

Petro Marko, a Drama Confronting Criticism

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Abstract

The purpose and object of this study is the writer Petro Marko in relation to the critical thought of his time as a playwright, where his small contribution to this literary genre serves as a reference for the era and the challenges that drama faced during that period. Known primarily as a novelist and a significant literary figure of his time, Petro Marko is mostly classified among the censored authors, particularly in the dramatic genre. The central research question is: "What was Petro Marko's challenge in writing drama in the 1960s?" During this period, ideology and political demands had erected an insurmountable barrier for Albanian drama, allowing only works that aligned with the tastes and interests of the regime. *Bora e kuqe*, a dramatic work by Petro Marko and a version of the play *Zonja Çurre*, was never published.

The results of this study will focus on the dramatic pieces written by Petro Marko, such as *Guna mbi tela*, which centers on the Vlorë War, and *Niku i Martin Gjinit*, a drama inspired by the era of Skanderbeg. However, the latter carried implicit political connotations due to the "liberalizing" elements that permeated it, leading to its prohibition as an ideologically harmful work inconsistent with socialist realism. Both works thematically embrace a historical approach and evoke the theme of freedom. However, Petro Marko seems to engage with his time primarily through the metaphor of the individual's fate in moments of crisis. The conclusions of this study will be based on the literary and critical findings of the time, highlighting how Petro Marko carefully entrusted the messages of his dramas to those who could decipher them. Both *Zonja Çurre* and the play inspired by Skanderbeg's era, beyond addressing national independence, clearly reference the concept of freedom. Freedom, as a universal metaphor, constitutes one of the most fundamental concepts in world literature throughout history.

Keywords: Petro Marko, Drama, Criticism, 1960s, Socialist Realism.

Presentation

During the totalitarian period, when culture and artistic literature were generally under the visible pressure of ideological and political institutions, particularly the Party, literature could not escape its obligations to them. Unfortunately, this obligation was complex, controlled on multiple levels: from political institutions to cultural institutions, and a third, more severe layer, that of the official criticism of the time. In Albania, the trajectory and development of literary production were deeply influenced by the political, historical, cultural, and social conditions of the

time. From 1948 and for nearly a decade thereafter, until the 1960s, Albania adopted a full model from the Soviet Union. This influence was exerted with unusual force, especially on staged drama and dramatic writing, as it was considered a daily product of the country's socio-political development. This burden weighed heavily on a cultural product so vital for a country like Albania.

This oppressive context, particularly relevant to the current theme, is illustrated through the political line emphasized in

the speech of the Fifteenth Plenum (June 1965). Drama scholar Mexhit Prençi writes: "Ominous and terrifying was the orientation given regarding the definition of issues and themes about what playwrights and writers should write, how they should write, how proletarian communist partisanship should traverse the creative process, how revolutionary class character should be expressed, who could be positive characters and who negative, who could be considered heroes, how the superiority of positive over negative forces should be portrayed, and so on." (Prençi: 2010, p. 90)

A vertical overview of Albanian dramatic production, especially from 1945 to 1973, shows that Albania had a remarkable cohort of playwrights who, despite lacking prior experience in this genre, managed to bring to Albanian theater a serious and cultivated form of communication through one of the oldest genres in human society. Within this vertical overview, one notes a strong desire to bring to the attention of Albanian society historical events, even ancient ones, that resonated with the Albanian reality. These were topical themes that reflected internal realistic impulses: how Albanians were building their society, their well-being, their recovery, who they were and how they were, as people of a country increasingly governed by totalitarianism, in conditions of prolonged isolation.

