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CULTURAL AND MYSTICAL ORIENTAL INFLUENCES IN ALBANIAN LITERATURE (NAIM FRASHËRI, DRITËRO AGOLLI)

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Rezumat

Influențe culturale și mistice orientale în literatura albaneză (Naim Frashëri, Dritëro Agolli)

Acest articol examinează rolul misticismului, spiritualității și sintezei culturale în literatura albaneză, folosind lucrările lui Dritëro Agolli și Naim Frashëri ca exemple principale. Analiza „Cufărul diavolului” lui Agolli arată cum integrarea lui în Bektashism funcționează ca o punte filozofică și spirituală între tradițiile orientale și cele occidentale. Agolli descrie practici mistice cheie, cum ar fi dansul dervișului Sema, în timp ce împletește teme de mister, manuscrise ascunse și căutarea adevărului care sunt simbolice atât pentru misticismul sufi, cât și pentru formele literare occidentale. Aceste motive reflectă angajamentul literar post-comunist al lui Agolli cu peisajul spiritual al Albaniei, poziționând principiile Bektashi ca o sursă de incluziune și împlinire personală. Articolul examinează, de asemenea, contribuțiile lui Naim Frashëri, în special explorarea sa alegorică a misticismului și reprezentarea sa a căutării adevărului, și oferă o perspectivă asupra influenței sale asupra spiritualității literare albaneze. Compararea acestor doi autori demonstrează dialogul cultural mai larg dintre ideologiile orientale și cele occidentale, evidențind modul în care ambii autori navighează în interacțiunea identității religioase și a pluralismului cultural. Analizând operele lui Agolli și Frashëri, articolul susține că lucrările lor oferă o perspectivă crucială asupra articulației literare în evoluție a spiritualității și integrării culturale în Albania postdictatorială.

Cuvinte-cheie: influență culturală, Bektashi, identitatea religioasă, pluralismul cultural, tradiție.

Резюме

Культурные и мистические восточные влияния в албанской литературе (Наим Фрашери, Дритеро Аголли)

В этой статье исследуется роль мистицизма, духовности и культурного синтеза в албанской литературе, на основе работ Дритеро Аголли и Наима Фрашери в качестве основных примеров. Анализ «Сундука дьявола» Аголли показывает, как его интеграция бекташизма функционирует как философский и духовный мост между восточными и западными традициями. Аголли изображает такие ключевые мистические практики, как танец дервишей Сема, одновременно сплетая темы тайны, скрытых рукописей и поиска истины, которые являются символами как суфийского мистицизма, так и западных литературных форм. Эти мотивы отражают посткоммунистическое литературное взаимодействие Аголли с духовным

ландшафтом Албании, позиционируя принципы бекташи как источник включения и личного удовлетворения. В статье также рассматривается вклад Наима Фрашери, в частности, его аллегорическое исследование мистицизма и изображение поиска истины, и предлагается понимание его влияния на албанскую литературную духовность. Сравнение этих двух авторов демонстрирует более широкий культурный диалог между восточной и западной идеологиями, подчеркивая, как оба автора ориентируются на взаимодействие религиозной идентичности и культурного плюрализма. Анализируя произведения Аголли и Фрашери, авторы статьи утверждают, что их работы дают важнейшее понимание развивающейся литературной артикуляции духовности и культурной интеграции в постдиктаторской Албании.

Ключевые слова: культурное влияние, Бекташи, религиозная идентичность, культурный плюрализм, традиция.

Summary

Cultural and Mystical Oriental Influences in Albanian Literature (Naim Frashëri, Dritëro Agolli)

This article explores the role of mysticism, spirituality, and cultural synthesis in Albanian literature, using the works of Dritëro Agolli and Naim Frashëri as central case studies. The analysis of Agolli's *The Devil's Chest* reveals how his integration of Bektashism functions as a philosophical and spiritual bridge between Eastern and Western traditions. Agolli portrays key mystical practices, such as the Sema dervish dance, while weaving themes of secrecy, hidden manuscripts, and the quest for truth, all of which are emblematic of both Sufi mysticism and Western literary forms. These motifs reflect Agolli's post-communist literary engagement with Albania's spiritual landscape, positioning Bektashi principles as a source of inclusion and personal fulfillment. The article also explores Naim Frashëri's contributions, particularly his allegorical exploration of mysticism and his depiction of the quest for truth, offering insights into his influence on Albanian literary spirituality. The comparison between these two authors demonstrates the broader cultural dialogue between Eastern and Western ideologies, highlighting how both authors navigate the intersection of religious identity and cultural pluralism. Through the analysis of Agolli and Frashëri, the article asserts that their works provide crucial insights into the evolving literary articulation of spirituality and cultural integration in post-dictatorship Albania.

