



## The Progressive Process of Kurdish Nationalist Discourse in Haji Qadir Koyi's Poetry

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate how Haji Qadir Koyi's poetry experienced three different stages in terms of form and content, through which Haji highlighted the discourse of Kurdish national identity. In the first stage, Haji used "Gazal" (sonnet), in which he imitated the rules of Persian classic poetry and the content of several Kurdish classic poets such as Nali and Salim. The second stage is a transitional period in which he stayed away from "Gazal" and used "Qasida" (long descriptive poem including "ode") to express his nationalistic feelings. Exploring another form of poetry named "Masnavi" (couplet) in the last stage, Haji addressed and further enhanced the discourse of Kurdish nationalism as the political ideology by which Kurdistan could liberate itself from the dominance of both Ottoman and Persian empires. The paper indicates that how the employment of literary forms in Haji's poetry was in close parallel with the process of changes in his thought and worldview regarding the status of the Kurdish nation.

### Keywords

Kurdish Nationalism; National Identity; Sonnet; Ode; Couplet

### 1. Introduction

The first engineers of Kurdish national identity were cultural elite, particularly the poets who used their words to illustrate the map of an imagined Kurdistan. Though most of them were clergy, they had strong ethnic sensitivity to create nationalistic language and symbolism. That is why it is not surprising that the centers of Kurdish

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national awareness in Kurdistan were mostly mosques and religious schools. This explains why Kurdish nationalism begins as an elite phenomenon not as a social and political movement. According to Castells, “most successful nationalisms presume some prior community of territory, language, or culture, which provide the raw material for the intellectual project of nationality” (qtd. in Sheholislami 13). Haji Qadir Koyi (1816-1897) is one of the most important Kurdish poets who endeavored to strengthen the discourse of Kurdish nationalism. At the beginning of his Diwan (his poetry book), he writes, I praise God in Kurdish language intentionally given that after my poem nobody can claim that God has not been praised in Kurdish language. It seems that for Haji Kurdish language plays a key role in his nationalistic poetry project even if it is intended for praising God.

Haji Qadir Koyi’s poetry has experienced three different stages in case of form and content, through which he has strengthened the discourse of Kurdish national identity. In the first stage, Haji has used “Gazal” (sonnet), in which he imitates the rules of classic poetry and the content of several Kurdish classic poets such as Nali (1800-1872). The second stage is a transitional stage in which he stays away from “Gazal” and uses “Qasida” (long descriptive poem such as “ode”) to express his nationalistic feelings. Exploring another form of poetry named “Masnavi” (couplet) in the last stage, Haji enhances the discourse of Kurdish nationalism as the political ideology by which Kurdistan can free itself from the dominance of two empires of Ottoman and Persian. The paper shows that how forms of Haji’s poetry go hand in hand with changes of his thoughts and worldview regarding the fate of the Kurds, the biggest nation without state in the world.

In what follows, the studies conducted in this area will be explicated as the background to this research. Then, a conceptual framework with regard to nationalism and the enlightenment will be presented. The core section of the paper focuses on Haji’s movement from lyricism to nationalism; the corresponding and parallel change in utilizing diverse literary forms to express his conceptions will be explored. Lastly, the three forms namely Gazal, Qasida, and Masnavi, which represent the three stages in Haji’s line of thought toward nationalism, are investigated with examining the extracts from his poetical works.



## 2. Literature Review

A few academic work and research has been done on Haji's poetry. Massoud Mohammad (1973) in his three-volume book entitled *Haji Qadir Koyi* sheds light on his personal life and the ways in which his thoughts took form throughout different periods of his life. His emphasis is more on discovering the events of Haji's life, and exploring more about his time history than poems themselves in terms of aesthetics or semantics. The significance of his work, however, is that for the first time, a Kurdish writer writes carefully and meticulously about the life and poetic thoughts of Haji Qadir, especially in the field of nationalism.

In their book named *Dîwanî Hacî Qadir Koyî* (Collected Poetry of Haji Qadir Koyi), Sardar Hemid Miran and Kerim Mustafa Shareza (1986) collected most of Haji Qadir's poems. Although there are some mistakes and the poems are not recorded as accurately as it is possible according to existing manuscripts, it is still worthwhile in the sense that most of his poems are collected in one book. However, the authors of this book wrote no commentary or criticism of Haji's thoughts.

In his book *Another step on the way for revising the collection of Haji Qadir Koyi's poetry* (1989), Mihammed Mullah Kerim attempts to correct several of the poems of Haji Qadir incorrectly recorded in Sardar Miran and Karim Mistafa Sharaza's book. It is also an attempt to write authentic copies of Haji's poetry. However, his nationalist thoughts in the field of semantics or his literary creations in the field of aesthetics are not dealt with.

