



THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMAN'S FIGURE IN THE SENTIMENTAL NOVEL "IF I WERE A BOY" OF HAKI STERMILLI

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Abstract: In this study paper, we will survey: "The religious aspect in the novel "If I were a boy" by Haki Stërmillit, and the main objective will be the observation and analysis of the woman's figure in the literature of this author, which is a literature with a sentimentalist style.

The sentimental Albanian prose of this author, with themes and scenes of Albanian life, has played an important role in the History of Albanian Literature and the fact that this topic has not been studied earlier is something special. This paper presents the key role that religion has in the characterization of the characters, in the psychological breakdown, but also in their fate. The analysis of the text of the above-mentioned author will be the main method of the work.

The purpose of the research is to see the author's intention to bring closer to the reader's optics, the most prominent religious characteristic segments of the sentimentalist prose, different moments and characters of life and time. We will do all this thanks to the help of literature, scientific research and materials that refer to this prose, using the comparative research, historical and empirical method as a scientific research methodology.

Keywords: sentimentalist style, religious aspect, the figure of the woman, social norms, patriarchal society, religion

1. Introduction

The relationship between religion and literature has long been a fertile ground for scholarly exploration, as numerous literary works draw upon religious narratives as foundational frameworks, sources of inspiration, or primary models. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in epic poetry, where imagery and allegories often echo themes from sacred texts. For instance, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Aligeri, 1998), composed between 1308 and 1320 and published posthumously in 1320, rigorously examines concepts of sin and redemption through a meticulously structured journey in the afterlife, deeply rooted in Christian theology.

Religion offers a rich symbolic language through which authors convey complex meanings. Allegorical figures representing virtues or vices frequently reflect religious ideals, as exemplified by John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (first published in 1678). However, many modern and contemporary authors adopt a critical stance toward religious themes, challenging traditional beliefs and practices. Notable examples include Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which interrogate the complexities and inherent contradictions within religious ideologies, often sparking significant social debates.



Religion is also intertwined with cultural identity, and literature frequently serves as a mirror reflecting this relationship. Writers from diverse cultural contexts draw upon their religious heritage to articulate broader cultural narratives, as exemplified by Gabriel García Márquez's use of religious motifs in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The evolution of literature reveals shifts in attitudes toward religion across historical periods. Movements such as the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modernism have each provided distinct perspectives on faith, generating literary expressions that reflect the corresponding social transformations.

The interplay between religion and literature reaches a pivotal point in Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1953), where he examines how the history of literature is profoundly shaped by religious influences—both in narrative structure and spiritual depth. He explores how different traditions, particularly biblical and classical storytelling, shape the evolution of mimesis, especially in the development of realism. Moreover, the debates between different worldviews based on religions, Gnosticism, or Rationalism (Ellwood 1999, 11), are the core part of the modern thought by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The experiential approach towards the divine and the supernatural thrived in the works of (Steiner, 1943) creating a new approach towards the dogmatic views of the canonical religion. Literature (and art in general) was considered as a manifestation of the human consciousness enlightenment, and the work of art was considered as profound as a religious experience. Religion remains a significant and enduring component in World Literature, and Albanian literature is no exception, but whereas the western literature feeds its narrative schemes, metaphors and structures in the Bible (Frye, 1982), Albanian literature was influenced by the nuances of its multireligious context (Qose and Mullahi 2024, 283). While tolerance (IDM, 2028) is often seen as the defining value of Albania's multireligious fabric, this article explores the more nuanced and complex truths found in certain culturally isolated realities.

The first Albanian novelist (Nikaj, 1892) explored Christian themes in his works, addressing not only the sociopolitical realities of his time but also articulating his concerns regarding the plight and injustices faced by Christians. Over time, Albanian literature evolved to incorporate varied approaches to religion, using it as a lens to critique societal issues, express personal concerns, or offer original perspectives on themes such as homeland, tradition, and progress (Brahaj Halili 2019, 75 – 80). A particularly notable example is Haki Stërmilli's *If I Were a Boy* (Stërmilli, 2002), firstly published in Albania in 1936, this novel received an extraordinary reception and was immediately republished in 1938. This sentimentalist novel stands out for its treatment of religion, not as a matter of personal, sentimental, or national concern but as a critical tool to highlight the position of the individual—specifically women—in society. Stërmilli examines societal development, emphasizing the impact of Islamic religious practices as imposed by familial and societal pressures.