Key words: cultural influence, Bektashi, religious identity, cultural pluralism, tradition.

Introduction

Well-known writers of World Literature have crossed religion and literature borders with the aim of enriching each-other. Many writers have considered Bible as a source full of stories and characters that have inspired them for their metaphorical and parabolic value, others have seen the Quran, and some even the Indian Muhabharata. Since the beginning, Albanian literature starts with a strong tradition of cultivating literature through religious influence. This will continue even later during the national Renaissance, during which there will be writers who will testify how their literary creativity becomes a model of how the influence of religion could be productive and not restrictive. The main representative personality of the literature of the national Renaissance, Naimi, in some of his works, takes subjects or even discussions from the Bektashi religious history, a tariqa originating from the Islamic religion. He and other writers emphasize the mediating nature and the originality lying in the interconnective nature of this religion among others.

Bektashism is based on a religious philosophy that relates without prejudice, with belief in God, equally for all the other religions. After the fall of communism in 1990, writers and artists rediscover spiritual harmony in the tradition of the Bektashi faith. Agolli is one of the writers who returns to the tradition of the Bektashi faith that is also the religion of his family, and the faith of the literary figures of the past that he revered, ex. Naim Frashëri. Agolli considers Bektashism as faith and also a philosophy that represents an open path, accepting all other beliefs, people, ideas, because it is based on tolerance, brotherhood and love, which according to him, are the main attributes converging the human and the divine. For him, humanity must aim the divine, only through moral perfection and enlightenment, by being present in substance and in spirit, as a moral, mystical and universal being.

Methodology

This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining textual, historical, phenomenological, and comparative approaches to explore the relationship between literature, religion, and cultural contexts. Textual analysis, through close reading, reveals how Bektashism shapes the writers' worldviews and creative processes, while historical analysis situates these works within their socio-political and cultural frameworks.

Phenomenology examines the subjective and spiritual dimensions of Bektashism, exploring its influence on perceptions of divinity and existence as reflected in literary forms. This approach highlights

how religious philosophy informs the writers' engagement with spirituality and its translation into literature.

A comparative approach investigates the intersections between Bektashism and other traditions, such as Persian mysticism and Christian influences, showcasing its syncretic role in Albanian literature. This method reveals how writers integrate diverse cultural ideas, creating a synthesis that is both local and universal.

Finally, a diachronic perspective traces the evolution of Bektashi influences from Naim Frashëri to Dritëro Agolli, analyzing how successive generations adapted these ideas to their contexts and demonstrating their lasting impact on Albanian literary and cultural identity.

The Tradition of Persian Culture in Albanian Culture

The influence of Persian culture and language has an enduring legacy and a long-standing tradition within Albanian culture and literature. The majority of scholars trace the origins of this influence to the 15th–16th centuries.

Certain researchers have noted, in their studies, the initial interactions between Persians and the peoples of the Balkans during an earlier, pre-Islamic period. However, their primary focus remains on the interactions between Persian and Albanian cultures beginning in the 15th century and beyond (Osmani 1998). Other scholars place the earliest contacts later, during the 16th century. "This acquaintance of Albanians with Persian culture and science is not new; it has a centuries-old foundation, and its traces can be found as early as the 16th century" (Hamiti 2009: 258).

Religious institutions, including madrasas and tekkes, served as vehicles for the dissemination of diverse forms of knowledge, both theological and otherwise. The tekkes, widespread across Albanian territories, not only disseminated Bektashi theological knowledge but also became influential centers for the diffusion of Persian culture, art, and science. Many Albanian scholars and intellectuals composed works in Persian and compiled Persian-Turkish dictionaries. For example, the Bektashi scholar Ibrahim Dede created a Persian-Turkish dictionary in the 15th–16th centuries, while Sami Frashëri produced a Turkish-Persian dictionary and contributed articles on Persian language, culture, history, and literature. Persian poetry was read in its original form for centuries across Albanian territories. Consequently, manuscript copies of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Hafiz Shirazi's *Divan*, Attar's *Mantiqu't-Tayr* or *Pendnameh*, Rumi's *Masnavi*, as well as numerous other scientific,

philosophical, and religious works in Persian, can be found in the libraries of madrasas, tekkes, and private collections across Albanian lands.

A testament to this cultural milieu is the emergence of Albanian literature written in the Arabic script. Under this influence, certain writers began to identify themselves as “the Saadi of their time,” exemplified by Ibrahim N. Frakulla, who, in his qasidas, adopted the structural elements of Persian verse. Qemaludin Shemimia, a prominent figure of the 17th–18th centuries, is widely recognized for his contribution to the propagation of Bektashi religious literature (Shuteriqi 1978: 199).

