also shares the ideas of uncovering ideologies and power relations in discourse. From a critical stylistic perspective, all texts are ideologically woven whether consciously or unconsciously. Critical Stylistics aims to uncover these hidden ideologies in texts and discourse by the following tools: (a) Naming and Describing, (b) Representing Actions/Events/States, (c) Equating and Contrasting, (d) Exemplifying and Enumerating, (e) Prioritizing, (f) Implying and Assuming, (g) Negating, (h) Hypothesizing, (i) Presenting the Speech and Thoughts of other Participants, and (j) Representing Time, Space and Society.

3. Analysis

This study analyses Kurdish Poetry, taken from Sherko Bekas's work. I use the poem *sculpture* from 'The Small Mirrors'. Here, it is logical to imagine a situation where Bekas puts himself in the scene as homodiegetic narrator (Genette, 1980, 1988).

Although 'The Small Mirrors' describes victims of mass killings, there is no mention of individual persons as victims or as perpetrators. Instead, metaphorically used nouns are seen in the poem to describe the victims with no mention of the offenders.
In addition, the subject slots are filled with post-modified noun phrases: 'a room of a house' and 'a house of a neighbourhood'.
The postmodifications by the preposition 'of' stands for urban structures and symbolises human settlements which are concrete structures called homes. Together with the verb choices 'is killed' and 'died' these inanimate objects become personified. The choice of such naming strategies with these verbs is used to describe the end of (human) life.
Yet, no offenders are mentioned but this does not mean that there is no information about the offenders. In contrast, the construction of the victims sheds light on the respective offenders according to a binary opposition between the victims and the perpetrators. This opposition has been discussed by Jančaříková (2013) and Tabbert (2015, 2016)].

Next, I will use the tools of Critical Stylistics to show how this conclusion has been reached. I will also show how the tools work together in the different conceptual functions to show the meaning of the texts. I begin with the most frequent of the ten textual-conceptual functions in the poem that is 'Representing actions, events and states of being'.

3.1 Representing Actions, States and Events

In this part, I explore the poem under consideration with a concentration on the choices of verbs. There are two material action verbs: 'died' and 'is killed' (Simpson, 1993) (arguably so in the case of 'died'). They are both factive verbs that focus on the outcome. The verb 'died' might arguably be considered a supervention process. This creates the impression that there is no need for an actor and thus a culprit. This underlines that 'room' is considered an animate entity because it is used with the verb 'died' that requires human actor:

> A room of a house died
> in the consolation it looked
> for the neighbouring rooms
> those whom it did not see
> those who did not come
> became, in the heart of window, a nob!

In addition, the use of the verbs 'to look for' and 'see' is foregreounded because they are mental processes of perception, often carried out by human beings whereas here, they are used with inanimate objects.
Another point is the verb 'to come', a material action process intention which indicates movement which a room is usually unable to do. Thus, the construction of a 'room' performing acts of movements and mental processes deviates from the norms of logic.

Further, this room is being described as in need of consolation which entails that emotion is a feature of the room which constitutes foregrounding and allows us to understand that 'a

room' and 'neighbouring rooms' are naming strategies that stand for the human victims of the killings.

Naming victims in relation to urban structure has the effect of creating proximity in the perception of these atrocities and makes the reader/hearer feel that those affected are innocent. This confirms Christie's (1986) notion of ideal victims who are powerless and are either sick or very young or very old, were carrying out a respectable project at the time of crime with no personal relationship with the perpetrator and with no reason to be attacked (Ibrahim & Tabbert 2021). Such an ideal victim, for example, is the character 'Little Red Riding Hood' from the same-named fairytale (Walklate, 2007, p. 28). Victims of international crimes, however, 'face much more difficulty in publicizing their fate and consequently 'benefiting' from their status as victim' (Van Wijk, 2013, p. 159). This is particularly relevant here as the Iraq-Kurdish conflict is a very complex one with no clearly carved good/bad dichotomy and thus goes against Van Wijk's (2013) criteria according to which 'potential [victim]-status givers' prefer 'comprehensible' conflicts that have a unique selling point, 'have a limited time span' and are 'well-timed'. Further, 'domestic policies, geopolitical interests, accessibility to the region and the possibility of donors identifying with the victims' (2013) are prerequisites for a conflict to attract public attention and for those victims to be perceived as 'ideal'. All this is absent from the Iraq-Kurdish conflict because at that time media coverage and human rights groups were not allowed to watch and report the conflict and its results. Therefore, the conflict continues and left behind thousands of civilian victims who Bekas writes about.