Unlike Islamic literature or the foundational influence of the Qur'an on Arabic literary traditions—as seen in works like Al-Ma'arri's *The Necessity of What is Unnecessary* completed around 1021, Rumi's *Spiritual Couplets* (1265–1273), or Hafiz's *The Collected Poems* (14th century)—Stërmilli's inspiration stems directly from the Albanian socio-historical reality. Islam, introduced during the Ottoman conquest (Faroqh, 2009), is portrayed in the novel with negative connotations, depicted as a regressive force intertwined with patriarchal traditions, poverty, and illiteracy.



This study examines how Stërmilli's sentimental novel constructs the figure of the Albanian woman, particularly how her identity is shaped by the influence of religious rules. Through this lens, the paper analyzes the broader societal impact of religion, especially on the family and individual. It seeks to elucidate the thematic significance of religion in character development and narrative structure, offering insights into the work's overarching vision. The research underscores how women's lives, shaped by patriarchy and religious doctrine, provide a fertile ground for feminist literary criticism. Historically, Albanian society has regarded women as inferior beings, as evidenced by legal documents from the Middle Ages, which defined women as "a bellow to be carried." (Gjeçovi, 1933) This marginalization persisted through the Ottoman occupation, reinforcing isolation and societal regression (Schmit, 2002). In Albanian romantic literature, the female figure frequently emerges as tragic, shaped by circumstances of societal backwardness and a patriarchal mindset.

This study aims to address a previously unexplored aspect of Albanian literature, contributing to the enrichment of critical scholarship on the subject. While the focus here is on Haki Stërmilli's work, the findings may open avenues for future research encompassing other authors and texts that engage with similar themes.

2. Methods

As a research methodology we will use the comparative (research), historical-literary method. Our research-scientific activity will be guided by a research plan and followed by several methods. We will use different methods to accomplish one very important thing; methods related to text theories (structuralism and different theories for the research of literary typologies), (comparative) research method, scientific research methodology, to get acquainted with the study tradition related to the presented issue. We will also plan: sources, literature review, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, and expression of the significance of our research.

3. Results

Through this paper, we intend to help shed some light on the religious aspect of sentimental prose, by clarifying the issues that traditional studies seem not to have addressed with due attention or with the necessary research for the analysis of sentimental prose in the religious aspect. In the novel "If I were a boy", Haki Stërmilli brings a new and original point of view to the issue of the emancipation of the Albanian woman in the literary period of the 1930s precisely for the treatment of a problem which he raises as a broad social problem. From the analysis done, we notice that the central character of this novel, Dija, plays an important role with all her individual characteristics that generally represented the Albanian woman as she was at that time. And at the same time it underlines and emphasizes such social problems as: the emancipation of women, the right to education, the right to choose one's personal destiny, the right to religious belief, etc.

4. Discussion and interpretation

4.1. The role of the religious aspect in highlighting the condition of the Albanian woman

Historically, literary portrayal of women often confined them to traditional, simple roles such as mothers, wives, or objects of desire. Jane Austen's novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), elucidate the limited social mobility available to women and the societal emphasis on marriage as a mean of securing economic stability.



The history of literature has shown us that religion has played an important role in shaping the identities and roles of women in literature. In stories influenced by religious themes, women are often depicted through the prism of social ideals. For example, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* criticizes the subjugation of women within a dystopian framework, illustrating how religious doctrine can serve as a mechanism of violence and oppression (Atwood, 1985). Furthermore, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* engages with Puritan views on morality and gender, providing an in-depth exploration of women's experiences within a repressive religious context. (Hawthorne 1878, 100 – 102)

Even in Albanian literature, the woman as a character has attracted the attention of writers throughout different periods, with her spiritual world, with the strength to fight for her rights and position in society, with her love and strong character. If we stop at the 30s, we notice that the figure of the woman of these years is a character with an attractive nature, that leaves beautiful impressions, but unfortunately, she causes pain and pity in the reader for her sad fate and subject to a spirits in a backward social environment.

The woman has been put in the center of the thematic interest of the writer Haki Stërmilli, which reveals all the great pain, the sad fate and the tragic end as the cause of a social backwardness and an absurdity of life where in this case, the main role in this tragic fate is played also the religious aspect.

The female character of Stërmilli sometimes tries to give herself a few moments of joy, to face suffering and has the courage to react, being transparent in every situation without having the duplicity of an evil character as her friend. She strongly attacks fanaticism, backwardness, the Muslim religion, which according to her is a form of fanaticism and customs that have spread deep roots in Albanian traditions, opposing the wearing of the headscarf, her lack of education, marriage against her will, the imposition of things by someone, wanting to breathe freely.