Islamic mysticism and Persian philosophy spread extensively in Albania through both the Sunni branch and the Bektashi order. The influence of the Bektashi order was particularly pronounced in Albanian centers where tekkes were active, including Tetovo, Elbasan, Frashër, Konica, Kruja, Rahovec, Mlecan, and Shkodra (Osmani 1998: 98). These tekkes housed extensive libraries containing old and rare manuscripts that provided access to Persian culture and philosophy for devoted followers, transforming them into “oases of civilization” (Dela Roka 1994: 41).

Most Albanian writers were acquainted with Shia mysticism and the dominant Persian philosophy, as represented by renowned mystics such as Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali, and Rumi. Tair Skenderasi, also known as Nasibiu, established in Frashër (1815) a prominent tekke that became notable for its religious, patriotic, and cultural activities.

In Albanian literary historiography, the epic poem *Karbala* (Qerbelaja 1898) by Naim Frashëri is considered the quintessential religious literary work of Bektashi culture. However, numerous other unpublished works also circulated among believers and preachers who frequented the tekkes. Before Naim Frashëri's poems, Dalip Frashëri had written an epic poem and, in Albanian, rendered the 65,000-verse *Hadikaja*, a monumental work of poetry (Myderizi 1996). Initially conceived as an adaptation of the Turkish writer Fuzuli's work (Osmani 1998: 43), Dalip Frashëri enriched the text with his own episodes, reflections, thoughts, and emotional tone. Completed in 1842, it circulated as a manuscript, primarily used by visitors to the tekke in Frashër (Abazi-Egro 2015: 16). While it is more a translation and adaptation than an original poetic composition, the work nonetheless inspired its readers, preaching the values of self-sacrifice for higher ideals. In 1868, Shahin Frashëri composed the epic poem *Muhtarname*, consisting of 12,000 verses, which also circulated as a manuscript within the tekke.

The scholars have regarded Naim Frashëri's *The Bektashi Notebook* (Fletore e Bektashinjet) as a collection of original poetry that encapsulates Pantheist philosophy alongside other key aspects of the Bektashi order (Mann 1955: 35-41). In this poetic work, Frashëri undertakes a comprehensive exploration of Bektashism, approaching it first from a general theoretical perspective and then delving into specific concepts. He examines Bektashism as a Shia doctrine with Persian roots while also addressing its role within the context of place, language, and nationhood. Through this dual lens, Frashëri analyzes the foundational Shia doctrine and contextualizes it within the Albanian cultural framework.

Attendees of the tekkes received not only a profound religious education but also extensive exposure to the culture, language, and philosophy of Eastern civilizations. The quality of this education is underscored by the fact that Naim Frashëri, at the age of just 25, authored and published an important work on Iranian studies, *The Persian Grammar, According to the New Method* – a text that was republished multiple times and noted for the fact that “this manual was used in the Albanian madrasas” (Osmani 1998: 93). Frashëri followed in the footsteps of the Bektashi fraternity, continuing the legacy established by Haxhi Bektash at the beginning of the 14th century.

In *The Bektashi Notebook*, Frashëri underscores the values of religious harmony and love for one's nation, writing: “The Bektashi belief resembles to a wide road directed by the light, wisdom, fraternity, love, humanism, and all that is good. On one side lie the flowers of wisdom, at the other side those of the truth” (Frashëri 1978a: 165).

Frashëri's epic poem *Karbala* (Qerbelaja), named after the Shia pilgrimage site, emerges as a natural continuation of the spiritual and literary traditions shaped by the Bektashi worldview. The influence of Persian literature in Frashëri's works has been recognized by numerous scholars. Jorgo Buló examines the mystical Sufi sources and the imprint of Persian poetry on Frashëri's oeuvre (Buló 1999: 131-161). Similarly, Ernest Koliqi, in his study *Influenze orientali nella letteratura albanese* (Oriental Influences in Albanian Literature), describes Frashëri as “a bright mind and a notable representative of Eastern culture” (Koliqi 1972: 132-152).

Naim and Sami Frashëri established a distinguished literary tradition that exemplifies how Persian literary and spiritual influence could serve as a source of creative productivity rather than an imposition of constraints. “He was thus trying to transmute the Bektashis' religious doctrine into a vehicle of national aspiration” (Duijzings 2002: 64).

Bektashism, a branch of Islam, was perceived in Albania as both exotic and imbued with a strong local and national significance, particularly during the 20th century. As a cultural crossroads, Albania absorbed influences from both Western and Eastern traditions, a dynamic reflected in various Bektashi concepts and practices. Naim Frashëri's interpretation of Bektashism, which "from the doctrinal perspective can be considered as a syncretism involving doctrinal elements of the Sunni, Shia, and Christianity," is deeply rooted in the core principles, experiential dimension, and worldview of Bektashism (Fortino 1995: 633-644).