Most of the programmatic speech from the 1963 Plenum clearly reflects political orientation, nearly to the point of rhetorical slogans: "Playwriting must contribute to the formation of the new man," "Drama must have revolutionary content," "Drama as part of the people's revolution", "Drama under the conditions of imperialist-revisionist encirclement", "Proletarian partisanship as the main ideological-artistic trait of drama", "Heroes of the drama must serve as positive examples for the audience." (Hoxha: 1963, pp. 95–98)

Albanian drama of this period is diverse. Despite known shortcomings in character realization, as highlighted by criticism, it offered excellent models of protagonists, of human mentality navigating uncharted paths. Therefore, like drama across the entire history of humanity, it constituted a vital intersection for enabling intergenerational communication, across historical eras and with perspectives different from those aspired to by the Albanian society of the time. In all observations, studies, and critical reflections, whether regarding plays that were staged or remained unpublished, those supported by the regime's critics or the Party's political apparatus, or even those that never made it to print or to the provincial stage, one finds authentic testimony to the sacrifices endured by this genre, particularly during the final two decades leading up to Albania's regime change in the 1990s.

Albania was one of the smaller countries in the Balkans, historically marked by strong ties and cultural relations with Western Europe. Yet, in the post-World War II period, under newly imposed conditions, it aligned itself with the Eastern Bloc, primarily the Soviet Union. The latter, operating under a singular totalitarian system unlike any other in the world, exerted significant influence. The Soviet Union and Albania had no comparable historical or contemporary indicators, nor could they serve as mutual reference points. There was no possibility of drawing analogies between their developmental paths, especially not in

terms of cultural evolution.

The ideological regime exercised a special degree of attention and imposition over dramatic literature. This pressure extended throughout the social and political fabric, resulting in a space of intense collaboration and conflict. The state exhibited meticulous control over every component of the dramatic complex: literary production, staging, directing, and other theatrical elements. Given this environment, one decidedly uncreative and non-artistic, Albanian drama was forced into extraordinary survival. On the one hand, it carried the ideological burden of schematism, populism, and enforced conformity. On the other hand, it faced the impossibility of resisting totalitarianism until the very end of the 20th century.

As drama during this period evolved entirely within the framework of totalitarian governance and ideological orientation, its development was heavily constrained and directly tied to political developments in the country. Despite its prolific and highly problematic output, Albanian drama, though bound to serve the political agenda, still provides significant insights into social phenomena, character types, narrative conflicts, and the profiles of authors who shaped this genre. Nearly the entire body of dramatic and theatrical material produced in that era can be regarded as analytical matter, raising critical questions inherent to its own existence. This study aims to highlight the practice of schematic treatment, the ideological homogenization of conflict, the repetitive traits of characters and heroes, the formulaic resolutions of dramatic situations, and the flattening of artistic levels under ideological pressure.

Operating within a particular socio-political environment, drama of this period constantly reflected its own constrained existence, locked in a conflicted relationship with itself. It was prevented from flourishing as an autonomous genre, meant to serve the theater and drama tradition as understood in world literary history, and from portraying genuine realities to the Albanian public. No other form of literary creation, regardless of artistic ambition, aesthetic refinement, craftsmanship, or authorial talent, can substitute the communicative experience fostered by a good drama. This is not solely due to the playwright's script, but because drama is performed, it takes on physical, spiritual, emotional, and mimetic life through the actor on stage, in direct confrontation and closeness with the audience.

In this setting, the relationship between the drama, its events, and its characters unfolds in front of the audience, in sound and image. The viewer, in one way or another, lives through it, no matter how long ago the play may have been written. Regarding the development of drama, as literary history has often explained in relation to the connection's literature holds with historical times, people, and events, whether describing or anticipating them, the genre that has consistently borne the heaviest consequences is drama and its playwrights.

Ancient drama, particularly that of antiquity, demonstrated to human society that the signals for their present and future come from writers, especially dramatists. Despite the specific societal structures of ancient civilizations, dramatic production, its conflicts, and its relationships with the state and the "emperor" already foreshadowed how future human relations would un-

fold, who their natural adversaries would be, and many other foundational questions. The three great tragedians of antiquity caused such turmoil in their own time that their significance echoed through every future system and regime led by emperors, censors, and dictators. It is said that the emperor of the time, displeased by something in the art and metaphor found in the theater of Aeschylus, took revenge, and so fell the fate of the great tragedian. In the end, this shows just how vital the mission of drama has always remained.