Peshraw Syyed Ibrahim in his book, "Haji Qadir Koyi as a Publicist" (2017) tries to prove that Haji is the first Kurdish intellectual to use his poetry to propagate nationalist ideas. From his point of view, Haji sought change, awareness, and the advancement of Kurdish society, and in order to achieve this end, he incorporated progressive thoughts into his poems.

What has not yet been discussed about Haji's poetry is the relationship between his nationalistic thoughts and his poetic form. In other words, Hajji's thoughts and worldview, which was constantly growing and deepening, had a significant impact on the selection of his poetic formats. What this paper explores is to find this relation in order to provide an illuminating understanding of the world of Haji's progressive thoughts.



### 3. Theoretical Background

This paper aims to track the development of a political concept, namely nationalism, in the form of literary texts. Nationalism, although a political concept, has been reflected in literary works of some poets like Haji as a thought. In fact, Haji with such nationalistic ideas can be regarded as an enlightening poet. According to Habib, “[T]he Enlightenment thinkers were by no means uniform in their outlooks, but in general they saw themselves as initiating an era of humanitarian, intellectual, and social progress, underlain by the increasing ability of human reason to subjugate analytically both the external world of the nature and the human self” (Habib 114). In his poems, Haji highlights a political-nationalist discourse, and provides an enlightening discourse in various forms of poetry.

What is highly significant in the present paper is not only the nationalist content of Haji’s works but also the relation between the poetic formats and the nationalistic concepts in his poetry. This paper seeks to examine the relationship between a poet’s political worldview and way of choosing a literary form for it, and thus explore a method for semantic reading of a literary work. Although nationalism has been largely debated from a political point of view, there is still much to be discussed in the field of literature and in particular the relation between it and literary forms. This paper examines the existence of nationalist ideas in Haji’s poetry and the process of its development in his poetic formats.

### 4. Three Literary Forms and Stages in Haji’s Development of Thought

#### 4.1. The First Stage: Gazal (The Sonnet)

Haji Qadir’s Diwan includes twenty sonnets through which he deals with love issues and idealistic themes. It seems that most of Haji’s sonnets belong to his early life of writing poetry when he was still living in Kurdistan. There are two important points regarding Haji’s poems in this stage. First, Haji gives little attention to Kurdish national issues and feelings. Let us consider “Kurd” and the other branches of it as indications of Haji’s views and feelings about his nation and land. In this case, we see that Haji only one time uses the word “Kurd” in his sonnets:

*From the figures of my sonnets, Chinese artists have been surprised  
Who says that the crafts of Kurds are only Kilash and Kapanik?*



As it is observed, the “Kurd” has no nationalistic or political connotation, and it simply refers to Kurds as a special community with its own culture and rituals.

The second point regarding Haji’s sonnets is that he is interested in imitating the content and form of great Kurdish classic poets living before him such as Nali (1800-1872), the pioneer of Baban school of poetry. In his sonnets, Haji refers to the name of Nali ten times, and each time he praises Nali and his creative Kurdish poetry:

*Nali and the land of Baban, Haji and the city of Koya  
Are comparable to Hafiz and the land of Shiraz, and Kalim and Hamadan*

As a whole, in the stage of writing sonnet, Haji is not so creative in realm of poetics, has no strong nationalistic feelings, and does not have his own views regarding Kurdish society and political condition of Kurdistan.

#### 4.2. The Second Stage: Qasida (The Ode)

The total number of Qasida in Haji’s Diwan is six. In these Qasida, Haji presents a new vision regarding the world around him. Focusing on the theme of nation, he does not deal with romantic love issues anymore. It seems that he has invented a new way of knowing himself and Kurdish society in the poetic form of Qasida. One can call this stage of Haji’s poetry as “the stage of transition to the discourse of nationalistic worldview”. This stage comes after that Haji has to leave Koya, a city of Southern Kurdistan and his place of birth, and migrate to Istanbul, the political center of Ottoman Empire. In fact, the entire six Qasidas of his Diwan are the products of his isolated life experience.

In most of his Qasidas Haji is highly critical of his country’s people since, according to him, they are careless regarding their mother language, which is Kurdish. In one of his Qasidas, “I told my sleepy luck”, he compares Kurdish to Persian, stressing that Kurdish language is not less qualified than Persian. He concluded that the Kurds themselves give no importance and are not careful about their own language:

*Like cloth-weaver who is not satisfied with his cloth,  
Do not say that Kurdish is not as beautiful as Persian.  
It is more original than the other languages.  
If it is insignificant, it is because the Kurds are not proud of it.*



This example, and many others in Haji's Diwan, proves that language plays a fundamental role in nationalist discourse. Haji Qadir believes that language and nationality are naturally linked. According to Haji's poetic discussions, although Kurds have no nation-state of their own, "the possession of a language is sufficient for a people to call itself a nation and express its claim to self-rule" (Sheyholislami, 2008, p. 89).