While Albanian scholars have predominantly focused on Naim Frashëri as a writer who employs literature to glorify the nation, foreign researchers have consistently explored the unique connection between his literary works and Bektashism (Gëzhilli 2021).

The Cultural and Inherited Religious Influences on Dritëro Agolli's Literary Opus

In Dritëro Agolli's literary opus, both in poetry and prose, the influence of oriental philosophy and literature is palpable. Same as other authors writing in an atheist regime struggled between the ideologically correctness and religiosity (Qose, Mullahi 2024: 295) Particularly after the collapse of the dictatorial regime in the 1990s, the writer began exploring new literary dimensions, striving to better understand the universe and regain his inner equilibrium. This search for balance also led him to engage with religious inquiry. The profound political changes and the disillusionment with the ideologies he had once adhered to instilled in him a fear of losing his sense of balance, which he endeavored to restore through religious belief.

His quest for equilibrium prompted a return to his familial religious roots. In the past, he had identified as both a "communist and Muslim"; however, after the collapse of his political beliefs, he sought refuge in the latter, which he considered his more enduring identity.

Agolli hailed from a family with a Bektashi tradition, with his paternal grandfathers holding the position of "myhipë". According to Agolli, his family was well-known and respected within the religious community. In April 1995, he reflected on his familial origins, acknowledging his reading about his religious heritage: "I don't pretend to have thorough knowledge, although I have read about the battlefield of Karbala, about the war of Ali and Muawiyah, about Haji Bektash Veli, the founder of Bektashism. I have also been in the city of Haji Bektash in North Turkey, as well as in Konya and Ürgüp, visiting these religious and mystical centers in Turkey".

Agolli was transparent about his religious beliefs and his perspectives on Bektashism, sharing them through numerous published articles, including those in the religious, sociological, and artistic journal *Urtësia* ("The Wisdom"), which is published by the World Headquarters of the Bektashi in Albania. In these writings, he elaborated on the aspects of the doctrine that he valued. Agolli described Bektashism as "a special path of revealing the cosmic and the humane, which also can define the mission of man as a conscious being". He further explained: "Bektashism seeks the harmony of the values with the obligations towards God, also including the harmony with other religions, wisdom, and objects of the universe" (Agolli 1998: 22).

Embracing Bektashism held significant importance for Agolli for various reasons. This tariqat, originating from the Islamic faith, has established "an intermediate typology and an interconnective originality"; it is, in fact, "a universal treasure of ideas, concepts, a powerful thinking ferment between East and West". Its unifying strength derives from its inherently liberal nature. Bektashism is founded on a religious philosophy that fosters connections without prejudice, treating all religions and beliefs with equal respect. Agolli holds Naim Frashëri in high esteem as a poet, referring to him as "the creator of Albanian Bektashism" (Agolli 1994: 8).

The reverence Agolli has for Naim Frashëri, whom he describes as "the greatest heir of harmony", may also explain his affinity for Bektashism. The notable works of Naim Frashëri, *The Bektashi Notebook* and *Karbala*, underscore the profound influence of Iranian philosophy in general, and Bektashism in particular. Naim's *Karbala* is regarded by scholars as "the statute of Albanian Bektashis, specifying their rights and obligations in general" (Osmani 1998: 115). Agolli was well-acquainted with these two works by Naim, appreciating their value and having studied them thoroughly.

Following the political changes of the 1990s, it is likely that Agolli incorporated into his literary work the universal ecumenism that forms the core of Bektashism – an ecumenism that embraces monotheism and represents a fusion of diverse influences, embodied through anthropological imagery. Viewing Bektashism as a religion open to all other religions, peoples, and ideas, based on the principles of fraternity and love, Agolli adopted it as both a personal and artistic path. For him, humanity's ultimate goal should be to connect with the divine through the moral perfection and enlightenment of the individual, both in substance and spirit, as a moral, mystical, and universal being.

Agolli highlights the fact that “Bektashism has created its own poetic tradition” and that “Naim had experimented with the intertwining of both of them, the idea of religion and poetry, as something big and unique” (Agolli 1994: 8).

Agolli’s and Naim Frashëri’s Admiration for Rumi’s Poetry, Mysticism, and Spirituality

In *The Devil’s Chest*, Agolli frequently invokes the figure of Rumi, quoting him as a central influence in the novel. This deliberate reference highlights Rumi not only as a poet but as a profound thinker. Agolli represents Rumi figuratively, stating, “He (Rumi) is not a prophet, but he has a sacred book like the prophets”, alluding to Rumi’s *Masnavi*. Bektashi followers, even those outside the tariqat, revere Sufi mystics, particularly Rumi. It is well-documented that Haji Bektash Veli, a foundational figure in Bektashism, was a Muslim nurtured within the spiritual tradition of Sufism and was closely associated with prominent figures such as Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, Sadreddin Konevi, and Evhaduddin Kirmani (Izeti 2021: 38).

