

A general overview of the literature for children in the first part of the 20th century

MSc. Rudina Alimerko (PhD Candidate)
University "Ismail Qemali" Vlorë, Albania

Abstract

Although in the first decades of the 20th century the Albanian literature for children did not recognize any distinguished literary work, a series of liberation insurrections in north and south as well as the Declaration of Independence in 1912 show the great efforts of our Renaissance figures who were teachers, ideologists and active participants in the armed movement. All this big issues in the life of Albanian people as well as their freedom-loving spirit become the inspiration of many themes, details and motives in the Albanian literature for children.

Some of well-known representatives of our national Renaissance such as: Çajupi, Asdreni, Fishta, Mjeda, Gurakuqi, Xanoni, J.Bageri etc., continued writing even during the first decades of the 20th century. In their poetic and literary writings, one could distinguish the romantic spirit of the exuberance of the love for the country, for the nature, for the universe, and sometimes there could be distinguished even a realistic tone which described the Albanian life.

Throughout all this literary work, the love for the country was connected with the love for the language and with the great efforts that were made for founding Albanian schools, with the reverberation of the wars for freedom, with the description of nature, birds and flowers as well as with the inspiration taken from the fantastical and fabulous world of the world literature.

Keywords: children's literature, literary pieces, folklore, didactic element.

Introduction

Among the distinguished writers who left an imprint in the literature for children since the 19th century were Gjergj Qiriazhi, Anton Xanoni, Ndre Mjeda and Josif Bageri. They gave their experiences and impressions in their literary works for children which in turn affected children's emotional world. Following *Gjergj Qiriazhi*, other teachers and writers of literary works for children, wrote many works consisting of prose, poetry, sketches and dramas.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Albanian literature for children, deepened more and more its romantic spirit. Except for historical and patriotic motives, they started treating also social motives and especially the children's plays and joy.

Although its general feature was the didactic element, one of the distinctions of this literature was the portraying of children and of teachers, their school and social life, the relationships between pupils and teachers as well as those between children.

Being conditioned by the historical circumstances of the Albanian life of that time (i.e., the liberation war for independence) still in this period, in the literary works for children are felt the patriotic motives and the reflection of the national history, starting since the Skanderbeg time. Having these features, the whole fiction was developed to serve to the Albanian schools, for the patriotic, ethical and moral education of children.

A great part of this literary writing has been included in textbooks, serving as extra readings and for improving the native language.

Soon after Gjergj Qiriaz, in the Albanian literature for children appears one of the disseminators of the Albanian language and education, **Josif Bager**, a poet and publicist from Reka, district of Dibra. Except for the poetries, short literary works and the folk which he used to publish in his magazine called "*Shqypja e Shqipnisë*", (in Sofia) he also published the volume of poetries entitled "*Kopësht malësor*" (1910).

Since the preface of this book, our poet advices Albanians to raise the national awareness in their children, to cultivate the national civilisation and culture by imbuing them the love for the poetry, fairy tales and for knowledge.

He considers the poetry for children "a medicine" to medicate the disease of ignorance which prevails in many parts of Albania.

According to the poet, the book not only illuminates children's mind but also their heart. Moreover, being affected by the uncivilized Ottoman invaders, the place of Albanians is in "the darkness", that is why knowledge is needed for the children and for the national civilization.

In his short literary works and poetries, Josif Bageri, reveals the rich emotional world of children through his experiences and inspirations by writing for the nature, seasons, for the house and for the family which brings up children and educates them. He also writes for the Albanian environment where courageousness and love are born and cultivated.

For the first time, in the poetic volume for children by Josif bager, we notice the epical and historical depictions he makes to Bajram Curri, the legendary knight (kreshnik) of our highlands. Also, the depiction he makes to *Naim Frashëri*, the poet who writes for the country with love, and also to other warriors and martyrs who died in the wars for freedom and independence. In the cycle of poems on the mother and father, Josif

Bager created a new type of poem in which the child himself makes a conversation, talks to his beloved people, his mother, father, sister and brother.

In many other poems on the seasons, is revealed the Albanian landscape and beauty, especially in the poem which is dedicated to spring. Tones of joy and belief are noticed in them, because the poet wants to show to the children that the most beloved place in the world is their hometown, their country. In many poetic verses, J. Bageri shows the wounds of the Albanian society to the children.

