

## TWO VIEWS ON AN ALBANIAN WAIL

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**Abstract:** Based on a point-driven approach to reading, *Two Views on an Albanian Wail* is a literary analysis of the story "Ajkuna qan Omerin" [Aikuna mourns Omer] by Mitrush Kuteli, included in the volume *Tregime të moçme shqiptare* [Albanian Old Tales]. The story was inspired by a wailing from *The Epic of the Kreshniks*, which is representative for the Albanian folklore and comparable to the great European epics, collected in the Geg dialect of the Albanian language. Our analysis highlights Mitrush Kuteli's narrative art, who, through very subtle linguistic and narrative means, manages to turn a wailing, which in folklore is addressed to adults, into a story addressed to children.

**Keywords:** *wailing, epic, Albanian folklore, cultivated literature, storytelling*

### 1. Introduction

Literature and language together as a whole give us the opportunity of enjoying, experiencing and recreating various informing, spiritual and aesthetic experiences. According U. Eco, it is literature which keeps language alive as our collective heritage, which shapes language according to its suggestions, and, by helping to create language, it creates a sense of identity and community.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, literature and literary writers may be considered representative, not just artistically, but above all linguistically. Thus, Albanian literature is represented

by writers who did not create an artificial language or complex artistic and philosophical constructs. They discovered in the simplicity of their language the special miracle of literature, creating their artistic individuality and artistic profile through the masterful use of this language. Undoubtedly, in this apparently simple but highly refined Albanian literature, a special place is occupied by Mitrush Kuteli.

In Albanian literature, the author's name, Mitrush Kuteli, is directly connected to narratives. The concept of narrative, understood as a sequence of events, having beginning, development of action, climax and resolution, has its origins in Aristotle's theory on tragedy: "Now, we have settled that a tragedy is a mimesis of a complete, that is, of a whole action, "whole" here

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<sup>1</sup> Eco 2007 :8-9

implying some amplitude (there can be a whole without amplitude). By “whole” I mean with a beginning, a middle, and an end. By “beginning” [in this context] I mean 'that which is not necessarily the consequent of something else, but has some state or happening naturally consequent on it, by “end” a state that is the necessary or usual consequent of something else, but has itself no such consequent, by “middle” 'that which is consequent and has consequents. Well-ordered plots, then, will exhibit these characteristics, and will not begin or end just anywhere”<sup>2</sup>

According to B. H. Smith's rhetorics<sup>3</sup>, a narrative is the process during which somebody tells someone that something has happened. Phelan adds to this model the role of the context, which means that the narration takes place under specific circumstances and with specific purposes.<sup>4</sup> This definition allows the concept of the narrative to contain a variety of pragmatylistic processes, or, to put it in R. Barthes' words, the narrative is "the first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres".<sup>5</sup> Starting from R. Barthes' view on narrative, we are going to analyse a narrative by Mitrush Kuteli, inspired by an Albanian wailing belonging to folk literature. We need to highlight that narratives play an important part both in Albanian folk and cultivated literature. They belong to different periods in the history of Albanian literature, and based on the periods they belong to, they have their own characteristics.

## 2. The Epic of the Kreshniks

*The Epic of the Kreshniks* or *The Epic of Muji and Halil*, as it is also known, is one of the oldest and most interesting examples of Albanian oral literature. According to Albanian critic Gj. Zheji, "... our epic of the Kreshniks belongs to the European epic tradition both from the point of view of its contents and from the point of view of its form. This is why it would not be a surprise, on the contrary, to have it analysed in connection to the German epic of the Nibelungs, the songs of Roland, the Spanish romances of El Mio Sid, the English Beowulf, the Scandinavian sagas or the stories of the South-Eastern Slavs etc. More than that, in our epic cycle, as in other epics, we encounter the same chivalrous psychology, the same etiquette, more or less the same kind of conflicts, the same weapons used, the same duels and ideals for women etc., not to mention here the fact that, especially in some of these songs, we come across almost the same old system of verse."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle 1972 :100

<sup>3</sup>Smith 1981:228.

<sup>4</sup> Phelan 2005:18.