Agolli’s admiration for Rumi can be more fully understood in the context of Naim Frashëri’s deep veneration for the poet, as Rumi’s worldview and poetry served as the primary source of inspiration for Naim’s own literary works. Scholars have long noted the influence of Persian motifs in Naim’s lyrical poetry, revealing a clear connection to the classical Persian poets. Naim found in their poetry a reflection of his own religious beliefs – Bektashism and Pantheism – where the divine and the human coexist harmoniously. Through the poetry of Persian Sufi poets, Naim discovered visions of life centered on universal love for humanity and the eternal nature of love. Naim’s poem *The Flute* (“Fyelli”) (Frashëri 1890: 25) has been interpreted as “a painful source of tears for the migrants”, evoking the sorrow of separation for those who are far from home (Shaplllo 1996: 90). Çabej was the first to draw attention to the fact that Naim’s *The Flute* was inspired by Rumi’s *The Song of the Reed* (Çabej 1996: 48). *The Flute* bears a striking resemblance to Rumi’s *Story of the Ney* (ney: reed flute), in which the melody of the flute dissolves sorrow. Naim’s adaptation of the flute’s sound symbolizes the human desire for a return to the cycle of rebirth. *The Song of the Reed*, also known as “The Song of the Flute”, encapsulates the mystical Sufi spirituality, with stylistically ambiguous metaphors and symbols that are drawn from the Quranic text or possibly older sources. These symbols echo Rumi’s interpretation of Quranic spirituality in his *Masnavi* (Bulo 1996: 13).

At the heart of *The Song of the Reed* is a lyrical meditation on the separation from the divine

“Friend.” This separation can be understood both as a longing for the divine guide and as a metaphor for the loss of a human friend. In the Albanian translation of Rumi’s poem, we encounter the following lines: *Fyelli është shok besnik i atij që e ndanë nga një mik / Ende na sëmbojnë zemrën meloditë e tij*. (Listen to the (ney) reed flute as it tells a tale / Complaining of separation).

The core of Rumi’s *The Song of the Reed* lies in the contemplation of the pain caused by separation from the divine Friend. One of Rumi’s most iconic stories involves the ney (reed flute), which appeared to him in a dreamlike state, carrying the sorrow of his lost spiritual guide, a dervish. The melodies of the flute seemed to emanate from otherworldly realms. Similarly, Naim Frashëri’s *The Flute* speaks of a song that is heard, but whose deeper meaning remains elusive and indecipherable.

The inspiration for these verses may be traced to the departure of Shams Tabrizi, a Persian thinker and poet who was Rumi’s close companion and spiritual mentor. After Shams’ departure, Rumi, in deep grief, began to whirl in a state of ecstatic trance, which led to his attainment of deeper spiritual wisdom.

While Naim was captivated by Rumi’s *Ney* poem, Agolli was drawn to the Sema, the whirling dance of the dervishes, which was popularized by Rumi’s poetry and Sufism. This dance, beyond its ritualistic significance, was intended to induce the ecstasy Rumi described, helping participants to achieve a fuller understanding of existence and the purification of the human soul.

In *The Devil’s Chest*, Agolli refers to Rumi with profound reverence, calling him “the greatest Persian-Turkish poet”, “the colossal poet and the Hazrat”, “Mevlana Mohammed Celalettin Rumi”, and “Hazrat Mevlana”. Agolli’s characters frequently quote sayings from Rumi’s *Masnavi*, such as: “All loves are a bridge to Divine love. Yet, those who have not had a taste of it do not know!” and “The human being is created by the soil, if the man is not modest, he cannot be called the son of Adam” (Agolli 1997: 85).

Agolli’s admiration for Naim Frashëri is also evident in the novel, where he refers to Naim as “The great Naim”, “The one who has been the first man in Albania, the master”, and “The exceptional lover of work”. When describing the Albanian landscape, villages, and farming, Agolli alludes to Naim’s poetry, stating: “Only a great man could write *Bagëti e Bujqësi*”, a work that romanticizes Albanian nature, farming, and its people. “There’s no other like him”, Agolli remarks, adding, “The great Naim was right to sing with such nobleness to the livestock and agriculture”. Throughout the novel, Agolli’s characters regu-

larly quote Naim's verses while reflecting on nature, language, and agriculture.

The Sema Dance in *The Devil's Chest*: An Expression of Mevlana's Dervishes' Philosophy

Dritëro Agolli's 1997 novel *The Devil's Chest* stands out as a distinctive work in both the author's oeuvre and the broader history of Albanian literature. It is a novel that reveals a deep familiarity with oriental culture, an aspect particularly striking given the author's previous works. Agolli demonstrates an unexpected breadth of knowledge about various places and their histories, especially evident in the detailed descriptions of Sufi rites and rituals.

