

The Representation of Women in the Albanian Ballads and in the Anglo-Saxon Ballads: A Comparative Approach



Literature

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to pinpoint the corresponding and contrary ways of the depiction of women and their role in the ballads in both English and Albanian literature. The aim of this paper is to facilitate students and teachers of literature in investigating different ballads and provide them a general insight in the way literature has been treated in both languages. The main method applied in this paper is the comparative one since this paper includes two different cultures where these ballads emerge from. Even though, the same form and structure are being shared by them, it is very significant to bring up that the representation of women in Anglo-Saxon ballads is quite different from the women in Albanian ballads. The paper will try to provide concrete examples and explanations in terms of the differences and similarities between these two types of ballads.

Oral literature, is a most loyal companion to early human life, it has its genesis in the distant past history. The development and existence of humanity, dealing with problems of different nature has required the need of artistic processing of events in the family and society. All these vital moments in art are expressed differently from those that occur in reality. In global terms we see that lyric poetry expresses suffering and intimate feelings which are closely related with human life. Epic poetry, in the early stages and later, have maintained and increased efforts of the ancients and the memory for them.

When we talk about ballads we have to take in consideration the historical and social conditions of their birth and spread. The English ballads are composed in the 18th century. The best known are Francis James Childs canonical volumes written between 1882 and 1888. The Albanian folkloric literature is rich with legendary songs. The Albanian literature, has inherited a rich folkloric tradition, whose most important part is the epos made of characteristic legends, ballads, and epic lays, which have been preserved through centuries by word of mouth from generation to generation. They were collected and published by some Albanian writers of the 19th and early 20th century, such as Jeronim De Rada (*National Rhapsodies*, 1866), Zef Schirò (*War Songs*, 1897, *Popular Songs of Albania*, 1901), Thimi Mitko (*The Albanian Bee*, 1878), Zef Jubani (*Collection of Albanian Folksongs and Rhapsodies*, 1871), Hil Mosi (*Albanian Folksongs*, 1909), Vinçenc Prendushi (*National Treasury of Folksongs*, 1910), Ernest Koliqi, Dom Aleksander Sirdani, Mitrush Kuteli (*Albanian Ancient Folktales – prose rendering of ballads and rhapsodies, particularly the epic lays of Mujo and Halil Cycle*, 1965), etc. But what is a ballad? Ballad is a traditional song that tells a story, a story with a simple verse and melody. A ballad is “a relatively short narrative poem, written to be sung, with a simple and dramatic action. The ballads tell of love, death, the supernatural, or a combination of these. Ballads often open abruptly, present brief descriptions, and use concise dialogue. The folk ballad is usually anonymous and the presentation impersonal. The literary ballad deliberately imitates the form and spirit of a folk ballad.” (Literary Terms, n. d). The Albanian ballads, also the Anglo-Saxon ballads, tell about the great deeds of heroes. However, there are a lot of women represented in these ballads. They are mothers, wives, daughters, fiancées, mistresses, etc. Half of these ballads treat the theme of love so we can understand that half of protagonists are females. Inequality between men and women characters follows from the principles of patriarchal society, where these ballads derive. The role assigned to a female from the society is to stay at home, obey her father, brother and latter her husband, and at the end give birth to her children and take care of them. Even though, Albania and Great Britain are far away from each other, a system of social structures such as religion, law, education or culture where men dominate over women. Chiefly female characters take place in love stories or family situations. In most situations they do not have the right to oppose and they are objectified.

Mother is the most loving and valued creature in the world. We have symbolized her with the hope, love, compassion, pure feeling, and lots of other names. She is the symbol of sacrifice. To understand this better we will take in consideration great ballads about mothers, one in the Albanian Language titled "Vaji i Ajkunës" comparing with that in English "The Wife of the Usher's Well". Mother's figure plays an important role in Albanian Ballads. She appears with full authority over her children. When they have important issues they go and consult her. Even when they have disagreements with each other, she makes them give up from a brotherly brawl. The typical mourning of the highlanders is characterized by great force and beauty. We find this motif at "Vaji i Ajkunës" and the mourning in great pain of Constandine's mother who has lost her eleven sons and has not seen her daughter since she has married with a foreign prince.

