

## *Albanian Lyrical Poetry and the Healing Process after the Fall of the Communist Regime*

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**Abstract.** Albanian literature is considered to be a domain of epic genres. The reason is strongly related to the historical and social context in which art and literature were developed. Having the ideological function as the main reason why most literary works were written, made epic genres strongly connected with the narrative of the nation and national awareness. From the Albanian Renaissance onward, epic poetry and later short stories and novels were the main genres that represented Albanian literature.

This dominant model became very oppressive during the totalitarian regime. Albanian literature was forced to enter the confines of socialist realism. Poets who could not comply with its schematic formula were condemned, imprisoned, and even executed. Lyrical poetry became almost obsolete during the communist regime in Albania, going by the number of books published. Moreover, the desperate call for freedom (personal and artistic) of the lyrical poets became the main indictment in the communist prosecutors' files. Although in quantitative terms the epic genres represented the dominant model of literary development, the repression shown towards lyrical writers is strongly related to the involvement of the state in the creation of a fake narrative and a fake identity for Albanian literature.

After the fall of the totalitarian regime, there was a sudden development in lyrical genres in Albanian literature. Lyrical poetry became one of the most important means of defining the huge emotional abyss that communism had brought into Albanians' lives. The remaining part of the literary work of the executed poets such as Lazër Shantoja (1891–1945), Trifon Xhagjika (1932–1963), Genc Leka (1941–1977), Vilson Blloshmi (1948–1977), Havzi Nela (1934–1988), etc., was published after the fall of the communist regime (1991). This literary corpus, together with the poetic work of imprisoned poets such as Isuf Luzaj (1913–2000), Arshi Pipa (1920–1997), Zef Zorba (1920–1993), Pano Taçi (1929–2012), Jorgo Bllaci (1938–2001), Frederik Rreshpja (1940–2006), Visar Zhiti (1952), etc., represented a new face of Albanian literary identity, which for the first time was strongly connected to poetry.

The main goals of this paper are to analyse the changes that happened in Albanian literature after the fall of the communist regime, present the transformation of the Albanian literary system, and highlight the importance of poetry

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in acting as a self-healing mechanism. Lyrical poetry became the voice of the national trauma in which Albanians were deeply involved. Through writing and reading lyrical poetry about the living hell of the communist period, poets transformed their wounds into an intense dialogue between the present and the past.

**Keywords:** epic genres; ideological function; lyrical poetry; healing; Albanian identity

## Introduction: The Land of Eagles and Banned Lyrical Poetry

Albania is known as the land of eagles, in which the eagle is a symbol of freedom and independence. Its meanings define main national narratives that are related to protection against invaders and the continuing struggle for survival and derive from the historical conditions the natives had to face (centuries of invasion by the Roman Empire and Ottoman Turks, and later Italian and German invasions during the Second World War). As a result, Albanian literature was strongly oriented toward epic genres as they could better highlight national awareness, values, and identity. From its genesis in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries Albanian folk literature has been presented through epic songs called the Epos of the Valiants (*Eposi i kreshnikëve*). Because literature and art (in the same way as history) used to be a realm of strength it was epic genres that best mirrored this reality.

During the Albanian National Awakening, there was a dominance of writing and publication of epic poems. They were first published abroad in the first Albanian magazines and newspapers, such as *Fiamuri i Arbërit* (The Flag of Arbër), *Albania, Kalendari Kombiar* (The National Calendar), *Dielli* (The Sun), *Drita* (The Light), *Hylli i Dritës* (The Star of Light), *Ylli i Mëngjesit* (The Morning Star), *Zani i Naltë* (The High Voice), *Përpjekja Shqiptare* (Albanian Effort), *Minerva, L.E.K.A., Dituri* (Knowledge), *Agimi* (The Dawn), *Rilindja* (Renaissance), *ABC, Bota e Re* (New World), *Cirka, Diana, Fryma, Illyria, Mirvana* (Minerva 2), *Normalisti, Njeriu* (The Man), *Revista Letrare* (Literature Magazine), *Shkëndia, Shpresa* (The Hope), *Shqipnia* (Albania), *Vatra e Rinisë* (Youth Hearth), *Vullnetari i Lirisë* (Freedom Volunteer), etc., and then brought into the country to raise awareness of Albanian identity.

