

# RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF A NATION THROUGH EXOTIC NARRATIVES

## The case of Albanian authors writing in Italian

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**Abstract** – Italian language narratives of Albanian authors hold a substantial presence in the Italian publishing arena. While frequently addressing themes associated with their homeland, these authors explore a diverse array of genres, including novels, memoirs, detective fiction, and poetry. This discussion, however, will not delve into the latter genre, as its unique aesthetic and formal characteristics would warrant a separate analysis. Despite the diversity of content and individualities of its authors, this narrative persists in being categorized either under the all-encompassing label of "migrant literature" or examined through a gender-focused lens, with predominant emphasis on some of the most renowned female writers. In our view, this peculiarity of the Italian literary criticism regarding Albanian literature can be attributed to a not yet entirely refined framing of the Albanian literary landscape itself and the historical-cultural context of a nation that, having endured nearly five centuries of Ottoman rule, was perceived as a mysterious Islamic outpost in the heart of Europe. Consequently, it remained one of the least explored European countries until relatively recently.

**Keywords:** migrant literature; comparative literature; imagology; Albanian authors; geocriticism.

*Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west*  
(H.K. Bhabha "Nation and Narration", 2005, p. 11).

## 1. Introduction

As a result of the first major migrations that brought to Italy people from areas of the world tormented by ethnic conflicts and economic crises in the last decades of the past century, works by authors for whom Italian was not their native language found their way to the Italian publishing market. Their largest group was, and still is, formed by œuvres of Albanian native speakers. In fact, there are over a hundred writers from across the Adriatic who have been publishing novels, short stories, and poetry written directly in Italian for about thirty years. In the European context, this phenomenon can only be compared to that of French-speaking writers from the Maghreb area<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> At this moment, an Albanian online magazine that is published in Italian has listed 232 of them, including several dozen authors of scientific texts and various publications. See *Albania Letteraria*: <https://albanialetteraria.it/scrittori/> (24.6.2024).

Of course, the authorial identities of Albanian writers, as with those of every other nationality, differ in cultural background, experiences, styles, and expressive choices, as do their respective narrative productions. Genres range from novels, short stories, and autobiographies to detective stories and poetry. We will not focus on poetry here, which due to its aesthetic and formal peculiarity deserves a separate analysis.

In view of such a heterogeneous panorama, we have questioned the critical tools currently applied to these works, which are often considered in a specific category such as 'migrant literature,' an apodictic definition that, as every *de-finition*, circumscribes, limits, and precludes the possibility of an all-encompassing observation.

In past decades the critical discourse on literature of migration deserved credit for bringing forth the individual and collective experience of entire nations, whose citizens sought elsewhere what their country could not or would not offer. On the contrary, in recent years italo-graphic literature (we will here use this term rather than the more common "italophone", which does not take into account the fact that the question is about writing and not about speaking)<sup>2</sup> has achieved such independence (of motifs, forms, and contents) that it would be inadequate to continue to label it under a definition bordering on stereotype, which does not account for a matter whose contours are currently more fluid.

## 2. Italograph Albanian literature: some examples

The thematic and expressive diversity among these texts would make it inappropriate to dedicate an overall analysis to novels and stories so different *inter se*. Such a grouping of works by, say, either French or English or German writers is no longer applied, unless they belong to the same "school" or literary movement. Thus, why should national labels be used as the criterion for grouping Albanian authors? Why would we want to place in the same category detective novels like Darien Levani's *Toringrad*<sup>3</sup> and the trilogy<sup>4</sup> of Artur Spanjolli that, echoing Garcia Marquez, spans a hundred years of an Albanian patriarchal family? Or what about the surreal cases narrated with sharp elegance by the doctor Arben Dedja<sup>5</sup> with his ironic, sardonic grimace, like the malicious laughter marking the passage from death to a new birth (Propp 1984, p. 134), the two extremes of life that Dedja confronts daily in his profession? What have they in common with Elvira Dones's novel *Sworn Virgin* (Dones 2007), a contemporary adaptation of the most popular Albanian anthropological myths about a woman who lives as a man?