3.2 Naming and describing

This section discusses the textual-conceptual function of Naming and Describing. Even though this is a small passage, it is complex and the analysis emphasizes how important this textual conceptual function is for Bekas in presenting ideological meaning:

> A room of a house died
> …
> A house of a neighbourhood is killed

The above extract is an example for a parallel syntactic structure of two clauses consisting of subject and predicator only. Yet these two structures are separated by six lines in the poem. A house and a neighbourhood are two entities that are human made and serve to accommodate people and create a living space and structure in which families live and raise their children. In addition, people build friendships, nourish them and make acquaintances while living in these urban structures. They are also used to combat negative experiences such as illnesses with love and solidarity(Douthwaite & Tabbert, forthcoming 2022).

These two noun phrases in their consecutive order are arranged by size from small (room) to big (a house and a neighbourhood). This metonymic relationship is used to broaden the effect of destruction. Also, Bekas has not mentioned any specific details about the neighbourhood and leaves it to the reader to use their schematic knowledge to draw a picture of the details whereby the reader can imagine their own neighbourhood to increase the immediacy and proximity of the killings and their destructive nature as it is not only a killing of people.

3.3 Negating, implying and assuming

Negation can evoke the sense of existence (Nahajec, 2012, p. 39; 2014) and make a 'hypothetical version of reality' (Jeffries, 2010, p. 107). Thus two different scenarios could be

created. The first is the actual happening and the second is the one that is possible to happen. What is possible to occur but has not actually occurred is realised by a negative particle (e.g. 'not'):

> those whom it did not see
> those who did not come

The two lines above occur in the context of 'neighbouring rooms' looking for 'roads' who did not come.

As stated in Section 3.2, the two negated verbs 'see' and 'come' are perception and action processes, done by living entities. Yet in the poem under investigation, these processes are carried out by 'a room' which is a deviation from our expectation and leads to a foregrounding of the verbs and help the reader to interpret 'a room' and 'neighbouring rooms' as in fact naming strategies for victims.

The same applies to 'a house of a neighbourhood', 'neighbourhood' and 'roads. These nouns/noun phrase are also naming choices for the victims.

In this section, the argument is further developed by analysing the the role of negation in the poem. Negation, as Nahajec (2012, p. 35; 2021) states, is presuppositional and produces implied meaning. I thus examine the two textual-conceptual functions of 'Negating' as well as 'Implying and assuming' here together. While flouting cooperation maxims prodcues implicature (Grice, 1975), 'pragmatic presuppositions reside in the shared conventions of language use' (Simpson, 1993, p. 128).

In the poem, negation pragmatically assumes that the reader/hearer is a discourse participant and sees that the house/neighbourhood/roads are there visibly and have the ability to 'come' while in reality they do not as they died/were killed. There is an additional implied level of meaning deriving from deliberately not following the cooperative principles (Grice 1975). For a better understanding of the implied meaning here, one needs to look at the the metaphorical naming choices for victims, namely the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE URBAN STRUCTURE (M. K. Ibrahim & Tabbert, 2021).

In this poem, the victims are no longer seen as people because they are described in terms of a man-made structure of a 'neighbourhood' and are not separate casualties but are rather tied together structurally, despite the fact they have relations with one another. They form intricate interrelations similar to those in families, friendships and between acquaintances such as roads running through a neighbourhood, connecting houses and their rooms to other houses/rooms. Therefore, the killings are not just meaningful based on the notion of indirect victimisation (when family and friends suffer the death of a love one who fell victim to a fatal crime) but, in addition, evoke the notion of murdering in a systematic way, a deliberate effort to erase an ethnicity and therefore depicting the crime that has happened in a way similar to the concept of genocide.