<sup>5</sup> Barthes 1977 :79

<sup>6</sup> Zheji 1998 :163

*The Epic of the Kreshniks* begins with "The Power of Muji" and continues with several songs related to a series of events and characters. There are the stories of Gjeto Basho Muji with his band of warriors and those of the Jutbina warriors that make up the main part of the epic cycle. The Kreshniks do not belong all to the same order. Muji and Halil together with their band protect their people from a danger coming from the North, from the interior of the peninsula. But Gjergj Elez Alia, another main character, belongs to another order, facing the danger which comes from the sea. In these legendary epic songs there are voices and echoes coming from many prehistoric epochs. This is why they are rated as "multi-character songs". The rapsodies of the Kreshniks' epic are independent songs, as far as their form is concerned. But in contents, they share the same mindset, the same age, the same space, the same mythological and semi-mythological figures.<sup>7</sup> The time of the action in the epic is uncertain, thus creating that timelessness dimension of the mythological time; the main conflicts take place between the band and the Shkias (Slavic tribes), but in various other songs the enemy remains undefined. Most of the songs are mainly related to the myths of the earth, the maternal figure is essential in them, Ajkuna being the main feminine figure.

Different scholars have given various titles to the epic of the Kreshniks:

Lord "The Singer of Tales"<sup>8</sup>; M. Lambertz "Die Volksepik der Albaner"<sup>9</sup>, Fulvio Cordignano "La poesia epica di confine nell'Albania del Nord"<sup>10</sup>; R. Elsie "The Songs of Frontier Warriors".<sup>11</sup>

During the period of the Communist regime, three volumes were published in French: *Chansonnier des preux albanais* (Songs of the Albanian Warriors) in 1967<sup>12</sup>, *Trésor du chansonnier populaire albanais* (Treasure of Albanian Folk Songs) in 1975, compiled by Zihni Sako<sup>13</sup>, as well as *Chansonnier épique albanais* (Albanian Epic Folk Songs) in 1983<sup>14</sup>, published by Qemal Haxhihasani (1916-1991) and translated by Kolë Luka (1917-1994). Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975) translated nine epic songs into Italian for his volume *Poesia popolare Albanese* (Albanian Folk Verse) in 1957<sup>15</sup>. A nice collection of epic material was also published in Russian by

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<sup>7</sup> Sinani 2011 : 10-11

<sup>8</sup> Lord 1960

<sup>9</sup> Lambertz 1917

<sup>10</sup> Cordignano 1943

<sup>11</sup> Elsie & Mathie-Heck 2004

<sup>12</sup> Sako 1967

<sup>13</sup> Sako et al. (ed.) 1975

<sup>14</sup> Haxhihasani et al. (ed.) 1983

<sup>15</sup> Koliqi 1957

David Samojlov (1920-1990) in *Starinnye albanske skazaniya* (*Old Albanian Legends*) in 1971<sup>16</sup>, translated by various authors.

This legendary epic, with its stories having at their centre the main Kreshnik family, that of Gjeto Basho Muji's, as well as with its songs about particular members of the Kreshik tribe, has awoken the interest of many Albanian writers. According to Shaban Sinani, the latest expressions of this legendary epic and its motifs in Albanian literature are Dhimitër Pasko (M. Kuteli)<sup>17</sup> *Tregime të moçme shqiptare* [Albanian Old Tales], Arshi Pipa's *Rrusha* and M. Camaj's *Dranja*<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, Albanian critic Sabri Hamiti claims that, from all these writers, Mitrush Kuteli's literary work *Tregime të moçme shqiptare* illustrates the best the author's status not as a creator, but as a recreator.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. The Approach of the Analysis

In the very simplicity of his highly appreciated style, Kuteli sets a special psychological reading of the event he narrates. Even though, after its publication, *Tregime të moçme shqiptare* has been interpreted in subsequent periods from various theoretical perspectives, Kuteli's narratives are still open to other reading approaches. Starting with the second half of the 20th century, the process of interpreting literary works has taken a significant turn, moving away from the general interpretation based solely on life circumstances and historical conditions. The new theories have largely been based on the text itself and the reader's response to it. Summarized by the term *reader-response theories*, they focus on the connection between the text and the reader and vice versa, pointing to the various ways in which the reader may actively participate to the process of interpretation.

Based on a point-driven approach, which has at its centre the reading of narratives as works having many things in common with listening situations<sup>20</sup>, we have analysed one of M. Kuteli's stories, "Ajkuna qan Omerin", included in *Tregime të moçme shqiptare*<sup>21</sup>, in which Omer, the son of the Kreshnik leader Gjeto Basho Muji, is killed by a band of Shkias while hunting with his father in the woods. Gjeto Basho Muji buries his son and when he returns home, he forbids his wife Ajkuna to mourn their son at home, urging her to mourn him outside the house, in the mountains, where he was buried.

