

The Distortion of Historic Memory in the Literary Memory of Social Realism

Eriola Agalliu^a

Abstract

This study endeavours to assess the deliberate distortion of historical memory in two works written in different periods of time by the same author, namely Vedat Kokona with the novel *Me Valët e Jetës (With the Waves of Life)* published in the 1960s, as well as his own autobiography *Endur në Tisin e Kohës (Woven in the Veil of Time)*, which was written and published after the 1990s. The novel was written under the censorship conditions of social realism, and consequently the stance toward historical war figures was shaped by the ideological prism: “Enver Hoxha leads the war, opponents like Lumo Skëndo collaborate with the enemy, and the indifferent intelligentsia must feel blameworthy for their non-engagement with the communists”. This scheme apparently collapses after the 1990s, when Kokona took it upon himself to narrate his autobiography, in the abridgment entitled *Woven in the Veil of Time*. Therein is revealed his realistic assessment of the figures of Enver Hoxha, Lumo Skëndo, Ernest Koliqi, etc. Freed at the time from the chains of ideological censure, in his memoirs, Kokona discusses these historical characters. Supplied with individual human sensitivity, facing good and evil, he reflects upon the past, with the consciousness of the intellectual who has witnessed an era permeated with major changes.

Keywords

Social realism, censorship, deformation of history

In this study, we propose to appreciate the intentional deformation of historical memory by analysing two works written by one author in different periods. Namely, the writer Vedat Kokona and his novel *With the Waves of Life*, published in the 1960s, as well as his autobiography *Woven in the Veil of Time*, which was written and published during the 1990s. We have examined two examples: How the two very popular figures of Enver Hoxha and Lumo Skëndo appear in the novel and how they are portrayed in Kokona’s memories. In this case, it should be emphasized that the author has had direct acquaintances with both figures mentioned above during his lifetime.

THE AUTHOR AND HIS RELATION WITH THE COMMUNIST REGIME

Vedat Kokona began his journey in Albanian literature during the 1940s. Up to the end of World War II, he played an active role in Albanian intellectual life with publications in the press of that time, metrical prose creations, as well as literary criticism. After the establishment of the communist

^aThe Center of Albanological Studies, Albania

Correspondent Author:

Eriola Agalliu, New York High School, Linze, Dajt, Tirana, Albania
E-mail: agalliu.eriola@yahoo.com

regime, Kokona was included among other non-party intellectuals (such as Kuteli, Cabej, Poradeci, etc.) (Hamiti 2009: 435, 463) who were viewed with suspicion by the government for the simple fact that they had never been connected spiritually with the communist movement. According to the Soviet model, these artists were not attacked directly, but were instead overshadowed. Kokona describes this kind of unstable relationship with those in power (whose proponent he never became) in his memories:

We, the “no-parties”, were surprisingly always next to each other, and those of the party were also next to each other. After talking endlessly about the dialectical materialism, socialist realism, which was the Himalayan peaks of literature and arts, everyone present took the floor and chewed as ruminants what the party threw at them to eat. (Kokona 2005: 193)

Nevertheless, he fails to avoid the theoretical basis of dialectical materialism as a translator throughout these years. As an excellent connoisseur of the French, English, and Russian languages, he translated a great number of documents and materials into these languages which the Party, Women, and Youth Congresses had lectured on in an attempt to thaw out his talent as a master of language and in order to demonstrate his support for the official ideology. In fact, hundreds of texts with political and institutional character were translated during this period at the instigation of the regime: speeches, lectures, etc., all of which provide evidence of the propaganda of the party-state.

As an artist of the period, he is included among the Poradeci and Kuteli generation. He is not classified among the revolutionary postwar poets (Alex Caci, Ali Abdihojha, Fatmir Gjata etc.), but neither does he belong to the younger generation of poets of the 60s, such as Fatos Arapi, Dritero Agolli, Ismail Kadare, etc. (Vinca 2009: 67). Inspired by Soviet literature, the literature method of socialist realism has already been standardized in our country. The communist hero and

the heroic themes of war, become dominant in almost all the works of the era. Those who avoid this theme look to the historical past, the era of Skanderbeg, whose figure reappears throughout Albanian literature of this period under the coarse wool of socialist realism. In this context, censorship remained the biggest obstacle to this literature. Vedat Kokona was no exception.