Things were different for Arbëresh writers<sup>1</sup> who lived in Italy. They managed to find a balance between epic and lyric genres. Romantic poets such as Jeronim de Rada (1814–1903), Zef Serembe (1844–1901), Zef Skiroi

<sup>1</sup> The Arbëresh are a community of Albanians who settled in southern and insular Italy between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries after the death of Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu.

(1865–1927), etc., were strong voices expressing love, human pain and sorrow, along with concern for the independence of their homeland. Because of the strong influence of Italian romantic literature, Arbëresh writers developed their aesthetic approach writing mainly lyrical poems.

On the other hand, for several complex reasons that are related to the historical context, Romanticism developed differently in Albania, evolving in a way that almost excluded lyrical poetry. Only a few lyrical poems were written and published by authors such as Andon Zako Çajupi (1866–1930), Naim Frashëri (1846–1900), etc., because the independence of the country required immediate measures, one of which, using literature as an ideological mechanism, made people aware of the importance of fighting for national freedom. After independence, between 1930 and 1940, some great examples of Albanian literature tried to forge a different path, forsaking committed literature (*littérature engagée*).

On this path was Lasgush Poradeci (1899–1987), who initiated a new lyrical perspective in Albanian national literature. He wrote two unique collections of lyrical poetry, including *The Dance of the Stars* (*Vallja e yjeve*, 1933) and *The Star of the Heart* (*Ylli i zemrës*, 1937), both published in Romania. “His style was characterized for its stylistic and technical complexity, as well as its engagement with topics like nature, eroticism and philosophy” (Logoreci 1977: 64).

After World War Two, Albania fell under a totalitarian regime that adopted very harsh policies in the fields of art and literature including the obligatory use of socialist realism, which inhibited the natural development of Albanian literature. Lyrical poetry suffered the consequences of this policy because the only poems to be published were those that were considered successors of partisan songs, or which were fully engaged with spreading the communist project. “The published poems were mostly about the actions of the popular masses in building the basis of socialism, or the heroism of partisans during World War II” (Kërbizi 2017: 203). Literature was considered an important means of propaganda, used to “help in remaking the world of ideas of the working people and educating them in the spirit of socialism” (Zekulin 1960: 433). During the communist regime, writers were encouraged (or even forced) to create literary works that promoted the values of the regime. This political approach towards art was legitimised in the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934), in which the party “demand[ed] from the artist a truthful and historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.” (71) Within this formula is the alibi for condemning writers who failed to ‘represent’ the ‘truthfulness and concreteness’ of the ideological transformations of reality.

This new political context (in which poetry and ideology should be strongly entangled), made it clear that lyrical poetry was banned and lyrical poets were no longer welcome in the ‘new Marxist World’. According to Ruth Jennison

and Julian Murphet in *Communist Projects and Poetics*: “Poetry is where communism has so often marshaled its imperatives and sharpened its sallies, on the lips of illiterate workers on the land.” (2019: 3) Badiou has called this a well-nigh apocalyptic “passion for the Real”, which tempered an indissoluble bond between poetry, communism, and the “people” (Badiou 2007: 54). He claims that there is a strong connection between poets and communism: the implementation of socialist realism implied the necessity of epic poems which would better represent the communist vision of the present and embody the future. As a result, even in Albania, there was an abundant list of writers who embraced communist ideas and joined forces to create ‘new man’ through their socialist realist literary works. According to Foucault “This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have recognized in him. It is a form of power, which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault 1983: 212). Foucault emphasises the totalising power of the state, which tries to produce a particular regime of truth. Resistance against power relations are generally in the form of anti-authority struggle.

In Albania, the poets who did not become part of the ideological system were condemned, imprisoned, or even executed<sup>2</sup>. The truth of the being, passion, sorrow, fear, love, strength, and weakness of the human soul did merely appear in Albanian poetry until the 1960s. After 1960, an impressive group of poets started to publish their first poetic collections, through which was stated a clear opposition between the young and old generation of Albanian writers. *Shekulli im* (My Century) (1961) by Ismail Kadare, *Hapat e mia në asfalt* (My footsteps on the Pavement) (1961) by Dritëro Agolli, *Shtigje poetike* (Poetic Paths) (1961) by Fatos Arapi, and later *Kohë e krisur* (A Mad Age) (1970) by Xhevahir Spahiu, were milestones of a new era in Albanian literature, an era in which poetry started to consolidate its status. However, it was only after the fall of communism that lyrical poetry could finally become a very important genre in the literary system.