This story has been selected for several reasons. According to Gj. Zheji, the original epic stories *Deka e Omerit* [Omer's Death] and *Ajkuna*

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<sup>16</sup> Samojlov 1971

<sup>17</sup> Dhimitër Pasko's literary pseudonym was Mitrush Kuteli

<sup>18</sup> Sinani 2000:13

<sup>19</sup> Hamiti 2010: 580

<sup>20</sup> Vipond & Rusell 1984 :261-277

<sup>21</sup> Kuteli 1998:167-172

*kjan Omerin* [Ajkuna mourns Omer] "have so many common elements that they may be considered as variants of only one rhapsody or as parts of one rhapsody".<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the epic wailing *Ajkuna kjan Omerin* is different from the other epic stories, including *Deka e Omerit*, in terms of the narrative style. In the epic wailing, Ajkuna's emotional inner world distorts the narrative, and thus, the linguistic narrative tools are very limited from a pragmatic point of view. In addition, the original epic story contains a series of tragic events presented in details which are too frightening for a child's understanding. It is exactly in his story *Ajkuna qan Omerin* that Kuteli's art lies through the interpretation and transformation of this epic into a sad, but acceptable story for children. Comparing the original wailing in the epic with Kuteli's story, we notice many similarities, as well as substantial differences between them in terms of elements and the role they play in the new context (i.e situation and purpose, in Phelan's terms). Using as a theoretical frame D. Vipond's and H. Rusell's theory on point-driven reading, we shall unveil the process by which the narrator transforms a wailing song meant for adults into a story meant for children.<sup>23</sup> Within a point-driven reading perspective, Kuteli may be considered as playing two main roles: 1. that of a point-driven reader 2. that of a recreator. In the first role, Kuteli's story observes the three criteria or "strategies", using Vipon's and Rusell's terms: coherence, narrative surface, transactional.<sup>24</sup> In the second role, Kuteli builds the story and its narrative tools by turning a verse epic into a prose narrative. As a result, we are faced with another point-driven reading process for a different reader.

### **3.1. The recreation of the epic**

Comparing the epic with Kuteli's story, we notice the similarities between them in terms of theme, but the same reader will experience the two readings in totally different ways. This kind of aesthetic experience is dictated by the way in which Kuteli recreates the epic, making use of specific linguistic tools.

If we analyse Kuteli's story from the point-driven reading perspective, we shall analyse particularly his strategies which become obvious while comparing the two texts. In the *Foreword* to his volume, Kuteli himself confesses he is a driven reader. To him, the re-reading, i.e. the recreation and reinterpretation of the epic, has been done with a very specific purpose, that of familiarizing children with the heroic deeds of the Kreshniks defending their people and country.<sup>25</sup> The author is very careful while trying to soften the tragic notes of the epic by presenting Ajkuna's wailing as

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<sup>22</sup> Zheji 1998:163

<sup>23</sup> Vipond & Rusell *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 270

<sup>25</sup> Kuteli 1998 :13,17

a very normal action for a mother: "Ajkuna is the desperate mother who is mourning her dead son, little Omer, with profound sorrow. And what lyricism there is in her words! She begs her son to go out of the grave, to walk in the mountains, to enjoy life, whereas she will go and take his place. Her husband, Muji, does not allow her to mourn at home, so that the enemy may not rejoice, but he orders her to mourn in the mountains."<sup>26</sup> This is how, from the very beginning, he turns his readers, the children, into point-driven readers.

### 3.2. Coherence

This is the moment where Kuteli starts playing his role as a re-creator, without drifting away from the epic. The recreation process relies mainly on the special treatment of certain elements belonging to the original epic. When we are reading Kuteli's story, its direct connection to the original epic is clear:

*Drita ka dalë e drit s'po ban* (247, 3) - *Ç'do të sjellë një ditë e tillë me dritë të marrtë? Askush s'e di* (167)<sup>27</sup>[The day is dawning but the sun has not come out yet - What will such a day without sun bring? Nobody knows.]

In these two verses of the original epic, the antonymic verbs are setting the scene for the bad event which is going to happen. In Kuteli's story a rhetorical question is added and the antonymic verbs are replaced with textual referentials like: *such a day/a day without sun* which turn the text into a typical narrative:

*Ça ka ba, zot, Gjeto Basho Muji* (247, 5)-*Ç'bën atë ditë Gjeto Basho Muji* (167)[What has Lord Gjeto Basho Muji done? - What has Gjeto Basho Muji done on that day?]

When we get to this particular point, we notice that the coherence with the original text is maintained because of this interrogation. The only thing that changes is the dialect: in the original epic the dialect used is Geg, whereas in Kuteli's story the Tosk dialect is predominant, but still preserving some elements from the Geg dialect.

*Qyqja nana e padjalë/ka nisë grueja me bërtitë* (247, 31-32)-*Ajkuna lëshoi një britmë grarishte* (169)[The poor mother without a son/ has started crying- Ajkuna cried like a woman.]