In the novel "If I were a boy", Haki Stërmilli brings a new and special perspective on the emancipation of the Albanian woman in the literary period of the 30s precisely for the treatment of a problem which he raises as a broad social problem. Haki Stërmilli through his character Dijes, who in this novel has the function of the narrator, presents the feelings, actions, situations, preoccupations of the time in certain social circumstances. The central character of this novel, Dija, plays an important role with all her features that represented the Albanian woman as she was at that time.

If we compare the character of Dije with other characters of Albanian literature, we can say that Stërmilli's Dija is the successor of Sami Frashëri's Fitneta and Bardhë. As Sami reflected the condition and fate of women in the Ottoman society of the time, Stërmilli also reflects the fate of women, but in the 30s of the last century. This means that as a realization and as a character it is key in terms of the evidence and reflection of the woman of that period, simultaneously making her more valuable because, as the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce says: "We cannot say anything substantiated about a work or an event if that work cannot be compared with some other" (Beker, 1995).

Dija is the victim of a primitive family and a fanatical society. In a social circle with primitive customs, the author puts on Dija the most precious characteristics, the traits of an unshakable morality, in some cases trembling and helplessness, but also the wisdom that she tries to use in every place and situation to triumph over gender inequality and the backwardness of time.



The woman, in the face of her position in society, plays a key role, angry while maintaining her morals with all her strength.. "Muslim women are locked inside the four walls, are poor, weak and inflexible, because they are oppressed and suffocated by the difficult choice and an education that advises and orders nothing but prohibitions; don't touch it, don't go out, don't talk, don't laugh, don't and don't. as much as the educator wants. The cover sheet therefore has his faults and he can never be necessary for the protection of a woman's honor, because her honor depends on the education that is given to her, on the character that is imparted to her, on the morality that is instilled in her and on the virtue that is given to her." (Stërmilli 2002, 25 – 26)

The special feature of the female figure in Stërmilli's novel is her spiritual and physical suffering, which pushes her to see the world differently and to write her life in a diary, expressing every suffering, bitterness, dissatisfaction, desire for life. the best, up to the love and secret desires for Shpendi, the boy from Kosovo. "*Shpendi loves me with all its soul and maybe more than I deserve. He now seems sweeter, friendlier and closer to my heart. Sometimes we spend our hours talking to each other just to measure each other's love. Now we live together, because even in our sleep we dream about each other.*" (Stërmilli 2002, 104)

Through this character, the author analyzing the female world has given an overview of the poor-quality conditions in which Albanian women lived before the Second World War. "*Future generations with no doubt will be suprised how did we endure this slavery that has been imposed on us by violence*". (Stërmilli 2002, 96)

Dija, on one hand, is the same character as the oppressed Albanian woman, on the other hand, it preserves the author's own creative originality. She is described differently, more delicately than the other characters. The author has given her strong morals, unbreakable character, clearer thoughts, "Until a few years ago, as a minor, I may have been a child in mind and lacked judgment. But now, since I'm 17 years old, I think I'm able to think and judge more clearly. And today, for God's sake, I have made up my mind that the female's covering sheet can not save her honor", (Stërmilli 2002, 23) characteristics that an albanian girl didn't use to have in the conditions of the mentioned time Dija meditates and protests calmly and cannot manage to change anything about the situation. Her figure clearly emphasizes the traits of sensitivity, love, change, high morality, patience, and above all, judgment, as can be seen below:

"Until a few years ago, as a minor, I may have been a child in mind and lacked the power of judgment. But now, having turned 17, I seem to be able to see more clearly and judge more soberly"and expresses her judgmental opinion: "Today, for God's sake, I can't believe that a covering sheet can protect a woman's honor." (Stërmilli 2002, 23)

By creating this character, the author stays faithful to sentimentalism. (Bell, 2000) thus giving value and meaning to this phenomenon, not very discussed. The fate of Dije is built on gradual problems, as we would call them, such as: her separation from school, confinement at home and covering with a sheet, marriage against her will and the culmination of all this, illness and death. The diary, in which she keeps notes, is her daily cry, comfort and evidence of an internal spiritual and social state. The author tries to express the centuries-old consequences of slavery, of the primitive mentality, deeply embedded in society, as follows through the character of Dije:



"The Muslim woman, suffocated within four walls, is weak, weak and indestructible, because she is oppressed and suffocated by the heavy yoke of an education that does not advise or command anything but prohibitions: do not touch, do not go out, do not speak, do not laugh, do not do as much as the educator wants. She is weak because she does not get enough air, does not see the sun, does not move, does not feast her eyes on the beauties of nature and laughs little and cries a lot. In a word, she is an unfortunate creature that tears your soul as if she could pour out her heart's poison for the injustices done to her" (Stërmilli 2002, 25)

