

# Rebellion of Memory in Albanian Literature after Fall of Communism

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## Abstract:

*At the beginning of the 1990s, many Albanian writers found in the past the inspiration for many literary challenges. Ismail Kadare, Fatos Kongoli, Dritero Agolli, Kasem Trebeshina, but also Visar Zhiti, Agron Tufa, Besnik Mustafaj, etc. interpreted the journey between the past and the present as a displacement in space, as a journey through which the writer overturns the usual vision of the world. The 1990s were not only the radical undoing of a half-century-old dominant system, but also the illustration of the biblical exodus toward Western Europe. The desire to escape was present in almost every Albanian family and the number of those who challenged the borders was extraordinary for the size a small country as Albania. The large moving mass was heterogeneous and transcended any cultural, social and societal differentiation, but in literature it was also translated into the departure of a large number of potential readers and possible writers of Albanian literature. During this movement, it was possible to move away from what was known, before and the present was interpreted with a new vision and identity. In this context, we will try to analyse some problematic issues as follows:*

- The stage and positioning of contemporary Albanian literature*
- Beyond the borders of Albania - Migration literature*
- Shadows of the past: Rebellion of Memory*

**Keywords:** *Contemporary literature; migration literature; literary memory; literary postmodernism; cultural globalization*

## 1. Introduction

The title of this study is linked with the image of a progressive chronological sequence, where we can ask questions about the position of contemporaneous Albanian authors in national and international panorama in present days. Albania stepped out of communist regime after 1990s inheriting problematic issues and from that moment until nowadays Albanian literature allows us to make some critical reflections

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about its historical existence and its present identity. Then, above all, the main concern might be: At what stage is Albanian literature today and where is it positioned?

The official answer from many literary critics and researchers seems to be an illustration of crossroads, with outlines of some recognised authors before the '90s, with few new names finding affirmation in national level and the rest engaged in anonymous publication of books without a proper impact on readers. This perception is felt not only from the community of readers, but also from literature critics. Gëzim Aliu, researcher and writer, while analyses the elements related to publishing practices in a chaotic consumer society, reflects that:

*„...severe situations around the world are fertile ground for literature, but the opposite happens here. Albanian literature remains outside European and world developments”<sup>2</sup>.*

This reflection has to do with the literary choices of that multitude of authors who imitated foreign forms and themes that sound distant for Albanian readers. The tendency to imitate or follow models of foreign literature was concluded with short-term experiments, in publishing books that were only a mere consolation only the authors' own private libraries.

The well-known Albanian writer Dritëro Agolli outlined the point of conflict with the readers in this uncontrolled tendency toward foreign models: *„Our literature is outside the Albanian reality, that's why it is not read. It's not the reader's problem. If there are works that excite him, he will definitely read them. Of course, this should happen for books that have value, because today in our country there are more books than readers.”<sup>3</sup>*

This judgment comes from the need to put order in the chaotic atmosphere where everybody was able and free to write and publish books without minimal literary requisites. People whom were forbidden to publish during communism regime, after the 1990's had the possibility to live the dream of „five minutes of celebrity”. Alongside them, authors with a long literary experience and young talented writers, failed to maintain the attention of readers.

An illustrative panorama of this second group, referential for contemporary Albanian literature, includes individualities such as Ismail Kadare and Dritëro Agolli, Kasem Trebeshina and Sabri Godo, Fatos Arapi and Skënder Rusi, Xhevahir Spahiu and Rudolf Marku, Mimoza Ahmeti and Visar Zhiti, Fatos Kongoli and Besnik Mustafaj, Agron Tufa and Elvira Dones, Ben Blushi and Ylljet Aliçkaj, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Gezim Aliu, „Sfidat e letërsisë dhe krijuesit sot në Kosovë”, Gazeta „Express”, 23.01.2013.

<sup>3</sup> Dritëro Agolli, „Shkrimtarët shqiptarë të fiksuar pas diktaturës”, Gazeta „Shqip”, 02.09.2010.



The authority of these writers comes especially from the publication in foreign languages, from translation and inclusion in important literary anthologies. All this constitutes a model of reliability and encourages confidence in reading for Albanian readers and critics. But today literature belongs especially to the judgment of that amorphous mass of books that fill the bookstores. Granit Zela, Albanian writer and translator, mentions some of problems that related to Albanian literature. Among other things, he mentions:

- 1- self-publishing of Albanian writers;
- 2- the lack of an artistic and aesthetic selection filter from the publishing houses, which „makes the shelves of the bookstores ready to fall to the ground;
- 3- the massification of literature;
- 4- lack of literary criticism;
- 5- lack of communication between Albanian cultural centers;
- 6- lack of literary periodicals;
- 7- copyright infringement;
- 8- low-quality translation into Albanian and the lack or uncontrolled translation of Albanian literature into foreign languages;
- 9- the alienation of the reader and the destruction of literary taste.<sup>4</sup>

