



ORIGINAL PAPER

The Prose of Ernest Koliqi in Albanian Literature

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Abstract:

Ernest Koliqi (1901–1975) was a dramatist, novelist, journalist, poet, translator, and one of the pioneers of contemporary Albanian storytelling. In this genre, he is known for three well-known works in Albanian literature, in which elements such as narration, theme, and discourse are distinguished, which, in addition to the authorial figure of Koliqi, also represent the purpose of this study.

Ernest Koliqi's creativity in prose is an interweaving of tradition and modernity. The object of the study will be his three most representative works in Albanian literature, with the titles "Shadow of the Mountains," "Flag Merchant," and "Mirrors of Narçiz." The prose of Ernest Koliqi points out the social and cultural situation of the Albanians at the beginning of the 20th century, in the 20s–30s, where the themes that dominate these stories are: mountain, blood, canon, friend, the given word, faith, myths, legends, the fantastic, the cult of the ancestors, including also the elaboration of social, psychological, and psychoanalytical character topics as well. The methodology of this paper includes a combination of comparative, semiotic, anthropological, and social methods.

The expected results of this study are related to the author's viewpoint and his perception on the concept of tradition and its application in front of the open world, the civilized world, and the Western world. It has to be emphasized the fact that Koliqi grew up in the Northern Highlands, where customs prevailed strongly, but he was educated in the Western world, in Italy. Therefore, his style represents a compound of modern and traditional aesthetics. This intercultural clash has influenced his artistic world and this was also reflected in the following study.

Keywords: *Mountain, trader, flag, mirror, water, myth.*

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Introduction

Ernest Koliqi's literary apex may be found in his three classics, "The Shadow of the Mountains" (1929), "Flag Trader" (1935), and "The Mirrors of Narçizi" (1936), which have become major works in Albanian literature.

The most truthful researchers state that "*In Koliqi's prose, the mountain is perceived as the traditional, the sole, the heritage.*" (Macaj, 2012: 80-81). The work "The Shadow of the Mountains" has been called one of his most specific works, and it relates to the spiritual worldview of Koliqi, where his meeting point with the mountain is based on the rule of three: T+T+T = with the mountain. Consequently, Koliqi had a sort of getting to know the mountain as he used it to search for the origins of his ancestors: "*Koliqi worships the mountain as a symbol of what is on the verge of extinction, of its past, which is the nation's past, of its roots.*" (Shehri, 2006: 103).

Therefore, Koliqi had a kind of coming to the mountain since through it he sought to find the roots of his ancestors: "Koliqi's worship of the mountain is the worship of what is going toward extinction; it is the worship of its past that, deep down, is the past of the nation, of its roots."

The typical expression "*Asht me kanu*" (Dedaj, 2010: 16), has prevailed for centuries among Albanians. In the novel book "The Shadow of the Mountains", "*they presented not only the events of mountain life but also of citizens; you were always based on the spirit of Canon of Lek Dukagjini.*" (Vuçani, 1995: 97-98).

The canonical code, which was unquestionably the law for everyone living in the Northern Highlands and beyond, is heavily used throughout the novels in this work. Salvatore Villari, an Italian academic, once stated that "*the Canon of Leka acts in the same way throughout Albania.*" (Salvadore, 1940: 30).

Thus, "The Shadow of the Mountains" is a piece of art that eloquently captures the true life of the everlasting mountaineer as well as the emotions and experiences of the 1920s in Shkodër and the Highlands. "*Koliqi is in the vanguard because it naturalizes the existing situation and tries to give Albanian life a new, Western spirit,*" as Ardian Ndreca remarks, and he is correct. (Ndreca, 2020: V).

Through his work, early 20th-century Albanian psychoanalysts and storytellers Ernest Koliqi aimed to transmit and preserve historical spiritual and cultural qualities for future generations. Thus, "*Ernest Koliqi recreated the essence of Highland, worshipping Fishta in the prose (Shadow of the mountains).*" (Hamiti, 2022: 371).