According to the author, such a woman, who has faced all these things, has her soul crushed, her authority and independence taken away, thus transforming her into a useless being for society and family. Through this novel, specifically through the character of Dija, a public appeal is made on the rights of women, their education and upbringing. In this way, with the female character, Stërmilli broke some taboos of the time, not only did women raise their voice for their rights, not only did they seek education and progress, not only did wanted to choose her love, the man she loved, but also for the fact that she occupied a special place in the novel, even when she stood up against the imposition of the veil and the forced and loveless marriage. The author gives her courage to call for justice, sharpness of mind on how to solve problems and move things forward, sincere feelings and a soft heart, stable morals, serving as a character to the reader, whether in physical or spiritual aspects, whether open-minded and creative:

This year's spring surprisingly, has passed with rains and has been quite breezy. The rain that had started a few days ago and continued with frequent interruptions, stopped yesterday after dark. Yesterday evening we had a clear sky filled with sparkling stars. Not a single cloud was visible in space. It was a nice night that would dawn on the first day of May, intoxicating and exciting young hearts. It was a night that was filling with longing missings and boundless desires, that would fill life and quench the strength of love." (Stërmilli 2002, 64)

Dija, standing at the head of the gallery of characters in the novel, expresses the characteristics of Albanian sentimentality. (Osmanaj 2019, 7 – 10), phenomenon which had given a special place to the figure of the woman and her feelings. She is a witness to the sacrifices, tears and sufferings of the Albanian woman to be educated, to be free to marry the man she loves. In her functions, as a daughter, as a friend, as a lover, as a sister, she maintains calm and strong morals. The character of Dija as a daughter, in the family context, is presented as suffering from pain, ignorance, housework and lack of freedom. Although the woman belongs to the fair sex, the author cannot carve and comb the character in this aspect, but only by presenting her with the black sheet they had covered her, "After two days they covered me with a black sheet and put a thick black veil over my face.", (Stërmilli 2002, 22) in some cases, ragged and barefoot, left by her stepmother, "She often took me to school barefoot or with clogs and wouldn't let me put my shoes on even if it rained or snowed." (Stërmilli 2002, 19) and in another case, with face unwashed and hair unkempt "she often grabbed my arm and led me out the door without washing my face or braiding my hair", (Stërmilli 2002, 19). Her confrontation with the covering sheet is full of pain, disgust, and the shortening of a youthful life, first recording it in her diary and later opposing it as a perverse phenomenon of prohibitions in general.



The author indirectly blames Dija's father, who applies all the wild norms of society of the time to his daughter. In this case, we support the thesis of researcher Resmije Kryeziu, who states that:

"Viewed in this way, the character of Dija has a dual role: that of a respected girl who experiences a tragic personal fate and that of a character who is the embodiment of the writer's political theses. These two lines are intertwined throughout the work" (Kryeziu 1988, 69)

Thus, through these two lines, the author's intention is realized to transpose the people he narrates about or the person he narrates as members of a real society. In the reader's eye, seeing Dije as a character at first glance and based on the situations and actions, which do not affect the reader emotionally, we will understand that she is very important part of the novel. In this way, we can say that the work is a baggage of feelings and actions. Through Dija as a character and the novel in general, Stërmilli manages to make harsh criticism of society, creating characters and situations that lead to a mirror for the reader. If we try to see a parallel, a meeting point or difference, between the woman of the Albanian novel of the 30s and the European one, we find that the European one does not know revolt, opposition or emotion at all, is more stubborn, therefore has the role of a servant, submitting to her husband or family, such as she is Pamela of Samuel Richardsonit (2001), who has a great moral height, corresponding to the stereotype of the girl belonging to the English literature of the 18th century, a woman who cares a lot about her virtues more than about life itself. On the other hand, the woman in the Albanian novel suffers, submits, but does not lack rebellion, the expression of feelings and emotions and no matter where she is, she fights with her own strength for an honest position in society, such as the Knowledge of Haki. The preservation of a family situation, whatever it may be, and the effort or struggle to change a family situation, miserable or primitive, according to the researcher Resmije Kryeziu, are two characteristics of European, Albanian sentimentalist women.

The researcher K. Rrecaj too, emphasizes that: "Stërmilli also investigated the views of Dija on morality and found out that she has clear and quite advanced ideas about morality." (Rrecaj 1988, 126). All the premises of Dija expressed in the novel make her a woman of high morals, with a sensitive and humanistic soul with a character that is difficult to break and a humanist whose sole purpose was the well-being of women in general, the protection of their freedom, thought and morality.