## Underground Poetry and its Healing Powers

After the 1990s poetry had a rapid development, both in terms of aesthetic value and in the number of published literary works. Referring to researcher Dhurata Shehri, lyrical poetry became the most popular genre in Albania,

<sup>2</sup> More than 158 writers, mainly poets, were arrested, condemned, imprisoned and some even executed during communist period in Albania (1945–1990).

based on the huge number of published works. “Summarised by decade, 1,158 volumes of Albanian poetry were published in the last decade of the 20th century, while in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 2,350 volumes were published; the upward trend was also felt between 2011 and 2018 where nearly 2,300 volumes were published” (Shehri 2021: 18). So, one of the most characteristic phenomena after the fall of the communist dictatorship is related to the dominance of poetry as a literary genre “in a ratio of 50–60% poetry compared to 30–40% prose in the total number of Albanian publications” (Shehri 2021: 18). This ratio, which is inverted when compared to literature elsewhere in the world, is a clear sign of the feverish need for communication with the recipient in order to share a deep emotional world, something that was hidden during the communist period.

Not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively, Albanian literature underwent a whirlwind of radical change after the fall of communism. Literature published after the 1990s tended to reconstruct the literary mosaic, which had been distorted during communism. After the fall of the dictatorship, forbidden literature came to light. Most of the published works of imprisoned writers were poetry collections. It is not a coincidence that the communist dictatorship targeted poets, because they found it very difficult to reduce their inner freedom. Some of them were executed (Trifon Xhagjika<sup>3</sup>, Havzi Nela<sup>4</sup>, Vilson Blloshmi<sup>5</sup>, Genc Leka<sup>6</sup>,

<sup>3</sup> Trifon Xhagjika (1932–1963) was a poet, journalist and even an artillery commander. Having written poetry that spoke against the communist system, he was arrested and then executed in 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Havzi Nela (20 February 1934–10 August 1988) was an Albanian dissident poet and teacher. Together with his wife he tried to flee from Albania. While crossing the border he wrote on a piece of paper: “Goodbye, homeland, I am leaving, but I am broken-hearted”. They were both captured just beyond the border. In 1967, the poet and his wife were sentenced and imprisoned. In 1975, eight years were added to Nela’s sentence due to his involvement in organising an uprising against the regime which took place within the prison. In 1986, he was released from prison. A year later he got the message saying his mother was very sick. He went to see her one last time, without asking for permission from the authorities. This was discovered by the government and Havzi Nela was arrested again and soon sentenced to death by hanging (1988).

<sup>5</sup> Vilson Blloshmi (1948–1977) was an Albanian poet and dissident. He graduated from Elbasan Pedagogical School, but he was not allowed to teach because of his ‘biography’ (his father had been arrested). After his graduation he worked as a miner, a wood-cutter, and a farmer. He was arrested and his diary, poems and translations were used by prosecutors as evidence of him being against the state. He was sentenced to death and executed in 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Genc Leka (1941–1977) was a poet and a teacher. He graduated from Elbasan Pedagogical School and served as a teacher in 1960–1961. He was arrested with his friend Vilson Blloshmi and executed in 1977.

Beqir Çela<sup>7</sup>, etc.), some others were sent to prison (Arshi Pipa<sup>8</sup>, Visar Zhiti<sup>9</sup>, Frederik Rreshpja<sup>10</sup>, Pano Taçi<sup>11</sup>, Jorgo Bllaci<sup>12</sup>, Jamarbër Marko<sup>13</sup>, Daut

<sup>7</sup> Beqir Çela (1918–1947) was a poet, translator, teacher and Member of Parliament after World War II. He translated into Albanian *Muhammad: The Hero as Prophet* by Thomas Carlyle (1935), *Sohrab and Rustum* by Matthew Arnold (1935), *Is man a machine* by Will Durrant (1938), *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1944). Three years after his last translation he was sentenced to death and executed.

<sup>8</sup> Arshi Pipa (1920–1997) was an Albania poet, philosopher and academic. He graduated in philosophy from the University of Florence in 1942 and became a teacher of Italian language in many Albanian schools. He was imprisoned for ten years (1946–1956) because his reading out loud of verses from “Song of the Flea” by Goethe, was considered to be antagonising to the system. After he was released from the prison, he escaped from Albania. In 1959 he emigrated to the United States where he taught at Adelphi College, Gorgetown University, and UC Berkely. From 1966 to 1989, he was a professor of Italian literature in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Minnesota. His “Book of Prison” became the first testimony of the communist crimes, especially those against the intellectual elite.

