



ALBANIAN LITERATURE FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE XX CENTURY UNTIL 1944 ACCORDING TO THE HISTORICAL OBSERVATION OF ROBERT ELSIE

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Abstract:

Robert Elsie is one of the important scholars of the Albanian language, literature, folklore and culture in general. His studies prove the great desire to know closely the Albanian land in its multidimensional aspects. He offers a positive image of Albanian values everywhere in the world. He enabled the world to know more closely the Albanian culture by becoming a model of a foreign researcher who studies the whole aspects of the culture of another country. Elsie also writes a history of Albanian literature starting from its first beginnings until the last decades of the twentieth century. Our study will focus on a certain period of Albanian literature according to the empirical experience of Robert Elsie in the Albanian space. The study aims to specify the main authors of the period from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1944, a year before the communist system was installed in Albania. This period, which spans about three or four decades, is distinguished for the thematic characteristics, forms and prominent names of authors who shed light on Albanian letters until the years before the beginning of an ideological system. The study aims to examine this stage through the research eye of Robert Elsie. How Elsie classifies the authors of Albanian literature in periods, how their literary work is related to the socio-political circumstances in the country and who are the major figures of these decades in Albanian literature are some of the issues that will be analyzed in this study.

Keywords: Albanian literature, Robert Elsie, culture, authors, literary periods

1. Introduction

The History of Albanian Literature by Robert Elsie is a very important book on the history of all Albanian literature from the beginning to the last decades of the twentieth century. The book is written to offer foreign readers a deeper knowledge of Albanian literature and culture in general. Elsie is aware that writing a literary history about another nation and culture is not an easy task and the final evaluation belongs to the Albanian reader himself. In the study on approximately

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the first four decades of Albanian literature, Elsie emphasizes that different political circumstances and events determine the activity of certain authors in a certain context. Starting with Çajupi, Mjeda, Asdreni and continuing with Poradeci, Migjeni, Konica, Noli and reaching the top with Fishta, Elsie tries to testify to their literary values from the empirical experience of gathering facts on the life and activity of these prominent Albanian authors.

2. The Period of Independence in Albanian Literature

The first decades of the twentieth century in Albanian literature represent the years when Albanian literature would undergo major changes in thematics, literary forms and with important works of some prominent authors of this time. Elsie looks at the general historical aspect starting with the declaration of independence of Albania in 1912. This period is also called the period of independence. The author presents an overview of political events and developments in Albania. There are three poets, Çajupi, Mjeda and Asdreni as the main poets who according to Elsie constitute the trio of the transitional period in Albanian literature. In literary studies on this period, Albanian literature has also been termed as paramodern literature, which warns of the first signs of modernity that will soon come with other important authors. There have been many debates and interpretations regarding the categorization of some authors in certain periods, which has also happened with Mjeda and Çajupi. According to Elsie, Çajupi is an essentially romantic and non-modern poet and Mjeda stands out as a classical poet who is the bridge between the Albanian Renaissance (Albanian National Awakening) of the late nineteenth century and the period of independence. Elsie connects the classical style of Mjeda with his purity in the linguistic expression that this author possesses and with a great influence not only from the culture of the Albanian national renaissance but also from his teacher, Leonardo de Martino. Asdreni is another important figure of Albanian literature who stands out for some outstanding poetic collections, as a prominent activist of Albanians in Romania and author of the national anthem of Albania. According to Sabri Hamiti, "*Asdren's work brings the transition from romanticism to the legacy of symbolism*".ⁱⁱ Asdreni is a poet deeply influenced by the currents of Romanian literature and despite not being considered a modern poet like Poradeci or Migjeni or a sublime poet like Fishta, he is valued for his crucial role in putting Albanian poetry on the path of modernity. Elsie emphasizes that the poetic collection "*Psallme murgu*" is considered one of the best Albanian poetic volumes of the twentieth century.