In the Qasida of "The land of Jizir and Botan", Haji sheds light on the political dimension of Kurdish nationalism discourse, claiming that enemies of Kurds threaten not only Kurdish language but also the land of Kurdistan:

*The land of Jizir and Botan, which is the land of Kurdistan,  
Unfortunately are going to be a part of Armenia.  
O, the tribes of Jaf and Bilbas,  
You will have no authority to go to the mountains  
Even if you die in the flats.*

In his Qasidas, Haji is not a romanticist anymore, but a nationalist, who is critic of the people of his own country in the realm of culture and politics. In other words, Haji has left his romantic vision in writing Gazal (sonnet) for the sake of reading the world of reality of his society through the form of Qasida. In this type of poetry framework, which is longer than Gazal and special for describing rather than admiring things or people, Haji has more space and time to criticize the bad aspects of his country's culture and politics. On the other side, through his poems in this stage, he enhances the spirit of nationalism among the Kurds and motivates them to be cautious and united regarding their political fate in the region at that time (the end of nineteenth century). It seems that in the last years of his life, Haji needs to send his nationalistic message clearer and simpler. For this purpose, he uses another poetry framework named "Masnavi" (couplet).

#### 4.3. The Third Stage: Masnavi (The Couplet)

The main feature of Masnavi (known as couplet in English literature), as a type of classic poetry in Kurdish literature, is that each poetic line of it has its own independent rhyme and the number of the lines can be unlimited. Haji Qadir has used this type of poetry at the last years of his life since Masnavi has given him, even in comparison with Qasida, more time and space so that he can better focus on his



nationalistic discourse. If one can prove this through Haji's poetry, s/he can refer to the following line regarding Eifel Tower of Paris in one of his Masnavis named "It is good to literary men":

*O, those who are busy with spiritual secrets  
The European technology has reached the level of miracle  
The top of Eifel Tower is in the sky  
Its opposite has been rooted in the Earth*

According to many historians of Kurdish literature, Haji Qadir died in 1897. Moreover, since the Eifel Tower's construction was finished in 1889, one can conclude that Haji has written this Masnavi when he was spending the last years of his life in Istanbul.

In his Masnavis, Haji Qadir presents his most sensitive criticism regarding Kurdish people and the way they think and act in terms of nationality and religious beliefs. In other words, he is critic of the people of Kurdistan in view of the fact that they are indifferent to his enlightening words, while they care about Sheikhs and Mullahs (clergymen of Islamic societies and, according to Haji, the representatives of traditional thinking). The following example of his poems can confirm this sense of criticism:

*Who claims that the Kurds are wise?  
They need to stop repeating the same weakness, but they do not listen to me.  
They criticize my obliging words,  
While they fear from the Sheikhs.*

One more point regarding Haji's Masnavis is that the number of those motives related to Kurdishness and Kurdish nationalism is 45, which is exactly two times more than the number of the same motives in his Qasidas (odes). This indicates that Haji has considered and used Masnavi as the most appropriate poetry framework for working on his nationalistic discourse. For example, in one of his Masnavis named "In the Ground of Spring" he says that for establishing an independent state sword and pen are needed:

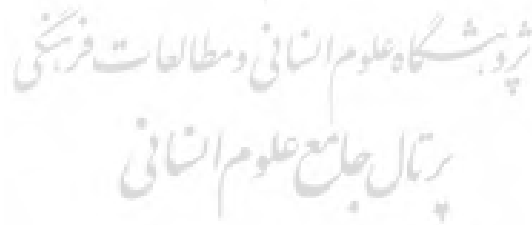
*O, my nice friend, as I have heard  
In the history of Jam, Askandar, and Kay,  
For making a strong state sword and pen are needed;  
I own the pen, but the sword is missing.*



As a whole, Haji has sent his most obvious and understandable messages through his Masnavis in the last years of his life. In addition, although Haji adores Kurdistan as his homeland, he is so critic of the Kurdish people since they are indifferent to their political fate.

## 5. Conclusion

Haji Qadir Koyi's poetry has experienced three different stages in case of form and content, through which Haji has strengthened the discourse of Kurdish national identity. In the first stage, Haji has used "Gazal" (sonnet), in which he imitates the rules of Persian classic poetry and the content of several Kurdish classic poets such as Nali and Salim. The second stage is a transitional stage, in which he stays away from "Gazal" and uses "Qasida" (long descriptive poem such as "ode") to express his nationalistic feelings. Exploring another form of poetry named "Masnavi" (couplet) in the last stage, Haji enhances the discourse of Kurdish nationalism as the political ideology through which Kurdish nation can liberate itself from the dominance of two oppressive powers named the Ottomanic and Gajar dynasties.







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