In the poem *"Vajtim e mallkim"*, the poet makes a conversation with children on their important role in the social life of Albania. He truly affirms that even children, with their feelings and their own world can influence in the fraternization of Albanians and especially in their attempts to avoid fratricides, separations and intrigues which poison the society.

In the same way as Naim Frashëri, A.Z.Çajupi and Ndre Mjeda, Josif Bageri wants the unity of Albanians for the "progress" and civilization of the nation, because he addresses in a very enthusiastic manner to the children, by showing them the national pride and the traditions of their ancestors.

"Reka-vendi im" is another poem which reveals a deep poetical world, a poem in which the longing for Dibra, his hometown, is felt,. Sometimes, in the poet's verses, the Country is personified and depicted with beautiful colours, in a clarion-call and with heroic leaders who have honoured even other nations of Europe.

Josif Bageri, as well as other Renaissance figures, in many of his poems such as: *"Msoni gjuhën e vet"* and *"E ama dhe i biri"*, sings praises to the Albanian school, which is the cradle of knowledge for Albanians.

The conversation held between mother and son in the poem *"E ama dhe i biri"*, the wise words of the mother represent the true wish of Albanians for their children to become knowledgeable and knights of freedom:

*The whole world learns this way, my son
And they think hard;
Everything in life,
By learning they had.*

The poet deliberately transmits such ideas to imbue the importance of education in the children's spiritual world in order for them to serve their country. For the similar purpose the poetical volume *"Kopësht malësor"* has been written, which has been widespread in Dibra, Tetova, Shkupi, Manastiri, Fieri, Vlora, Shkodra, Durrësi and in Elbasani. Bageri created poems being influenced by the people's folklore.

In the Albanian literature for children, in the first half of the 20th century, there were a lot of teachers who gave their contribution by creating tales for children and by using them in school.

Similarly, A.Xanoni, L.Gurakuqi, N.Mjeda and other teachers and poets such as A.Asllani, V.Harxhi, J.Minga, A.S.Drenova (Asdreni), L.Skëndo and Gjergj Fishta often appear in the press of that time as well as in the books containing short literary works which sing praises to the country, to the children's plays and to their freedom-loving spirit.

The Albanian literature for children was further more enriched by the short narratives of Lumo Skëndo (Mithat Frashëri) under the title *"Hi dhe shpuzë"* (Sofia, 1915) in which the author addresses especially to the new generation. Also, this literature was enriched by a series of tales written by Faik Konica, characterized by a great literature and language culture. Some of the literary works of Konica are written for children. For instance, here we can mention the poetic creations in prose such as *"Anës liqenit"*, *"Në liqen"*, *"Malli i Atdheu"*. Konica has written three tales: 1. *"I urti i Malit"*, 2. *"E bija e mbretit dhe trëndafilin"*, 3. *"Terkuza"*. They are short, with a clear significance, human and they even contain patriotic elements. Prof. Nasho Jorgaqi estimates that *It is not difficult to create a tale by using an oriental subject*, but Konica, thanks to his creative skills of a real artist, his refined feelings, his sense of mass and tone of language, has created a masterpiece in its kind.

Moreover, we can mention here various poems and narratives for children by Gjergj Fishta, the great national poet, the so called Albanian Homer. Fishta did not write for children. But, many of his poems started to be sung by all ages and began to be used in textbooks. Through the love for the Albanian language, he teaches to the children the love for their nation:

*As the song of the summer bird,
That dances through the April green,
As the sweet wind breeze
That caresses rose bosoms;*

In these literary works, one could feel the original concept of poets and writers which approaches even more to the children's world.

Well enough, the literary review has pointed out the fact that in the Albanian literature for children at the beginning of the 20th century the literary works of A.S.Drenova have gained great values. The author gives wide depictions of Albanian life in a great artistic mastery.

This new artistic level in the literature for children was also followed by the literary works of Hil Mosi (especially his poems and compositions), such as *“Eja verë”*, *“Djali shqiptar”*, which were quickly learned by heart by the Albanian children. The literary works of Milto Sotir Gurra, such as *“Rrëfenja”* (1911), *“Goca e malësisë”* (short story of 1912), has also served to our national education. This is another true attempt to enrich the literature for children.

However, the whole picture of the Albanian literature for children at the beginning of the 20th century shows the great care of writers and poets to develop and cultivate furthermore the achievements of the romantic literature.