HISTORICAL FIGURES AS LITERARY CHARACTERS IN SOCIAL REALISM LITERATURE

His novel *With the Waves of Life* (*Me Valët e Jetës*) strives to present us with the Albania of 1930 to 1944, in the form of a novel of social realism (critical). Conditioned by the censorship of the time, Kokona presents fictional characters as some historical figures according to how they were perceived by the regime. Up to this point, Kokona continues with the standard model, already known, of the literature of socialist realism: The communists have led the fight, the class enemies have collaborated with the enemy, the patriots, or the indifferent compatriots should feel guilty for their inaction and their no activation with the movement. Vedat Kokona began to write his work in 1958, while the first volume was published in 1961 followed by the second volume of the novel in 1965. The novel *With the Waves of Life* describes the years of the first half of the twentieth century, and more specifically, the period during World War II. Narrated in the third person, the novel narrates the story of a young intellectual of the time, Ismail Kamberi.

Kokona aims to convince us that the main character has a sense of hesitation when confronted with the war. Even though he has a deep sense of patriotism, he hesitates to join the war by declaring for either side (Mekuli 2000: 152). As an intellectual of his time, Ismail Kamberi participates in intellectual debates, whether conversations between him and his fellow teachers at the school, or else debates with his

communist sister within the family setting. Among all these situations, this non-combat character carries the drama of an idealist who observes the collective drama, without ever being able to become an active part of the social movements of the time. Precisely for this reason, we can say that in the novel, Ismail Kamberi himself is not, and cannot in any way be, the model of the hero of socialist realism. He does not have the proper fighting spirit, he does not know how to be inspired by the Bolshevik ideals, and most importantly, he does not depict the communist heroic character who is willing to sacrifice himself in the name of social upheavals. These were models which were well-known in Albanian literature during the period (as mentioned earlier, one may consider the novels of Ali Abdihoxha, Fatmir Gjata, etc.), and were undoubtedly borrowed from the Soviet literature models of the period.

Nevertheless, in its entirety, the novel bears obvious features of a work of socialist realism. In the novel, Kokona refers often to the image of young communists during World War II. Their active role in this fight became the main topic of the novel *With the Waves of Life*. The work is about Ali Kelmendi¹ and Koci Bako² as initiators of the communist movement in Korca, with a focus on patriotic pathos. More precisely, the main character of the novel (which in fact carries clear autobiographical elements) (Fetiu 1979: 138) passes his youth as a student and later as a teacher at the French College of Korca. There, our hero, Ismail Kamberi, has the good fortune to become familiar with the “Inspirer” and the “Ideologist” of young communists in this city. This literary allusion named Petrit Skender is none other than a glorified Enver Hoxha. It is not difficult to discern behind this figure—a copy of the “Great Inventor” of the fight for freedom against the Nazi-Fascist occupier. The work (especially in its second volume) presents to us entire passages where the figure of Enver Hoxha (in the novel under his alias Petrit Skenderi) is portrayed according to the contours of a genuine literary hero,

though it is in essence written as a historical portrait. Even the name itself Petrit (a great warrior according to Albanian folklore) and Skender (modeled on our national hero Gjergj Kastriot or Skanderbeg) follows precisely the line of the model names of socialist realism in the work. Here is what we read about this figure in one of the passages of the work:

Ismail saw a smiling face, cumulus, goodly hard, which he knew very well. All the eyes of those in attendance that night in the room of that detached house of a poor but patriotic family of Tirana were stuck to this image. An image which was beginning to become known among the intellectuals of Tirana who participated in secret meetings where they would speak about this young professor of the Korca Lyceum who was recently fired because of his anti-fascist activity.

Petrit Skenderi watched regularly and with attention all those who had come to participate in this meeting. He greeted them with a smile and, with those he knew, he exchanged a few words. (...) He began to speak slowly, in an entirely familiar tone, immediately attracting the attention of those who were listening to him, by pronouncing his words clearly and by giving a sweet look with his large eyes at them, gazing out from his black and thick eyebrows. From the beginning his words, though simple, were put immediately into the hearts of those who heard them, as if they introduced fresh air into a room which had remained closed for a long time. While his voice seemed to come from ages long past, resounding like the ringing of heroic weapons and triumphant as if to foreshadow victory.

Comrades! Our little nation, with all of its old history, has fought tirelessly and has shed blood to break the chains of bondage. With our national hero Gjergj Kastriot leading us, our people fought heroically, distinguished for a quarter-century. (...)