The author's dedication to the suffering woman, to this daughter whose mother has died and since childhood has faced injustice, patience, and slavery, is of particular importance for society and the phenomenon of sentimentalism in literature. This type of Albanian woman, who in Stërmilli's novel comes with the wisdom and sensitivity of an ideal woman, rightly takes its deserved place in Albanian literature. This heroine would undoubtedly deserve such a statement, because during her childhood and youth, in addition to the human and feminine aspects that she tried to preserve under difficult conditions, she was ignored and enslaved by others, losing her education, her destiny in life, and ultimately her life itself. Dija in a way surrenders to death, calls upon it, accepts it, because her soul was attacked by the disease but more by the greatest possible dissatisfaction and sadness.

It can not go without saying that Stërmilli's purpose in this novel is clear and defined, to direct a critique on society and power, through a diary-novel, to give women their rightful place and emancipation, which novel she enriches with a spirit that is sentimental, that is, sensitive,



suffering, complex, but thus preserving the tragic character of the character, as well as the sentimental character of the work, which in fact contains a life drama.

4.2. Religion and its role in the novel

In the novel, "If I Were a Boy", specifically in the story of Dija, religion, its role and importance also take an important place. Within the work, the religious spirit is also revealed the fact that the woman does not dare to take off the veil, otherwise it can be considered immoral. As many actions and experiences are narrated, where Dija as a Muslim woman seems to represent the voice of every stifled girl and the author creates her as a character open to thoughts due to the fact that she does not want to be a slave to one religion or another, but has advanced and progressive thoughts. Religion for her is not an obstacle to the development of society, family happiness or, conversely, suffering, as much as it is moral - psychological and physical violence from people. Dija's progressive ideas also appear directly from this: "which states that even the Albanian Christian woman (Catholic-Orthodox) is not in a good position and calls for the correction and improvement of the position of the Albanian woman at the national level." (Stërmilli 2002, 121). Although Dija is somehow forced to accept what is imposed by custom, religion, her father and stepmother to wear the veil, she is aware that religion or the wearing of the veil plays no role in protecting a woman's honor and what difference does it make if a Muslim woman is covered and a Christian woman goes out without a veil?! Nothing. The conclusion follows that the veil does not serve the purpose, which leads to sacred and divine morality. As can be seen in the excerpt below:

"I have heard from old and young men that religion commands that the limbs of the body must be covered. Of course, the moralist also commands so. Okay, but what about Christian women who go out without a sheet, are they exposing these limbs? Do they go out naked? No, never. Then the covering the sheet does not serve the purpose for which we have been told that it is moral, holy and divine. Moreover, the imams say that uncovering the face is permissible by religion. Since religion allows the face to be uncovered, I think that there is no less importance left to the covering of the body by clothing, whether these are beautiful or ugly, old or new, patched or no." (Stërmilli 2002, 23)

The character of Uncle Haxhiu, whose real name was Hasan, but Dija calls him Uncle Haxhiu because he was in Mecca, is of the same opinion. According to him, religion is not an obstacle to the development of society, as much as inhumane behavior in society and in the family is. His entire explanation of religion is given with convincing facts and arguments that were unacceptable to Dija's father. According to Uncle Haxhiu, "-The Prophet commands us to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave and says that the greatest titles of honor in this world are those that are secured by knowledge, not by strength or wealth." (Stërmilli 2002, 23) His civilized opinion is useful in shaping Dije on this context. Even Dije's cousin, Hamiti, felt bad when he saw Dije wearing that black sheet, addressing him: "- Why don't you tear it, my dear, that damn sheet? - my cousin Hamiti said to me when he saw me. He got angry and for a while he cursed against me and against the blinding fanaticism that was leading us to the abyss." (Stërmilli 2002, 27)

As we investigate in the novel, Uncle Haxhiu's conversations and advice have had good impact to Dija by influencing her personality. Although he was religious, he did not fall prey to the sermons of the hoxhallars, always evaluating them with reason and a progressive mind. For him, the sheet is a bizarre invention of some fanatics who have reduced the value of our religion.