"Vaji i Ajkunës" or "Ajkuna qan Omerin" is an artistic masterpiece. Omar, Muji's son is surrounded in mountains and after a rigorous fight he is killed. When Muji arrives there, the battle is over, lots of enemies are dead, but his son as well. By the killed enemies he realizes that even though his son was seven years old he fought like a hero. He buries his son with his hands in the Yellow valley and goes back home. When mother Ajkuna hears what happened to her son, she starts lamenting. Ajkuna is a compassionate mother who deeply suffers her son's death. Mourning and lamenting mother shows a dramatic spectacle. For example:

Kur ka dale nder Lugjet t'Veidha,
atehere nana hanen ka mallkue:
-T'u shkimte (shofte) drita ty, o mori hane,
qe s'ma çove ate nate nji fjale,
n'Lugje t'Veidha, shpejt me dale
bashke me hy n'nji varr me djale!...
Kur ka shkue te varri i djalit,
ka pa ahin treqind vjec,
ahiisterrema-rrema,
nji ma t'bukrinmbivarpo e shtin
Mir' popshtetetpërdeg' t'ahit,
Pikon loti mbivartedjalit.
Kanëlanëkangenzogjtë e malit,
Kanëlanëkangen me veshtrue !
- Po as'e din se kushkaardhe,
Qenukçoheshpërm'ufale,
More i miri i nanes - o ?
Amanet, o more bir,
Dilnji here ksiburgut t' erret,
Fol me nanenqët'karrite :
S' m' kelan' kurrëkaqshumëmëprite !...
More Omer i nanes - o!
A thueGjogun me ta prue ?
Dilnji her' për me lodrue,
Bjernerdgurra me u freskuè ,
Kërkomajatbashk' me zana,
Se tyvarrin ta ruen nana,
More i miri i nanes - o !.(e.dPalaj&Kurti 1966)

Panoramic background is not simply an external means to set the mind, but is also an integral part of the totality of feelings, organic element that cannot be separated from events. With a huge force Ajkuna wants to stop the moon to help her find her son, the birds of mountains stop their songs to listen to the pain of the mother who prays to stone and trees of the forest to open a place where she can be buried together with her son. In "The Wife of Ushers Well" the mother cannot believe her boys' have passed away. The woman suffers bitterly for the loss of her sons, cursing the winds and sea. She goes mad. The mother calls them over and over again to come home. Then she uses magic or the supernatural to bring her sons to back. They return, but as ghosts and have to leave in the morning.

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them over the sea.

They hadna been a week from her,
A week but barely three,
Whom a word came to the carline wife
That her three sons were gane.
(The Norton Anthology of English Literature 1993)

Many female characters acquire active roles themselves. They are brave when their beloved ones need their help. In Albanian ballads sister plays an important role helping her brother. She is represented as a strong character. If we take in consideration Gjergj Elez Alija sister we cannot find an equal character in English ballads to compare with her. She closes herself in the castle for nine years taking care of the nine wounds that her brother has after a fight with the enemy.

Kënga e Gjergj Elez Alisë

Trim mbi trima aj Gjergj Elez Alija,
qe nandë vjet nandë varra n'shtat m'i ka.
Veç nji motër natë e ditë te kryet
ia lanë varrat me ujt e gurrs' nandë vjeçe,
ia lanë varrat me ata lott'e syve,
ia ter gjakun me ata flokt' e ballit;
shtatin vllaut ia shtërgon n' ruba t' nanës;
n' petka t' babës trupin ia hijeshon;
armt' e brezit ia rendon mbi krye. (Neziri 1999)

It is important to mention Doruntina, Constantine's sister and their strong sister-brother relationship. He allows her to marry a foreign prince and gives the Albanian Besa to his mother that whenever she would like, he will bring her home. The institution of BESA is very important to us, and it is shown that even though he is dead he rises from the dead and brings her to his mother. In English ballads sometimes she sacrifices herself because she decides to marry the antagonist's son and stops the war between two families. So, her role in these ballads is as peace-weaver and this was the most difficult one because she marries a person from the enemy in the hope of ending the warfare. However, peace was not always the result of such a marriage and the sister has to accept a double burden. Most of English ballads represent sisters as cruel, for example, in the murder ballad "The Two Sisters" where because of jealousy the older one tries to kill her younger sister.