Anton Xanoni

Father Xanoni, together with the well-known poet and linguist Ndre Mjeda, has been a member of the literary association *“Agimi”*, founded in 1901, whose role was to encourage literary works in Albanian, by using his alphabet.

He attended religious studies abroad. In 1893 he returned to Shkodra where he worked as a teacher in religious high schools, until he passed away.

Xanoni had a special interest in poetry: he translated some eclogues by Virgil, he translated and adopted various poems and fables for textbooks; he also wrote some patriotic poems.

In the centre of these literary works was the evocation of the wars and deeds of Skënderbeu and the struggles of Albanians for freedom and independence and also the admiration of the Albanian language. At the beginning, Anton Xanoni together with Ndre Mjeda appeared in the Albanian literature with their artistic world in the book *“Këndime për shkollat e para të Shqipnisë”*, published in Shkodra in 1908.

This book is distinguished for the poets' great love towards children and national education, given the fact that both these authors were the founders of the Congress of Manastir, and *who gave all their energy and talent in the attempt to create the Albanian alphabet*. Even in the pages of this book there are a lot of poetic verses, which give depictions of love for one's Country and for the painful feelings for the nation being enslaved by foreign invaders. Apart from this, many verses reflect the love for parents and teachers, the love for school and for companions.

Xanoni has been known especially as a fabulist. In the monthly religious, *Elcija*, in 1902- 1910, he published some original or adopted fables, poems or articles having a knowledgeable nature. These writings were of a popular scientific nature from the field of zoology, botany, physics and history. In the original fables, he displayed a special skill, by creating the Albanian environment and characters. He was very careful about the technique of poetry and often gave good examples of stanzas and meters.

We can mention here interesting fables such as, “*Rrena*”, “*Ujku*”, “*Këshillë e mikut*” and many others which are distinguished for the musicality of their verses and for conveying ethical and moral messages.

The child: Mom, the lie, how has it become?

Can it be seen? Can it be touched?

Out of the mouth, does it go out, how come?

Does it to something resemble?

The mother: You know what is it? It is a crust,

It is a filthy thing,

Your eyes can't see it,

Your hands can't touch it.

(The lie)

Xanoni is the author of the following books: “*Gramatika shqype*” (1903), “*Shkurtorja e historisë së mocme*” (1910), “*Prisi ne lame t’ literatures*” (1911) and author of the following literary books: “*Llogoret e mullinjve*”, “*Skenderbeu*” (drama), “*Muzhikator i verber*”, “*Gjenovefa*”, “*Mesimet e plakut*” etc.

The literary works in verses by Xanoni, after liberation, collected and edited by Mark Gurakuqi, were published in the volume entitled “*Vjersha për të vegjël*” (1967), while his prose, together with that of Mjeda, were published in a common volume entitled “*Agimi*” (1962, confessions).

According to the pedagogical principles for the compilation of this book, poems, fables and short narratives are organized based on the children’s age, and with which authors are pretty familiar, because they have been dealing with the opening of Albanian schools and advancement of the national education for a long time.

Ndre Mjeda

Ndre Mjeda started his literary works with poems for children, which were included in textbooks, thus helping the Albanian schools and enriching the literature for children further more. Mjeda’s literary works for children are characterized by the expansion of topics and problematic issues regarding the society, by the deepening of realism, by enriching figures of speech and expressive instruments, which strengthened the lyrical notes in the poems for children.

Mjeda has given a great contribution in the Albanian alphabet. Dr. Mentor Quku, the passionate researcher, throughout all the above mentioned work, attests, by using documents and syllogisms, the twenty-year old convincing and persevering work of Mjeda to create a scientific and practical alphabet for all Albanians and he also wants especially to attest his distinctive role in the work of the Congress of Manastiri.

In 1901, together with his brother Lazer Mjeda, Archbishop of Shkodra, he founded the literary association "Agimi". It has its own alphabet, on which was based the publishing of some textbooks (The first singing praises for the first Albanian schools, 1904-1911) during the Ottoman invasion and which were republished some times in 1927. Mjeda cooperated with Anton Xanoni for their compilation.