<sup>9</sup> Visar Zhiti (1952) is one of the most important representatives of underground literature (a phrase he coined). He graduated from the High Pedagogical Institute in Shkodër and later became a teacher in the northern part of Albania. In 1973 he prepared the poetry collection *Rhapsody of the Life of Roses*, which was considered by communist ‘experts’ to have pessimistic and hermetic verses, and ideological mistakes. He was arrested in 1979 and condemned in 1980. He was released from the prison in 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Frederik Rreshpja (1940–2006) was a lyrical poet, essayist, publicist, and publisher. He is considered to be one of the best representatives of lyrical poetry in Albania. In 1975 his literary work was retrieved from bookshops after a decision from the Ministry of Education and Culture. Immediately afterwards he was arrested and convicted as “a person with high social dangerousness, who aims to undermine, weaken and overthrow the system”. He was first sentenced to four years and later re-sentenced. He died in extreme poverty after the fall of communism.

<sup>11</sup> Pano Taçi (1929–2012) was another condemned poet. At a very young age he met Lasgush Poradeci, who helped him publish his first poem in the literary journal *Bleta*. At a very young age he became a member of Debatik (United Boys of Communist Ideas), and later became a partisan in the 23<sup>rd</sup> brigade. After the installation of the communist system in Albania, he was expelled from school for his decadent poems and was later arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison. After his release, he was deported for four years to poor villages in Myzeqe. In 1963, he was ready to publish his first poetic collection *The Bridge of the Rainbow*, but the book was considered to have discrepancies with the ideological line and it served as the *corpus delicti* for his next conviction. He was arrested again and sentenced to another 5 years in prison. After his release he worked voluntarily for Metallurgy Combinat. After a month of work, he was arrested again and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

<sup>12</sup> Jorgo Bllaci (1938–2001) was a poet and translator. He was sentenced in the 1950s for his political beliefs. After his release from prison, he worked in construction. After his death he was given the award of Great Master in translation.

<sup>13</sup> Jamarbër Marko (1951–2010) was a poet, journalist and son of the well-known writer Petro Marko and the painter Safo Marko. After the imprisonment of his father he came

Gumeni<sup>14</sup>, Mark Ndoja, Gjergj Komnino<sup>15</sup>, etc.). Some died in these communist prisons (Vinçens Prenushi), some of them hid and drifted into oblivion (Zef Zorba<sup>16</sup>), while other voices were silenced for different reasons (Lasgush Poradeci)<sup>17</sup>. As Murphet (2019: 34) highlights: “Taking issue with the perceived ‘harm’ done by the poets’ stories and manners (to public morals, and the individual soul), the communist republic could not possibly tolerate the promiscuous mimesis of multiple identities that poets routinely perform”. The imprisoned poets did not fall into experiments that communists designed, their poetry was not for the masses as was the aim of realism socialist dogma. By writing poetry they successfully preserved their identity, activating a defensive mechanism against the annihilation pressure of the system.

The literary corpus of the condemned writers saw the light of publication only after the fall of the totalitarian system.

This category of poets has a very important value in Albanian literature because they were denied the right to publish during the regime; they were imprisoned and were not allowed to write while incarcerated or to publish after it. Some of their poems were created within the prison, memorised by the author or other prisoners, and published many years later. The underground poetry, has an essential importance, not only because of its aesthetics (in opposition with the method of socialist realism), but also as a symbol of resistance against the totalitarian system.

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under surveillance. In 1975 he was arrested and condemned for agitation and propaganda. He was released from prison in 1978 and started to work as a loader until in 1991 he had an accident and was disabled.

<sup>14</sup> Daut Gumeni (1943) is another condemned poet. He graduated from *Pandeli Sotiri* Pedagogical School in Gjirokastër. As a student he developed an anti-communist approach, which was also reflected in his poetry. In 1967 he was arrested for agitation and propaganda and suffered the cruelty of communist prisons for 23 years.

<sup>15</sup> Gjergj Komnino (1919–1996) was a poet, teacher, playwright, folklorist and author of the *Albanian Lyrical Songs* collection (1955). Although he was a partisan during the Second World War he was sentenced to 13 years in prison during the communist regime.