Drama developed late in Albanian literature, whether among writers living within the country or in exile. This delayed experience had its own realities within Albanian cultural and literary life. Nonetheless, the history of Albanian drama represents a significant chapter in the broader history of Albanian literature, both in terms of the issues it addresses and the path it has followed in the Albanian context and within the genre itself. Petro Marko does not represent a clearly defined or widely articulated phenomenon in the critical discourse of his time as a playwright. His modest engagement with this literary genre remains a point of reference for the era and the difficulties drama faced. Though better known as a novelist and a prominent intellectual in Albanian literary circles, Petro Marko is primarily counted among the forbidden authors, especially in the dramatic genre.

Prof. Dr. Kudret Velça, a prominent critic and a theoretical figure in dramaturgy (though not strictly a scholar of dramatic theory), in a later writing, one that does not follow the rules and doctrines of socialist realism, takes the opportunity to examine Petro Marko's dramatic output within a broad framework, recognizing him as a major figure of Albanian letters. Velça argues that Marko's dramatic works are not obscure due to neglect or lack of interest on the author's part, but rather "because of the dictatorship that ruled over us" during the period in which his literary creativity flourished and reached its highest peaks.

As a "rebel poet," a great writer, and a talented artist, Marko could not accept the rigid norms imposed by the method of socialist realism, norms that were more political and ideological in nature than aesthetic or artistic in essence. Referring to the firsthand "memories" of the orientation and "violence" that politics inflicted on non-conformist literature and drama, within the framework of a study on Petro Marko's dramaturgy, Velça, one of the few critics of the totalitarian period who reviewed much of the dramatic work of socialist realism in the press, writes: "Many of his works (Petro Marko's), in poetry, prose, and drama, were banned because of his non-conformist and dissident positions, and were archived away [1]. In the field of drama, this stance was even more radical [1]."

Writing drama in the 1960s was an even greater ordeal for Petro Marko. At that time, ideology and political requirements had built a towering and impenetrable wall for Albanian drama, defining the kind of content that would be acceptable or pleasing to the ruling power. *Bora e kuqe* (Red Snow), a dramatic piece by Marko and a version of the play *Zonja Çurre*, was never published. Subsequently, Petro Marko wrote the dramatic work *Guna mbi tela* (The Cloak on the Wire), centered around the War of Vlora [2, 3].

This is the author's second play, structured around a historical

event and populated with historical figures brought into the textual dimension. It concerns the 1920 War of Vlora, which coincided with the moment when a popular uprising, led by ordinary people, successfully drove the Italian army into the sea. Among the legendary figures of that war, also present in the text of this drama, is Selam Musai, the popular hero who, as the song goes, seized the cannon by its muzzle [4]. Alongside him are other protagonists of that heroic and unequal battle, set against the backdrop of extraordinary political and social upheaval. The play *Guna mbi tela* is composed of two main parts, subdivided into ten scenes in total [4].

His other play, *Niku i Martin Gjinit*, draws its subject matter from the era of Skanderbeg. However, its underlying political tone, marked by a "liberalism" that permeated the text, led to its prohibition [5]. It was deemed ideologically harmful and incompatible with the aesthetics of socialist realism. In *Niku i Martin Gjinit*, Marko deliberately journeys into the era of the Great Time (*Moti i Madh*), through an imaginative escape to the fifteenth century [1]. This temporal distance, away from the suffocating present, enables the historical event to acquire contemporary resonance. It is precisely this transposition that makes the appropriation of the play so complex within Marko's dramatic corpus [4].

"From an artistic standpoint, the play *Niku i Martin Gjinit* opened the path for the poetic drama in Albanian literature [6]."

This drama, with its meaningful title, places at the center of its narrative and dialogue the heroic spirit of the fifteenth-century Arbëresh (Albanian) people, an unexpected historical episode that undoubtedly attracted international attention then and now, serving as an emblem of the Albanian presence in this part of the world. The extraordinary heroism of that era, otherwise known as the Great Time, is inextricably tied to the iconic figure of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, who stood against the Ottoman threat and carved his name into the memory of the Albanian people and European civilization [4]. His resistance became a legendary act in the face of the Ottoman Empire, an act rooted in the courage of the Arbëresh, a people who have long defended their honor and homeland [4].