This character seems to be with the author himself, precisely in the issue we discussed above. He seems to be the voice of the author himself who tries, as the researcher K. Rrecaj notes *"to influence the formation of Dija point of view to evaluate issues fairly, objectively."* (Rrecaj 1988, 132)

"Among the other characters in the novel, Uncle Haxhiu stands out, opposes the fanatical imams and propagates women's freedom, in the spirit of the Bektashi sect. With this character, the author has tried to present some liberal demands against the fanaticism and excessive conservatism of the time." (Group of authors 1989, 538 – 539)

Dija, with all her heart called the cover, an eternal condemn: "I walked around the whole relatives. Somewhere I stayed two nights, somewhere three. Finally I returned home to suffer the sentence of life imprisonment that my father gave me according to his primitive mentality." (Stërmilli 2002, 27)

The author H. Stërmilli attributes such religious traits to Dija as a character who is very careful. The reader is aware that the author is hidden behind the narrator. Her meditative reaction against the veil, the consequences that have remained in the life of a Muslim woman are felt by the reader. Mahmud Hysa also notes:

"She finds that the covering sheet has no motives, neither moral nor religious, much less religious, and this is explained to her by Uncle Haxhiu, an intellectual of the time, when he says that the sheet is a bizarre invention of some fanatics who have reduced the value of our religion. However, the consequences of the sheet are very serious in Dije's opinion." (Hysa 2002, 182).

Only her fear that Shpendi, the love that had taken her heart, is a Christian has a reasonable basis. Why is this happening? She knew, not that she would question her love and fulfillment because of the different religion, but because of what her father would say, who would not accept the realization of such a love in any way. "Now I know that he is not Irene's cousin. This doubt, which gnawed at my heart like a worm, disappeared, but another line immediately replaced it: Yes. He is not of their tribe, but he may be Christian and thus our union will be forbidden by religion." (Stërmilli 2002, 50) and in another case she states:

"What if he is a Christian? Even if the world collapses, I cannot be with him, because religion does not allow it, my father does not allow it. This thought is now deeply rooted in my brain". (Stërmilli 2002, 53) And from the moment she learns, in a conversation with mother Gjystina and Irena, that Shpend is a Muslim, her heart is relieved and filled with hope that the marriage will not have any difficulties. In the novel we also come across the religious rite that Muslim women do not dare to touch a foreign man with their hand before she is engaged or even becomes his wife. "-Shpendi's mother is called Fet-hije, but shortly they call her Hije. And their sister's name is Sofije, but they call her Fije to be polite, just like they call you Dije, and your name is Shadije. - But, these are Muslim names - I said confused. - Yes, Muslims are my daughter - replied Mother Gjystina. - Huh!? Aren't they Christians?! - I said amazed and lushed. - No, no - said Irena *"looking attentively. My face has become pale and my heart start beating hard from this information which was opening the happiness doors"* (Stërmilli 2002, 60). Logically, if Dija were a man, among the many steps he would try to make in life, as Professor M.Hysa notes *"will fight against fanaticism as a product of religious dogma."* (Hysa 2002, 183) The main character Dija, had supported all



hopes only if one day the traditions and religious rites would change, if there were good people at the head of the country to free women from their bad fate.

5. Implications of the study

This study had as its object the treatment of the religious aspect and its role in the creation of the image of the woman in the sentimentalistic prose of only one writer, so we think that this may be a flaw of our work, which has come due to of the time and type of study we have carried out. But we hope to continue to expand and research this topic more and work around it with more in-depth and richer studies, thus influencing the enrichment of studies that present the close relationship that religion and literature have in general. and religion and the figure of women in literature in particular

6. Conclusions

From this research and the from the literature treatment, we have come to the conclusion that the author Haki Stërmilli is the first in Albanian literature, especially in the sentimentalist one, who configures and creates a special and unrepeatable female figure. A figure through which he manages to identify, emphasize and criticize many wounds of the Albanian society such as; backwardness, poverty, patriarchal mentality, imposed religion, lack of faith, lack of education, lack of freedom for women and individuals in general. Thus transforming him into a character who speaks the author's ideas, a character who fights and whose ideas and thoughts are quite different from his contemporaries and the social circle in which he lives.

This article also highlights the negative role of religion in the emancipation and destiny of the Albanian woman, a role which comes not as a result of the idea and concept of religion or belief in itself but comes from the application and spread by inappropriate and inhumane people of this religion. So, through this novel and specifically his female character, the author does not only criticize religion and faith, but its practitioners and preachers more, due to the lack of humanity, malice, backwardness, illiteracy, narrow-mindedness, etc.

Through this research, we think that we have contributed to the evidence of the features of the sentimentalist novel and the values that a critical literature had and still has today, a literature that not only imitates or creates a new reality, but a literature that criticizes to improve real life reality.

SUMMARY: “The religious aspect and the construction of woman’s figure in the sentimental novel “If I were a boy” of Haki Stërmilli

The relationship between religion and literature has long constituted a fertile terrain of scholarly inquiry, as literature frequently appropriates religious sources for its narrative architectures, symbolic repertoires, and moral frameworks. This interconnection, far from being static, has manifested itself across epochs, cultures, and literary genres, generating works that alternately reaffirm religious traditions or subject them to scrutiny and critique. The article under discussion situates itself within this broad discursive field, narrowing its analytical lens to Albanian literature—and more specifically to Haki Stërmilli’s seminal novel *If I Were a Boy*—to investigate how religion functions simultaneously as a thematic axis and as a social force shaping the representation of women’s condition in early twentieth-century Albanian society.

