

Female Profile in the Epos of Albanians**Literature**

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Abstract

Through the contextual analysis of the “Cycle of Heroes” corpus, known as the Epos of Albanians or Albanian Epos similar with neighbors in Balkan, this thesis aims to prove the written time of epos in the beginning of matriarchy features (the mother has a special place when the father of heroes is missing) and attempts the coexistence between lyrics and epic (assembled thanks to the female roles in the subject). From the methodology perspective, the analysis used is the one which describes the female character in the epos, being it negative or positive, and their role in the action’s course outlined in the epic’s subject. Text’s analysis anticipates the interpretation based on comparative anthropological data (cultural living in the mountains that composes the origin of the event or musical instruments), but also in ballads or legends belonging to the same period. In conclusion, this thesis determines that century X-XII is assumed as the time when the cycle is established, and furthermore, it is proven due to the matriarchy rule in the Albanian territories [UP1]. From the profile standpoint, the fact that epos is considered as epic did not prevent the popular Aedin to approach the lyrics forms to certain characters (mostly females), a fact that verifies the early coexistence between epic and lyrics or mixed types.

Gustav Meyer, a well-known Albanologist published his first song for Albanian “cycle of heroes” in 1897. The first verse begins with: “The light shines bright even the sun hasn’t rises up”[1], certainly, as a consequence of working for a long time in Europe and other continents since the beginning of XIX century. He was a collector of spiritual wealth that different people created centuries ago. Perhaps, he was the first writer who gave incentives for many other Albanian passionate scholars to walk in this path. The 30 Songs of the Frontier Warriors (Këngë Kreshnikësh) are the best-known cycle of northern Albanian epic verses published in 1897 until the end of last century by: Donat Kurti, Barnardin Palaj, followed by other well-known foreign albanologists such as, Rrustem Berisha, Qemal Haxhihasani, Anton Çeta, Zymer Neziri etc...

Historically has been claimed that this songs are sung in Nikaj, Shalë, Rugovë, Mërtur, Llapushë, Grudë, Llap, Krajë, Pukë, Tropojë, Shosh, Kelmend, Kastrat, Dibër, Gallap, Kërçovë, Drenicë, Bregu i Matës" etc.[2].

In such a spatial extent, it is very difficult to announce, even approximately, where exactly our epic was born. However, there is a strong evidence, within its own existence, that its first cradle is Malësia e Madhe, (northern highlands)...Its roots can be found in Slavic tribes (shkjuu), in Kotorr, in warriors such as Muji and Halili and in all Jutbina’ warriors who are always in a stand by war situation [3].

Franciscan priests, Bernardin Palaj and Donald Kurti, devoted collectors of early heritage of inexhaustible spiritual wealth, through their accuracy and scientific character, have necessarily marked the places where they discovered the pearls of this epic. Thus, we come to a general conclusion that mountains are the cradle of the Albanian Epos of our heroes. In addition, the northern Albania region is known as its birthplace.

Another important fact about cycle of heroes is that those songs are sung through one-stringed musical instrument, the lute (*lahuta*). Probably, it was born along with the songs and it is mostly used in northern region of Albania and having said that, we assume that there’s nowhere else it was born. Furthermore, it was orally spoken and time after time was fully enriched with new figures similarly to a palimpsest immemorial.

In Albanian Epic introduction, Palaj and Kurti parallelize the “Albanian rhapsodist who sings epic songs, with an Irish shepherd or a German peasant. Ideologically, the humans fight the legends and rhapsodies” [4].

The rise of such cultural monuments as epos and the fact that people embraced the ancient culture makes this phenomena be still alive and resistant to the time. The poetry never grows old. It has no age” [5]. Certainly, it was not a mistake that ancient and actual scholars named our legendary epic as “Cycle of Heroes”. This is as a result of rhapsodies’ content but also because of the stories of two brothers, Mujo and Halili and their thirty “agas”. In addition, the “cycle of heroes”, is named after it to respect the timeframe (century X -XII) assumed as the period when the epos is established, and in regards of tradition when the leader of tribe and family was the man feature.

Among these “extraordinary people in extraordinary days” [6], often, despite their defense of hearth and honor, freedom, customs, language and songs of ancestors, animals and good, in this undeclared war but continuously opened with newcomers- Slavic Tribes, women and girls were always on the spot. These brave heroes of our epos, considered as fathers of epos, have always strengthened the Albanians characteristic and Albanian roots such as women’s bravery and honor [7].

The presence of matriarchy elements (special place of a mother at a time when the fathers of heroes feature is missing and the respect for breast feeding), are elements that tells us, among other things, about ancientness. The study of these songs leads to the conclusion that the gallery of female characteristics, although disproportionate to that of heroes, pervades the entire epos. It is an important part of life and an inescapable reality which often brings together lyricism and epic in these songs. Some of these songs distinguish that lyricism and epic is not a substantial part of the song entirety.