3.4. Hypothesising and Presenting others' speech and thoughts

It can be argued whether modality is capable of constructing 'a hypothetical alternative reality' (Jeffries, 2015, p. 165). Modality can work in some way similar to negation (explained in the previous section), and can be related to the concept of point of view because it conveys the viewpoint of a speakers/writers about a proposition (Simpson 1993, p. 47). Either way, a closer look at the poem shows no examples of modality which means all sentences are categorical:

At the end I am Kurdistan

This line is of relevance because it presents Bekas' preference to make his assertions categorical and unmodalised. It is also the only indication of the presence of a first-person narrator and therefore an indication that the poem 'sculpture' is, in fact, written in Direct Speech. As Ibrahim and Tabbert (2021, p. 85) have stated elsewhere, "it is arguably a presentation of speech rather than thought as the poet foremost writes these words to be published rather than merely inform the reader of what is going on in his head". What follows is an increased proximity of what is being said in this poem. This means the passage, if not the entire poems, becomes personal as it turns out to be Bekas' own speech. In this way, Bekas appears as a contemporary witness to the crimes discussed in this work.

In terms of crimes of the state, Cohen (2003, p. 546f) states that the problem 'that the state is not an actor and that individual criminal responsibility cannot be identified', leading to a common perception that, the resultant action is not '"really" crime'. Cohen goes as far as to state that 'the political discourse of the atrocity is [...] designed to hide its presence from awareness'. Seen against this background, Bekas' poem appears to challenge hegemonic power and is clearly taking advantage of Bekas' worldwide fame to raise awareness of a counter-hegemonic narration of events by means of Direct Speech. In a culture of denial, (Cohen 2003, p. 548) in terms of institutionalised crime, Bekas mentions no clear perpetrators although they nevertheless exist and are described by their binary opposition with the respective victims.

3.5 Representing time, space and society

In this section, take a quick look at deixis in the line 'At the end I am Kurdistan'. Deixis is considered to be a linguistic pointer (Semino, 1997, p. 32), to space, time, or social relations etc. Bekas creates immediacy by means of Direct Speech, temporal deixis (present tense), personal deixis (persoal pronoun 'I') and a relational process intensive. A careful analysis of the poem 'sculpture' for such linguistic pointers shows that 'it' (a third person pronoun) replaces 'room' and 'house of a neighbourhood' as naming strategies for people and, in this case, the victims.

Furthermore. the temporal reference (verb tense) in the line 'At the end I am Kurdistan' shows a shift from past to present tense. From this line onwards, verb tense changes in the lines that follow between present (perfect) and past tense. These deictic pointers separate the killings in the past from the current influence they have on the homeland of the narrator and thus the Kurds, a people spread across several countries (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) with no internationally recognised state. Therefore, with the spatial deixis ('Kurdistan') Bekas refers to a foremost geographical and cultural region bringing in the notion of ongoing attempts to form an independent Kurdish state (M. K. Ibrahim & Tabbert, 2021). This again shows the significance of discovering values in ideational or world-building processes as carriers of ideological meaning.

4. Conclusion

The study has found that the textual conceptual functions looked at are consistent in confirming the overall argument that the construction of the victims is due to a binary opposition between the victims and the perpetrators and the offenders are only implicitly represented. Bekas avoids mentioning the offenders and does not state specific victims. By doing so, Bekas leaves the slot empty for the reader to fill in by drawing an image of the victims and

the atrocities carried out by anonymous offenders following governmental orders. The perpetrators are constructed very cruel and the victims as ideal victims both tied together and having relations with one another. However, the victims face much more difficulty in receiving global recognition of their fate and consequently the Iraq-Kurdish conflict is a very complex one with no clearly clear good/bad dichotomy.

Critical Stylistics and its ten textual conceptual functions (out of which I have looked at seven in this paper) is a means to shed light on the linguistic construction of a systematic and wide-reaching victimisation in an attempt to erase an ethnic group. The victimisation not only involves killing people but also destroying nature. This constructs crime close to the idea of genocide. The complexity of state crime becomes clear in the data where Bekas resists hegemonic discourse and uses his popularity to raise awareness to a counter-hegemonic narration of events. Furthermore, the poem 'sculpture' from 'The Small Mirrors' shows that Bekas longs for an independent state for the Kurds.

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Endnotes

[i] Speech at Folkore Hois, The Whole Sky of my Borders, 8/8/1987, https://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/12092013