2.1. Authors Residing in America

An important place in this period have also Faik Konica, Fan S. Noli and others living in America, as Elsie classifies them. He underlines the importance of creating societies and cultural institutions of the Albanian-American community. The most prominent names who helped strengthen and unite Albanians in North America are Faik Konica, Fan S. Noli, Sotir Peci, Kristo Dako and Konstandin Çekrezi. "*Konica is the founder of the critical cultural model in Albanian literature and the founder of literary criticism, as well as the initiator of modern Albanian prose*".ⁱⁱⁱ Even

ⁱⁱ Sabri Hamiti, *Letërsia moderne shqipe*, UET-Press, 2009, fq. 5

ⁱⁱⁱ Sabri Hamiti, *Letërsia moderne shqipe*, UET-Press, 2009, fq. 67

according to Elsie, Konica has played an important role in various fields in Albanian culture. This is emphasized by mentioning him for his merits in various fields as a prose writer, critic and publicist. On the other hand, he praises Noli as the poet of great national aspirations but also of ardent poetic and political feeling. From this point of view, we see that Elsie sees Noli through two prisms, between literature and politics. If we look at the history of Albanian politics, we see that Noli for a period has been the Prime Minister of Albania and this aspect has naturally had an impact on the treatment of his figure, as a poet who is known for great ambitions in various fields including politics alongside the spiritual side as a poet and as a preacher of the Christian religion. He also distinguishes himself as a translator of some of the masterpieces of world literature, where as it is known Noli has translated many masterpieces of world literature in Albanian such as Don Quixote of La Mancha, Hamlet, Macbeth, etc.

2.2. The Voice of The Albanian Nation

Elsie dedicates a large part to Gjergj Fishta, as he calls him "The voice of the nation". Elsie presents the biographical aspects and the founding of "Hylli i Dritës", an Albanian magazine of the time, while most of it deals with the treatment of Lahuta e Malcis (The Highland Lute).

Elsie gives a brief overview of each of Lahuta songs. Lahuta e Malcis (The Highland Lute) according to the author, is the most exciting and powerful epic poem written in the Albanian language. Elsie gives a broad overview of the influence that Fishta has had not only on poets but also on Franciscan scholars and beyond. Elsie points out the consequences of communism in the approach to Fishta and his work, which was censored by being criticized and banned for the Albanian reader, but which was never forgotten by the inhabitants of Shkodra and Albanian readers throughout the Albanian lands. *"After relations with Yugoslavia broke down in 1948, it was likely that expressions of anti-Montenegrin and anti-Serb sentiment would not be considered a major sin in the Party's view, but as far as Fishta was concerned, an official position had already been taken and, perhaps out of respect for new Slavic allies in Moscow, this attitude could not be removed without causing any scandal. Gjergj Fishta, who only a few years ago was praised as the national poet of Albania, disappeared from the literary scene and no trace of him appeared. They were so afraid of him that they later say that his bones were secretly taken out and thrown into the river".*^{iv}

As can be seen, Elsie expresses himself with "perhaps" leaving his claims with some hypothetical points on the causes and consequences that led to the development of certain events in Fishta's life, which determined the fate of reading and stopping his work in the Albanian spaces of the communist years. But Elsie also identifies the figure of Fishta with his city of Shkodra, contextualizing it with the fact that the reader from Shkodra always had in mind the work of the great Albanian author. The figure of Fishta, as it has had a great influence on various Albanian readers and scholars, plays an important role in the observation and interpretation of Robert Elsie in terms of the history of Albanian literature, valuing him as the voice of the Albanian nation.

^{iv} Robert Elsie, *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*, Dukagjini, Pejë, 2001, fq. 304

2.3. Forerunners of contemporary Albanian literature

Migjeni and Lasgush Poradeci are two important names in Albanian literature. Both of these authors are categorized in modern literature because of the style and nature of their writing, despite the fact that the discussions are different by scholars. According to Elsie, both of these authors represent the signs of a newer period, the contemporary one. Migjeni is an important author in Albanian literature, who through his expressionism managed to masterfully deal with the element of misery and suffering, is known as an author of social topics. Elsie considers Migjen's appearance in Albanian letters as a prophetic work, as he describes this author as a messianic. According to him, Migjeni was the poet who raised his voice against hunger, misery and injustice. *"Migjeni was the first to see the harsh reality of life, the shocking scale of misery, poverty and disease he observed everywhere around. He was a poet of despair who saw no way out, who had no hope, because only death could end this suffering"*.^v