Regarding Elvira Dones, her work is frequently treated together with that of Anilda Ibrahimi and Ornella Vorpsi, in a kind of female literary triptych that also seems to codify a gender category alongside that of the "migrant". Thus, for the same reasons that we auspicate a critical discourse that goes beyond the worn definition of 'migrant literature', we are not pursuing here an analysis of the so-called 'female narrative', a definition which tends to replace national- with gender-based identity. Instead, we aim at drawing attention to the need to develop new analytical tools for what is today a substantial literary production, framing it in the cultural context of the country it represents.

<sup>2</sup> The same preference is expressed in Sinopoli 2005, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Published in 2016 by Edizioni Spartaco.

<sup>4</sup> *Cronaca di una vita in silenzio*, Lecce, Salento Books, 2003; *La Teqja*, Lecce, Salento Books, 2013; *Preludio d'autunno*, Lecce, Besa Muci, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *Trattato di medicina in 19 racconti e ½*, Torino, Vague Edizioni, 2020.

Ultimately, there are four main reasons that lead us to analyse the case of Albanian authors in Italy:

- There is a large group of Italian-Albanian writers who constitute one of the largest communities of European authors writing in a non-native language.
- The way in which Italian literary criticism deals with their works seems to highlight the persistence of a pre-established scheme.
- Thirdly, since literature plays the role of both historical and mythopoetic memory, expanding the spectrum of observation can contribute towards dismantling stereotypes that still surround Albania.
- In the fourth place, focusing on Albanian literature written in Italian risks making the average reader believe that the one produced in Italian is "the" Albanian literature, with the result of obscuring the existence of Albanian authors published in the motherland (except of course for Ismail Kadare), while ignoring many other authors writing in Albanian.

In view of all that, this paper does not claim to offer results, but rather tries to show shortcomings in Italian literary criticism so far and to open a path to new approaches on this subject.

### **2.1. Literary production and cultural imagery**

In general, we form our own idea of a culture and the country it belongs to thanks to the literature it produces, to the imagery conveyed by its authors and all those who have been inspired by it and have reworked it within their own imagination. For instance, if we think about Russian literature, the first titles that come to mind might be *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Anna Karenina*, and so on. It is evident how determinant literature can be as a source of information that has an influence on our thinking through various channels of mediation and second-hand re-elaboration of its contents. Furthermore, it plays a leading role among other sources: being rooted in the past, literature communicates images, thoughts, and judgments expressed in all times and cultures, and it has never ceased to have an impact on our consciousness even in the age of mass media and the internet (Moll 2002, p. 185). Now, if in turn we think of Albanian culture from the perspective of an Italian reader, what would be the representing images one would come up with? Moreover, what are its images that are valued by literary criticism in Italy?

When it comes to any nation whose cultural identity is generally known, consideration is given to the most famous authors. However, when dealing with a country like Albania, which has specific linguistic features (we recall that Albanian is unique in the Indo-European trunk of languages), political history (almost 500 years of Ottoman domination, followed by almost half a century of isolation under a dictatorial regime), and the coexistence of Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox religions, it has long been shrouded in mystery and considered as a liminal corner of Europe. Still in 1914, the secretary of the British Consul in Shkodra could write:

During the past quarter of a century Albania, being in Europe and yet not of it, has hardly been touched by travellers, who have gone further afield to Asia and Africa, but have passed by the eastern shores of the Adriatic. (Peacock 1914, p. 2, 5; italics ours).

The issue then becomes complicated, or perhaps too simplistic, with the result that those few names known abroad are considered emblems of the nation's image, first hand witnesses of a recent and little known story. All of this leads to a broader question: how

much of Albanian culture is known outside the country? Who, among non-specialist readers, has at least a general notion of it?

### 3. A little-known yet much fancied country

Even today, more than 200 years after Albania entered the Grand Tour circuit thanks to famous authors such as Lord Byron, François C. H. L. Pouqueville, Edward Lear and that the country has become a popular destination for international tourists, its literature remains relatively little known in Italy and elsewhere.