Religion and Literature: A Historical Overview

From antiquity through modernity, religion has endowed literature with a symbolic lexicon and narrative scaffolding. Epic traditions frequently drew from sacred cosmogonies: Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* offers perhaps the most paradigmatic example, a vast allegorical edifice rooted in



Christian eschatology, while John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* presents an allegorical morality tale of virtue, sin, and redemption.

Yet this relationship is not reducible to affirmation. Modern and contemporary literatures often adopt a critical, even adversarial, stance toward religious ideologies. Works such as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* foreground literature's capacity to interrogate religious authority, exposing contradictions, abuses, and their deleterious effects on individual liberty. Religion, in this sense, emerges as both a source of inspiration and as a contested site of cultural critique.

Moreover, literature does more than mirror individual belief; it reflects and constructs collective cultural identities. In Latin America, Gabriel García Márquez integrates religious motifs into broader narratives of history and community. In the European tradition, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* famously traced the ways biblical and classical traditions shaped literary representation. Shifts across the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Modernism reveal literature's dynamic responsiveness to evolving conceptions of faith, reason, and cultural identity.

Religion in the Albanian Literary Context

Unlike Western Europe, where biblical traditions dominate, Albanian literature developed within a multireligious matrix shaped by both Christianity and Islam. This pluralism endows Albanian letters with distinctive traits. Early writers such as Nikaj (1892) addressed Christian themes while reflecting the sociopolitical realities of their time. By the twentieth century, religion became not merely a matter of faith but a critical lens through which writers interrogated social backwardness, patriarchal structures, and political stagnation.

Importantly, Albanian literature did not reproduce Christian or Islamic canonical traditions wholesale. Unlike Arabic or Persian literatures—where the Qur'an profoundly influenced poetic and philosophical production in figures such as Al-Ma'arri, Rumi, and Hafiz—Albanian authors anchored their reflections in the sociohistorical reality of Ottoman domination and entrenched patriarchy. Religion here is less an abstract theology than a lived practice, entwined with structures of power, gender, and social control.

Haki Stërmilli and the Sentimentalist Novel

The article identifies Haki Stërmilli's *If I Were a Boy* (*Sikur të isha djalë*, 1936; republished 1938) as the pivotal text for examining these dynamics. Widely received in Albanian literary culture, the novel belongs to the sentimentalist tradition, which privileges personal emotional expression as a vehicle for broader social commentary. Unlike earlier romantic or nationalistic treatments of female figures, Stërmilli places religion at the very center of women's oppression, presenting it as a determinant of identity, destiny, and suffering.

The narrative unfolds through the diary of Dija, a young Albanian woman whose inner voice documents her struggles within a patriarchal, religiously conservative society. Through her reflections, Stërmilli denounces the regressive role of religiously sanctioned customs—particularly Islamic practices inherited from Ottoman rule, such as veiling, forced marriages, and restrictions on women's education. Religion in this text is stripped of transcendence; it appears as an instrument of control, reinforcing patriarchal norms and obstructing female autonomy.



Methodological Framework

The article adopts a comparative and historical-literary methodology, employing structuralist and typological approaches to analyze Stërmilli's work within the dual context of European sentimentalist traditions and Albanian cultural realities. Primary texts are read alongside secondary scholarship on religion, feminism, and Albanian literary history, enabling the authors to illuminate a largely neglected intersection: the role of religion within sentimentalist prose, especially in its gendered dimensions.

Key Findings: Religion in *If I Were a Boy*

1. The Central Role of Dija

Dija epitomizes the Albanian woman of the 1930s—subjugated by religion, patriarchal tradition, and social ignorance, yet endowed with moral strength, sensitivity, and a yearning for freedom. Her diary serves simultaneously as testimony and protest, a discursive weapon against the roles imposed upon her.

2. Religion as a Mechanism of Oppression

The veil emerges as the novel's most charged symbol of religious oppression. For Dija, it is not a sacred garment but a "life sentence" that erases individuality and dignity. Her reflections dismantle the notion that honor resides in veiling, arguing instead that true dignity derives from education, morality, and personal integrity.

3. Progressive Counter-Voices

Not all religious figures embody fanaticism. Uncle Haxhiu, returning from Mecca, represents a more enlightened strand of religious thought, advocating education and rationality over blind ritualism. His presence underscores that religion per se is not inherently oppressive but is vulnerable to distortion through fanaticism.