This catalogue of shortcomings in Albanian literature looks ominous for those readers who are interested in Albanian authors in present time. It resembles the orientation to stay away from something that may lack in quality and aesthetic values, and at the same time, the literary system rarely takes initiatives to put things in order. Professor Ermir Nika, in an interview at the „Shqip” newspaper, points out that:

*„The public is not at all aware of what is being published today. He does not know the authors who are playing a decisive role in Albanian literature today. The reader is informed of some names, but he finds difficulties to accept even the new publications of important Albanian authors, because they seem to be entrapped in the past”<sup>5</sup>*

In the turbulent and chaotic present, readers choose the safety of previously consolidated names. Even in the biggest bookstores in Tirana, Albanian literature is read much less than foreign literature translated into Albanian.

The main problem is also the lack of continuous resounding of contemporary names. Culture is not seen as processing values, but as horizontal massification. Values and anti-values are not separated and differentiated, but are put on the same level as to give a permanent

<sup>4</sup> Granit Zela, „Nëntë varrët e letërsisë shqipe”, Gazeta „Nacional”, 12. 12. 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Ermir Nika, „Lexuesi s'i njuh shkrintarët bashkëkohorë”, Gazeta „Shqip”, 03.09.2010.



twilight to the Albanian world. And through this inconveniences, the Albanian reader hardly has the willingness to complete the journey inside Albanian literature, but stops, somewhere in the middle, without being able to follow and with the laziness to continue further.

## 1.2. Beyond Albania: Migration literature

If we refer to the German writer H.M. Enzensberger, „modern” times and modernity in the XXI century, are characterized primarily by the „Great Migration”<sup>6</sup>.

The 1990s were not only the radical undoing of a half-century-old dominant system, but also the illustration of the biblical exodus toward Western Europe. The desire to escape was present in almost every Albanian family and the number of those who challenged the borders was extraordinary for the size a small country as Albania. The large moving mass was heterogeneous and transcended any cultural, social and societal differentiation, but in literature it was also translated into the departure of a large number of potential readers and possible writers of Albanian literature. The most desirable destinations were neighbouring countries such as Italy and Greece, but also France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and beyond the European continent, in USA and further more.

Today, a lot of former migrants are become writers who have published in the languages of the host countries. Already accustomed to modernity and its liberal ideology, many of them recognize the difficulties of freedom and democracy: those who do not have the means to master the world are structurally excluded, and their literature understands this kind of conviction. Let’s see how Ian Chambers describes migrant writers in his book „Multiple Voices of the Mediterranean”:

*„...excluded from representation, cut off from modernity, other histories, other bodies, other lives are left to survive in obscurity; therefore they write fragmentary narratives denied the coherence that comes from recognition”.<sup>7</sup>*

Our interest in this context is related with young authors who started writing in the language of the host country, without any previous publications in Albania. Today they constitute a fascinating and interesting dimension, enriching the national identity with experiences of a very inclusive reality.

The first tendencies of these authors were those of an analysis of themselves, accompanied by an analytical look at the society of the new country where they settled. Often this was accompanied by a liberation

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<sup>6</sup> H.M.Enzensberger, „La grande migrazione”, Torino, Einaudi, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Chamers, „Le molte voci del mediterraneo”, Raffaello Cortina Edl, 2007. 20.



from the „mother tongue”, and with an artistic expression that could show doubts, intimate pain and collective accusations.

In the Italian context, there can be mentioned Albanian writers such as Ornela Vorpsi, Gëzim Hajdari, Anilda Ibrahimi, Elvira Dones, Ron Kubati etc., characterized by explanation of their identity and origin in a different narrative style. They are not just writers who left their country of origin, but representatives of literary migration who choose to write and publish in a foreign language and succeed in this.

A large number of writers who live abroad today want to escape at all costs from territorial or localist encirclement; sworn enemies of linguistic localism, they choose to write in a foreign language to better control the sense of what they express and to avoid any worthless nostalgia.

All this affects the content, style and working conditions. More than 30 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the cultural metamorphosis has affected the image of art and the way of life. These authors know best the internationalization of the literary market and the feeling that the writer addresses his art to a global community rather than to a national one.

Today, these authors are a good reference option for authors who write and publish in Albania. The positive effects of this new situation make it possible to bypass the criticism of a provincial Albanian literature that cannot survive outside the threshold of its territory. The negative fact in this new panorama, is the careless attention of literary critics toward this already tangible reality of Albanian literature. It is unfair to expect the indisputable international success of Albanian literature, in order to take in consideration afterward this new line of authors who live and write in an international dimension.