For the sake of clarity, and at the risk of stating the obvious, we want to specify that by "Albanian literature" we mean literary productions written in the native language and published in Albania and Albanian-speaking areas. While most readers are familiar with the name of Ismail Kadare, the same cannot be said of Fatos Kongoli, Ali Podrimja, Zija Çela, Luan Starova, Mehmet Kraja, and Luljeta Lleshanaku, to mention just a few of the most successful authors. An isolated voice in the total silence of the national press was raised in an editorial that appeared more than 10 years ago, a succinct overview that nevertheless showed an interest in the "autochthonous" Albanian narrative. Curiously, the title "*Albania, nasce la letteratura*" ("Albania, literature is born"), suggests that for the small Balkan country literature was a recent phenomenon<sup>6</sup>.

Given the abundance of fictional countries inspired by Albania, the country offers a peculiar example of heterotopia, one of those "other spaces" that, according to Foucault (2014, p. 17; our translation), "have the power to juxtapose more spaces, more places that are in themselves incompatible in a single, real place". Actually, the imaginary countries inspired by Albania are numerous enough to occupy a space in itself among the several imaginary countries inspired by the Balkans.<sup>7</sup>

As is the case with the entire Balkan area, the placement of Albania in the imagination of past centuries derives from an indistinct topography, unknown enough to give rise to representations covering the entire palette of the picturesque, as befits lands whose representation has remained for centuries on the border between exoticism and mystery.

Since ancient times, in fact, the country has been represented as a mythical place, an ideal backdrop for adventurous events. Among the examples of the classical era, we remember the *Menaechmi*, Plautus' comedy of intrigue and identity swaps set in Epidamnus (today Durrës), which in turn inspired Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, set in the fairy-tale world of Illyria, the historical region along the eastern Adriatic coast, corresponding largely to present-day Albania. In modern and contemporary literature, we may move from the *Land der Skipetaren* ('*Skipetaren*' is a calque of the endonym Shqip(ë)tari, which designates the Albanian population) of the German author Karl May (1887) via the Syldavia in the *Adventures of Tintin* by the Belgian Hergé (1939), to the *Elbonia* in the cartoons of the American Scott Adams (1989).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/albania\\_201012060952487230000](https://www.avvenire.it/agora/pagine/albania_201012060952487230000) (29.8.2022).

<sup>7</sup> Goldsworthy 1998. Among all the Balkan countries Albania is probably the one that has given rise to the creation of the greatest number of imaginary countries.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the motifs that underlie the creation of imaginary countries inspired by Albania, see Gargano 2014.

### 3.1. A Narrative Born in a Different Language

As we delve into the narrative forests of Albanian literature, we see that "spaces in another language" have coexisted there since its origins. If we look at poetry, the phenomenon dates back more than two centuries earlier, when between 1508 and 1510 Marin Barleti wrote in Latin *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum Principis*, which can be considered a bestseller of the Renaissance epic literature.

The *De vita* has inspired countless narratives (Zotos 1997), as well as numerous plays (*Comedias Escanderbecas*, named after the adjectivisation of the name Scanderbeg in Spanish during the seventeenth-century) and paintings (Tashi 2019). The character of Scanderbeg was so captivating that it even gave life to what is considered the first female epic poem in Europe, the *Scanderbeide* by Margherita Sarrocchi (1623).

A rather unusual case is also the fact that the first novel of Albanian literature was written in French and published in Paris at the end of the 19th century by the writer and politician Pashko Vasa (1890 and Elsie 2010, p. 467), who chose French as the vehicular language to present his country to the European public.

At that time, it was a common practice for Albanian intellectuals to publish their works in the language of the countries where they resided. As a result, many pivotal works of Albanian literature were published not only in France, but also in Romania and especially in Italy, thanks to the *Rilindja Kombëtare (National Renaissance)*, which is the largest cultural and patriotic project within the Ottoman Empire. It was led by intellectuals, most of whom operated abroad. Language and folk culture were the foundation of this rise of national awareness. As a result, among the Arbëreshë intellectuals of southern Italy, the first collections of folk songs and popular traditions came to light.