Although the play invokes historical circumstances from the time of Skanderbeg, *Niku i Martin Gjinit* is not a historical drama in a conventional sense. Rather, those circumstances serve merely as a point of departure, as a narrative impulse to enter the psychological terrain of the drama, where the focus lies on the deeper influence of other factors, particularly the psychological destruction of youth, both then and always. The uniqueness of the dramatized heroism, the twenty-five-year battle between the Albanians and the Ottoman invaders, is rooted in the site of the most epic resistance of the time: the hearts of the Arbëresh, strengthened by the spirit of their legendary leader, then and forever.

Both of these plays adopt a historical thematic framework and evoke the concept of freedom. However, what truly emerges is the author's engagement with his own time, primarily through the metaphor of the individual's fate in moments of crisis. The critic emphasizes that Marko's drama focuses on portraying the fate of individuals and the depth of their characters, with the hu-

man being placed as the central figure of the dramatic narrative. Petro Marko knew both how and to whom to entrust the messages of his plays within the context of their time.

Across all dimensions of his dramatic works, both in *Zonja Çurre* and the play inspired by the era of Skanderbeg, the notion of liberty stands out as a recurring theme, alongside national independence. Historically, freedom has constituted one of the most essential concepts in world literature, embraced as a universal metaphor. Confronted with an impenetrable barrier, Petro Marko's dramaturgical trajectory was abruptly cut off. The author could not accept such a compromised relationship with the essence of drama, its mission, known since antiquity, nor could he reconcile with the kind of ideological subjugation demanded by the system, nor with the method of socialist realism, which necessarily required the reflection of the regime's current political agenda. The only play that survived the period or was accepted as such was *Për lirinë e popullit* (For the Freedom of the People), co-written with writer Shefqet Musaraj. (Hoxha: 1963, p. 107)

For the Freedom of the People, in terms of composition, is structured into three acts and consists of eight scenes. At its core lies the theme of war, specifically, the moment when Nazi Germans arrive in Albania, an episode clearly selected with intention within the framework of the text. The play intertwines the internal conflicts of the wartime years, namely the clash between nationalists and internationalists. This division is vividly portrayed across the scenes, always highlighting the victors, the communists, and underlining the alleged collaboration of nationalists with the Nazis. The drama emphasizes the supposedly progressive role of the communists, consistently shaped by the ideological principles of socialist realism. Equally striking is the harsh depiction of the Germans, presented in black-and-white tones, a stylistic decision rooted in the dogmas of the official socialist realist model [4].

Conclusions

In closing, we may conclude the following:

Art, culture, and literary production during the totalitarian period in Albania were subject to visible and pervasive pressure from ideological and political institutions, especially the ruling Party. Literature could not escape this obligation, which was complex and strictly regulated across various layers: political

institutions, cultural institutions, and a third, more severe layer, that of the official criticism of the time. In Albania, the development and trajectory of literary production were deeply shaped by the political, historical, cultural, and social conditions of the era. The full ideological experience Albania absorbed from the Soviet Union, from 1948 to nearly a decade onward and into the 1960s, was imposed with unusual force, extending heavily over drama, both as a staged art form and as literary creation. Drama, as a cultural product reflecting the socio-political evolution of the country, was severely burdened in a nation like Albania, where it could have played an elite and essential role. Despite these conditions, talent always finds a path. Such was the case with Petro Marko, the writer from Vlora, who remains a distinguished figure in Albanian literature. Although his creative output was subjected to ongoing ideological revision and continuous surveillance and reprimand by the ideological structures of the time, his presence remained vital [7].

A known writer and master of metaphor, Petro Marko's literary creativity reflects a strong tendency to position the human being within a universal relationship. Yet, the codified "law" of socialist realism did not allow the dramatist Petro Marko the artistic freedom he needed.

Marko's literary profile carried a proven connection to the universal message of literature in general. For that reason, his phenomenon in dramaturgy could not properly unfold within the constraints of that era.

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