<sup>16</sup> Zef Zorba (1920–1983) was a poet and a translator. He was also the director of the House of Culture in Shkodra. In 1946 he was charged with “agitation and propaganda” and was imprisoned. Zorba spent five years in labour and ‘re-education’ camps until his release in 1951. During the communist period he kept a low profile and his poems were only found and published one year after his death.

<sup>17</sup> Lasgush Poradeci is the most prominent voice in Albanian poetry. According to Robert Elsie, “Poradeci’s verse creates a metaphysical bridge from the psychic states and trying moods of earthly existence to the lofty spheres of the sublime, to the source of all creative energy”. However, Lasgushi Poradeci decided not to write any more after the installation of the communist regime and the implementation of socialist realism as the official form of art.

Andrei Plesu highlights that the most important issue in understanding cultural resistance is to emphasise “the constitutive freedom of the spirit with the aggressiveness of an inflexible ideology” (1995: 71). Prison poetry is definitely the highest form of resistance because communist authorities tried to prohibit any type of communication (oral or written). Writing within the prison was considered to be an action against the state, and if discovered the author would suffer severe consequences (from isolation to an extra 10 years). Taking into consideration the fact that “everyone at the bottom reported to the top, and everyone at the top theoretically knew what was happening at the bottom” (Applebaum 2012: 51), the existence of prison literature is significant evidence of solidarity between prisoners who refused to be part of the state mechanism. The reason why is strongly related to the core existence of prison literature which aims to preserve human values in the time of existential crisis; meanwhile the state was using all its oppressive mechanisms to annihilate the identity of the so-called people’s enemies, hence writing poetry was a form of survival. By expressing their inner feelings, the imprisoned writers found a way to deal with trauma. Poetry not only light up the soul of the writer, it also soothed the pain of each reader or listener, who felt represented. According to Eriksson (2004: 50): “A poem gives shelter to and can contain what it evokes, such as strong emotion. The poem can be a place of safety.” And the place of safety belonged not only to the writers, but also to the audience (who used to memorise poems and repeat them in silence). The intense feelings embodied by the author are transferred to the readers, with their bodies becoming “the ground in which text grows” (Hunt and Sampson 2006: 149). Writing poetry becomes an important process by which to “enable repossession of the life narrative” (Bracegirdle 2011: 82) by including prison in the narrative.

This means that one of the main forms of resistance against the system of oppression was through the expression of one’s feelings and thoughts about love and anguish, memory and loss, intense reflection or imaginary flight from physical chains or prison walls. The endurance of human values and identity is a higher act of resistance, i.e. the prison writers succeeded in saving the human world even after experiencing deep trauma.

The literature of prison brought a high level of poetic sensibility to Albanian literature. However, it was only after the fall of the totalitarian system that literary works written during the communist regime, labelled condemned literature by Visar Zhiti, started the communication process with the readers at the aesthetic and semantic levels. The unpublished works of condemned writers, i.e. mainly ‘prison literature’, were published only after the fall of communism.



These works were kept hidden<sup>18</sup>, some of them buried underground, some others memorised by the poets with no written evidence, in order to protect both the literary works and the writers. Any sign of their existence would have been used by the regime as reason to reconvict the author. Writing poetry behind bars is a political act, argues Patricia Sánchez-Flavian in a 2003 article in *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe*, because poetry “offers an emotional sanctuary for escape” (114) within the brutal environment of prison, providing the opportunity for both spiritual and political revelations. It is a strong sign of resistance against the environment in which the writers are compelled to spend their lives, and against the political regime that unjustly put them there. In a similar way, Amy Washburn highlights that poetry is an opportunity to reckon with both “barriers and freedom”. Writing poetry in prison was a defence mechanism used to safeguard the strength of thought, emotional sensitivity and inner balance of the imprisoned writers, even though the act came with an increased risk of punishment.

Some of the most important poetry published after the fall of communism, which best represents the literature of prison, is: *Libri i burgut* (The Book of Prison) (1994)<sup>19</sup> by Arshi Pipa (sentenced to 20 years and imprisoned for 10 after an amnesty); *Epika e trëndafilave* (Epics of the Roses) (1990) by Jorgo Bllaci; *Kujtesa e ajrit* (The memory of the Air) (1993), *Hedh një kafkë te këmbët tua* (I Cast a Skull at your Feet) (1994), *Mbjellja e vetëtimave* (Sowing Lightning) (1994), *Dyert e gjalla* (The Living Doors) (1995), *Kohë e vrrarë në sy* (Time Murdered in the Eye) (1997) by Visar Zhiti; *Udha e ëndrrës* (The Path of the Dream) (1998) by Daut Gumeni, *Autoportret* (Autopportrait) (1991) by Zyhdhi Morava; *Rastësisht me dashje* (Accidentally on purpose) (1995), and *Pro Nobis* (2001) by Jamarbër Marko; *Blerim i thinjur* (Grizzly Green) (1993), *Dhe vdekja do paguar* (Even death will be paid) (1997), *Poezi të zgjedhura* (Selected Poetry) (2002), *Pani plak* (The Old Pan) (2005) by Pano Taçi, etc.