On the other hand, Lasgush Poradeci, another important author, is considered by Elsie as the poet of metaphysical themes, the poet inspired by nature and the lake. Mitrush Kuteli and Ernest Koliqi are the other two important names of Albanian literature, which Elsie does not ignore. He highlights Koliqi's contribution to Albanian education. As a creator he compares his prose with that of Pirandello in terms of penetration into the psychology of the characters. While emphasizing that the collection of stories *"Tregtar Flamujsh"* (Flag Trader) is considered one of the best in Albanian prose. *"Regarding the space of Kosovo, we think that the most historic, most iconic step for our man, is the decision of Ernest Koliqi to send about 200 Albanian teachers to us, who became the leaders of the transition from religious school to national secular school"*.^{vi} As the Tosk equivalent of Koliqi, Elsie sees Kuteli, who gave a positive direction to the development of the short story in southern Albania, mentioning works such as Ago Jakupi, *"Tregime të Moçme Shqiptare"* (Ancient Albanian Stories), *"Poem Kosovar"* (Kosovar Poem), etc. Elsie, besides Koliqi and Kuteli, also mentions the journalist and storyteller Milto Sotir Gurra, the novelist and sentimental playwright Foqion Postoli, Haki Stërmilli who deals with the topic of woman emancipation, Sterjo Spasse whose work *"Why?!"* describes it as a nihilistic work and a novel of denial and even compares it to Goethe's *Werther*. It is known that Goethe's *Werther* had aroused a high interest and popularity in Western culture at the time of its publication and had had a great influence on the European romantic literature of the time. Elsie seems to see a similar influence in this work, which was something new for the Albanian reader and the novel as a genre was beginning to be affirmed by talented novelists such as Spasse and others. Other names mentioned by Elsie are Mehdi Frashëri, author of the novel with a romantic spirit *"Nevruzi"*, Filip Papajani, Zef Harapi, Kolë Mirdita, Nonda Bulka, Vedat Kokona, Musine Kokalari, the tragic figure of the communist era, known for the work *"Siç më thotë nënua plakë"* (As the old mother tells me).

2.4. Albanian dramaturgy until 1944

The author also gives a special emphasis to dramatic works, written until 1944 before the beginning of communism in Albania. Here he mentions the names of Anton Santori, Leonardo De Martino, Mihal Grameno, Andon Zako Çajupi, Foqion Postoli, Kristo Floqi, Etëhem

^v Robert Elsie, *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*, Dukagjini, Pejë, 2001, fq. 308

^{vi} Nysret Krasniqi, *Letërsia e Kosovës (1953-2000)*, 99-AIKD, Prishtinë, 2016, fq. 20

Haxhiademi, etc., reserving a place to the great Albanian actor Aleksandër Moisiu for his great contribution to dramaturgy and the whole Albanian culture. Elsie as a forerunner of communism in Albania mentions a period which he names as the cultural zenith of the mid-30s, where he dwells on cultural-artistic, publicist, cultural monthly, literary magazines, highlighting the names of Branko Merxhani, Vangjel Koca, etc. *“Intellectual life between the thirties and the beginning of the forties, had reached unprecedented peaks, a zenith in the Albanian written culture. A modern literature was created in Albania and the state had finally passed its childhood and had come of age. This was a brief flowering in the shadow of the coming apocalypse that would extinguish the flame of true literary creativity for twenty years. The young bud of Albanian literature would soon be cut and just as soon as the roots of the newly blossomed flower would be cut”*.^{vii} Elsie mentions the political issues that led to the founding of the Communist Party of Albania, the period when Albania was stifling values and intellectual freedom and installing the mechanism of socialist realism when literature obeyed and depended on politics. He mentions the name of Sejfulla Malëshova as an activist and his tragic end during this time. In his view, there are no good authors in the communist regime in Albania, but there are good works. These are the first signs that prove that Albanian literature was entering a new phase where the names of authors who dominated Albanian literature were already declining until before 1945 as a new system was beginning, where first was the party and then the individual with his literary work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

I declare that there is no conflict of interest

About the Author

Veron Dobroshi is a PhD Candidate in Philological Sciences at the University of Prishtina. His areas of interests include history of literature, mythology and especially contemporary literature. He has published various articles in local and international journals. He has participated in several international conferences such as the “International Seminar on Albanian Language, Literature and Culture”, the International Seminar “Father Gjergj Fishta: Research and Interpretation” and has participated in various relevant trainings.

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^{vii} Robert Elsie, *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*, Dukagjini, Pejë, 2001, fq. 366

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