Koliqi draws inspiration for his novels, "The Shadow of the Mountains", from popular culture, mythology, legends, fairy tales, and ballads. He also weaves elements of fantasy and historical Albanian life together, demonstrating that "*the wonderful and fantastic that constitutes the terrain of folklore, stimulates the imagination and plays a key role in reading the text*" (Rusi, 2022: 82) and supporting the idea that "*... reading is not a linear process that goes from an active author to a passive reader, but a historical event, where public expectations, norms, and preparations come into play.*" (Fusillo, 2023: 117).

"The Wonderful Bride" is the first novella in this work. Other novellas include "Blood", "New Song", "If you are old", "The Dancer of Dukagjini", "The Friend", "A dream of a summer afternoon", "When the clocks tell", "The Garden", "To the three oaks", "Diloca", "The last fairy", and so on. Robert Elsie's assessment of Koliqi is summarized as follows: "*Of all the prose writers of the period, none was bigger and more powerful than Ernest Koliqi.*" (Elsie, 2011: 328).

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Koliqi's stories that depict the extraordinary as a part of the ordinary in settings like the Highlands and Shkodra allow the reader to "*identify with the main character - about the nature of a strange event*" and include the novels "The Wonderful Bride," "The Dancer of Dukagjini," "When the Clocks Announce," and "The Last Fairy." (Todorov, 2015: 181).

The story's narrator opens by describing a typical day in the church, with people entering and exiting, their attire, religious rites, and the general happiness in that serene setting. The story of Lekë Binaku, the heroic man who witnessed an unusual event, rapidly attracted the reader's attention. It tells the story of a young person who was married to a prostitute but was forbidden from talking to anyone about their marriage for fear of the prostitute punishing him and rendering him mute. The church's parish priest, Don Marku, delivers this tale with conviction.

"Only the narrative allows you to find the "lost time": the story synthesizes the heterogeneous, allows you to "read" the phases of life itself as "chapters" of a development, moments of a description which requires not only the explanation but also the meaning of the journey done." (Franzini, 2018: 106).

With this tale, Koliqi contrasts paganism and Christianity as integral aspects of the highlanders' way of life. Even though they attend church and practice church rituals, they adhere to and believe in antiquated beliefs that have roots in polytheism. *"The simplicity of the fable, the language, the imagery, allow Koliqi's novels to keep their grace intact even today."* (Ndreca, 2020: IV).

In contrast, "The Dancer of Dukagjini" is a story that blends fairy tales and legends with a theme drawn from mythology. The historical period falls under the reign of Skanderbeg and other notable individuals from that era, such as Lekë Dukagjini. *"Dukagjini's dance is a characteristic remodeling of the oral-based situation, because basically we have only one type of situation, in the transformation of the Fairy into the character of the Flower"*. (Rahmani, 2002: 98).

A work of fiction, "When the Clocks Announce," likewise incorporates themes from Malësi mythology and superstitions. Gjeto and Lulashi, two fugitives known as komites by Koliqi, are large and will kill anyone who tries to turn them in to the authorities. They hear seven gunshots one day, but it is truly just no one.

According to mythology when someone hears such a noise, it means that in seven days that person will die, in this case folklore should be: "... used to create literary narratives." (Gruffydd, 1928: 81).

The final story in the work's order is titled "The Last Fairy". Similar to how the Kreshnik era comes to an end with the new reality, this story/tale, replete with mythological themes, ushers in a new chapter in the history of the Fairies. In addition to being a linguistic form, *"the myth can also be viewed as a visual or tangible form. It may also be a type of theater that is solely composed of motions, such as dance and figures."* (Leenhardt, 1947: 56). This story is told by Reshidi to his two cousins, Samihaja and Nasibe. Following the Ottoman Empire's annexation of Albania, this tale first became ingrained in Albanian culture.