### 3.2. Albanian literature in Italian: a longstanding presence

Despite what one might assume, Albanian literature has been present in Italy for over four centuries, ever since a large number of Albanian families migrated to southern and central Italy after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. In these regions, the Arbëreshë preserve their language and culture. The oldest bilingual text in Albanian and Italian is *Cuneus Prophetarum* of Pjetër Bogdani (1685), which also happens to be the first original literary work in the Albanian language. Furthermore, among the Arbëreshë, bilingual literature has been continuously produced since the works of Girolamo De Rada (Altimari 2017, pp. 79-98), an original and paradigmatic voice in European Romantic poetry.

The bilingual practice initiated by these authors was to become an important strand of the written tradition during the 19th and 20th centuries. Reflecting on Arbëreshë literature and considering its binary identity, Bond and Comberiatì (2014, pp. 11-12) argue that it is impossible to restrict the literary expression of a nation to a single language.

In fact, it is possible to speak nowadays of "Adriatic literature" or "Mediterranean literature" as reference points using a supranational identity that unites writers and authors of micro-local identities. According to Maria Todorova, this could also provide an authentic response, in the case of the Adriatic, to the cultural "creation" of the Balkans. Even if situated in the heart of Europe, the "Balkan Orient" is distinct from the generic 'Orient' of Edward Said's, if for nothing else, for its geophysically determined area. And it has been thanks to the specific tools developed by Todorova in her foundational essay on 'Balkanism' that the analysis of this space of representation could assume its own distinct features, in contrast to the more general Saidian Orientalism.

## 4. National identity as a negotiation process

Under the various types of collective identities, ethnic identity has been differentiated from other social identities relating to a shared culture and a common origin, even if it is not a flat and uniform process across groups (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997; Vathi 2015).

During the dictatorship Albania underwent a drastic change. Various cultural models of other communist countries, like Russia and China, were imposed. This new culture that was proclaimed as the only culture and the bearer of all truths created a clear breach with tradition in order to build a 'new world'. After the fall of the regime, Albania experienced a profound identity crisis, and as is often the case in such circumstances, a new myth emerged – that of the West as the 'promised land'.

Curiously, in a similar vein the West, which had long been viewed with fascination by Albanian society, created its own myth, that of the Albanian, a stereotypical figure infamously crafted by the media, which played a critical role in the discrimination of immigrants (Vehbiu, Devole 1996).

Through largely popular Italian television that had been secretly watched in the country, despite fear of condemnation by the repressive regime that forbade access to foreign media, Albanians were grotesquely portrayed as being sordid, ignorant, and either prostitutes or pimps, or just plain criminals. This set in motion a process of devaluation and identity masking, which had a particularly heavy impact on women (Bregasi 2023). We consider it crucial to dwell on this aspect, given its significance for grappling with the Albanian narrative in the Italian language.

### 4.1. Fluid identities

Identity is a key element of subjective reality: It is formed by social processes (Berger, Luckman 1991, p. 194), and as such it stands in a dialectical relationship with society. According to Anderson's (2006, p. 9) definition, all the communities are imagined, and the nation is just an imagined political community, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Consequently, the ethnic identity that binds people based on their origin is not defined once and for all, but is constructed, modified and even reshaped by time.

In Nagel's view, the chosen ethnic identity is determined by the individual's perception of its meaning to different audiences, its salience in different social contexts, and its utility in different settings. There are also a few other factors, such as socioeconomic, political, and cultural elements that influence individuals to reshape their ethnic identity, which makes it unstable over time.

This theoretical discussion is essential to understand that 'negotiation' is not a straightforward process. For migrant writers who must utilize language within this hybrid cultural zone, the negotiation process becomes even more complex, as Homi Bhabha (1994) demonstrated in his theorization of the third space.

Let us consider the case of Ibrahimi, who asserts that she is not an Albanian writer since she has not written anything in Albanian and does not believe she ever will.

I am and will always remain Albanian, but the writer has never been one. At the same time, it is true that I am not even an Italian writer, because I approached Italian literature when I was already an adult. Perhaps the most accurate thing to say is that I am an Italian-language writer. Italy has a certain resistance to this definition, and I believe it is because it has difficulty to

look back at its colonial history. For writers in the francophone world, it is not the same thing. For Italy, Italian-language literature is almost a sore point<sup>9</sup>.