4. Emancipation as a National Imperative

The novel situates women's emancipation within the larger narrative of Albania's modernization. Illiteracy, forced marriages, and patriarchal customs emerge as impediments to national progress, with religion—when misappropriated—deeply implicated in this stagnation.

Comparative Literary Context

Dija is situated in dialogue with both Albanian and European sentimentalist traditions. While she inherits traits from Sami Frashëri's heroines, she exceeds them in her explicit defiance of social constraints. Unlike Richardson's Pamela—who epitomizes virtue through submission—Dija embodies resistance, critique, and a demand for self-determination. Her diary is not a record of resignation but a manifesto of rebellion, marking Stërmilli's originality in transforming sentimentalist conventions into a vehicle of social critique.

Religion and Love in the Novel

A recurrent motif in the narrative is Dija's love for Shpendi, complicated by the rigid boundaries of religious identity. Initially she fears he may be Christian, which would render marriage impossible within her family's religious codes. Relief follows upon discovering his Muslim identity, underscoring how profoundly religion dictates personal destiny. Yet her reflections also reveal skepticism toward the legitimacy of such dogmatic divisions, exposing their irrationality and underscoring the novel's critical edge.



Feminist and Social Critique

Read through a feminist lens, the novel positions Dija's plight as emblematic of Albanian women more broadly denied education, confined to domestic servitude, subjected to arranged marriages, and stripped of individuality. Religion, ostensibly a guarantor of morality, functions instead as an ideological apparatus legitimizing patriarchal domination. Stërmilli's critique, however, is nuanced: he distinguishes between faith as doctrine and the distorted, inhumane interpretations perpetuated by religious fanatics.

Discussion: Religion, Literature, and Women's Condition

The article extends its discussion beyond the Albanian context, situating Dija alongside global literary figures whose lives are circumscribed by religious structures. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* reflects economic and social constraints on women in early nineteenth-century England; Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* dramatizes women's suffering within a Puritan framework; and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* envisions religion as a dystopian mechanism of total control. In this comparative constellation, Stërmilli's novel resonates within a broader literary tradition of interrogating religion's role in gendered subjugation, while preserving its distinctively Albanian inflection.

Implications of the Study

While acknowledging its focus on a single author and novel, the study opens fertile avenues for future research on the entanglements of religion, gender, and literature in Albanian letters and beyond. It underscores the critical potential of sentimentalist prose—often dismissed as secondary or derivative—to illuminate pressing social concerns, particularly the discourse of women's emancipation.

Conclusions

The article arrives at several central conclusions:

1. **Stërmilli's Originality**

He emerges as one of the earliest Albanian writers to craft a distinctly critical female character who openly resists religiously sanctioned patriarchy. Through Dija, he foregrounds Albania's social wounds—illiteracy, backwardness, and gender inequality.

2. **Religion as a Negative Social Force**

The novel does not repudiate religion in toto but denounces its distortion into dogmatic practice that legitimizes oppression.

3. **Contribution to Albanian Literary History**

If I Were a Boy constitutes a milestone in Albanian sentimentalist prose, transforming the genre from imitation into critique, and mobilizing literature as an instrument of social reform.

4. **Feminist Resonance**

The novel affirms women's emancipation as indispensable to national progress, situating Dija's suffering and protest within a wider feminist discourse.

Final Assessment

Ultimately, the article demonstrates that religion and literature, while historically intertwined as repositories of meaning, also function as battlegrounds for struggles over freedom, identity, and social transformation. Within this framework, Stërmilli's *If I Were a Boy* emerges as a landmark text in Albanian letters: religion is represented not as a spiritual abstraction but as a lived and contested reality, a system implicated in women's oppression yet open to critique and reform. By



harnessing the sentimentalist form and the confessional voice of the diary, Stërmilli amplifies the silenced experiences of Albanian women, converting private suffering into a vehicle of cultural critique.

In so doing, the article contributes not only to the study of Albanian literature but also to broader debates concerning the intersection of religion, gender, and literary representation.

Keywords: Religion and literature, Sentimentalist prose, Diaries as narrative form, Female emancipation, Patriarchy and oppression, Veil (symbol of control), Gender and religion, Fanaticism vs. enlightened faith, Education and progress, Marriage and women's autonomy, Critique of dogmatism, Identity and freedom, Religion as social force etc

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Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study is based exclusively on literary text analysis. It does not involve human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or any form of empirical data collection. The research consists solely of critical analysis of a published literary work.

In accordance with institutional and national guidelines for humanities research, formal ethical approval was not required. No informed consent was necessary, as the study did not include human subjects or sensitive data.

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