After witnessing this collective nonsense, the fairies, who stood guard over Albania and its people, lost interest in their song and began to pass away one by one. *"...he brings the supernatural characters down to the human scale and makes them completely reasonable and natural creatures."* (Kittredg, 1916). The last fairy and the most exquisite singer was the only one to make it out alive. A shepherd tending to his livestock heard the song she was sad to be singing for the last time, as it echoed and

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landed on his ear. The shepherd approached the fairy, who acknowledged him and said, "*Who knows, maybe he will repeat this song in the future, he has resurrected the dead fairies.*" (Koliqi, 2004: 159).

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The only fairy to escape unscathed was the final and most talented vocalist. The song she was unhappy about being singing for the last time echoed and fell on the ear of a shepherd who was tending to his cattle. After acknowledging the shepherd, the fairy added, "Who knows, maybe he will repeat this song in the future, he has resurrected the dead fairies."

The shepherd taught it orally to his children, and they taught it to their children, but the song was transformed, added and diminished, never competing with the original. "*Recently, shepherd taught the song of the last Fairy to his daughter-in-law, who used it to lull the boys and girls he had from him to sleep. The boys sang, when they grew up, you grazed the herds in the mountains; the girls took her with them, and she got married, among distant mountains. Therefore, the song spread far and wide. However, you crossed, during the weather, mouth to mouth and mountain to mountain, you changed. Many words were third, others were added.*" (Koliqi, 2004: 159).

It appears to be a metaphor from Koliqi, in which the spiritual values that have embodied us throughout the ages are called for to be preserved and passed down through identity memory. These values are described as follows: "... *general concepts are criteria based on which the members of a culture determine what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly.*" (Williams, 1970: 27).

Koliqi's seminal work, "Flag Trader" (1935), personifies and makes the author most famous. Most people agree that the stories in the anthology "Flag Trader" represent the best of Albanian prose written before World War II. (Elsie, 2001: 333).

This is because of the work's theme and the stylistic treatment it received while it was written and published. The piece was first published in Bari in 1935, followed by Rome. During this time, Albanian society was attempting to experience cultural emancipation and become more like the West, whether through fundamental changes such as literature and art or simply through trying to live up to the model of life set forth by the West. At the time, the country was still part of the kingdom of Zog and was consolidated as a state between the two world wars.

Even writers and activists such as Koliqi were forced to participate in the aftermath of these initiatives and made a significant impact. The collection of sixteen stories titled "Merchant of Flags" depicts the positive and delicate aspects of Albanian society and represents a sea change in both literary discourse and reader interpretation. The tales are as follows: "Flag Trader", "Should I Leave", "The Friend in the House", "Little Drama", "Seven-year-old Woman", "He Found It After the Bat", "Thrown Oil", "The Nightingales of Plepishti", "Mother's Hands", "Plum Beyond the Wall", "Rrokòll", "An Event in Kezenaj Street", "One Day of Days", "Lumnija", "Bloody Moon", and "Cradle of Art".

Through these tales, Koliqi aimed to delve into each person's psychology. The most amazing thing about this piece is definitely its attempt to untangle the entire national psyche through it.

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As a politician and activist, Koliqi has always been in tune with the needs and aspirations of the Albanian people, but he also brought European standards and expectations to our literature, surpassing those of the readers. "... *the work of art is examined as a system of signs, or as a structure of signs that serves an extraordinary aesthetic purpose.*" (Wellek & Woren, 1956: 208). Because of the incredibly skillful structuring of his writing, Koliqi continues to be one of the most significant figures in contemporary Albanian prose.

The narrative "Flag Trader" opens the work. Personifying the author himself, Hilush Vilza confronts Gaspër Tragaçi. The author jumps right into the subject, as though he wants to immerse the reader in his story right away. Hilushi flees from the merchant Gaspër on a regular basis. It is the intellectual's sentiment to not wish for himself to be faced with mediocrity or those who display their outward nature in front of the intellectual. However, what actually occurred to our hero. Reality is unavoidable for everyone. Hilushi is invited to the store by a gasper.