The figure of a mother, wife, daughter and *zana* are reflected in different ways and in most diverse forms. In many songs, women appear in prominent individual profiles to demonstrate her critical role in protecting the family, maintaining and insuring the continuity of life, ability to give advice and resolve complicated situations. Her image is identified as a protector of honor, family integrity, tribe etc.

Similarly, intuition, exquisite taste and rhapsodies sensitivity has highlighted more of feminine character, such as, strength, facing the challenges with heroism, self-denial, deprivation and sacrifice in protecting their precious things.

It would be enough to remember the 2nd song, “Mujo’s Oras”, the moment when Halili, following his mother’s advice, goes in to the Harambash tower to save Mujo who was captured. In subsequent song, “Mujo visits the Sultan”, Mujo is advised by Halili, who persuades him to ask their mother if he should or should not face the Sultan.

“Let us go to our mother and ask for her counsel,
There will we follow whatever she tells us!”8]

As their mother gave her bless, they go to the king and unsurprisingly came back as victorious. The following verses, describing the strength of mother’s word, prove her wisdom, the respect towards her and the fact that a mother’s word has the power of law. Given the strong position of Mujo and Halil’s mother and the fact that in our epos she is the icon of parenting, her words and messages are as much crucial as prophetic, the

deductive reasoning, position the reader in front of an undisputed power of the female in historical events who shapes the matriarchal conception of the society at that time.

In the XXV song, “Halili Avenges Mujo”, family heroes’ fates persist from the mother strength: Halil, outraged by self-praise and feats of Mujo, somehow left overshadowed in the men log, seeks to show his bravery and ability to avenge the attack on his brother. In the beginning, Mujo makes fun of his brother but when he realizes he is being serious, decides to go and ask mother’s advice. The popular rhapsody should have found out a “manly” solution: by putting Mujo on Halili’s feet and fighting him with a sword or asking advice from his friends, “30 *agas*” on how to proceed in good and bad situations.

But in both scenarios he would have been wrong because in this glamour moments of both warriors, the mother could weep one of them.

Rhapsody intuition led to a more perfect solution, by making their mother a protagonist, her wisdom through words and advices emanating peace and understanding, unity and not division. The wise solution that the mother could come up for her heroes was facing them with the test of hunger. She could not choose among her children. This test will determine the winner.

Among the most prominent female figures is Ajkuna, the wife of Gjeto Basho Mujit, the leader of heroes. Perhaps, mourning the loss of her son Omer, the sensitivity and the features parallelize her with Hekuba in Homer’ poem.

In “Ajkuna Mourns Omer” song, the image of dramatic pictures is not only shocking but descends into the deepest spirit’s tissue.

As always the creator – people, having respect for the spoken word, create such unimaginative figures that cannot be easily erased from the memory. We are not mistaken if we call them elegy: Ajkuna mourning, a mother who lost her son in the melee, stops the stars moving around the sky and the birds singing their songs:

“Well she leaned against the branches,
Tears were dripping on his tombstone.
The mountain birds did stop their singing,
Ceased their song so they could watch her!...” [10]

Ajkuna mourning goes beyond the cosmic pain and it shocks the elements of nature:

“Oh, my Omer, mother’s treasure,
Shall I bring to you your courser?
Come on out and frolic with it,
Ride now to the cool spring waters,
Or to the mountains with the *zanas*,
Your mother here will guard your tombstone,
Oh, my dear son, mother’s treasure.”..."[11]

The coexistence of lyricism with epic makes us believe that the heart speaks and the mouth doesn’t. The inner force of a mother to afford the unaffordable, the loss of a son, escalates the pain in monumental proportions as much as she forgets the breathtaking images and listen only her heart beating. This song, which is

not the only one, has inspired the famous writer Mitrush Kuteli, who in prose wrote one of the most popular books for children and young. That is how he describes the story with the same cycle as the cycle of heroes, “Ajuna Mourn Omer”: “The valley are trembled by her mourn...the mountain’s *oras* take pity on her; they drug her in their arms and fly high to the alps, up in the highest trees inside Jutbina”. They let her close to the hearth and say:

Oh Omer’s mother, stop mourning. We shall guard the tomb of your son forever, the mountain’s oras and the birds shall mourn him. The moon and stars will shine bright in the dark. [12].

It is known that at different times, the cycle of heroes has seen rhapsodies that do not deal with Mujo and Halil’s acts, yet they are considered as part of the cycle. Among them can be distinguish “Gjergj Elez Alia” song, the most beautiful and artistically realized song in the cycle of heroes, of course not diminishing any of them. Although it is not directly linked to the cycle, this song won the “leader status” for its esthetic beauty and the message it conveys. Reconciliation between legends and the context of defending the homeland, the vital phenomena and the unique beauties of the literature images, makes this ancient song be the artistic gem.

The figure of “Gjergj Elez Alia” portraits the strong figure of the unrelenting sister verse after verse and as a result the reader today can figure out the image of Albanians (male and female) protecting lands and honor of their ancestors.