As an important part of condemned literature is the work of executed poets. Havzi Nela's (executed in 1988) literary work was published in 2018. His complete work *Shtatë Fletore – vepra e plotë me 5548 vargje* (Seven Notebooks, Complete Works with 5,548 Verses) was published 20 years after his execution; *The Complete Work* by Vilson Blloshmi (executed in 1977) was published in 2020; Trifon Xhagjika was executed in 1963, with his literary work *Atdheu është lakuriq* (My Fatherland Is Naked) published in 1994.

<sup>18</sup> What has remained as evidence of prison literature is only a small part of the overall corpus. An important part of it was destroyed or lost in prosecutors' offices.

<sup>19</sup> The book of prison was previously published by APICE (1959), in the USA.

Part of condemned literature is the literature of the drawer, the best representative of which is Zef Zorba. His literary work *Buzë të ngrime në gaz* (Lips Frozen in a Smile), was published one year after the writer's death (1993). The modernist poems of Zorba were written almost half a century ago and had almost fallen into oblivion, as had their writer. Zorba's work, according to Sabri Hamiti, is "like a poetic, systematic and organic book in the style of Baudelaire. Systematised poetry collections where the poetic elements are harmonised in the overall structures ... had rarely been met before in Albanian literature". (Hamiti 2021: 47)

Most of the poetic collections of condemned literature featured freedom, pain, love, and dignity as the most common motifs, used as poetic shields to protect the human soul from the annihilation of the communist desert.

The numerous publications of poetic collections immediately after the fall of communism answered an important question: Why did Albanian literature before 1990 lack a self-published or samizdat element? The answer was first related to the cruelty of the communist regime, which had a very sophisticated system of surveillance, used to prevent publication of any kind of literary work except official publications of socialist realism works. The communist system in Albania was considered one of the most cruel totalitarian systems in world history, surpassing almost all communist countries in the number of victims and convictions per capita. However, the most important reason is that many prominent figures in the Albanian elite were suffering in prison. It was an endangered underground literature of, mainly, poetry that was continuously at risk of annihilation, its carrier being the imprisoned writer and the reader. Most of the works of condemned literature, prison literature included, are poems because only poetry could bear the suffering, trauma, resistance, hope, memory, etc., expressing them through an extremely economic use of words. The frightening experience of prison was expressed through the emotions of human beings who were aware of totalitarian system's project of annihilate people (especially intellectuals) through the annihilation of feelings, love, poetry, art, beauty, inspiration, life itself. And because of their awareness, these prisoners knew the importance of writing, especially writing poetry. Scholars Sjollema and Hanley (2013: 60) found that "the very act of creating, writing, and sharing poetry with others was seen as an act of empowerment".

Writing literature, especially poetry, helped the writers protect their sanity in a time of total madness. According to Sanchez-Flavian (2013: 114), poetry helps to create "safe 'spaces' ... to explore not only the 'self', but new forms of struggle as well". On the other hand, poetry's capacity to heal overcomes the author and becomes part of a healing system. There is solace in recognising that you are not alone in your pain, in your suffering. According to Robert Carroll

(2005: 164), “Our voices are the embodiment of ourselves, whether written or spoken. It is in the times of extremity that we long to find words or hear another human voice letting us know we are not alone”. The poetry written in the prison became a “medium through which new discourses initiated and the dialogue opened by the prisoner-poet enables the reader to be engaged” (Sanchez-Flavian 2013: 114). In the condition of reduced communication between prisoners, the dialogue evolved in a specific way. Poetry was created by the writer, secretly told to trusted friends in prison and then repeated until memorised by each of them.