It was the first time that Ismail had heard such a political speech during a period of occupation. By listening, he had the impression that these words, as if a powerful hammer, shattered the chains of slavery and forged bonds of freedom with anvils of human hearts. (Kokona 2003: 413-415)

If we make a detailed analysis of this textual fragment, the cult of personality inspired or indoctrinated by the ideology of the era may clearly be discerned. Enver Hoxha (as Petrit Skenderi) appears here as an intellectual leader and ideologist of war who inspires others and the popular masses. Beyond

the similarity created with Skanderbeg, there is also something of Jesus Christ in the image of the savior who intends to create something new. Czeslaw Milosz, therefore, observes that this character preaches the New Faith, he is a visionary who has to be glorified, according to official terminology, because this is the transition from critical realism to socialist realism in Eastern European literature (Milosz 1953: 39). Underscoring this figure as a hero, Kokona does not fail to mention the detail that Petrit Skenderi “was fired as a teacher because of his anti-fascist activity”, thus echoing the populist recurring slogan of 45 years by the regime’s official historiography. Such passages are repeated several times in the novel, especially in the second volume, where the figure of Enver Hoxha (again as the literary character Petrit Skenderi) is portrayed under the the background of the era.

In the novel, various characters are on the move. They enter the work by means of the fruitful imagination of the author, as altered models with prominent biographical elements, or as distinct historical figures with a well-defined status, nevertheless, through the prism of ideological judgements. Such is the case with Mit’hat Frasher³ (as Lumo Skendo) who does not appear as a character in the novel, but who is instead discussed by the other characters. In the 1940s, the intellectual circles in Tirana are divided into several groups, according to political preferences, pro-Italian, pro-Germans, Bolsheviks, nationalists, etc. Among these groups, the main hero, Ismail Kamberi, wanders in an undecided way. In the novel, we also find a secondary character named Reshat Delvina:

Reshat had a close relationship with Lumo Skendo, as for about ten years he had visited his bookshop, located on “Rruga Mbretnore” Street, almost every evening to talk to the bookseller, for whom he had a deep respect which transformed into admiration on the day that Lumo Skendo invited him to his home. On the afternoon that he visited the home of the bookseller, Reshat had been impressed by the possessions of those thousands of volumes which filled the walls of the four large rooms and, when they were sitting

around the small table having tea, Lumo Skendo had shown the cigarette pipe and the coffee cup of Naim⁴, which he had kept as a memorial on his table. This increased his sympathy for this man who seemed to be a pure patriot. Later, during his visits to the bookseller’s shop, Reshat had noticed that Mit’hat Bey was doing favors for all the Beys who came to his bookshop in order to make smalltalk, and how, with those who were not of his rank, he joked in his special way, speaking to them with an exquisite irony which he had learned from Franz Anatol, his favorite author. (Kokona 2003: 486)

It is clearly understood that Lumo Skendo is being judged here from a social-realist perspective for his reactionary tendencies, as well as for the aristocrat snobbery and vanity in Tirana during the 1940s, but above all, for the fact that he had a negative and discouraging impact on the intelligentsia of the era, who saw in this descendant of the Frasher⁵ dynasty, Naim’s vision of Albanianism. Despite this idea, and completely in accordance with the regime’s censorship, Kokona, the narrator, asserts that none of the patriotism of the fathers of that period remains in the soul of Lumo Skendo and that his destinies are not related to the tragedy that has invaded the homeland. It is therefore possible to understand the irony which accompanies this emblematic figure of Albanian journalism and politics of the time.

In the novel, other very popular figures of the era also appear as characters, who, unfortunately, the communist regime labeled from the start as suspicious or undesirable. It is not difficult, therefore, to discern within the work characters that are shaped in the complete likeness of Eqerem Cabej, Nexhat Hakiu, Lasgush Poradeci⁵, etc. These latter are pro-Western intellectuals in Albania of the 1940s who espoused a desire to changing the popular system, not through revolution, but through social emancipation and the implementation of fundamental human freedoms. These figures appear in the work, to varying degrees, with the kind of indifference and indecision that characterizes such positions at the center of the social era debates.

HISTORICAL FIGURES IN THE HUMAN AND INTELLECTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF VEDAT KOKONA

The scheme of transforming historical figures into fictional literature characters, according to the preferences of the censorship of the time, seems to decline in the 1990s. The professor and well-known translator not only does not give up his artistic creativity, but also assumes that, in the form of an autobiography, to tell us his untold story by alternating between meditations and reflections on life. In 1996, Kokona presents his memories in summary entitled *Woven in the Veil of Time* (the work was published after his death by his daughter—Mrs. Mirvjen Kokona), a work which very realistically displays the author's personal judgment concerning the figure of Enver Hoxha, Lumo Skendo (Mit'hat Frasheri), Nexhat Hakiu, Eqerem Cabej, etc.