In his poems for children, it is revealed an immense and wonderful landscape of the Country as well as children's love for him. Mjeda's poems have an educative content and a diversified form. Through these poems, the author tries to ennoble children's spirit, to enable them to value the beautiful, the useful and the moral aspect in life. However, thoughts, feelings, ideas and moral lessons are given in an attractive way, in a clear language, with simple figures of speech and expressive details. Some of the most beautiful literary works are the poems which sing praises to the beauties of nature in our country and to the seasons. They kindle to the children the desire to admire the graces of nature and to taste closely its fabulous beauties. ("Pranvera", "Mbrini vera", "Filloi toka m'u përtri", "Vera", "Vjeshta", "Dimni e plaku", "Mbramja" etc.). The poet does not describe the season solely, but he associates them with people, with their thoughts and feelings. We can mention here the poem "Pranvera", which ends in a significant stanza:

*Sitting up near the fireplace, a man is being rotten,
Run, farmer, where your job demands you,
Digging the land, an ox is being bellowed,
Get ploughed the land to do.*

In these poems as well as in other poems such as "Puna", "Një qortim", "Guxo" etc., which are inspired by the motive of work, the poet sings praises to the human activities, such as the wellbeing of common people and of workers who do not spent their time in vain but try to take the best from nature by working hard. The work is the source of all good things. For instance, in the poem *Guxo!*, the work is raised in the level of heroism and courageousness, as the only source of happiness in life.

*By jeering and lazing,
Nothing can come out of them!
Whatever you want to get,
Braveness and courage is begged!*

According to the author every living thing works. Bees, ants and swallows work. He has a great consideration for the worker, the seaman, who similar to the bee which works all day long, they bring prosperity. In the poem "Puna", the author shows the hard work and worries of the farmer, by making use of the parallelism:

The bee works all the day long,

*By looking for the pollen through flowers,
By digging into this and that,
To fill up its own honeycomb.
Under the sun, a worker is full of sweat,
On the ox plough he stays crouched,*

Apart from them, the themes in Mjeda's literary works for children are enriched and expanded with motives regarding seasons, birds, school, teachers and phenomena which kindle the sense of humour in children, the motive of helping a friend, helping elders etc. Te vjersha *Dashnia ndaj prindet* ai shkruan:

*Mom and dad, how that good,
You have brought me up.
How well you have raised me
For each time and place...*

And below, he emphasises that are his parents who have kindled him the desire for important deeds and for happiness.

In the poem "*Ndera e femijeve per mjeshtra (mesues)*", the poet lists all the merits attributed to teachers. And their pupils, in gratitude, will follow the way for which they have been told by their teachers:

*To you, who work all the day long
This poor mind and this heart belong:
As much as I am alive, as much as I am on this earth,
Love and honour will be given the same to you.*

Children's love for their parents and the other way round is a beautiful feeling, deep and sincere.

Also, we should stress the fact that author feels sorrow for poor people who try to face the obstacles in life. This is noticed especially in the poem "*Vera*", which tells about an unlucky girl who harvests the wheat alone, because she has lost her beloved people. Here, it is given a realistic description of the Albanian reality of that time.

*Alone on that land, as a consumed,
Black upon the clothes, dark on the face,
You remain a girl without friends, lonesome
Your shade as friend becomes the only one.*

*Every other time, you are always alone
I used to find you, my daughter, happy among sisters,
This year I found you alone*

Without a sister and fun. (Summer)

In this point of view, the poem “*Dimni*”, appears to be very intense, in which it is described realistically the situation of the old man. He finds it hard to face the cold weather and the storm. His monologue expresses the complaints of the author towards the social reality of that time, in which people do not take care and do not support the elders. The author describes the harsh winter through the complaints of the old man towards the north wind (freezing wind), and to the ice that is about to freeze his blood.

*On lands and mountains
A windstorm is blowing;
Windstorm, hold your step,
Stop, ice, and don't freeze me;
Don't freeze this blood drop,
Hide, hide, poor old man.*

Ndre Mjeda, paid great attention especially to the Albanian language. Similarly to Naim, who sang praises to the native language, Mjeda was inspired by the ideals of that time and wrote the poem “*Gjuha shqipe*”. In this poem, he has combined the history of a people and its spiritual physiognomy in a special mastery, with their hero (Mjeda), or with the devoted scholar of the Albanian language and in the end with his own optimistic spirit, which bursts in vowing, in order to be a worthy son for this country.