Can we call the literature of Albanian italograph authors postcolonial literature? Can we speak of an Italian colonization of Albania in the same terms as we do of French or British colonies? Could those few years of invasion by Italy (1939-1942) have had such an influence that they are reflected, a century later, in a more recent narrative?

Nor does it seem plausible to talk about media colonization through television, as claimed by some, since it is known that most of the Albanian population did not even own a TV set, and the films produced by *'Kinostudio Shqipëria e Re'* continuously fuelled hatred towards the Italian invader. It could be argued that the mixed feelings towards Italy among Albanians may have emerged after the fall of the communist regime, when Italy became, for many Albanians, *'America'*. Afterwards, the so-called "hegemonic" invasion of images from Italy – along with melodies, colours, and collective narratives – generated an increasingly bitter paradox between one's everyday reality, perceived as restrictive and deceptive, and the reality of the neighbouring country, perceived as closer because it was dreamed of (Moll 2013, pp. 117-136).

#### **4.2. Literature and cultural identity: the mirrored view**

Starting from the desire to classify the new italograph literature as a developing genre, the first attempt is seen in labelling it such as "migrant", "autobiographical", "testimonial", "exile", etc. From an initial survey, it appears that in Italy, the advent of so-called 'migrant writing' – considered as an evolution of narratives developed by men and women from foreign territories – is regarded primarily as a journalistic case, rather than seen as a model of a new literary genre. When we talk about so-called minority literature, or 'non-dominant literature', the reflections become more articulated and elusive. It must not be forgotten that literary, cinematographic, artistic, and media images can transform reality, create and fuel conflicts, and change our way of thinking.

Seeking to shed light on the complex relationships between Albanian italograph authors on the one hand, and their reception in Italy on the other, as well as on the historical and identity dynamics involved in this operation, several scholars take a step back in time to the second half of the nineteenth century, when Italy regarded Albania as an ideal continuation of its own coastline towards the East. At that time, texts were produced that were imbued with exoticism and a taste for discovery, which served as fundamental elements in educating public opinion towards the Italian colonial adventure. In short, the view of Albania that emerged from these texts was orientalist in nature (as seen in Montanelli's (1939) famous reportage, written in the wake of Albania's annexation by Fascist Italy).

The complexity of relationships is also reflected in the difficulty which Italian literary criticism encounters when analysing texts by Albanian authors writing in Italian. Here too, there is the impression of having two points of view: one that represents the Italian gaze towards Albania, and the other that is the Albanian gaze towards Italy,

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/arec/Albania/Anilda-Ibrahimi-il-percorso-solitario-di-una-scrittrice-188089?fbclid=IwAR21eQtrHblYU\\_hP0SA8RaTm7MkN5uOdOKGXed3UEKLCUr0C\\_GTL-V49\\_q0](https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/arec/Albania/Anilda-Ibrahimi-il-percorso-solitario-di-una-scrittrice-188089?fbclid=IwAR21eQtrHblYU_hP0SA8RaTm7MkN5uOdOKGXed3UEKLCUr0C_GTL-V49_q0) (29.8.2022).

representing the contrast between the local and the global, the national and the international<sup>10</sup>.

In her interpretation, Nora Moll (2013) borrows from sociologist Paolo Jedlowski the notion of the “narrative community” that overlaps with the pre-existing community, which is configured as a “new space of relations”.

The study of migrant literature in Italy emerged out of the necessity to define this 'new' literature and to classify texts that were previously ignored. For this reason, the creation of a strong identity with specific features to be taken seriously was seen as a necessity by researchers. Lebrun and Collès maintain that migrant literature constitutes a new literary category characterized by transculturation, issues of identity, linguistic choice, and social criticism (Anacleria 2016, pp. 27-42).

### **4.3. Which Albania are we talking about?**

The decision to create a strong identity by putting the spotlight on the new myths that have emerged about Albania after the fall of Enver Hoxha's regime continues to nourish a collective imagination that, on the one hand, does not contribute to understanding its culture, yet, on the other hand, allows Albania to remain in the focus of the media. As such, Albania remains a new, wild, Balkan Orient, where the Kanun functions as a cultural code.