In the first lines belonging to the epic, two elements are drawing our attention: *nana e padjalë* [the mother without a son] and *ka nisë grueja me bërtitë* [the woman/mother has started crying]. In Kuteli's story the verb *mbeta* (I remained) ("*Qyqja mbeta nënë e padjalë*" (169) [Oh my God, I remained a mother without a son]) and the adjective *grarisht* [like a

<sup>26</sup> Kuteli 1998 :19

<sup>27</sup> The examples comparatively given are from the two texts, accompanied by the page and verse numbers.

woman/womanly] are inserted, but they do not refer only to Ajkuna but also, indirectly, to all women mourning the death of their family members.

### 3.3 Surface narrative

In the process of recreation, Kuteli introduces elements that do not exist in the original epic: three new passages which are his own creation, each of them playing a specific role. First of all, the author is setting the scene, preparing us, the readers, for what is going to happen next. This is done by means of time and space deicts and attributes connected to these deicts: e.g. *Bjeshkët* [mountains] - a name indicating a large, shadowy, indefinite space (the connected attributes being *të heshtura*, *të mugëta*, *me kreshtat në re* - silent, dusky, with their peaks in the clouds). This vast indefinite space appears to be engulfed by the fog, slowly vanishing, as suggested by the verb *davarit* [vanishes slowly], but at the same time threatening, without hope, because of the absence of the sunlight which creates a gloomy atmosphere, counterbalanced only by the few white spots of snow: e.g. *në ndonjë rrudhë mali, lbardh ndonjë njollë dëbore* (167) [on some mountains, here and there, some white spots of snow].

In the original epic, the name *bjeshkë* is mentioned only at the end in order to indicate that this is the dwelling place of the Hours, mythological figures in the Albanian folk tradition, believed to decide human beings' destiny (249, 85). Nevertheless, *Lugjet e Verdha* [the Yellow Hills] are the place of action where the battle between Gjeto Basho Muji, his son and the Shkias takes place, as well as the burial.

After the setting of the scene, the narration is continued by means of rhetorical questions which play the role of introducing the idea of mystery and creating the feeling of suspense: *Ç'ka, vallë andej në ata grumbuj zymtësie? Ç'fshihet në brezat e errët të mjegullës?* (167) [What may be there in those heaps of gloom? What's hidden in the dark clouds of fog?]. The mystery and suspense are heightened by the use of the subjunctive-admirative mood as in the following example: *do të paskej qënë mirë të paskej dalë ndonjë erë ...* (167). [It would have been good if some kind of wind had blown...]

Secondly, Kuteli expands the narrative by means of the miniepisodes which never appear in the epic. In the story Muji decides to go out for hunting (167) - He buries his son in the mountains and meditates there (168) - Muji prepares for revenge (episode appearing before the dialogue with Ajkuna 168).

Thirdly, the story is also expanded through Muji's role as an actor. In the epic, Muji's role is episodic, whereas in Kuteli's story he is the main character, the real actor: he prepares himself for hunting, takes his son with himself, performs the ritual of the burial (during which the story also

describes his state of mind), talks with Ajkuna about what happened and what she has to do. Muji tells Ajkuna that their son was killed, who killed him and where. In this case Muji is the actor, while Ajkuna remains with the same role as in the epic, mourning being her only role.

Finally, the author-recreator tells the story in the Tosk dialect. The story narrated in the Tosk dialect, particularly in the Eastern speech of the Northern Tosk, maintaining here and there words and phonetisms belonging to the Geg dialect make the narrative more fluent and less dramatic.

### 3.4 Transactional

Based on the above analysis, we have seen how the epic wailing, essentially a poetic text, is transformed, yet preserving on the surface the basic elements of the event. Kuteli neatly adds narrative elements to the text: descriptions of time and space, actions and actors, narration in prose, in the northern Tosk dialect, which is closer to standard Albanian, as compared to the Geg dialect. As a result, he turns the epic "Ajkuna kjan Omerin" (which contains with a very limited number of narrative elements) into a fully narrative text. Kuteli's art is also highlighted by the fact that his long narrative text containing few wailing elements is transformed into a readable text meant for children.

### Conclusions

In this article, we have presented a new model of analysis for Kuteli's story "Ajkuna qan Omerin", inspired by the epic with the same title "Ajukuna kjan Omerin", included in *The Epic of the Kreshniks*, an epic which contains mainly wailing elements and which Kuteli transforms into a story for children. This re-interpretation of the wailing reveals not only Kuteli's art as an original author, but it also gives each reader the opportunity to recreate the story by him/herself. So switching from point-driven reader to story-driven reader makes the reader become part of what he/she is reading, and, why not, allowing him/her to recreate it in another way.

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