*As the voice of the nightingale,
The Albanian language trembles me,
As the smell of the hyacinth,
My whole heart it consoles.*

Hence, the author compares our language with the voice of the nightingale, but also with the smell and beauty of the jacinth, in a great pleasure.

Naturally and not deliberately, by making use of the literary instrument of comparison, which serves do give a higher effect, he highlights the Albanian language, because its soundness and undoubtedly its freshness surpass the nightingale and the jacinth. It is also related with the feelings of every Albanian regarding the native language (by imbuing it in children) because logically to him, based on the circumstances of that time, the Albanian language, the native language for which Renaissance figures sacrificed so much and shed their blood, it is the most beautiful language in the world.

Such an evaluation is real, because since in childhood, each of us is brought up with the love of the mother, with histories about one's people and especially with the glory of Albania. That is why Mjeda sings praises to the Albanian language and especially in relation to his fate, the fate of an emigrant.

*In other countries and lands,
Where I am living since a lot,
My poor heart only for you beats,
And because of longing it pours tears.*

As it is known, Mjeda is distinguished for his objective to deepen his studies about the Albanian language, to become its teacher, and not abroad, but only in his Country, in every corner of it.

Based on the rich Albanian folkloric tradition, in order to convey wisdom to the children, Mjeda has combined some wise words such as:

*Gold by fire is proof
Friend in need is understood.*

*Whoever those fear is caught
The rain on the road finds its drop.*

*A light-minded man
Keeps his head up.*

which, being created according to the popular structure, convey thoughts which remain in children's memory.

Mjeda uses the educative or moral lyrics, the fable and enigma in his poems for children. He takes advantage of the oral poetry which has a clear, fluent and rich language.

Hence, riddles are of great importance too. They have always raised the curiosity of children and they still do. Riddles are very attractive, because they display a real world, concrete and at the same time they encourage the fantasy. They make you think over. These poems-riddles are short, usually with four, six and eight verses and the characteristics that children should find are illustrated with pictures. Hence, Mjeda writes about the candle as follows:

*Fat is my body, cotton is my soul
A small flame is on my head
A shining light to everybody
I give, who knows my name?*

All his poetic works do not surpass three or four stanzas. Except for this short form, he successfully manages to deliver the content, to transmit emotions to the young readers, to expand their way of thinking and to educate them with the popular spirit.

Generally, Mjeda transmits emotions to the small children and kindles nice feelings and powerful literary and patriotic thoughts to them through his force of word and art.

In the poetic works for children by Mjeda, we must mention his fables too. They are few in number, just fifteen. They are inspired by the La Fonten, by Ezopi and by our folkloric treasury etc., but they differ a lot from them. For instance, the fable "Mini" has similarities with that of Ezopi or of La Fonten. But in their fable, the field rat goes to the city and the other way round and they do not like the life of one another. Whereas, in Mjeda's fable, the field rat does not manage to return to his country. He is captured by a cat. The moral drawn by Mjeda in this fable is as follows:

*On that road, where you live well
If changed without a reason, you are wrong.*

Mjeda's fables are short, not loaded with many details, adorning and dialogs. Folklore is not much present in his fables. Whereas from the point of view of structure, fables do not differ that much from other poems: they are divided in stanzas, which is not very common for classical fabulists and for the Albanian ones. The moral is always given in a concrete manner through a two-verse stanza.

Some of the literary works that were written specifically for children as well as some literary works that Mjeda wrote for grown-ups, but which were included in the literary readings for many decades (such as: "Gjuha shqipe", "Vaji i Bylbylit" etc.), were collected by Mark Gurakuqi in the volume entitled "Guxo", (poems 1953, in which some of the poems were attributed to Mjeda by mistake because in fact they were written by Xanoni), "Agimi", (confessions, 1962, with Xanoni as a co-author), "Vjersha per te vegjel" (1967), "Poezi të zgjedhura për fëmijë" (1975), "Zambakët" (poems, riddles, wise words, 2000) etc.

In Mjeda's poems for children, didactic and moral notes are not felt that much as in the literary works of other Renaissance figures. The attempt to display the thoughts and feelings of the lyrical hero regarding life enabled the strengthening of lyricism and enriching the figures of speech.

Mjeda is a master of verse; just in a few verses and with a clear language and special figures of speech, he has the ability to kindle thoughts and emotions to the young readers, to wake their fantasy, to educate them with the spirit of morality.

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