The topic of prostitution, which is the central theme in Vorpsi's novel, highlights one of the first messages about femininity that the protagonist receives: "A man can wash himself with a piece of soap and come out feeling new, while a girl can't be cleansed even if washed by the sea!". She writes about a country where "a beautiful girl is a whore, and an ugly girl - well, poor thing, she isn't" (Vorpsi 2007, p. 7). This portrayal of a society where female beauty is associated with sin represents one of the most potent images in the novel.

Ornela Vorpsi's novel supplies an interesting example of heterolinguistic writing *en abyme* as, since she moved to Paris, she switched once again her language and now writes directly in French. This serves as yet another reason to consider the definition of migrant literature as outdated. In a world where mobility is a daily experience, the act of writing becomes a migratory practice between peoples, languages, and cultures. Are there other reasons besides those of migration that characterize the works which are studied? If so, why are these reasons not being examined? Is it because they do not fit into the schema of migrant literature, or because they do not hold any aesthetic or literary value? As Comberiat (2010, p. 54) claims, it seems that immigrant writers are not entitled to an aesthetic investigation but are simply used to introduce Italians to unknown aspects.

In fact, reading studies that focus mainly on some authors we have mentioned, one may be under the impression that there are two types of Albanian literature: one for an international readership and the other, circulating at home, from where it transpires only with great difficulty, without, however, ever finding an echo in Italian criticism. To further explore this comparison, the linguistic and literary competence of scholars of Albanian studies is also necessary.

<sup>10</sup> An extensive specialist study on the construction of transcultural narrative identities can be found in Rocchi (2021).



## 5. The publishing market and its laws

The tendency to attribute the origin of undesired phenomena to members of minority groups is typical of ethnocentrism, which significantly derives from and contributes to the development of stereotypes that may be beneficial for the publishing market. If the market offers only the texts that are meant to satisfy the reader's *Erwartungshorizont*, neglecting other equally interesting *œuvres*, a limited and distorted image of the cultural identity of a country will be given. Most of the authors said to produce migrant literature have never been published in their home country, where they remain unknown despite having gained a certain fame in Italy. However, this fact does not prevent literary criticism in Italy from identifying them as representatives of Albanian literature in Italy and as witnesses of an unknown country across the sea.

Publishers choose to tell the story of foreigners through their own voice, even if sometimes this involves publishing texts written by four hands. In some cases, the editorial intervention can be wide-ranging, as in the case of the novel by singer-songwriter and composer Ermal Meta (2022), which in a few weeks climbed the sales charts. Set in 1943, it tells the story of the resistance against the Nazis from the perspective of a very young talented musician, Kajan, who befriended a German deserter who became his piano teacher. In its flat and polished style, the narrative is enhanced by Albanian words that probably aim to certify the authenticity of the creation by a non-native (Italian) author.

It is not our intention to criticize widely applied editorial practices, particularly when they can generate a significant impact on the audience, drawing attention to marginalized cultures and fuelling the desire to understand them better. But precisely in the wake of these successes it seems even more desirable to rethink outdated critical paradigms, in favour of new reading grids open towards (to put it in Comberiati's words) "liquid borders" that, in the case of a country like Albania, with which we share the shores of the same sea, could be placed under the perspective of a trans-Adriatic or, why not, Mediterranean literature.

## 6. Conclusions

The considerations that have emerged from our analysis so far encourage us to hope for new critical approaches towards Albanian literature, both of that produced in the motherland and so far little known in Italy (except through a very limited number of internationally famous authors), and of that written directly in Italian, often considered as ethnic literature and therefore analysed on the basis of predetermined, nationality- and gender biased paradigms, rather than according to universally applied categories.

Literature, like art, music and every other aspect of creativity, has no boundaries and does not emigrate, but takes different words and forms every time. Perhaps this was what Emil Cioran meant when he said: "You don't live in a country, but in a language. This is what a homeland is, and nothing more."

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