In fact, the merchant has a monolog in which he reminds Hilushi of his father's friendship and family history. To preserve their friendship, the merchant counseled Hilushi to use knowledge and education to benefit the nation, but Hilushi interpreted the merchant's advice as moralizing, using metaphor and subtext. "*The merchant, as the most interesting and complex figure of this new reality, takes place in four stories, in which he is seen from different angles.*" (Smaqi, 2009: 93).

Hilushi's telepathic understanding of the story's progression begins when the merchant laments Albanian society's identity and patriotic crises. He claims that because this society does not support the nation by purchasing his store's flags, the merchant, like others in the chain, also loses out. Hilushi tells him that wealth is not acquired at the expense of holy objects, as she gives him stern words and leaves the business.

Koliqi's "The Mirrors of Narçiz" is a work of high artistic and intellectual maturity that was initially published in 1936 in "*Gazeta Shqiptare*" in Bari. It was later reprinted as a separate volume in Rome in 1963. Koliqi established the groundwork for contemporary Albanian literature with his novels "*The Shadow of the Mountains*" and "Flag Trader."

The author uses the ancient myth of Narcissus—which Koliqi treats as "*the myth is a form of thought*" (Cassier, 1925)—to illustrate a concept and guide that will eventually change as a result of a person falling in love—whether it be with themselves, with art, life, the land, or the past. "*In literary texts, retrievals are sometimes rendered useful by their passage through mythological memory. Each myth that has been recovered is actualized through a ceremony.*" (Macaj, 2012: 81). First-person narration is used throughout. The writer functions as both a storyteller and a persona, conveying endeavors to delve profoundly into the enigmas of creation, attractiveness, and existence. "*Reading a story also means that you have been caught by a tension, an anxiety.*" (Eco, 2007: 19).

Koliqi thus plays an active role in these circumstances and events.

"*In Koliqi's work, we do not see heroes anywhere, but only ordinary people, because the most difficult work—even for the heroes themselves—is to live an ordinary life.*" (Ndreca, 2020: XV).

On the compositional level, this work consists of seven poetic stories that respond to seven mirrors: "Waters of the Well", "The Old Shkodra Mirror", "The Well of Bardhonjars", "Stream in Dukagjin", "An Idiot in Helvetia", "Wave of the Sea" and "Glass of My Winder". These reflections are seven thoughts/meditations about the

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world, art, mystery, and life, where the element of time is undefined. This work is structurally divided into seven texts. These texts, which are short stories, are related to the first text. *"We are in literature, in the art of creation. The Colic has chosen the narcissus. The narcissus died, and the flower remained in his memory. This myth takes on a personal character."* (Macaj, 2012: 82).

Almost all of the stories give the impression that the author is trying to discover himself, to rediscover his face, by gazing in his mirrors. However, the reader can also learn about the author through Narcissus, the face of Koliqi, and how the poetic quality of these tales creates a slight mystical effect in communicating with the reader.

"Waters of the well," the first scene, functions as a kind of prologue. There, the author claims to have been a sincere lover of Narcissus since he was young, almost as if he were trying to penetrate the reader's world.

I felt in love with Nerçiz's fairy tale by all my blood burst. I was looking anywhere for mirrors to be seen." (Koliqi:2010, 7).

"The old Shkodra mirror" is a classic example of reflection or going back to one's early years, revisiting his early and formative years.

"I came back to Shkoder after many years of being abroad, and once I was invited for lunch by some of my relatives. As soon as we ate, they directed me to have some rest in a large room whose iron windows were reflecting a garden located behind the house." (Koliqi:2010, 14).

"The Well of Bardhonjars" attests to the writer's journey back to his early years. Moving water serves as a metaphor for the change from the well's water to the chroi's water, signifying the passage of time.

"Let yourself be on the yoke of the Albanian land, you restless and dreamy bastard. Do you want your body and soul to be strengthened to bravely beat the hard paths of life tomorrow?" (Koliqi:2010, 30).

The objectified subject "Stream in Dukagjin" is another revelation in the form of reflection that strikes a blow to Narcissus by accusing him of having a great love for urban life—life behind walls, gardens, cobblestones, and arched windows—and of having given up on extremely large and naturally occurring ornaments such as the Dukagjini beshkas.