### **1.3 Shadows of the past: Rebellion of Memory**

Albanian literature did not find it easy to dialogue with that part of the past reality that was privileged by the communist dictatorial regime during the second half of the century. XX.

Initially, there was a reluctance towards the aesthetic and artistic values of those who had been able to publish and live in the communist dictatorship. The initial trend was to set aside established authors or cast doubt on their merits. The demand for distinct differentiation and separation from the past had the privilege of being read or pronounced forcefully. The perspective of Franc Roth, one of the founders of magical realism, who wrote: „we want to see the world bathed in the clarity of a new light” helps to imagine the general borders of the Albanian literature after 1990s.



The search for novelty was not only a need to supplement what was not allowed before, but also an attempt to avoid or forget the terrible events that took place in Albania during communism. People were frenetic to speak, to write, to impose themselves to the world, even when they didn't have much to say or display. All of this was an attempt to regain the habits of a normal life. The predisposition was to experiment not only in content, but especially in the form and style of narrative books.

At the Scientific Conference „Literature as such” in 1996, researcher Adriatik Kallulli formulated the question:

*„Is there a present-day literature that is separated and structured with its authors, that has made a clear separation with the past, or it is a continuation of the past, as a logical flow of that legacy that is heredity from yesterday?”<sup>8</sup>*

This question posed an important problem about Albanian literature at that time. The partition required could not be differenced in an easy manner, but the need to act like this was perceived strongly in Albanian literary circles. But in any case, there was not identified clearly a new generation nurtured with theoretical, academic notions and attitudes or attracted totally by a way of life that did not resemble the past at all. Therefore, it was impossible to deny an instinctive continuity with tradition of the past.

The researcher Kallulli uses as a selection tool, the classification of Albanian literature into stable and transitory literature. He declares an interesting view on authors and books included in this classification:

*„The evil lies also in good writers, with average values, even in those with excellent qualities, who have always approached and entered inside the artistic pantheon, paradoxically, they have both stable anthological values and antivalues or books composed in accordance to the schemes of the program party... Such a phenomenon begs to create pain for us, because it is a sad testimony that totalitarian, even despotic dictatorships deform the character and artistic coherence of writers.”<sup>9</sup>*

From this position, we can underline that the problems of the continuity from past to present are linked with form, content and political collusions between yesterday and nowadays. It is implied that a part of this literature, transitory and unable to withstand time, had to be replaced by authors denied or persecuted by the regime. This was a good way to re-evaluate literary texts mainly on aesthetic rather than programmatic

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<sup>8</sup> Akademia e Shkencave, „Letërsia si e tillë”, Akte të konferencës shkencore, p. 84-85, Tiranë 1996.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.



criteria. From this, one could calmly accept the deletion of many ideologically conceived books, subject to the judgment of time.

„Even our most prominent writers have been forced to admit that many of their books will be erased by time and generations. Remember F. Arapi's maximal line: *'People will come after us and judge us for things - Oh, how they will judge!'*”<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusions

This study aimed to highlight Albanian literature and Albanian writers in a continuous dialogue with their historical yesterday and today's changes. After the 1990s, the diachronic time of Albanian art opened up and transformed into a movement that included new spaces. Many things with yesterday's tones were left in the middle and the artistic journey took the form of an escape towards innovation; towards what was denied before; towards censored forms and contents.

The question raised in this study: *Is there a good and popular Albanian literature today?*” found an answer in an analysis of the panorama of Albanian literature after the 90s, with Albanian authors inside and outside the country, who aimed to perform new literary dynamics. Attention shifted to the multitude of texts that began to be translated from foreign literature. At the same time, many young authors were engaged in experimenting with new forms of literature, bypassing traditional forms of creation with rigid rules, to experiment with personal freedom of expression.

From traditional literature with consolidated names, the debate shifted to a large number of books that were published in the Albanian market. From the ideological notion of the „New Man”, it was moved to the elaboration of the „New World”, where writers in literary groups or individually analyzed the world with different and personal eyes.

The process of judgment, along with selection, is long and difficult in a society that cannot easily be separated from the past. This is not an easy process, because memory is able to preserve experiences and knowledge of the past, to understand the present and to project the future. This concept, was at the ground of literary discussions, in order to understand that the distance from traditional forms of the past, could by no means mean its annihilation. Life without memory, whether individual or collective, would undoubtedly be a life without quality, and oblivion would imprison people in a truncated perception of the past.

This prompted many writers to turn toward past, which began to be considered a journey of self-discovery. Many authors experimented in this

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*



direction, making an autobiographical psychoanalysis of what had been suppressed, dark and insurmountable for years. Literature with a face from the past, can be considered in present as a powerful voice of writers who tried to fade the deformation of time.

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