Differently from the novel where these historical characters, shaped like literary characters, are viewed in full compliance with their ideological line, in his book of memories, Kokona speaks about them with a human sensitivity of the individual who has been fortunate enough to know and come into contact with some of the most important figures during this era of Albanian society. Because they belong to two contrasting eras by the world outlook, the works represent also an opposite view about these figures. In the book memories many years later, the writer undertakes to tell the truth impressions by the meetings with these historical personalities of the past. The book, titled *Woven in the Veil of Time*, comes in the form of a literary autobiography and through the first-person narrative, the situation raised genuine event, previously untold.

During his years as a Lyceum student in Korça, Vedat Kokona has well known Enver Hoxha (except their common origin of Gjirokastra) because the latter named, was in a class with his brother—Nedim Kokona. In the 40s, we find them both were as

teachers at the Lyceum where they studied earlier, Vedat Kokona was as a teacher of literature and Enver Hoxha was as a teacher of morality. For two and a half months, they also shared a room together. In his memories about Enver Hoxha, he writes:

During those ten weeks we lived together I never saw him working. He taught morality in the lower grades of the Lyceum, he read the novel of Ferdinand Celine *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (*The Journey to the Edge of the Night*) for hours. He never spoke to me about politics or communism. If he was a communist, as adept of a doctrine to which others went to Spain to fight, he would try to attract the attention to me, a neophyte to this belief, because he had no fear that I could report him. I was with him until the half of '40. I am more than sure that till then he had not have those evil ideas in his head, such ideas that would raise him more four years later, in those enormous heights, from where he hauled over the coals those who had given him sustenance, and threw into the abyss relatives, friends and especially the land that had bored him. (Kokona 2005: 101)

As can be seen, none of soc-realistic fantasy novel is found in the above mentioned memories. The writer, devoted to the dogmas of the regime and the excellent professor, with the weight of years on his shoulders, does not agree on the figure of Enver Hoxha and his role during the war. The intellectual Kokona after the 90s, judges the ex-dictator's image, just like how he had known him in his early youth, when they still saw each other as two young men newly arrived from France, full of dreams for the future. Not only there is nothing heroic in this character, but we also see that there is nothing of a communist idealist, as the later version was arranged by Enver Hoxha himself and later was trumpeted by all hierarchical levels of the regime.

The same goes for Mit'hat Frasheri (alias Lumo Skendo), too. Kokona himself speaks with sympathy and admiration for this intellectual, who had made in 1939 the preface of the volume of poetry "Light and Shadow" appreciating, in this way, the arrival of a young poet in Albanian literature. The meeting with Lumo Skendo is described thus in the book with

memories of Kokona:

You could find Lumo Skendo only into “Skendo Lumo” bookstore. I begged my father to take me to him one day. He did it. We found him sitting in front of a long rectangular table. (...) A face different from the others, is that face that strikes immediately the gaze like a sunbeam. What struck me in the face was the brightness of the eyes. I thought that this man was different from those I had known until then, excluding my father, of course. He appeared to be pleased—or so it seemed to me—when he learned that I was studying the Lyceum of Korca. Since that day, as long as I was in Tirana, during the summer vacation, I would go often in his bookshop. One day, I begged to pay him a visit at his house, because I had heard that he had a very rich library. He invited me wholeheartedly. I went. I feel as if it was just yesterday even now after sixty years. (...) The first floor, where we stayed, was composed of a large living room whose walls were covered with books. We sat in two old chairs in front of a small oval table, where there was placed a coffee cup with a plate and a cigarette pipe. I knew that he did not smoke and that cigarette pipe did grab my attention.

“Are you looking at the cigarette pipe?”

“Yes sir!” I said in a voice slightly timid. “You don’t smoke, do you?”

“This cigarette pipe and this coffee cup are Naim’s.”