THERE were two sisters, they went playing,
With a hiedownedowne a downe-a
To see their father's ships come sayling in.
With a hydownedowne a downe-a
And when they came unto the sea-brym,
The elder did push the younger in.
'O sister, O sister, take me by the gowne,
And drawe me up upon the dry ground.'
'O sister, O sister, that may not bee,
Till salt and oatmeale grow both of a tree.'
Somtymes she sanke, somtymes she swam,
Until she came unto the mill-dam.
The miller runne hastily downe the cliffe,
And up he betook her withouten her life. (e.d Eliot 2010)

The sister and brother love is closely linked with the theme of incest. In some English and Albanian ballads the motif of recognition is often combined with the theme of incest. Sometimes the act of incest is not consumed; it is often interrupted by the sudden intervention of a bird who speaks, as in the Scottish "Bonny Farday" as well as in the Albanian ballad "Gjon Pretika". But in English ballads there are cases when incest is consumed and brings about tragic consequences as in the ballad "The Sheath and the Knife". But, unlike Scottish ballads, in the Albanian ballads incest is not executed, the marriage of brother and sister is not consumed – recognition in due time, at the right moment, or some mysterious force prevents it from taking place. In fact, the Albanian ballads totally exclude the possibility of the consummation of sex between brother and sister. In ballads as 'Aga Ymeri', 'Ymer Aga', 'Halil's Wedding', and 'Chieftain Zook', the motif of recognition of husband and wife is closely linked with the motif of promise and pledge of honour, with the ring as a sign of recognition. The motifs of these Albanian ballads are similar to the Scottish ballad Hind Horn. The newly-wed couple are bound to keep the promise of loyalty for a fixed period of time. In 'Hind Horn' this period is 7 years, whereas in the Albanian ballads it is 9 years (or 9 years and 9 days) as in 'Little Constantine' and 'Ago Ymeri'. But there are cases when beloved girls behave as presumptuous. "Barbara Allan", for example, where she scorns her lover so many times but when he dies, she regrets and desires to die.

Conclusion

The Anglo-Saxon women and the Albanian women were able to attain dignity and respect in assuming their role of wives, mothers, and peace-weavers sisters. Even though, they share the same form and structure, it is very important to mention that the role and the character of the female figure, in the Anglo-Saxon Ballads is quite different from the role and the character of the female figure in the Albanian ballads. We can conclude that as suffering mothers they share common elements when suffering for the death of their children. However, in their role as mothers they differ because in Albanian song often happens a male character to seek advice from their mothers when they have to decide for important issues, which is not seen in the English ballads.

As sisters they differ because in Albanian songs sisters play an important role helping her brother in fighting with the opponents or taking care for her brother after he is deadly wounded. With the patience and sister's care he achieves to recover and fight with the Black Prince who comes out of the sea to take his sister. He fights with the black prince to save his sister's honor. When we come at the third role, that of husband and wife relation, we can say they share similar role. They have to obey their fathers, brothers, and their husbands. They spend their lives under the protection of their men. In addition women were automatically assigned to second hand citizens or they were downgraded to less important role in the society.

Although the role of women has developed from that time to nowadays, there is still inequality between men and women. Nowadays, women are gaining more and more rights; also have more role and integration in social, political and economic life. Women are accepted everywhere: in politics, governance, leadership institutions, law-making, decision making, etc., but with certain percentage and that percentage is determined by the governing men. I would like to end this paper with Joseph Conrad's saying: *'Being a woman is a terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men.'*

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