In this song, the rhapsody brings into our attention the heroine figure of a sister. She does not have a singular name, she is known as the Albanian sister who died young to accomplish the exact same mission as her brother – freedom. Even in this song, as usually occur in the cycle, the real amalgamation of those fantastic elements provides her the legendary colors.

Using a rich visual arsenal, especially anaphora, comparisons or hyperbole, people have perpetuated the strength and sister’s heart that beats as her brother - the hero. They both fell ground dead:

“The hero then turned and in one final effort
Threw his arms round the neck of his unlucky sister,
At that very moment the two hearts ceased beating,
Dead to the ground fell both brother and sister,...”[13]

Probing deeper in the Albanian epos of heroes, after wars and falls, such as Gjergj Elez Alia and his sister, the reader realizes that they just vanishes figuratively, in a sense of a temporary departure. This idea and understanding convince the reader that the heroes are immortal.

It cannot be drown a scientific modest profile of the female feature in the cycle of heroes without analyzing the profile of Tanusha, King’s daughter, who is gracefully described in “Marriage of Halili” song. She is the most beautiful girl in Jutbina and in all the areas where heroes live. Tanusha is the symbol of love; she is the bridge between two enemy camps and the portrait of a complex coexistence in war and peace. In her portrait, people through comparisons, epithets and similarities see another Mona Liza or subsequent sister Tone, who generates the beauty as an aesthetic category in incredible proportions centuries ago:

“... The brows of her eyes are as straight as tree branches,
The line in her forehead’s a path up the mountain
Lit by the bright golden beams of the moonlight,

Both of her eyes are like ripening cherries,
 Her eyelids resemble the wings of a swallow,
 Her face, when she blushes, is like a red apple,
 Her nose is as straight as a rifle by Tusha,
 Her mouth which is small is a blossoming flower,
 Her teeth are as white as the rocks in the river
 Just after rainfall when sun begins shining,
 The nape of her neck, oh, a dove's does resemble,
 Her figure is slender as that of a spruce tree,
 The skin of her hand is as sleek as is boxwood.”[14]

Meanwhile, as a human being, the female carry the misfortune of life. The contrast that Rhapsody is opposing to Tanusha, a paradise angel, is her mother who is portrait as a negative person coming from hell, right hand of her vicious usurper husband - The King. Together with treachery, deceit and violation of speech, the yesterday listener and today's reader have created the image of a viper, a figure that drains malice. Daughter – mother antithesis, perhaps in a primitive way, is conceived by the creator as an antithesis of generations where the triumph of life belongs to the successor. The mentioned female profiles, such as *oras and zanas*, these mythological beings, confide to the cycle of heroes' corpus a hopeful light among the stench of wars and battles. These female profiles, through their strength, beauty and their wise advices melt the ice, and by staying stoic alongside their heroes demonstrate the tender of their creator.

“Bracing the roles played by the art of people and folk was considered as an essential factor for the development of the European art since XXIII century”[15]. In this context, we don't have why not to examine the continuity of the creative literature and Albanian folk. It starts with historical songs such “Kosovo War” (1389) the first one of this genre, and uphill with great Albanian writers as: Buzuku, Bogdani, Budi, Bardhi, Barleti. This spiritual wealth is exploited by our modern writers, among the most prominent: Kadare Kuteli, Arapi, Grillo etc. However, through their pen and because of the affection these writers have after myths and legends, portrait women as brave, wise, good souls, beautiful as an integral part of the Albanian Epos of Heroes.

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- [2] Begzad Baliu, "Songs of Frontier Warriors", Editor "Libri Shkollor", Prishtina, 2010 (reprinted), p.272.
- [3] Nikolla Spathari: "How I knew Malësia e Madhe ", editor "Idromeno"-Shkodër, 2001, p. 217.
- [4] Father Bernardin Palajt and Father Donad Kurti: "Albanian Epos and the Legend", "Plejad" editor, Tirana-2005, p. 6.
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- [6] Literature 1, group of writers, "Albas" editor, Tirana, 2006, p. 35.
- [7] Father Bernardin Palajt and father Donad Kurti: "Albanian Epos and the Legend ", p. 10.
- [8] Same reference, p.41, verses 37-38.
- [9] Same reference, p. 246, verses 115-130.
- [10] Same reference, p. 276, verses 58-62.
- [11] Same reference, p. 276, verses 78-85.
- [12] Mitrush Kuteli, "Old Albanian Tales", third edition, "Naim Frashëri" editor -Tirana, 1987, p. 110, copies 12.000.
- [13] Father Bernardin Palajt and father Donad Kurti: "Albanian Epos and the Legend ", p.73, verses 164-168.
- [14] Same reference, p. 49, verses 86-98.
- [15] Sydney Finkelstein, "The life-giving power of folk' art ", published in the critical study summary "B. Breht, R. Foks, S. Finkelstein", Polygraph Combine, Tirana, 1982, p. 350.