This knowledge is most notably present when the two main protagonists travel to Turkey to attend an academic conference. In addition to their academic duties, they become spectators and participants in the Mevlevi Sema dervish dance, an experience that Agolli portrays in rich detail. The author dedicates significant portions of the novel to describing this ceremony, highlighting not only the choreography of the dance itself but also the profound devotion and exaltation it inspires in the protagonists and other attendees. As Agolli writes:

"After this the dervishes..., they repeated three times a strange walk while a slow song that resembled a cry could be heard. This was the greeting that one soul gave to another, concealed inside the beings" (Agolli 1996: 184).

In the Sema, each participant holds a symbolic role, with the entire ceremony serving as a representation of the movement of celestial bodies. The white robes symbolize the shroud, while the tall brown *kylafs* evoke the gravestones in cemeteries. The dervishes' whirling around themselves and around the *semazen* (the sheikh) mirrors the movement of the Earth on its axis and in orbit around the sun.

Agolli's fascination with this dance is evident, but why did he choose to incorporate it into his novel? The first indication of his interest lies in the connection between the Sema and the name of Hazrat Mevlana Mohammed Celaleddin Rumi. The ceremony's description as a meeting point of the human soul with music, and its circular symbolism, closely aligns with Agolli's own view of humanity's place on Earth and in the universe. Agolli is opposed to fixed ideas and static feelings; the themes of perpetual transformation and the journey towards truth, resonating with Heraclitus' philosophy of change, are prominent in his work. He rejects the notion of resignation, the acceptance of defeat, and the stagnation of unchangeable truths. Instead, he champions an inner dynamism that is also reflected in his characters. In contrast, Rumi is known for his disdain of "obedient

dialectic philosophers" who adhere to fixed truths, rejecting the "logic of change" (Zeqo 2001: 58).

The Encounter with Mysticism in Agolli's *The Devil's Chest*

In *The Devil's Chest*, Agolli describes the renowned Sema dervish dance, incorporating it into the narrative as part of the technique known as "a novel within the novel". The philosophical and spiritual foundations of the Sema dance, as practiced by the Mevlevi order, are deeply rooted in the aesthetics of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, who centers his teachings around three core values: poetry, music, and the Sema dance. Agolli's portrayal of the dance is detailed and evocative, as he seeks to preserve its mysticism while simultaneously making its meaning accessible to the reader. The Sema ceremony is an act of devotion, encompassing the listening to *Ilahis* (sacred hymns), religious music based on sacred texts, and the act of whirling in unison with this music.

The protagonist of the novel, Cute Babulja, is intimately familiar with the hidden meaning behind the Sema dance. It is through his words that Agolli attempts to convey the significance of this dance, which, for him, represents both a philosophical practice and a religious rite. The dance serves as a path to purification, an act that projects the past onto the future while striving for an equilibrium that reflects the dualistic nature of life – a nature that is paradoxical in its very essence.

For Agolli, the exhilaration induced by the Sema dance is viewed as a ceremonial act of reconnection with God. This is achieved through a process of exhaustion, exhilaration, awe, realization, and total joy. As the emotions are enlightened, the individual self disappears, and light pours from every direction, while darkness solidifies like stone. The ecstatic experience derived from the Sema dance mirrors the writer's own creative process. Just as the dervish seeks liberation through the whirling dance, the writer yearns for similar freedom and release in the act of writing. The mystical experience of self-annihilation – devotion to God through religious ecstasy – and the subsequent path of adhering to Bektashi principles represent the journey toward understanding life and becoming part of the brotherhood.

Early Sufism, with its Pantheistic worldview, emphasizes the union with God, and mysticism is a foundational concept within Sufism. The Sema dance, the dervishes, and many Bektashi rituals are enveloped in mysticism, a theme Agolli emphasizes through the expressions of fear and awe voiced by his characters – often masked by humor. As one character observes, "these dervishes make wonders", "miracle maker dervishes", and "What is they hypnotize

us". Others remark, "The dervishes may put a spell on us", "the dervishes and their hypnotizing tricks", and "enigmatic dancers" further underscoring the mystical aura surrounding these practices.

In Konya, the home of the flying dervishes, Agolli introduces a Turkish character who serves as a double for Cute Babulja. This character not only resembles him physically but also shares similar expressions and ideas. Their conversations often turn to the mystical abilities of the dervishes. Cute Babulja, seeking to deepen his understanding, asks his well-versed friend Bamka, who is knowledgeable about Mevlana Rumi, whether Rumi "has written anything on metamorphoses". Agolli's awareness of the mysticism surrounding the dervishes and their brotherhood is extensive, and he describes it in vivid detail, all while maintaining the characteristic humor that pervades his prose. For instance, he elaborates on how the Sema dance evokes profound feelings of inner purification, a search for peace, and a quest for the ultimate Truth (Agolli 1996: 173).