"I looked at the water and looked for the white limbs of the goddess in the stream. I saw only my face, and I was surprised. An unknown Narçiz appeared on the surface of the water." (Koliqi:2010, 37).

Similar to the sixth mirror, "An idiot in Helvetia" is devoted to Dom Lazër Shtanojë. It was previously known for this name as well. Narcissus appears in the water of its streams since the work was written from Switzerland, a nation located in the center of Europe, which has mountains that match those in Albania and has peaks and springs.

"When my eye then turned and reflected in the mirror of the foreign water, I did not recognize myself; a thousand faces were gathered in my face. There were those of the Ancients in which Albanian blood shone for a thousand years." (Koliqi:2010, 43).

The "Wave of the Sea" emerges as a mirror that places the writer before the water, one of his living settings.

"I was walking with an outstanding friend along the Albanian coast, and her presence always gives me a special charm that makes my deepest emotions burst miraculously." (Koliqi:2010, 44).

"The glass of my window" is the seventh and last mirror in this work. These mirrors are connected to each other, and everything leads to a journey for the narrator

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between these mirrors to find and discover himself, his face, and the whole nation. In this picture, the storyteller was influenced by the element of loneliness; thus, the memories occupy a considerable amount of space in his thoughts.

"I have opened my eyes again. Of all the things, I felt somehow unusual. They were also suffering as I did, in that special light that floated lightly, iridescent, wonderful, and above the yard, beyond the steam, around the bell tower, through the white sky, and back, far away, in the mountains of Albania, on the roads of the sea, in the infinity of the galaxy."

Conclusion

When it comes to Albanian literature, Ernest Koliqi praises stories and novels that have ideas yet are set in the Albanian environment. Therefore, we can conclude that Ernest Koliqi's inventions, which emphasize Albanian stories in particular, are what give Albanian prose its modern shape. Koliqi's discourse and narration establish him as one of the key figures of Albanian literature's modernization. His style is a blend of modern and traditional aesthetics.

The problem of such a society begins to be exasisted, returning to tradition, evoking memories and consequently, displacing this picture to the modern and contemporary plain. His literary peak reaches him with works: "The Shadow of Mountains" (1929), "Flag Trader" (1935), and "The Mirrors of Narçizi" (1936), which have taken a crucial place in Albanian literature.

With the publication of "The Shadow of the Mountains," in which he chronicled the everyday lives of the highlanders in northern Albania via twelve stories, Ernest Koliqi established himself as a prose writer in Albanian literature. Koliqi breaks all previous limitations in Albanian literature with his prose, which takes on a whole new form upon his arrival.

Koliqi, also referred to as the writer who lived between the "sea" and the "mountain," was able to blend Western European and traditional Albanian cultural aspects. The sea spoke to him via his culture, while the mountain became through his thoughts. Koliqi is the most distinctive writer of his type because of the way he blends contemporary and tradition.

The main focus of Ernest Koliqi's literary journey is the consideration of issues such as blood fear, emancipation, knowledge and ignorance, man in front of himself and his social circle, man enslaved by the past, and the challenges of confronting reality. Koliqi's "Flag Trader" is notable for his understanding of the psyche of the persons he writes about. Some have referred to the novels in the volume "Flag Trader" as the best written in Albanian prior to World War II.

The work "The Reflections of Narcissus" represents the author's pinnacle of maturity. This piece is an appeal to rediscover our identity and the long-standing customs that define who we are as people and a country. Koliqi's prose has shaped the Albanian literature, eventually eluding the schematization of utilitarianism. This study has contributed greatly to the establishment of a new benchmark in the Albanian literature. While earlier literary works aided in the nation's freedom and awakening, Koliqi has aided in Albanian society's spiritual and doctrinal liberation as well as increasing the stature of our literature by putting it in the context of the global literature.

Ernest Koliqi was and is now a gem in the chain system of development of contemporary Albanian literature, primarily because of his contribution to the prose of northern Albania.

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