I felt like I was dreaming. I had before me Naim’s cigarette pipe and coffee cup, and, behold, right here in front of me was Naim’s nephew, Mit’hat Frasheri! Was there anything more beautiful?! (Kokona 2005: 72-73)

This is the same scene that we have quoted above as a passage from the novel *With the Waves of Life*. The only difference being that the protagonist before was Kokona himself. “Meeting for the first time with Lumo Skendo was one of the most beautiful days of my youth”, he says. With this figure, he saw the Albanian patriot and erudite as premature, perhaps, for his own circumstances. It is no wonder, then, if we say that through Lumo Skendo the young boy, the poet Kokona was projecting his self-portrait as a publicist and an author. Some years later in Tirana after the 90s, he would, as a professor and a popular interpreter, radiate aristocratic culture and western tastes to youngsters; as such he would constitute a model of nobility which the dictatorship failed to distort.

Why did we assume to make a comparison of both eras?

Although in essence the comparison of a novel with an autobiography may be perceived as a scientific inconsistency, the issue does not seem so simple. Can we confess that it was the desire of the author, who in the novel wanted to glorify his youthful ex-friend and ex-roommate, who fatally decided to take power enough to eliminate anyone who had known before? Can we conclude that every author was free to describe and imagine as he would, even the well-known figures of the period, without the permission of any historian? Of course we do. This has been demonstrated by all of the world’s greatest authors, who, according to their desire, have carved out human characters which they had known.

It is understood that we cannot naively believe that it was the desire of Kokona. At the time when the novel was written and published, Enver Hoxha was at the zenith of his power. The literature and the arts in general were shaped every day by the role of the legendary commander in the war. Socialist realism in the country was aiming at the creation of Homo Sovieticus, something which was loudly trumpeted in all satellite countries of the Eastern Bloc. The censorship of socialist realism also touched Albanian literature in a more serious sense in our country; this kind of literature was connected strongly with the cult of personality (according to the Stalinist model) of Enver Hoxha. Because of this censorship, the writers of the 50s and 60s tried to save themselves and their work by focusing on military entities and a preference for fighter heroes as opposed to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

CONCLUSIONS

Much has been written about the dimensions of censorship and self-censorship in the literary works of socialist both before and after the 1990s in all countries of the East (Dado 2010: 10). In this sense,

this analysis does not undertake to handle the strange respect that the establishment showed to literature, through fear, propaganda, demagoguery, and populism, as instruments of subjugation (Albanological Studies 2010: 110). We believe that the examples quoted above from Vedat Kokona are pure cases of censorship, because the author himself has never had, even the slightest illusion for the communist movement, for the dictatorship of the proletariat, for the foresight of Enver Hoxha as a statesman, or even for the bright future of Albania in socialism. We are thus persuaded, if we read the journalism and literary creativity of Kokona between 1940-1944, where the esthetic trends (Kokona 2006: 24) and the passion for literature prevail as an expression of absolute freedom in art. We concur if we read the memories book after 1990, where Kokona confesses and simultaneously reflects, and above all, we can be convinced of that, if we believe in the intellectual model which he created, as an interpreter and professor of French, until the last years of his life.

With the charm of an experienced French aristocrat, he was far from being the mass paradigm of the intellectual who thinks like a revolutionary. Such a reputation with the governmental establishment is a denial which never solidified into the open and visible hostility of a dissident opponent. His reputation, however, remained both doubtful and established for many years (as artistically established as the figure of Enver Hoxha in the novel of the 1960s).

We are not here to judge, because, as Czeslaw Milosz stated, we should be more prudent when we judge those who live under totalitarian regimes (Milosz 1953: 11, cited by Karl Jaspers in the forewords of *Captive Thought*). We can only presume that the price that they have paid must have been very high.

This price does not reveal anything except for the great desire and the subsistence of a man, an intellectual and an author, who struggled within the conditions of a system which restricted, to the extreme limits of being, human freedom in all its forms.

Notes

1. Member of communist international and organizer of the communist movement in Korca.
2. Organizer of the communist demonstrations in Korca and killed on November 8, 1941 the day when Communist Party of Albania was founded.
3. Patriot, publicist, translator, author, diplomat, and active politician in the first half of the XX century. Son of Abdyl Frasheri, ideologist of Albanian National Renaissance.
4. Naim Frasheri, Albanian national poet, the leading poet of Albanian National Renaissance.
5. Poets, professors, translators, and linguists, active in the Albanian press and literature during '30 of XX century and following. During the communist rule, they retired from the public life or they remained hidden dissidents.

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Bio

Eriola Agalliu, Ph.D. student, an Albanian language and literature teacher at the New York High School of Tirana, the Center of Albanological Studies, Tirana, Albania; research fields: Vedat Kokona, literary work, monography, social realism, literary studies.