The Unity of East and West: Bektashism as a Cultural and Spiritual Bridge

The novel *The Devil's Chest* aims to convey the idea that "there is a real balance of values" between East and West. A significant portion of the narrative centers on the journey of two characters to Turkey, specifically Istanbul and Konya. This section of the novel draws inspiration from the author's own visit in 1995, during which he toured the Topkapi Palace Museum, the former residence of the Ottoman sultans. Among the treasures he observed were a gold-plated bone fragment of John the Baptist, Muhammad's weapons, and his footprint, cast in gold.

It is no coincidence that Agolli situates the scientific conference, which serves as the premise for the protagonists' journey, in Konya. According to mythology, Konya was the first city to be revived after the Great Flood that destroyed humanity. Once a Greek city, it underwent successive transformations: invaded by Arabs for two centuries, absorbed into the Byzantine Empire, later becoming part of the Seljuk Empire, and eventually integrated into the Ottoman Empire. As the center of the Mevlevi mystical order founded by Rumi, Konya is a repository of cultural synthesis, bearing the traces of various civilizations that have shaped its rich heritage.

Agolli demonstrates extensive knowledge of Oriental culture, as illustrated in many parts of the novel. For instance, his characters participate in a conference where they present topics exploring the connections between Albanian folklore and Eastern cultures. Cute Babulja delivers a presentation titled *Albanian Folklore and Nasreddin*, while Bamkë Dy-

njaja discusses the influence of Mevlana Rumi on Albanian writers such as Nazim Berati, Hasan Zyko Kamberi, and Muhamet Kyçyku. These presentation titles underscore Agolli's erudition regarding the Arabic – and particularly Persian – cultural influences on Albania. The academic interests of his characters reflect the author's own preoccupations, which extend to the mysticism of dervish life, their music, and their extraordinary dance, as well as their philosophy and way of living.

Academic Shaban Sinani highlights Agolli's efforts to create cultural equilibrium in his works, noting: "The writer is cautious and provocative with the way he chooses to name things, aiming to persuade the reader to understand that the eastern and western civilizations are two views of the same human culture, in which there is no place for hierarchies and protocols" (Sinani 2012: 210).

Agolli's profound admiration for diverse traditions and rites stems from his belief in the universal nature of human values across the globe. His erudition in Eastern cultures and philosophy underpins his advocacy for a harmonious philosophy of balance. Disillusioned by the human idealism that culminated in communism, Agolli turns instead to religion and a belief in God as a source of inner fulfillment.

Mystic thinkers maintain that reality is singular, and all other beings are manifestations of this unity. Naim Frashëri encapsulates this concept with the verses: "They come from there, they will go back there, everything vanishes, besides his face" (Zeqo 2001: 58).

A similar sentiment surfaces in *The Devil's Chest* when, at the conclusion of the Sema dance, during which Cute Babulja participates, a passage from the Quran is recited: "East as well as West are of Allah's, because Allah involves everything, every place, He is Inclusive, he is Wise" (Agolli 1997: 185).

The movements of the dervishes, as depicted in the novel, aim to inspire and embody the ideal of universal peace, as outlined in their religious doctrine.

Bektashism in Agolli's Novels

Scholars have noted traces of Bektashism in Agolli's works, particularly in the novel *The Man with the Cannon* (*Njeriu me top*), where the character Mere the old man embodies attributes of a Bektashi Dede-baba (religious leader) (Sinani 2012: 110). Pantheistic elements can also be observed in his poem *Mother Albania* (*Nënë Shqipëri*).

In *The Devil's Chest*, Agolli portrays characters who approach Bektashism either as a philosophy or as a deeply held religious practice. While some engage daily in rites and prayers venerating significant

saints, others perceive it as a way of thinking rather than a formal religion. Throughout the novel, Agolli employs narrative opportunities to reference pivotal figures and narratives central to Bektashi history. For instance, one character explains, *Don't be like Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr and the favorite wife of Mohammed who revolted against Ali ibn Talib, the great Abas Ali. Do you know that Aisha was caught by Abas Ali and kept in Medina, only afterwards she repented, and only in the name of the Prophet Mohammed he released her* (Agolli 1997: 253).

This passage highlights key figures of the Bektashi tradition, including Imam Abbas Ali and the accursed Muawiyah, who rebelled against him. Agolli's characters also subtly reference Haji Bektash Veli, the founder of the *tariqa*. These references, delivered discreetly due to the novel's setting in an atheist communist society, reflect the reverence for Haji Bektash Veli as a spiritual figure. For example, characters mention swearing by his name to assert credibility or recount the tradition of him speaking into the ears of the dying.