For imprisoned poets the process of memorising poems, as well as writing poetry, was an act of resistance, an effort to light a flame that the state was trying to extinguish through inhuman behaviour such as torture. As Tom Wicker states, prison literature is a “fascinating glimmer of humanity persisting in circumstances that conspire, with overwhelming force, to obliterate it” (2005: 7). Writing and memorising poetry are also important mediums of preserving the identity of the self, a form of belonging to a small community while dreaming of better days. Poets inevitably followed the thread of life, entangled with symbols and metaphors. Instead of the silence of death, which the totalitarian state aimed to instil in the minds of imprisoned intellectuals, there was poetry as an art of rebellion, as a voice of resistance against the system. It is this awareness of the important role of poetry that made Visar Zhiti claim in *The Memory of Air* that, “Forest area has been reduced / And the surface of fear has increased ... / Forest area has been reduced / **The surface of poetry, of sighs** .... The reduction of the surface of poetry is close to the reduction of sighs, which Zhiti strongly connects with the survival of the human soul.

Moreover, the healing function of poetry applied not only to fellow prisoners but also to readers after the fall of the communist regime. Condemned literature was published after the 1990s, shedding light on the ferocity of the totalitarian regime and the crimes committed against the Albanian elite. Even though a democratic system was installed after the fall of communism, the new political party that won the elections was the successor of the party which had governed the country for more than four decades (with a reformed program and a new name).<sup>20</sup> The publication of condemned literature brought a new narrative, the narrative of people who had suffered without being guilty. A curtain fell away and Albanians saw the hell that most people had not been aware existed. Poetry written by political prisoners (who belonged to the intellectual elite) exposed the tragic fate of the individual betrayed by his own country,

<sup>20</sup> The Albanian Labour Party (1945–1991) was dissolved on June 1991 and succeeded by the Socialist Party of Albania.

a reality that was completely unknown to the majority of people because of propaganda.

The publication of prison literature was not only evidence of the sufferings of imprisoned intellectuals, it was also a reflection of the overall trauma of Albanian society. The importance of this genre in Albanian literature is fundamental, because most state security apparatus files were destroyed, so literature and poetry together with the testimonies of the imprisoned intellectuals were the only ways to understand the past. The literary works of this group of writers were not only valuable for their aesthetics, they also had a strong correlation with the truth, bringing to the country's attention the abyss into which Albanians had fallen during the communist period.

Moreover, convicted writers changed people's approach to the dictatorship, destroying the false narrative that communist ideology had tried to construct over the years. Their literary work showed the tragic but real face of life in a totalitarian state. It spoke with the language of pain, anger, absence, risk of life, horror, torture, and darkness, but also with endurance, hope, sacrifice, the dream of freedom, and ideals. This poetry nurtured the hungry souls of an audience who, for several decades, had lived in the desert of communist life. Through poetry, readers recognised and consequently mitigated the national trauma. Readers (in a similar way to writers) tried to heal the wounds of the past using the power of words.

The publication of condemned literature also has national moral values. Albanian literature lacked literature published in a non-official way. After its publication Albanians became aware of the existence of a literary corpus that symbolised the resistance of the intellectual elite, who had been executed, incarcerated, but not bowed. (Kerbizi 2019: 34)

As Shaban Sinani highlights (2009: 48), condemned literature is, "an unyielding guardian of the memory of man [and nation in the struggle] to preserve identity", so from this perspective, this literature comes as evidence of the survival of man and humanity. Literature overcomes human limitation because through literature universal messages are given. These messages aim to model the present based on past experience, to evoke collective memory: by remembering the past we preserve the present and stop the future repeating history.

## Conclusions

Poetry had a crucial role in shaping Albanian identity after the fall of communism. The publication of prison literature (for example smuggled out of prison

on cigarette papers), and the publication of condemned literature (poetry books that could not be published during the communist period) showed a new unknown reality. The publication of the works of convicted writers and artists, the testimony of the horror experienced and their endurance and sacrifice in communist prisons became the symbol of a nation that did not remain silent, a symbol of an elite that was killed but did not kneel to the system. Through writing, sharing this writing and reading it after the decline of communism, Albanians diminished the national trauma inherited from the totalitarian period. By giving voice to the suffering, terror and pain of the communist past resistance, endurance and survival became the poetic credo of condemned Albanian poets. From this point of view the poetry of condemned writers had not only high aesthetic, but also high ethical, value.

To sum up, in dark times like those in which Albania suffered during the communist regime, poetry became a safe harbour in which to protect the sanity of the mind and the emotions of the soul. Through poetry, writers created a healing mechanism that changed pain into art, and trauma into something of aesthetic value.

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