Agolli's portrayal of Bektashi families aligns with his belief that, *In Bektashi families people showed a strange equality between men and women, the old and young ones, because they considered God was in everyone* (Zeqo 2001: 35).

These principles manifest in the harmonious relationships between his characters, such as the love between Fatime and Selman Thana or the familial interactions in Sherif ABC's household.

Agolli's affinity for the Bektashi worldview stems from its liberal and tolerant practices. Scholars often categorize it as a heterodox form of Islam due to its openness and adaptability, emphasizing its role as a universal model for transmitting religious values in an inclusive society. Indeed, Bektashism highlights the *central role in the renewal of Islamic pluralism worldwide* (Schwartz 2007: 20-21).

The novel's setting in Konya – symbolizing a synthesis of civilizations – is particularly significant. Konya, with its juxtaposition of mosques, churches, and ancient shrines, epitomizes coexistence and resonates with Agolli's rejection of borders and divisions. His depiction of Bektashism similarly reflects this ethos of inclusivity, presenting it as a middle path characterized by mutual understanding and tolerance. The parallels between Bektashi veneration of the Twelve Imams and the Christian veneration of saints, particularly in Orthodox traditions, further underscore this harmony (Zeqo 2001: 17).

Bektashism's spiritual structure also emphasizes secrecy as a fundamental principle, a motif Agolli intricately weaves into his narratives. While Naim

Frashëri explored this mystery through material and subjective dimensions, and Lasgush Poradeci captured it poetically as *More secret than secrecy itself*, Agolli develops his post-dictatorship novels around enigmatic manuscripts that defy interpretation.

Agolli's treatment of secrecy incorporates both exoteric and esoteric dimensions. The concealed manuscript within *The Devil's Chest* symbolizes the inner depths of its innocent author, whose soul becomes entwined with its revelation. This theme resonates with Ja'far al-Sadiq's notion of *the secrecy of something that remains secret, the secrecy that only another secret can decipher. A secrecy above the secrecy*. Agolli imbues this secrecy with the attribute of *the forbidden*, intertwining it with the pursuit of truth.

In Agolli's work, secrecy is where truth resides. The manuscript's hidden nature necessitates its preservation, with Sherif ABC striving to uncover its entirety and bring it to light. This act of revelation is imbued with profound significance: *Everything that comes to light shines, it chases away the shadows, and the truth shines in front of everyone*. The interplay of light and darkness echoes the religious perspective in Naim Frashëri's *Karbala: The Goodness comes to light / in the Shadows remains the evil!* (Frashëri 1978b: 151).

Through Agolli's intricate exploration of Bektashism, secrecy, and inclusivity, his novels transcend cultural and religious boundaries, offering profound reflections on the universal search for truth and spiritual fulfillment.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we argue that while faith reveals absolute truth, literature offers artistic truth, often delving into themes that transcend mere imagination to foster cultural dialogue and mutual understanding. Literature, as explored in this study, acts as a bridge for communication between people of differing faiths, civilizations, and political views. Writers possess a unique ability to cultivate appreciation for diverse beliefs, promoting the values of coexistence and mutual respect. Figures from Albanian literature, such as Naim and Sami Frashëri, have exemplified this role, viewing Bektashism not merely as a religion but as a philosophy that fosters understanding within a multireligious society.

In this context, Dritëro Agolli's shift toward Bektashism, following his disillusionment with communism, highlights the *tariqa's* liberal, tolerant principles that advocate unity and cultural harmony. Agolli's works present Bektashism as a universal model for transmitting religious values in an inclusive society, while also contributing to the global renewal of Islamic pluralism. Similarly, Naim Frashëri's poetic

synthesis of Bektashi pantheistic beliefs, influenced by Persian Sufi thought, envisions a world founded on universal love and transcendence. Agolli, too, emphasizes the mystical elements of Bektashism, using the dervish's music, dance, and spiritual philosophies to illustrate the harmonization of Eastern and Western civilizations.

Through Agolli's exploration of secrecy and spiritual quests, he further deepens this vision of unity. His depiction of characters interacting with Bektashi figures and rituals highlights the importance of co-existence, even in restrictive circumstances. The symbolism of Konya, a city that epitomizes cultural synthesis, serves as a metaphor for Agolli's broader literary project. Ultimately, both Frashëri and Agolli demonstrate how Albanian literature, while rooted in national context, contributes to a broader, universal dialogue on the coexistence of cultures and beliefs. Their works reaffirm the enduring power of literature to bridge divides, offering a vision of unity that remains profoundly relevant in contemporary discourse.

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